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Break in the Thunderstorm / Claire Lawrence

**CHANGING THE WORLD
THROUGH WORDS AND ART**

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Cover: Break in the Thunderstorm / Claire Lawrence

Snow Drift

Jose Trejo Maya

Inscribe:

stones covered in snows/storms.

The view from the *Observatory of Tulum*:
skies refract in jade iris glare.

It began as a flashpoint from
the sun on the sand.

It's your viewing the *Equinox of Spring*:

walk towards new heights colonnaded rites.
the passage of centuries past:

Running on Moontime

Kerry Muir

Characters:

Maeve Age 16. Eight and a half months pregnant. Any race, as long as it is believable that she *could* be Missy's daughter. Not necessarily gorgeous, but full of hope—which is gorgeous in and of itself.

Missy Age 32. Beautiful bordering on gorgeous. Any race.

A. Age 41. Caucasian, reddish-blond hair. Around 5'9". Resembles vanished-from-the-spotlight rocker (at the time) Axl Rose. Maybe a little out of shape, slight gut coming on.

Place:

Lancaster, Winnetka, Reseda—places near Hollywood, but not of it.

Time:

February, 2003, except where indicated in flashback.

Notes:

Direction can be somewhat expressionistic. There should be a dream-like quality present throughout the play that is not unrealistic. Most scenes take place in the kitchen of Missy and A's house, so—a table, a few chairs. A microwave. A sewing machine on the kitchen table, where Missy is piecing together handmade lingerie, nightgowns. To one side of the stage, a bed in shadows, indicating Missy and A's bedroom. Homemade curtains hang from a makeshift window—outside, a view of the moon. The moon can be photo-real, or crudely expressionist—a child's cut-out drawing of the moon, for example, dangling from a string.

"They told me not to leave, but I left anyway."

Axl Rose, on leaving his hometown of Lafayette, IN, in a 1989 interview with Del James for *Rolling Stone*

Spotlight on Maeve in the dark, who speaks to the audience.

Maeve:

—and straight ahead of me the full-moon, right above the road. So low in the sky it almost touched the divider line—and it was huge. That moon looked wider than the road itself, that's how full it was. And suddenly the moon was not a moon at all, but this big, round, shiny magnet pulling me, and this fierce thought just, like, *ripped across my head—Now! Go! Run and grab it—that road, that moon, that whole new shiny life ahead!* And I was about to do it. But then I thought—*What if I never see Sinclair and Aaron and Francess again?* I mean, you know, *What if?* ‘Cause I bitched about going to Bible and all, but the three of them? Were like—All I had. In the *world*. I mean, those three gave me *everything*. But then I was, like, *That moon—!* (*stops herself*) And then I remembered something kind of weird, and I spoke it to myself out loud to make sure I heard it—I said, *Maeve*—cause I was speaking to myself, so—I was all, like, *Maeve, you might not remember this, but it was Sinclair who mentioned to you all about moon-time in the first place. And it was Francess, who confirmed it. And Aaron who backed her up after that, even when you still had your doubts*—it was those three at Bible who were the ones to tell me: how moon-time is different from time on earth. How time on the moon dilates... whereas time on earth? Is *compressed*. That's the words Sinclair used when he explained it to me—“*dilated*” and “*compressed*.” He said *A clock running on the moon will run slower than a clock on earth. And yet—they both are telling the truth. Chew on that a while*, Maeve. And this is a fact. Sinclair showed me on the internet, so—there you go. Scientists have proved it: There is no Reality. (*beat*) Or, better—there are many. *One's not truer than another, Maeve. They're all relative*, Sinclair said.

And I took those words to heart, and I ran and ran and ran.

Later, though, when I had time to think, I got afraid of God. Because God would not be thrilled for me to of run like that. Also, it occurred to me: God never mentioned moon-time in the Bible—I mean, not once. But then I thought, *Why would God put me in Bible study with Sinclair and Aaron and Francess if He didn't want me to learn about moon-time? After all, it was God who threw all of us in together like that.* And anyway—I sure as hell wasn't there for Bible, so—it must of been for the moon. God *must* of wanted me to know—at least, that's how I thought.

And then I was gone. No more looking back. ‘Cause once you break the rules, they watch you like an eagle—you lose your privileges and bla-bla-bla, but—more than that? Looking back would’ve been a betrayal of everything they stood for—Sinclair, Francess and Aaron. A betrayal of the precious idea they gave to me. I had to follow through, if not for myself, then for them. And if not for them, then for the moon, and for the moon alone.

Sound of a heart beating low and steady and reverberating. Lights fade on Maeve.

8 p.m.—home of Missy and A. The sound of the heartbeat fades into the sound of rain on the roof. Missy at the kitchen table, sewing. A knock at the door. Missy opens it, revealing Maeve. Pause.

Maeve:

Hi, I’m here for Axl...?

Missy:

Axl? (*confused*) There’s no Axl here.

Maeve:

Axl Rose?

Missy:

(*beat*) Is this a joke?

Maeve:

Um, no?

Missy:

(beat) Okay, is this? This is, like—a goof? Like a spoof for Youtube—?
Where's the camera? I mean—come on! I'm not an idiot!

Maeve:

Um. I'm seriously here for Axl. So don't be all, like, you don't know.

Pause.

Missy:

Axl Rose doesn't live here.

Maeve:

Did he move?

Pause.

Missy:

Um. Honey? Do you think Axl Rose would live in a two-bedroom tract home in Reseda? If Axl Rose is anywhere he's in Malibu or Paris, France—he sure as hell ain't here. *Missy starts to close the door.*

Maeve:

God fucking dammit! God! Fucking damn fucking piece of shit!

Missy reopens the door.

Maeve (*cont'd*):

He's such a liar! Such a liar! Lying sack of—oh, my God, I hate him!

Missy watches Maeve melt down. After a bit—

Missy:

Are you...? (beat) Do you...? (beat) Is everything...?

Pause. Maeve slumps to the ground, defeated.

Missy:

Look. It's raining. Would you like some. I dunno. Some tea or something?

Pause. Maeve remains inert.

Missy (*cont'd*):

It'll be. It'll be all right. I think you. I think you might need to eat. Am I right? You need to eat? Look, just—come on now. Come on, come in, come in. *Missy helps Maeve off the ground. Escorts her inside the house.*

Missy (*cont'd*):

When I was pregnant, I. Had um. I had this craving. I craved spaghetti and meatballs all the time. With little chunks of onions. I wanted to gnash those chunks between my teeth and split the flavor wide open. (*beat*) That and chocolate. I wanted chocolate all the time.

Missy and Maeve enter kitchen.

Missy (*cont'd*):

I don't have that but—I've got lasagna. Cheddar cheese, zucchini. The little chunks of onion. You need a lot of vegetables—I hope you know that? I hope you've been eating lots of veggies all along? (*beat*) Have you? (*beat*) I'll bet you have. You're gonna be just fine. *Puts leftover lasagna in microwave.*

Missy (*cont'd*):

Hot tea? I know—a glass of milk. Milk builds bones. Bones need calcium. So, milk, milk, milk, milk, milk. (*beat*) Milk.

Awkward, interminable silence. Finally, microwave bell dings.

Missy (*cont'd*):

So. You're. Um.

Missy serves the lasagna to Maeve at the kitchen table. Maeve scarfs it down, ravenous.

Missy (*cont'd*):
...looking for...Axl Rose?

Maeve nods.

Missy (*cont'd*):
In Reseda?

Maeve nods again, mouth too full to talk.

Missy (*cont'd*):
In this house?

Maeve nods once more.

Missy (*cont'd*):
Huh. That's. That's strange.... We've. Lived here almost two years now....

Maeve:
You and Axl?

Missy:
No. Me and— my boyfriend.

Maeve:
Blond-ish red hair, graying at the edges?

Missy:
Yeah, he—

Maeve:
Gravelly voice?

Missy:
Uh, I guess—

Pause.

Maeve:

Piercing green eyes?

Missy:

Uh...yes...

Maeve:

Any kids?

Missy:

One. But—she's. All grown now. More or less.

Maeve:

You had her before you and Axl met?

Missy:

I never *met* Axl! (*beat*) Do you? Want me to—to call someone?

Maeve:

I have someone. I have Axl. So, no, you don't need to call. *Maeve studies Missy's sewing machine next to her on the table.*

Missy:

Look—I can assure you, no one's sheltering any aging rock stars here! The sooner you get a grip on that—

Maeve:

(*re: sewing machine*) What are you making there?

Missy:

It's um. Lingerie. Of sorts. I—I want to. Start a line. (*distracted*) A long, long... line.

Maeve:

Cute. (*touches fabric*) A little *Frederick's of Hollywood*, but—cute. Overall.

Missy:

(*caught off-guard*) Thanks. (*beat*) I'm Missy.

Maeve:

Maeve.

Missy:

Maeve? That is so. Pretty. (*beat*) Maeve.

Maeve:

So he goes by 'A' now, huh? Sly dog.

Missy:

Would you come off of it! 'A' stands for *Anthony*! He owns pizza parlors in the valley! He can't sing for shit! He's as far from rock-stardom as you can possibly get!

Maeve:

That's what you think.

Sound of rain up. Blackout.

Midnight, same evening – Missy and A. in the kitchen. A. wears restaurant work-clothes. Missy sews away. Sound of rain continues from previous scene.

Missy:

Someone came by today, looking for—of all people!—Axl Rose? (*no reaction from A.*) Axl. Rose. (*beat*) Does that? Mean anything to you?

A:

Frontman for Guns N' Roses? I hear he's all washed up. Kurt Cobain and that whole Seattle scene bumped him out. Guy looked like some kinda douche after that.

Missy:

She was pregnant.

A:

Who?

Missy:

She ate like a fiend. Polished off your lasagna.

A:

You fed her?

Missy:

She was cold and wet—

A:

You invited some pregnant teenager into the house and fed her my lasagna?

Missy:

(beat) How do you know she was a teen?

A:

A girl, you said! Didn't you just say that? Some girl?

Missy:

She needed a bath pretty bad.

A:

Well, I'm surprised you didn't offer her use of our bathroom! Jeez, Miss!

Missy:

She was like eight months pregnant. She was all alone. She was looking for Axl Rose.

A:

And that didn't strike you as just the slightest bit loco? Unbelievable!

Missy:

She was totally alone!

A:

Okay—I get the gist. One minute you're a grown woman opening your front door. Next thing you know, you're staring at your reflection in the fun-house mirror. You had a bad trip. A flashback. You thought: *Do unto others as you wished others had done unto you.* And, babe—that was kind. Very, very kind. But the bottom line is: you don't know her. If she comes back here again, tell her to hit the road running. (*beat*) This is a weird world we live in! There's some whackadoodle-doozies out there! Just look at the goddam papers. Every day it's something! Every! Goddam! Day!

Missy:

A.? Can you lower your voice? (*indicates off-stage*) She's sleeping.

Pause.

A:

Are you shitting me?

Maeve enters from bedroom wearing one of Missy's nightgowns. It fits her funny. Long pause.

Missy:

Anthony, Maeve—Maeve, Anthony.

Maeve:

(*beat*) We've met.

Blackout. Sound of rain slowly fades, disappears.

Spotlight on Maeve. She talks to the audience.

Maeve:

He said his name was Axl Rose and I was all like, *Wow*. I mean. I know the music. I've heard him belt his lungs out. And I've belted my lungs out right along with him. (*sings*) *Where do we go now...? Where do we go-whoa...?* And then the *Ay-yi's* and you know, the whole rigamarole. I'm vaguely familiar but—the funny thing was? He didn't *look* like Axl Rose. I mean, I he's, like, *well-past prime-time*, but this guy had—I mean he had a *lot* of wear-and-tear on him, to put it mildly. And he was wearing sunglasses so—it was hard to tell. I mean, he *might* have changed over the years—I dunno. I thought, *Maybe he could be Axl Rose*—if he, like, had done a ton of drugs and gotten really sick and gone insane and bitter and crazy and gotten a whole lot of really bad plastic surgery—which, come to think of it, is, from all accounts, what really happened to the man—so. I thought, *It could be Axl, just older now*. I mean—you know? It could. (*beat*) So I told him about moon-time, right there, over spaghetti. And he, you know? He listened.

Lights up. Flashback to a few hours earlier, before A. came home. Maeve and Missy sit at the kitchen table. The lasagna dish is empty. Maybe they drink tea.

Missy:

Yeah but anyone can say, *I'm Axl fucking Rose!* But—how would you really know? I mean, any freak can saunter up to a pretty girl and say those three little words.

Maeve:

(counts on her fingers) That's four.

Missy:

(counts) Okay, whatever, four. But still—how can you be so sure?

Maeve:

I've heard him scream. That's how.

Rain continues, soft. Blackout on Missy and Maeve.

Heavy-metal music blasts—maybe something like the opening of 'Welcome to the Jungle.' Spotlight up on A. – he bops to the music, busts a few Axl-esque moves, lip-

synchs in front of an imaginary mirror hanging on the fourth wall. Missy watches him for a while from the sidelines, then abruptly shuts the music off.

A.

(*to mirror*) Am I...? Am I Axl Rose? (*laughs, a few beats*) Are you really asking me that?

Missy:

Yes.

A. turns, looks at Missy as... lights shift. Sound of heartbeat up. A. turns from the fourth wall—takes a suitcase from under the bed and starts to pack in the background. Simultaneous spotlight up on Maeve, in the foreground. She talks to the audience.

Maeve:

—’cause you know the minute I started to run, it was like, *Oh my God*, it was just like, *Oh my God*, you know? Like the lid was just blown off the roof and the whole sky was pouring in. And you know—I could finally *breathe*. I could see *colors* again. And I was just like, *Wow*. I had close to three hundred from the Shake ‘n Smoothie, so I was like, *Let’s go*. And whereas usually things pass *me* by? Now it was *me* that was, like, passing everything—the Wind-chime hut and the *House of Gnomes* and *Tabitha’s Thrift Shop*. And the police billboard over *Family Dollar*, offering rewards for snitching on dog-fighters, and the *Award-winning Menudo!*-place, and the *Ye Olde Gift Shoppe*—which they spell with two P’s and an E—why? I don’t have the slightest—and for once *I* was the one passing it all by! Leaving it in *ye olde duste*! Saying *Goodbye* to everything... *goodbye, goodbye, goodbye...* And all I could feel was, like—this joy—this pure and total and complete like, *joy*, at the thought of leaving.

Lights shift, come up on Missy and Maeve in the kitchen, in flashback.

Missy:

You’re the same. Same age. Same—everything.

Pause.

Maeve:

(*genuine*) I don't mean to disappoint you, but I'm from Lancaster. Lancaster's not even close to Bakersfield. It's like, way south of there.

Missy:

I know Lancaster. High desert. Antelope Valley. Are there really antelopes?

Maeve:

There's a lion reserve. Tippi Hedron owns it. (*beat*) She was in *The Birds*.

Missy:

But when did you get there?

Maeve:

When did I get where?

Missy:

Lancaster.

Maeve:

I've been there all my life. (*beat*) Until now, I mean.

Sound of heartbeat fades. Lights shift bend and shift.

Spotlight up on A. He packs a suitcase, sings to himself—not just the vocals, but all the instruments: guitar riffs, percussion—everything.

A:

(*growl-sings*) Where do we go now...where do we go now...Bam-poom-pam-pam! Where do we go now...where do we go now...where do we go-whoa....Bam-bam! Ay-yi-yi-yi-yi-yi-yi-yi-yi....WHERE DO WE GO-WHOOOAAAHHHHH.....? (*Pause, then sings last note of song*) ...whoa.

Light dim on A.

Wide, dilated spotlight up on Missy, who speaks to the audience.

Missy:

—and I ran and I ran and I ran, you know? After the white limousine! In Bakersfield. It was driving down the road, away from me. Under this huge full moon. And the limousine was the same exact color and shiny tone and texture as the moon—so much so that I remember having the distinct impression the limo was like, some rogue piece of it—some random, stray shard of moon that had wiggled loose and gotten away, and was now returning home to the sky, back to its origin. And I was like—*Hey! Wait! Don't leave me here! Come back and take me with you!* (beat) He was traveling incognito. And I was all like, *Rock stars in Bakersfield!*, you know? He'd come into the bar where I was working—no entourage, no nothing—and he'd sang one simple song—that song that ran on continuous-loop in my head, after I had my kid? *Sweet Child*. Oh, man, right? I was in this weird, lost phase where I couldn't get a grip on much of—you know, much of anything. (beat) And like—no skills. I could tell you a lot about *Oh, Jesus saves* and *Jesus loves you* but they don't pay Sunday school teachers much. In fact—they don't pay them at all! So I stripped. Whatever—big deal. Lightning hasn't struck me down yet. Whatever, right? That's what *I* said! In Bakersfield. A friend of a friend of a friend of a friend had this bar. I did crunches for like two months, and I was set. (beat) The body bounces back real fast from childbirth when you're sixteen and a half. Whatever, right? Work nights. Baby, days. My family wrote me off and. Church wrote me off and. Well. I was. Pretty wiped. But there was this couple at my church. This, like, older couple. And when they heard there was this. Uhhhhh... Baby. They were just like. *On me*. Like white-on-rice... White-on-rice... (beat) I wonder who made that up? White-on-rice... *white-on-rice*. Who came up with that...?

A:

(sings weirdly, under Missy) Where doooo we gooo noooow....?

Missy:

Anyway. Long story short: I gave her up. I was all out of gas you know? And. They were persistent. I mean, they had. Like, reserves of the stuff. Of persistence. (beat) I really hate them now—that's neither here nor there. But. I really—(pause) And that night after I relinquished her—that's the word they use—“*relinquish*”—I went to work. Mainly so I didn't have to think. Because

the music there was so loud, and the crowd. And there was a bouncer, Major, who always had pot. So there I was at work, trying my best to numb out. And that's when he walked in. Rock stars do that, I guess. Every once in a while. They—I don't know—want to go, like, back in time, before the fame monster devoured them. Be anonymous in some roadside dive. Be *The Invisible Man*. He came in and sang. Just him, all-alone. In the corner of the bar. He was. Um. Barely lit. But you could see. It was him all right. (*beat*) It was him.

In another part of the stage, A. packs his suitcase and growl-sings quietly:

A:

(softly) Where do we go now...where do we go now.... Ay-yi-yi-yi-yi-yi-yi.... *Singing continues at low volume during the beginning of Missy's monologue.*

Missy:

And after he sang, he got up and left without any fanfare. I don't think anyone even applauded, we were in so much shock. No *thank-you-very-much*. No *Elvis-has-left-the-building*. No *Thank-you-and-Good-night!*—one minute he was there, and then he was gone. Simple as that.... And that's when it hit me: he is gone. And she is gone. And then, you know, suddenly *I* was going, going, gone.... The walls of the club warped and bent right before my eyes.... The walls I'd used to numb me out, suddenly—folded *in*. And all I heard was my own heart beating hard and slow and deep, like an LP on the wrong speed—one heartbeat, I'd thrown on my coat; the next, I stumbled outta the bar; the next, I ditched my high-heels and was running barefoot down the road.... And the whole world went silent, except for this weighted, prolonged heartbeat that echoed off each passing second, like a ball hitting the backboard of a basketball hoop in slo-mo.... each second like silly-putty, stretched-out and elastic.... and as I neared the white limousine I saw him get inside it, and I heard the door closing, and the car pulled away on gravel.... and I ran like holy hell after him all the way down the road....long after the tail lights disappeared into dark, completely...

A:

(sings) Where do we go-whoa....

Missy:

I mean—how fucked up is that? I mean—*(starts to laugh, then cracks)* Right?
(beat) What a joke. I'm sorry. I'm just. Really. *(tries to pull it together, cracks again)* Man! Fuck this. *(beat)* Anyway—I saw him. *(beat)* And then—I ran and I ran and I ran.

Lights up on the kitchen. Maeve and Missy at the kitchen table.

Maeve:

But what would he be doing? In a dive like that? I mean, he was a big rock star. What was this, 1986?

Missy:

No! God, I'm not that old! It was more like.... *(counts, to herself)* It was more like. 1987.

Maeve:

Why would he bust out of his cooshy fame-bubble to visit some honky-tonk?

Missy:

Maybe he needed to get away.

Maeve:

From Hollywood?

Missy:

Why else does anyone ever want to get away? Leave themselves behind

Short pause.

Maeve:

I guess.

Blackout.

Spotlight up on Maeve, who speaks to the audience.

Maeve:

And I was having so much fun. I'd stop like, wherever and get soda and licorice. Sometimes, lottery tickets. More soda, more licorice... and then, for protein? A plate of spaghetti at this pizza place in Winnetka. But around the time of the spaghetti, all the wheels came off—that's when shit happens. When you get lonely over spaghetti. When the protein kicks in and all the sweets wear off.

Lights shift. Flashback to eight and a half months earlier. Maeve sits in front of an uneaten plate of spaghetti. A. enters, approaches her. Missy watches the scene between Maeve and A. play out.

Maeve:

Yeah, *right!*

A:

No really. I have I.D. (*beat*) Here, I'll show it to you. (*he does*)

Maeve:

(*beat*) It says you're Axl Rose.

A:

I'd love to see more of you.

Maeve:

You're seeing me right now.

A:

No, but. (*beat*) More.

Maeve turns to Missy, breaks out of the scene with A. for a moment.

Maeve:

(*to Missy*) And I was low on funds. And all I could think was, *How much more licorice and spaghetti was my money going to get?* You know? So when he offered me fifty bucks, I thought, *What can it hurt?*

Maeve turns back to A., reenters the scene with him. Missy watches.

Maeve (*cont'd*):

(*to A.*) If you're really Axl Rose, then I want three hundred. (*turns to Missy*) I thought that was bold!

A. recedes into shadow. Spotlight up on Maeve alone, speaking to the audience.

Maeve (*cont'd*):

But. Suddenly, I was stuck with him. With, you know. With Axl. I couldn't shake him. He had the edge on me. More money, for one. And for another, a car. And I just. Got stuck. (*beat*) I kept Axl company, for like—I don't know. Two months? Maybe more. He put me up at a motel. I watched a lot of TV. I must of seen a million episodes of goddam *Law and Order*. And in between homicides and murder trials, Axl visited me.

Pause. Maeve turns to Missy. Lights shift.

Maeve (*cont'd*):

(*to Missy, genuine*) I'm sorry. This must be hard—

Missy:

Don't be.

Maeve:

No. Really. I'm really sorry.

Missy:

I'm not upset at all.

Maeve:

(*genuine*) Then. Why are you crying?

Low, reverberating sound of a heartbeat, in slow motion. In slow motion, to the sound of the rhythm of the heartbeat, Missy presses Maeve's palm to her cheek, her forehead, her mouth, her heart.

Missy:

Because I'm just. I'm so. Relieved. To have you with me, finally.

Lights down on the kitchen.

Spotlight up on Maeve. She talks to the audience.

Maeve:

In Bible we were talking about the moon. How time is different there. How a year on earth might only be a minute on the moon. So—there's no one Time that's correct. All times are accurate, only different. Which is to say there's no one Reality that's correct. Reality is relative, which is to say—there's no Reality at all. It doesn't exist. I mean—just look at me: in Lancaster I was an orphan. In Winnetka I was a prostitute. And here in Reseda? I'm a beloved daughter, with the most beautiful mother on earth.

Blackout.

Flash-forward. Lights up, revealing Maeve and A. in the kitchen.

Maeve:

I don't have anywhere *to go*.

A:

What do you want? Money? Huh? Is that why you're here? Because if it's money you're after, I'll gladly pay you off.

Maeve:

(*re: Missy*) I promised her I'd stay.

A:

I don't wanna have to hurt you—

Maeve:

I don't care if you do.

A:

What about your condition?

Standoff.

Maeve:

I don't care if you do.

Pause.

Maeve (*cont'd*):

You told me yourself you were Axl Rose. How is it you *did* that?

A:

I think the real question here is: how is it you *believed* me?

Maeve:

But. Are you?

A:

(*exploding*) No, I'm not Axl Rose! Are you really that stupid? I was just having fun with a nice, little, *fresh-off-the-bus* kid-hooker. Isn't that what you whores are supposed to do? Play along with our fantasies? Isn't that what I paid you for? Yeah, I'm Axl Rose, baby—now go ahead and blow me!

Pause.

Maeve:

But what about the moon?

A:

What about it?

Blackout.

Dim spotlight. A. approaches it warily, steps into it, almost reluctantly, as if in slow-motion. He speaks to himself sometimes—other times, he relates to the audience.

A:

And Indiana, and my stepfather, and my father before that, and what else could I do? Sing, scream, go insane. Beat up anything that moved. Dream at night about running, fast. Dreams of running free. But the stepfather always appears and stops you in those dreams. Your mother hides out downstairs in a bomb shelter kind of thing. A bomb shelter of her own making so she doesn't have to hear. That's when the poetry hits the roof. Poetry and blasphemy, then it's off to church. Then back home to scream—screaming's kind of like throwing up, but with sound instead of food. Step-father bungles you, more screaming, more church. A family merry-go-round-and-round-and-round-and-round and before you know it you're in the front lines of a rock band and people pay to see you scream. Scream your fucking lungs out! You scream so loud, even mothers locked up in underground bomb shelters of their own making can hear you because—in truth—you want them to hear. You do.

Missy:

(sings softly, under A.'s monologue) *Ay-ay-ay-ay-ay-ay-ay-ay...Where do we go now...?*

A:

And the crowd screams back at you. They have their stuff, too—maybe not the same as yours, but—*something*. You read me? Or they wouldn't be there to hear you scream. I mean, am I right? Or what?

Missy:

(from the sidelines, listening) Sure.

A:

And finally you're on a Greyhound bus with thirty bucks wedged in your jock strap and still the perverts try to feel you up. They still try! Of course they do! Because they can smell the past all over you and you're now and forever this magnet and those fuckers are drawn to you like tides to the moon. And later

they'll call you a rapist and an abuser and a bigot and a homophobe and a has-been and a monstrosity—but what else were the options? I mean—I could've stayed put in Indiana and worked in a pizza place or something—you know, some shit like that. But I didn't stay put. I didn't stay at all. I took my chance when I had it. (*beat*) And I ran and I ran and I ran.

Lights shift.

Missy and A., in kitchen.

Missy:

You know. Sometimes I don't think I know you.

A:

Sure ya do.

Missy:

No. Not really, I mean.

A:

How can you not know me? We've been together since around nine-eleven, so—

Missy:

I mean—I've never met any old friends of yours.

A:

—like, almost a year and a half—how can you say you don't know me?

Missy:

Or any family, even—

A:

I told you, I'm not on good terms—

Missy:

But—there's gotta be *somebody*—you can't have sprung out of a vacuum!

A:

Stop overthinking! Ever since your little protégé walked in the door, you're like suspicious or something! It's like we're in a freakin' detective movie all the time! Well, I'm sick of it! I'm Anthony, "A" for short! I got pizza parlors in Northridge, Winnetka, Pacoima and Reseda! With prospects in Santa Clarita! We're rich! We're fucking rolling in it! We don't want for food or clothing! You get a toothache, I take you to the dentist, first class all the way! You want your ass waxed, your nails shellacked, your highlights, whatever—no problem! You don't even have to work anymore! Fucking kick back, sew panties all day and read your horoscope! I mean—what the hell do you want?

Pause.

Missy:

Do you think we could have a kid?

Pause.

A.

Who, us?

Missy:

'Cause you know, it's not too late. I still got all my parts.

Lights dim.

Missy drifts to bedroom, sorts through her closet. Sorts through lingerie. In shadows, Missy selects lingerie, changes into it. Simultaneously, in the foreground—a flashback scene takes place between Maeve and A., eight and a half months earlier—

Maeve sits in pizza parlor, half-eaten plate of spaghetti in front of her. A. sits next to her at the counter, wearing sunglasses, mid-conversation.

Maeve:

But—you don't look anything like him.

A:

I've lived life pretty hard.

Maeve:

But—your face—you. You can't be him.

A:

That's the crazy thing. I am.

Blackout.

Flash-forward to the present—bedroom of Missy and A. A., eyes wide open, unable to sleep, lies in bed. Missy climbs into bed in lingerie, wraps herself around A. like a vine.

Missy:

You're you. And she's her.

A:

And you're you. Now go to sleep. *He stares up at the ceiling.*

Missy:

How did you know where to find me?

Pause. A. studies her a while.

A:

I went back to the bar in Bakersfield. And there you were. Still dancing, like an angel.

She swings one leg his torso, straddles him. Looks out the window at the moon.

Missy:

Full moon tonight.

A:

(beat) Full moon. *He pulls her towards him.*

Lights dim on Missy and A.

Spotlight up on Maeve. She appears exactly as she did in the opening scene. Same energy, same story—she's finishing what she started.

Maeve (*to audience*):

And I didn't even realize it, but before the thoughts had even had a chance to crystalize in my head, my legs were already running on their own volition. Because my legs, they knew—long before my mind—what I was gonna do. So I found myself, suddenly, running—bound for the moon, bound for my new life, bound for the road that stretched out like an oily black ribbon coming undone, unraveling beneath that beautiful moon, and my feet slapped hard and flat against the pavement of that dark, bumpy road, and with every running step that went *slappity-slap-slap* I was thanking my friends, saying *Thank you, thank you, thank you*, under my breath to Frances and Sinclair and *Thank you!* to Aaron, for without them I wouldn't have known how time differs on the moon, I mean—I wouldn't have known at all! So I whispered *Thank you, thank you, thank you*, and my heart pumped and my legs sprinted, and my breath came in short, stabbing spurts that burned the back of my throat, and that's the way it went and the way it would go, me running like a crazyman full of wild abandonment until the moment would finally hit and my future would rain down into my lap like a river of quarters flowing from a lucky slot machine, or like a bolt of lightning zapping me in the head, or a block of cement crashing on me and shattering all my bones, or like dandelion seeds, all white and puffy and feather-duster-like, raining down on my head, clinging by all matter and means to my hair and eyebrows and eyelashes, the way dandelion seeds do when they're wayward and floating. That's how it went and how it would go until the future hit—all my thoughts zig-zagging in a million-and-one directions, me flying through the dark like an arrow released from the bow, soaring towards nothing less than the whole wide future before me, the whole wide world ahead—me, speeding towards my shiny new life, bright and full and surrounded by a soft white glow-y halo... and I fixed my gaze on that great big moon as if it were life itself, as if it were *my* life—my shiny, new life.

(beat) And I ran, and I ran, and I ran.

Sound of heartbeat crescendos—then fades into sound of rain.

Lights out.

End of Play



Pas Toucher / Roger Camp

\$100 for 100 Words Contest Winner

Love Poem

Pamela Sumners

Darling, while I was gone for the summer
you heated gas on the stove and burned
down the house, and darling, while I was
gone, you invited a snake pit into the kudzu
and they strangled every last flower we had.
This is what I had heard but when I returned
the house stood true against the falling sky
but one dog was dead and another ripped
in his throat. I know my people always said
you were a little cold-natured for a Southern girl.
It must be those Yankee Calvinist parents you had.

\$100 for 100 Words Contest Finalists

Suitable Match

Melinda Winograd

You're the circus tent sewn
from red and white flags,
erected on a pillar of salt,
while I am the tiger in a box
behind concessions turning
tricks for scraps of praise.

In the Dark (a Micro Essay on Black Sails' James Flint and the Gay Villain Trope)

Lory Saiz

We're kids who grew with only villains to turn to for a hint of queerness, and then grew older to find ourselves between knowing better, knowing the dark heritage it rests on, and knowing we can't carry the shame of those who have done this to us in their place, knowing that our hearts are still in it and have the right to be. If so, then James Flint is catharsis, he's the gay-coded villain who is actually gay and not actually a villain, just as enraged as us at that unjust distortion, living in the process of undoing it.

The End of the World?

Claudia Reed

The smoke pumps darkness. I focus on Frankie's profile as he passes through and we emerge. It was industrial, that time.

Now it's happening again. The forest combusting to the north yellow-grays the sun. The local trees are stunned with empathy. The little dog lies down beside the road, panting and blinking. Frankie is just to my left. I remind him that he died seven years ago but he doesn't say anything. Never did say much, except to answer a question. So I ask for the second time: "Is this the end of the world?"

The Bar at the Bottom of the Hill

Thomas Boos

Where our fathers met our mothers in the lampless gravel parking lot. Where there was nothing at all. Where we ended up spending the best part of our twenties. Where the sky at night was a black upturned bowl that we never gazed into—never wondered what was beyond because we knew there was nothing. Where the neon flag hummed above the door, and the taxidermy deer stared from every wall. Where they sang *West Virginia, mountain mama*. Where our lives came to an end. Where there was nothing at all.

As a God

Mary-Chris Hines

Her son, the monk, black vestments;
In his cell the voices, organ,
Moaning, chanting. He prays to lords
She never read or heard before.
The religious day starts each sunrise,
Services run all night,
His face white beneath the hood,
Eyes focused beyond her.
Mourning, she enters the kitchen,
Pours more coffee, awaits his reckoning.
She loves him as a God
And bows before him, crying.

Zapped by Electricity

Judith Ralston Ellison

William Faulkner's words were my hell at fourteen. My father, professor of American Literature at an Ivy League . . . okay, Harvard, made me make a poster with Faulkner's words: *Gratitude is a quality similar to electricity: it must be produced and discharged and used up in order to exist at all . . .* I didn't study at Harvard but became fascinated by the mystery of electricity. I am a happy man, a hands-on electrician. I own my own company and my dad works part-time for me cutting lumber and selling nails. The poster hangs in the shop.

The Shovelers

Bob Thurber

The shovelers arrive early, dragging their shadows across the snow. Most are thick-bodied old men with wide shoulders and short beards, but there are a few scraggy, pasty-faced youths among them. Long coats conceal their overalls. Most wear wool caps. All wear boots. The group huddles beside the gravesite to share cigarettes. Soon a truck will arrive, bringing tools. The foreman will hand out pickaxes and shovels then stand back and watch. The foreman is not a shoveler, though he used to be, but so long ago only the fathers of the shovelers remember. Those fathers who were themselves shovelers.

November

Jodee Stanley

I didn't mean to have this conversation again: about why the heat is on and the window open. Why sometimes my mouth bleeds for no reason. Why I bought that hat but never wear it. November's just like that. One day you look outside and the sidewalks are empty. You find yourself walking on the gray edge of everything, shoulders hunched up around your ears to block the wind. You talk and then you stop talking. Listen. Our bones are trying to tell us something.

Whiskey Mermaid

AD Conner

When I lived with my parents in the shotgun house, I'd hide in their bathroom and pretend to be a mermaid stranded in a stranger's tub. In the living room, they'd drown out life with glass bottles and loud music. I'd bargain: God, make them normal, and I'll never ask to be a mermaid again. I have my own family now, but in the bathroom, I crawl into the bottle hidden under the sink, searching for normal. I drink my way out and find the toilet. I'm a flushed goldfish spinning down, praying: let me live with the mermaids.

Plow in the Sky

Jesse Sensibar

I looked up from my tractor and saw the plow in the sky turning white furrows, miles wide in a blue earth stretching across the northern horizon.

He didn't say a word, just kept working that plow in the sky, sowing thorns of hell, seeds of heaven.

What Happened to Mr. Morrissey

Steven B. Rosenfeld

The spring of 1954 was the first time my father let me down. It was all about Mr. Morrissey.

When we arrived in school that May morning, we found a stern-looking grey-haired woman sitting at Mr. Morrissey's old wooden desk. She clasped her hands together on the desktop and looked at us over half-rim glasses.

"Good morning, class," she said without a smile. "I'm Mrs. Davis and I'll be your teacher for the rest of the year."

What happened to Mr. Morrissey?

"I'm not at liberty to say," Mrs. Davis told us, "but we'll do our best to pick up where Mr. Morrissey left off and carry on."

But, of course, we didn't. Yes, Mrs. Davis finished the prescribed sixth grade curriculum, but it wasn't the same. I missed many things about Mr. Morrissey, but what we surely didn't carry on were our derisive parodies of the Army-McCarthy hearings we'd all been watching on TV.

Before the live coverage of the McCarthy hearings, we didn't even have a television in our house. My parents read the *Herald Tribune* and Dorothy Schiff's liberal *New York Post*—my father often reading the *Post* editorials aloud at breakfast—and they listened to the radio, mostly classical music on WQXR and John Cameron Swayze's nightly newscast. We all tuned in to Edward R. Murrow's *Hear It Now* on Friday nights and, just for fun, Jack Benny on Sundays. But no television. My parents said it was a mindless distraction. "Intelligent people like us read books," my father told us, "we don't waste time watching television."

My father's study, just off the entry foyer of our house, was filled with books. Floor-to-ceiling shelves held complete sets of Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, George Eliot, Jane Austen, and much more. I wanted to believe Dad had read most of them. I too read books—the ones my grandmother bought for me, like Illustrated Classics versions of *Treasure Island* and *Tom Sawyer* and scores of Landmark History books—and the more ambitious novels like Jack London's and James Fenimore Cooper's urged on me by Mom, who'd earned her degree in American Literature at Brooklyn College while Dad was overseas in the Army. I also read comic books, although my parents frowned

on them. They tolerated Archie and Bugs Bunny, but the ones I really loved, like Superman and Batman and Captain Marvel, were banned from our house. I had to buy them with my allowance, read them in school during recess, and then give them to my friends.

Even with no television at home, I had managed to see a few TV shows. My two best friends from school, chubby, jovial Andy and short, wiry Frank, both had 10" black-and-white TV sets with rabbit-ear antennas. Our three-bedroom colonial in the middle of a tree-lined side street, white with green trim and shutters, was only a few blocks from the old red brick elementary school, so I regularly walked to and from school with Andy, who lived on the next street over in a house very much like ours, except the trim and shutters were black.

When I went to Andy's or Frank's house after school, we'd sit in their living rooms, eat Mallomars and watch Superman or Roy Rogers or Captain Video. Once in a while, the three of us went to the Saturday afternoon movie matinees and then drank chocolate milkshakes at the ice cream parlor next door, although my parents carefully monitored what movies I could see. Westerns with John Wayne and Gene Autry and comedies with Martin & Lewis or Bob Hope and Bing Crosby were OK, but not the science fiction movies I yearned for.

"Those movies are too scary for kids, Davie," my mother proclaimed. "They'll give you nightmares and I don't want you staying awake all night." So I didn't go to movies Andy and Frank were allowed to see, like *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and *The Man from Planet X*.

Although our town was staunchly Republican, I knew my parents were Democrats who were going to vote for Adlai Stevenson in the 1952 election. In fact, Dad was on the local Democratic committee and wore an "All the Way with Adlai" button, although not to work. So, when it was announced in school—I was in fifth grade then—that we'd be let out early the following Wednesday to see General Eisenhower's motorcade come through town, I asked my father if I had to go.

"Yes, you do, Davie" he said. "Forget his politics. The man led our Army that won the war against the Nazis and the Japanese. You may not get another chance to see a true hero." My dad had been in the Army during the war and considered himself a patriot. Tall and imposing, with thick curly hair just beginning to grey at the temples, he was a successful trial lawyer in the city. He wore gold-rimmed glasses, three-piece suits to work and a tan

cardigan and slippers at home, where he sometimes worked in his study at night or tinkered at his basement workbench on weekends. When he laughed, there were crow's feet next to his eyes.

Dad was very conscious of his standing in our community. He participated in the campaign to raise funds for a new hospital and bought prominent seats for High Holy Day services at Temple Sinai. And he taught us to "respect the Stars and Stripes," which he said symbolized "our sacred Constitution." So I went with my class to see Eisenhower, and we stood in the crowd on the curb waving the little American flags on wooden sticks they gave us, as Ike's open limousine went by and he waved back.

"Dad, what's an egghead?" I asked one evening during that election season. "A couple of kids at school said our family were 'eggheads' because we're for Stevenson. The way they said it, that didn't sound too good."

"Nonsense," my father said with a laugh that brought out the crow's feet. "An egghead is someone who uses his head. Someone who thinks. That's exactly what we are, and you should be proud of it." He tousled my hair.

I guess it was because we were all eggheads that Dad set very high standards for my sister and me, particularly how we were expected to do in school. If I came home with a 95 on a test, Dad would always ask, "so who got the other five points?" He enforced strict rules of behavior as well, but he rarely lost his temper. The closest he ever came was when I was ten. Andy and I got caught filching candy bars at the A&P, and they called our parents.

That evening, as soon as he got home from work, Dad summoned me to his study, closed the door and pointed to the chair opposite his desk. Then he sat at his desk with his grey-green eyes fixed on me. Before saying anything, he kept looking at me for several minutes, like Superman using his x-ray vision. When he did speak, his voice was calm but more intense than I'd ever heard it.

"Do you know what this is about, David?" he asked, not taking his eyes off me. He always called me "David," not "Davie," when he wanted me to listen carefully.

"Yes, sir," I said, looking at the floor. "What happened at the A&P, I guess."

"What *happened?*" my father said. "You mean what you and your friend Andy *did*, don't you?"

"Well, I mean it was Andy's—" I started to say.

Now he raised his voice and pointed a finger across the desk. "Oh, no. The one thing I won't tolerate is for you to try to blame this on Andy. Listen, son, we all are responsible for our own actions. Something like this most of all. Understand?"

I nodded, still looking down.

"Now I want you to look at me," Dad said, lowering his voice again. I looked up and he met my gaze.

"Your Mom and I didn't raise you to be a thief," he said. "I don't expect *ever* to have to say that again. If I did something like this when I was your age, your grandfather would have taken a belt to me." Dad didn't lift a hand to me. He knew he didn't have to. Instead, my allowance was cut off for a month—which meant no comic books and no movies—and I wasn't allowed to go to Andy's or Frank's house after school "until further notice." So, no TV, either.

But Dad was just as hard on himself. If he lost a client or a motion in court, he would berate himself for days, brooding alone in his study at night with his J&B on the rocks, hiding behind the evening's *New York Post*. I guess if he could have, he would have docked his own allowance, too.

When we started seeing the name Senator Joseph McCarthy in the headlines of *The New York Post* and hearing it on Edward R. Murrow's program, Dad sat us down and explained that McCarthy was spreading "a plague" that could strike anywhere.

"It's not just Communists and liberals he's after," Dad said, "it's also homosexuals."

Homosexuals? That was a word I hadn't ever heard before. "What are homosexuals, Dad?" I asked.

He stopped for a moment, glanced from me to my sister, who was only seven, then looked away. "You don't have to know everything, David," Dad said. "Let's just say that these days everyone has to be careful."

The next morning, on the way to school, I asked Andy if he knew what homosexuals were.

"They're fags, stupid," Andy replied. That wasn't at all helpful, but then Andy started talking about the Knicks game the night before, so that was the end of it.

Dad had said everyone had to be careful, but he was hardly careful when the school board tried to prevent Pete Seeger from giving a concert in the high school auditorium. He and a few others in town formed a committee and spoke out. "Pete Seeger may have leaned pretty far to the left twenty years

ago,” Dad told us, “but he and Lee Hays stepped up to support the war effort against the Nazis. Not letting him sing violates the First Amendment right to free speech.” In the end, Pete came and we all went to the concert. No one sang along more enthusiastically than my father.

As I turned eleven and started sixth grade in September of 1953, I had come to believe that my father was right about almost everything. But he was wrong when he said I might never see another true hero. When he said that, I hadn’t met Mr. Morrissey.

Mr. Morrissey was the first male teacher I ever had, and nothing like the straight-laced middle-age women, some tall and skinny, others short and stout, who’d been my teachers since first grade. Mr. Morrissey was in his late twenties, medium height, with a high forehead and thinning brown hair. He wore horn-rimmed glasses that he was always pushing back up onto the bridge of his nose. Occasionally, a sheepish smile would cross his face when one of us asked a question he didn’t know the answer to, or maybe didn’t want to answer.

I quickly concluded that Mr. Morrissey was an egghead. He had a soft voice that made you lean in to hear him, which we always did because we didn’t want to miss anything he said. When he wrote on the blackboard, it was never rote rules for us to copy into our notebooks because they would be on the test. Instead, he used colored chalk to draw bold diagrams and cartoons that made us laugh, but also helped us remember the lesson—funny little characters in the shape of Vs and Ns and As to depict verbs, nouns and adjectives, or three square-rigged sailing ships gliding across the Atlantic to discover America, or Tom Sawyer whitewashing the fence.

Nor did Mr. Morrissey ever stick entirely to what he was supposed to be teaching. One day, when we were reading *The Count of Monte Cristo*, he suddenly stopped and looked at his chalk drawing of sad-looking, bearded Edmond Dantes behind bars in the Chateau d’If prison, then stared out the window, as if he’d just seen something interesting in the schoolyard.

“You know,” he said, “in a way, Edmond Dantes reminds me of one of my heroes, Eugene V. Debs.” He turned back to face the class. “Has anyone ever heard of Debs?” None of us had. “He was sent to prison for leading a railway workers’ strike in 1894. While he was in prison, he became a socialist and when he got out, he founded the Socialist Party of America and ran for President five times as the Socialist Party candidate.” Before we knew it, Mr. Morrissey was explaining what socialism was.

When I told my parents about that class, I learned something about my father and grandfather that I'd never known. Dad's middle initial, E, stood for Eugene, after Debs himself. My grandfather had voted for Debs for President four times!

On the first day of class in September, Mr. Morrissey had told us he was a science fiction fan and urged us to read H.G. Wells, whom he called "the Shakespeare of science fiction," although no Wells novel was on the sixth-grade curriculum. Then, when we studied the great explorers, Mr. Morrissey pulled down a map of the world, but at the same time drew a diagram of the solar system on the blackboard. We knew from fifth grade science how far away the planets were from earth. Tracing the routes of Magellan and Vasco da Gama on the map, he then added a space ship to his drawing on the blackboard. "The distances those guys sailed back in the 16th century were so huge, it was like someone today taking a rocket trip to Jupiter or Mars," he told us. And suddenly we were discussing the feasibility of interplanetary space travel.

During the unit on the American Revolution, when we came to Benedict Arnold, Mr. Morrissey started a class discussion on the meaning of the word "traitor." That led him to Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, who had been executed the previous June for giving atomic secrets to the Russians. "Were the Rosenbergs traitors, like Benedict Arnold?" someone asked.

"Well, if they really did what they were found guilty of, then yes," Mr. Morrissey replied. "But a lot of people think they were framed and rushed to the electric chair as part of this red scare stuff that's sweeping the country."

When I came home and told my parents what Mr. Morrissey had said about the Rosenbergs, Mom suggested inviting him for dinner the following Saturday night. Having unmarried teachers over for dinner was encouraged by the PTA, and Mom thought that, "as a bachelor," Mr. Morrissey might "appreciate a home-cooked meal." Mom liked entertaining, although it wasn't often that Dad was willing to put up with dinner guests. This time, though, Dad agreed that we should invite Mr. Morrissey. He'd said more than once how he worried the Rosenbergs were victims of anti-Semitism, so he was eager to find out if Mr. Morrissey agreed.

As if we were expecting royalty, Mom polished the sterling silverware and took out the gold-edged china my father had shipped home from Japan. She made one of her best dishes, pot roast with mashed potatoes, and apple

brown betty with vanilla ice cream for dessert. Once everything was ready to go in the oven, she went out to get her hair done.

That evening, there was lots of conversation, with Mr. Morrissey the center of attention. The grown-ups drank wine and talked about the Rosenbergs, Eisenhower, Pete Seeger and the “Red Scare.” At one point, Mr. Morrissey made me blush by saying what a good student I was. But what I remember most is when he told my mother it was OK for me to see those science fiction movies.

“Most of them have some grounding in scientific fact,” Mr. Morrissey said, “they’d be educational for a smart kid like him. For example, my roommate, Matt, who’s a real movie buff, says *The Day the Earth Stood Still* is a serious allegory about the threat of nuclear war. David’s old enough to understand that, so don’t hold back his intellectual curiosity.”

When Mr. Morrissey mentioned his roommate, a strange look came over my father’s face, and he shot an odd glance across the table at my mother. And Mr. Morrissey showed one of those awkward smiles I’d seen so many times in school. Soon after that, he thanked my parents for a lovely dinner and said it was time for him to go home.

“What a nice man,” my mother proclaimed right after Mr. Morrissey left. “He’d make some lucky girl a fine husband.” The way she said that, it sounded like she’d been rehearsing the line in her mind for delivery the minute he was out the door.

I’d never thought for a minute about Mr. Morrissey getting married, but for several days after that, I wondered if Mom had fallen in love with him and was going to leave us so she could be that lucky girl. Nothing like that happened, of course, but thanks to Mr. Morrissey, Mom did change her mind about sci-fi films. So that winter, I got to go with Andy and Frank to *Invaders from Mars*, *It Came from Outer Space*, and my all-time favorite, *War of the Worlds*.

When I told Mr. Morrissey one Monday morning in December that we’d seen *War of the Worlds* the previous Saturday, he reminded me that it was a novel by H.G. Wells. “Fine that you saw the movie,” he said, “now get the book and read it.” All I had to do was mention that to my mother, and for my birthday she gave me *Seven Novels of H.G. Wells*. By the end of the summer, I’d read them all—starting, of course, with *The War of the Worlds*. In the introduction to the *Seven Novels*, I learned that Wells was a socialist, just like Eugene Debs. But by that time, Mr. Morrissey was gone, so I couldn’t tell him.

After the Christmas recess, it didn't take long for Mr. Morrissey to go from Debs and the Rosenbergs to Senator McCarthy. Hardly a day went by when he didn't find some reason to mention McCarthy, tell us how the man had made a career of forcing honest people out of the government and ruining lives based on unsupported accusations, and how "innocent folks all over the country are getting surprise visits from the FBI." He said he was disappointed that President Eisenhower refused to confront McCarthy. "He says he doesn't want to get down in the gutter with that guy," Mr. Morrissey said, "but that's just an excuse. The man who defeated Hitler's army in Normandy could get rid of McCarthy if he wanted to."

Then, in the spring, when McCarthy took on the United States Army in those televised hearings, my parents finally bought a television, which they put in the wood-paneled basement rec room so we all could watch. And Mr. Morrissey came up with the idea of staging our own version of the hearings on Friday afternoons.

Because most of us had been watching the hearings or the nightly news excerpts at home with our parents, we all knew the main cast of characters. Even if we weren't exactly sure who was who and what it was all about, we knew who the bad guys were—not only McCarthy, but also a rodent-like guy named Roy Cohn, and someone called G. David Schine—and that among the good guys were Army Secretary Stevens, the kindly old committee chairman Senator Mundt, and a Boston lawyer named Welch. When Mr. Morrissey handed out the parts, Freddy, the smartest and funniest boy in the class, was chosen to play Roy Cohn, and he cracked us up with his weaselly imitation. Jimmy, whom I'd always thought of as a good basketball player but dumb, nailed it as McCarthy. One of the girls, Vicky, who'd been the star of the school Christmas play, took the part of Schine. She dressed up as a shoeshine boy who kept forgetting what he was supposed to say, including his name—G. David Shoeshine. She was constantly rummaging through her shoeshine box, looking for her lines. My friend Frank was picked to play Welch, but he couldn't compete with Freddy, Jimmy and Vicky's antics. I got the part of Secretary Stevens, but I played him straight. At one point, Freddy, ad-libbing as usual in the role of Roy Cohn, pointed at me and said "I have reason to believe if you look in that guy's desk, you will find RED crayons!"

Mr. Morrissey insisted on being Sen. Mundt, probably so he could keep us from getting totally out of hand. He bought a plastic hammer at Woolworth's so he could gavel the weekly session to a close after half an hour.

It was great fun, but Mr. Morrissey made certain that we were learning at the same time. The Friday before the Memorial Day weekend, as our mock hearing wrapped up, I raised my hand.

“Mr. Morrissey,” I asked, “are you sure we’re OK doing this? I mean, aren’t you afraid the FBI might come after *us*?” He started to show one of those half-smiles, as if he didn’t want to answer the question, but then he changed his mind.

“No, I’m not worried,” he said firmly. “I think Senator McCarthy is finally on the rocks. That guy Welch,”—he pointed to Frank—“has his number.” Everyone laughed. “Seriously, though, I hope some Friday soon we’ll be able to play our version of The End.”

At home, when I told my parents what Mr. Morrissey had said, Dad nodded. “Yes,” he said, “Hopefully, McCarthy is nearly through.”

Just as Dad and Mr. Morrissey predicted, the hearings soon ended—badly for Senator McCarthy. But the happy ending was never played in our classroom. Jimmy never got to point his finger at Frank and accuse one of his associates of being a Communist, and Frank never got to recite lawyer Welch’s famous comeback—“Senator, you’ve done enough. Have you no sense of decency, sir? At long last, have you left no sense of decency?” By the time that dramatic exchange flashed on our TV screens, Mr. Morrissey had vanished, somber Mrs. Davis was sitting at his desk, and our Friday afternoon lampoons were no more.

The day he disappeared, the talk in the cafeteria, during recess and after school was all about Mr. Morrissey. Each of us had a theory about what had happened to him, although everyone agreed it must have something to do with what we’d been up to on Friday afternoons. The most common opinion was that somebody’s parents—there were lots of guesses on whose—had sent an anonymous note to the Board of Ed, just like in *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and gotten him fired. Others thought Mr. Morrissey had received one of those visits from the FBI after all. Maybe the agents had been sent to his house by Roy Cohn, or by Senator McCarthy himself. There was even a view that Mr. Morrissey was in jail, like his hero Eugene Debs. We needed to know the truth and, if Mrs. Davis wasn’t at liberty to tell us, we’d get our parents to find out—not only find out what happened to Mr. Morrissey, but bring him back to us.

So when my father came home that evening, I knocked on the door of his study. “Dad, I need to talk to you,” I said. “It’s about Mr. Morrissey. There

was a substitute in class today, and she said she'd be our teacher for the rest of the year."

"Yes, I know," my father replied.

"You know? How?"

"I think all the parents know. We all got phone calls this morning, after you'd left for school."

"So then, you're going to get together, form a committee and get Mr. Morrissey back, right? Like you did last year when they tried to stop Pete Seeger from singing?"

"No, son, it's not the same."

"Why not? You told us then that it was all part of—you called it 'the plague' that Senator McCarthy was spreading." I could feel my blood rising, and my voice went up an octave. I repeated all the schoolyard theories about what might have happened to Mr. Morrissey. "We can't just sit here and let them turn Mr. Morrissey over to the FBI," I pleaded. "You said just last week that McCarthy was good as done for."

"Yes, let's hope that's true," my father said.

"So, what are you afraid of, Dad?"

"Look, Davie," my father said, not looking at me, "this thing with Mr. Morrissey isn't that simple. It's not like it was with Pete Seeger, not at all. Your mother and I just can't do anything this time."

By now, I was in tears. "I don't understand," I said.

He got up from his chair, put his arm around my shoulder and hugged me. "I know you don't. But you will when you're older." And with that, he poured himself a J&B and sat back down to read the *Post*.

Over the next few days, I found out I wasn't alone. Andy, Frank, Freddy, Jimmy, Vicky had all had more or less the same conversations with their parents. We still didn't know what had happened to Mr. Morrissey. All we knew was that we weren't going to get him back.

Gray-haired Mrs. Davis dutifully led us through the rest of *Oliver Twist*, Robert Frost's poems and whatever math and American history we still had to cover to be ready for Junior High School in the fall. And then the school year was over. Andy and Frank left for summer camp, but I wasn't going to camp that year, because Dad had just bought a new '54 Chevrolet Bel Air and we were going to spend six weeks seeing the USA in it, just as Dinah Shore sang on our new TV. The trip was planned for late July, so I had a few weeks to kill on my own. I rode my blue bike around the neighborhood, pretending I

was Captain Video and the bike was my spaceship. I shot baskets in the driveway and read H.G. Wells' novels. And I went to the movies. It was the summer of *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, *Monster from the Ocean Floor*, *The Stranger from Venus*, and *Riders to the Stars*, and I wanted to see them all.

So there I was by myself one Wednesday afternoon in July, at the air-conditioned Orpheum Theater on Main Street, munching popcorn and riding to the stars. It was an amazing trip. But then, as the lights went on and I got up to leave, I saw something even more amazing. Sitting two rows in front of me was Mr. Morrissey. But he wasn't alone. With him was a young man about his age. I figured it was Matt, the roommate he'd mentioned at dinner that night, but, as the lights went up, I noticed that they had been holding hands during the movie.

"Mr. Morrissey!" I blurted out. He turned around, but as soon as he saw me, he turned back and slumped down in his seat. My first instinct was to come forward to speak with him, but I quickly realized that he was trying to pretend he hadn't seen me. Before I could decide what to do, the two of them got up, hurried down their row in the other direction and left the theater through a side door.

I skipped the milkshake and rushed home to tell my parents what had happened. Luckily, Dad was home early from work and sitting in his study reading the *Post*. I knew I was supposed to knock before disturbing him there, but I was too excited.

"Dad!" I blurted out as I barged in. "Guess who I saw at the movies? Mr. Morrissey! So, he's not in jail after all. He's still in town."

"I remember he told us you were one of his best students," Dad replied. "I'm sure he was pleased to see you."

"Well, that was the weird part," I said. "I know he saw me, but he pretended he didn't. And he and the guy he was with ran out of the theater without talking to me."

"The *guy* he was with?" Dad asked. A strange look crossed his face, like when Mr. Morrissey mentioned his roommate at dinner that night.

"Yes. I guess it was his roommate, but I think I saw them holding hands during the movie."

"Sit down, David," Dad said, folding his newspaper. "Your Mom wanted to tell you this when Mr. Morrissey was fired, but I thought it would be better to wait until you were a little older so you could understand. But you may as well know now."

"Know what?" I asked.

"Do you remember a few months ago when you asked me what homosexuals are?" Dad replied.

"Yes. You wouldn't tell me, so I asked Andy. He said a homosexual is a fag. Some kids in school were calling Adlai Stevenson a fag, so I figured it was like an egghead. Isn't it?"

"No, David, it isn't. First of all, that word, fag, is a horrible insult, and I don't ever want to hear you using it again, OK?"

"OK, but then what's a homosexual?"

"David, it's a man who is attracted to other men, not women. It turns out that's what Mr. Morrissey is, as you saw at the movies today, so the school board had to let him go. They had to do it to protect you and the other boys in the school."

"Protect us? From Mr. Morrissey?" I couldn't believe I was hearing him right.

"Yes, David. Homosexuality just isn't normal, it's unnatural."

"But Dad," I persisted, "you said Senator McCarthy was against homosexuals, and you hated him. You were so glad that he lost at the hearings. So why do you agree with him about this?"

"Look, David, I'm glad we're finally rid of McCarthy, but as I told you, this isn't the same thing. This country isn't ready to accept homosexuals, particularly not as schoolteachers. And, to tell you the truth, neither am I. In fact, if you must know, your mother and I ended up signing the parents' petition to get rid of Mr. Morrissey."

That ended the conversation. For weeks, I was devastated. I couldn't shake the feeling that my father had let me down. But I guess he was right about one thing. Back in 1954, I really was too young to understand. It would be many years before I could fully comprehend what had happened to Mr. Morrissey, and why, fifteen years before Stonewall, my own father had helped to make it happen.

Usetah' Be People

Roeethyl Lunn

We were familiar with the Chitlin Strut entertainers. They came to town and did their shows in tuxedos and evening gowns which mirrored the air of success. We saw the way they lived and were not envious of them—hobos living out of their own cars. We had Black preachers, teachers and successful farmers—the local Black aristocracy—who separated themselves from us and look down on us with disdain. But we never had access to Blacks at higher levels of success and accomplishment. We didn't have those images to imitate.

We didn't start seeing storied Black people in print until after desegregation happened. The now defunct Dixiecrats was the political party of choice in our state then, and it had instructed local officials to censor any material which promoted integration or otherwise posed a threat to the *Southern way of life*. So when I first started researching Black-owned publications such as *Ebony*, *Hue*, or *Jet* magazines and saw archived black-and-white, glossed-over images of Eartha Kitts and Josephine Baker being celebrated in France, and Martin Luther King and his wife dressed so elegantly and dancing at his Nobel Peace Prize gala in Sweden, I was astonished. I was surprised to see Black people back in those days living their lives like affluent people do today. I still cannot get myself to believe that even back then some Black people were well educated, lived in nice homes, own their own companies, and actually lived in foreign countries. I was astounded at the great chasm that existed between their lives and the way we had to live our lives in the South. Every time I saw these images, I always found myself thinking or saying out aloud in a dumbfounded stupor, "So *this* is what some Black people were doing while we were picking cotton." How were those people notified? How were they and not us alerted to the fact that the opportunities which they involved themselves in were available to them? How did they know that they could involve themselves in these kinds of endeavors? What gave them privy to do this, and why wasn't all of us, granted such an insight?

Living under the sponsorship of a segregated South and being regulated in every aspect by belittling Jim Crow laws was not only taxing, it was often perilous for a Black person during the early to mid-1900s and before. Members of my family considered ourselves blessed because we had a history of just being mistreated and dismissed, and not counted among the ones that were hanged or executed innocently.

For me personally, I knew that racially based atrocities were out there. I heard when they were publicly recognized or reported in newspapers, but as a child and then as a teenage girl growing up in the 1950s and '60s, the only harsh realities of Jim Crow in which I could be recognized were centered primarily around my family's finances. We were sharecroppers, and my father was basically illiterate. He could write his name and spell out words to read them, but he couldn't count very well. At the end of the year and time for accounts to be settled, he could only trust that the landowner was not taking advantage of him. When my mother suspected that the calculations were wrong, my father didn't have the nerve to confront the landowner, or he didn't trust himself enough to be able to get a job as a day laborer or as a janitor at one of the mills downtown.

I was ashamed and did not want my classmates or teachers in the modern and sanitary school that I attended to know how poorly my family lived. My parents could not afford the twenty cents a day it cost to have my school's hot cafeteria lunch, so I spent the lunch hour in the library reading books and periodicals. Except for electric lights, an electric stove if you were lucky, and an old car or truck, most of the people in my area lived as if we were in the last part of the eighteen century instead of the mid-nineteen hundreds. We had no running water or bathroom in our house. We washed ourselves in tin tubs and used a smelly outhouse, hid ourselves in the woods, or sought out overgrown weeds in fields when we needed to relieve ourselves. There was no money to purchase toilet tissue, sanitary napkins, toothpaste, or hair rollers. We used leaves and corn cobs when we defecated, used tightly wrapped old rags to keep menstrual blood from seeping out of our confined area, rubbed Ivory soap or baking soda on the corner of a wet towel to clean our teeth, and used brown paper bags, torn apart and twisted into individual spiral strips, to roll our hair.

We were grateful to God when desegregation came and lifted Jim Crow's ties.

Factories began hiring Black men and women as full-scale employees, and with these new wages, families were now able to purchase fully constructed, three-bedroom brick homes or partially completed wooden shell ones. We were given a chance to live a better quality of life. We saw ourselves as different people, a people of hope and opportunity. It took decades before we began to see that desegregation, even with its influx of new advantages, was only a pyrrhic victory. For those of us who lived lives before it came, saw and suffered through the costs required to bring it into being, and are still living after it has happened in this “New Day,” reflection will help us confess that underneath are elements that should have been hurled away: poverty, ignorance, and social injustice. Thrown out also were elements of Black life that are now needed and much desired. Black people have forgotten how to love and care for each other’s wellbeing, have colorful personalities yet sturdy ways, and having the faith-girded, incomprehensibly resourceful, and rebounding character of Black folks that used to be.

Snoot

Our favorite visitation from my mother’s people was not a brother of hers, in particular, but a first cousin of hers who everyone called Snoot. Snoot was a football player sized middle-age man. He was tall, dirty red in color, and wild, just like the rest of his family. Everyone loved him because he was quick-witted and knew how to stir up fun. He would always bring my mother some homemade wine when he came, and winked at her when he laughingly told her to “Keep dis to use when ya cook yo’ Christmas cakes...Here, let dem chillum taste some...ain’t gon hurt ‘em.” When he would open one of the jars, my parents would allow him to let us taste a little of it. Snoot loved drinking and rabblorousing at all the juke joints he could find, and in the wee hours of the morning when he apparently couldn’t find anyone else in Chesterfield, South Carolina to amuse him, he would “suddenly git a hankerin” to come visit us. We could always hear him coming because every car he seemed to have found always had a loud and ticking sound. No matter what time of night, we would hear his old car, and someone would shout loudly, “Dat’s Snoot.” We would always wake up grinning. When he was ready to leave, and we were saying goodbye to him, he could make us fall out laughing when he would begin talking to his car. After he got it cranked, and got it running good, he’d ask it,

“Where you goin’, car? Listen at it, ya’ll. That thing talk’n. Listen what it say’n.”

Even though Snoot would mouth what the car was supposedly saying, we could hear it ourselves as the motor said, “Ches..ter..field, Ches..ter..field.” We never saw Snoot in the daytime. And the very first boyfriend I ever had looked and acted just like him.

Idel and Her Sisters

The women in my mother’s family believed strongly in being caretakers. In that way, they were similar, but in other ways, they were so diverse.

My mother was tall and heavy, but to our puzzlement, my father always called her Slim. When one of her friends discovered she still had a picture of my mother when they were young and showed it to us, I could see that she was beautiful and had been very slim. By the time I came to know her, she was in her middle forties and had suffered through years of taking care of ten living children, burying the children that had aborted themselves before their time was due, performing labor-demanding farm chores, preparing thousands of meals, and having to take the authoritative position in every major decision our father ever made. She was still a handsome woman; but over the years, she had disregarded her physical beauty. The hair that hung to her mid-back on the picture had changed into a mixed gray and black curly fuzz, like Albert Einstein’s, and her long bout with asthma and type 2 diabetes left her eyes looking weak on some days.

On the other hand, Lela Mae kept herself up and was always a beautiful woman. She had delicate features, beautiful and well-fitting sundresses and coats, beautifully polished nails, and black silky hair—like a lighter complexion version of Lena Horn. She eventually moved to Maryland and married a man with a well-paying job. Lela Mae always considered my mother as her mother, and in gratitude for my mother’s earlier efforts, she alone or she and her husband Bubber were forever taking yearly trips down South to see us in the summer, driving long and spring-colored cars that had rear ends that look like small whales. Lela Mae and her husband never had children, so she scattered her motherly affections on her sisters’ children. She sent us clothes regularly and always sent my mother train tickets in late fall—after the summer crops were harvested—for her to come visit her and harvest

more clothes or anything else in Lela Mae's house she could bring back home in her large suitcases.

Nellie, my mother's other sister, had a wider face than my mother or Lela Mae. She and all her children look as if they had within their bloodline a Native American or an Asian. She married a widower who had children that was nearly as old as she, and my mother said Nelly addressed her husband, Brooks, as *sir* while they were dating. Nellie wore an apron over her dress every day, and even though she and her husband raised both his children and her and his children, she was a better housekeeper. Her house stayed cleaner and more organized than my mother's. Nellie kept her house dark in summer with shades drawn and screen doors closed. We kept our house wide open in summer, so our house had flytraps and Nellie's didn't. Brooks sheltered her. He insisted on being the only authority figure in their house, and when he died, she had difficulty adjusting. After Brooks died, they had to leave the farm and move into a house near town. Even with the move, she still lived within the same seven-mile radius in the same small, Southern county all of her life. I cannot remember whether she ever even visited other states as my mother did. I know she never went to a doctor until the ambulance attendants took her to one shortly after she died. I know she was a great cook, and the preacher was always at their house for meals, especially in the summer on Sundays because she collected her menus from the fruit trees and the vegetable garden in which she took pride in. I know the children Nellie gave birth to always called her *Miss* all of their lives, as her stepchildren called her. They answered her when she summoned them by saying, "Miss, M'am?" as if they were questioning whether or not she'd even called them. I know Nellie's children also had, back then (and still have now), a habit of holding their syllables longer than others. They always "sang," as the locals call it, when they pronounced their words—which ended up sounding like they were saying, "Mis-ish, Mah-am." Singing some words while speaking is a habit that I sometimes have, along with a lot of my mother's people.

Baltimore

One of the earliest and most confusing memories I can recall from that time period (and the way my people used to be) is getting off a train in Baltimore, and seeing rain mixed with cylinder-shaped pods of ice coming down from the

sky. I must have been about five years old at that time. I believe this to be so because I am two years older than my youngest sister, Betty Jean. Betty Jean could not come with us on that trip because my mother had a habit of taking only two of her sturdier-walking younger children with her on her annual trip to visit with Lela Mae.

As we were coming off the train's steps in Baltimore with my mother, I remember her holding my hand tightly and then instructing my next-older sister Lela and me, sternly, not to move an inch. She had to release our hands for a moment to claim and struggle with our large suitcases and then show our tickets to the white man with a cold-looking face. He was dressed in a splendid maroon and black uniform with gold trimmings.

The man frightened me. I stumbled and had a hard time convincing my mother later that I was not being disobedient. I had to let my mother's hand go because the things I was noticing were different up here in Baltimore and frightening. But most of all, the voice—that usually comes from within me and from within other very small children to calm us and reassure us and to help explain the things we could not understand—was being silent. It didn't tell me to not be afraid of cold-face man. It wasn't coming to me to tell me also why the raindrops up North had ice in them, and how the wooden toy soldiers that could only stand in a storefront window during Christmas time back home had somehow in this city managed to come alive enough to step and move his large arms up and down.

Winter, 2019

Except for my cousin, Monk, my sisters Eva, Mildred, and Betty Jean, my baby brother, and the City of Baltimore, everyone and everything else in this narrative is either dead or otherwise gone. The only memories left are always preceded by the caption *How it used to be in the South* or *How Black people used to be* before desegregation came and restructured everything.

The Cleanest Alimentación in Spain

David Joseph

The Alimentación was clean. It was clean and neat and had many things that people could buy. The shelves were filled with crisps, ramen noodles, dried cups of soup, and sauces including American ketchup. Inside the refrigerators, cans of soda were stacked neatly above chilled bottles of wine people in Spain prefer to drink on warm days.

Behind the counter, there was a freezer with bags of ice packed perfectly to maximize every inch of the space. In Spain, ice is like gold. It's rare and a real commodity in the Andalusian summers when the air gets thick and the temperatures rise. But the Alimentación was clean, impeccably clean. It was neat and clean, and it was easy to see that everything was in its place.

Each morning, around 9:30, Maria would arrive to open the Alimentación. She would slide the metal garage door upwards, revealing the large, glass window facing the narrow street. She would step through the doorway and enter the darkness that filled the store. She walked inside, placed her shoulder bag behind the counter and took quick visual inventory before even turning on the lights. She moved with purpose and precision. There wasn't a sense of urgency, but Maria possessed an attention to detail that wasn't always apparent with proprietors in Spain. She didn't look hurried, but she proceeded with a certain intent and focus that was undeniable.

Sometimes, when I entered to get a cold drink at the start of the day after an early morning walk, the lights were still off. The door had been opened, but the day's customers had yet to arrive. Maria would smile and say, "Buenas días" warmly. Over time, I had become something of a regular, and it almost seemed that Maria prioritized my arrival at the start of the day, often completing the transaction before even bothering to turn on the lights.

"Uno ochenta" she'd say, and I would have my coins ready. Each time, she accepted my money, she did so with genuine appreciation, and I liked going there. I liked Maria. I liked her store, and it was nice to go there in the morning. She was always friendly, and it was nice to get a drink and be friendly. This was one of the things I liked most about Spain. People were friendly and they made the smallest interactions pleasant.

Like most of the Alimentación owners in Spain, Maria was Chinese. Of course, Maria was just her Spanish name. Chinese business owners often adopted a Spanish name as a way to integrate with the locals, although it is

unclear whether this approach was effective. They learned Spanish, and they opened their Alimentacíons for business.

One day, I asked my friend Juan why no Spaniards owned or worked at Alimentacíons. Although I admired the increased diversity in provincial Spain, I couldn't understand why no Spanish men or women operated these businesses. Juan replied that Alimentacíons were open for more hours than other businesses. They began the day earlier, didn't close for siesta, and stayed open later into the evenings. Oh, and they worked Sundays too. "Spaniards" he said "simply aren't willing to work as hard as the Chinese families who immigrate to Spain" and, according to him, this was the reason no Spaniards had Alimentacíons. Maria confirmed this work ethic one morning, sharing that her exercise was walking ninety minutes to and from work each day.

During the week, it seemed like Maria was always working in the Alimentación. Sometimes with her husband. Sometimes alone. But she was there from the time the store opened in the morning until long into the night when people stumbled out of tapas bars and through the door in search of a piece of candy, soda, or bottle of water. Regardless of the condition of the patrons, Maria employed the same poise and kindness. This was their business after all. They were in a foreign country, and they worked hard to accommodate the local culture as it was. From day one, they understood they were playing the long game. Trust would take time, but they were willing to do whatever they could to become part of the community.

The Alimentación was on a long street that ran from one area in the center of town to another. It wasn't a main thoroughfare, but it was an effective cut through for taxis and scooters. The street was mostly comprised of tapas bars and panaderías, which made it an attractive place for tourists, locals, and anyone traveling on foot. At the bottom of the street was a handsome plaza with great trees that rose into the sky and surrounded an impressive statue, which was the centerpiece. This allowed people to get something at the Alimentación and then wander down to the plaza with their snack or drink in search of a bench, with the sun streaming in from all corners of the Plaza, enveloping them in a warm embrace. I loved to bring my drink to the Plaza with a book and take up temporary residence on an iron bench. But the Alimentación was well located, surrounded by dozens of apartment buildings and easily available to residents and tourists alike.

In Spain, it isn't uncommon to enter an Alimentación and see the smoke rising to the ceiling or inhale the stale stench of cigarettes permanently

suspended in a small space. But Maria never smoked inside her Alimentación. If she smoked at all, she made sure not to do it in her Alimentación, and the air in her store smelled fresh. The floor was also smooth and clean. There were never any signs of footprints that had been there earlier in the day, and Maria made sure of this. She swept and mopped throughout the day to ensure that people felt like they were entering their own home.

On the shelves, the canned food and glass jars were lined up, the labels centered meticulously, facing directly towards the customer. When a customer would come in and handle an item on the shelf, Maria would make note of this. However, in an effort not to embarrass the customer or make them aware of her obsessive nature, she would wait until they had left the store. Then she would peek out from behind the register and walk around the counter. She would calmly turn the label back, centered perfectly once again for the next customer who might enter the store. This did not bother her. It did not bother her that customers handled the items, and it did not bother her to return them to their original position. It was simply what she did, a measure in place to maintain the cleanest Alimentación in town.

On weekends, her son Jorge worked in the store in order to give Maria a break and allow her to spend time with her younger children. During the week, Jorge helped out with his brothers and sisters. He assisted them with their homework, made them dinner, and helped get them off to school. Jorge was 18 now, in his final year of Bachillerato at a colegio near their apartment. He was an excellent student. He was very responsible. And he liked to help his mother. On the weekends, he did this by working at the Alimentación. He was proud of his mother, and he liked the store. It was good to work at the store, and Jorge liked to help his mother out by working there over the weekend.

Jorge could move easily between, Spanish, English, and Chinese. Unlike Maria, who had command of two languages (Chinese/Spanish), Jorge had mastered three. He spoke each of them very well, and this was particularly helpful when interacting with tourists--many of whom came from the United States, United Kingdom, and China. Jorge was now learning German too and already knew a bit of Italian as well. This made him an asset in the store on Saturdays and Sundays when the volume of tourists increased. In fact, some English-speaking expats even waited until the weekend to purchase goods, since they knew Jorge spoke such good English.

Jorge was big for his age. Tall and big. A little overweight and not particularly athletic. He was the kind of kid that might be made fun of even if

he wasn't Chinese. Being Chinese in Spain made things even harder, but Jorge was strong. His body was stronger than it might have appeared and his internal fortitude exceeded his physical strength—which was considerable. His family had come to Spain when he was young, and he was used to people rolling their eyes or muttering under their breath.

Moreover, this wasn't simply Spain. This was Granada, in Andalusia, where the tradition is rich, the culture embedded, and the region extraordinarily provincial. Granada was far less diverse than some of the larger cities in Spain. This made things harder for a new family, an immigrant family, particularly when they were taking business from Spaniards in such a difficult economic time. Jorge knew these things. He understood, and he carried this understanding with him when he went to work in the store each weekend. He thought of his place in the world as he walked to the Alimentación, and he wondered if things would always be this way. Times change, he thought. He hoped. Perhaps not as quickly in Spain as some other countries. But nothing stays the same. Not forever. Not the wars or the weather or the wind. Jorge wasn't holding his breath, but he had a degree of faith, and he would be ready when things were different.

One week after the conclusion of Semana Santa, the biggest festival in Granada, Jorge was working at the store on a Sunday when few places were open. A group of four boys his age walked into the Alimentación without giving Jorge so much as an acknowledgement. One boy said something with his hand covering his mouth while the others laughed. Jorge knew they were likely taking about him as he stood quietly by the register. He was a little agitated, but he tried not to show it. He stood up as straight as he possibly could, and he tried to remain composed. It wasn't difficult for Jorge to remain composed. He was mature for his age, and he took it in stride.

"Chino!" said one of the boys. "Mira" as he took his left hand and swept a row of cans off the shelf, sending them tumbling to the floor while the other boys laughed. Jorge moved out calmly from behind the counter and towards the boys. He knew they were trying to rile him up. He stood in front of them inside the store. It was Sunday afternoon. The air was warm and the light was streaming in. The streets were empty. There was nobody else around. It was just him and them, staring, basically eye to eye, although Jorge looked down on them slightly due to his height. The boys smiled, almost taunting Jorge, begging him to take at swing at one of them. Their eyes were laughing, waiting

for Jorge to respond, to unleash his emotions, perhaps in the form of a clumsy, awkward punch in their direction.

As Jorge stood there in front of the boys, the long lens of history flashed before his eyes. This history of China. Of Spain. Of his ancestors. From the Great Wall to the Alhambra Palace, where the Moors once reigned supreme before Ferdinand and Isabella conquered southern Spain. He thought of his parents, the distances they had traveled to arrive here, the sacrifices they had made for their children, the dignity with which they carried themselves. He thought of the twelve lions at the Alhambra, carved in perfect stone, frozen for eternity, who could not roar even at the most infuriating moments. He thought of these great lions most of all.

Whenever he was forced to bite his tongue or hold back his fists, he would focus on the lions. These lions had been there for centuries. They were handsome and strong and chiseled in stone. They guarded the beautiful court, looked out from the inside at the surrounding walls, and were confined for eternity with a presence but no voice. Jorge understood what the lions felt. He understood, and he knew what it felt like to be rendered speechless and still need to stand tall.

“Perdone,” he said as he moved past the boys only to reach down, pick up the cans, and return them to the shelf. He took his time with each one, reaching down carefully, grabbing them in his hand, and then lining the shelves with the labels facing out just as his mother would.

“Nada?” one of the boys said. “Nada? Claro. Ha-ha.”

Jorge felt the anger rush through him from the inside. He wanted to wipe the smiles off their faces. He dreamed of shoving one of them against the wall and telling them not to come back. They had tried to humiliate him, and he felt the desire for some sort of retribution. But he knew that wasn’t possible. His family had too much to lose, he thought. There would be other days. There would be other opportunities, different opportunities. But today was not that day. Jorge knew that and had to accept that his yearning for retribution would have to wait.

Jorge had been in Spain for the majority of his life, and in many ways he felt Spanish. He had been to Mirador San Nicolas when young couples would take photos after getting married in a nearby church. He liked to see the couples dressed up, the bride in a flowing white dress against the sprawling, stone backdrop of the Alhambra Palace and the groom dressed smartly in a dark coat alongside her. He had seen Spanish couples there, and he had been

there when Chinese couples took photos as well. But he had never seen a couple from different backgrounds. This he had not seen, not once in all his trips to the Mirador with the Alhambra in the distance and the great Sierra Nevada Mountains peering over its ancient shoulder.

Her name was Lucia, and she was in Jorge's class. She was Spanish and she had long, dark hair and eyes that even seemed to shine on the darkest days. They lit up every room she entered, and Jorge waited each morning to see her walk through the door. Like Jorge, Lucia was a very good student, and he often found himself working alongside her at school. Jorge could tell by her eyes that she was kind. She was kind and understanding, and she never pitied him. Most of the Spanish kids at school either pitied him or resented him. Lucia did neither. Outside of class she always said a warm hello, even though her friends moved swiftly past Jorge as if he wasn't there.

By now, he was used to the cold treatment, but Lucia was different. She raised the temperature in the room, and she gave him hope. Hope for Spain. Hope for the future. Hope for himself. They shared a bit of an unspoken language, and Jorge wouldn't dare risk their quiet bond by revealing any deeper feelings he might have had. No, for now this was enough. This was more than enough. To dream was more than enough, and he looked forward to seeing her each day he went to school. He couldn't wait to be welcomed each morning by her smile. It was all that he needed in order to propel him through the rest of the day and into the weekend when he would work in the Alimentación that his mother worked so hard to run all week long.

The boys in the store laughed in his face, collected a few items they wouldn't be paying for, and walked haughtily out the door. I just happened to brush by the boys on the street before I walked in to the Alimentación.

When I walked inside, Jorge had returned to his place behind the counter. He said a respectful hello, and he tried to stand as tall as he was able, gazing coolly, as the boys disappeared down the street. Once they were out of sight and out of earshot, Jorge tallied the items they had stolen on the register. He reached into his pocket, took out his own money, and processed the payment to eliminate any profit loss that would have been evident to his mother.

On Monday morning, Maria entered the Alimentación in the dark as she did at the start of each week. The shelves were lined perfectly, with each label facing out, and there wasn't a speck of dirt on the floor. She checked the register and went over the books. The store had made a handsome profit over

the weekend on the heels of the week following Semana Santa. Once again, Jorge had done a fine job. He was a good boy, she thought. He was a good boy and he had done a good job. She turned on the lights, propped open the door, and waited to greet the first customer of the day. Moments later, I walked in.

Life on Earth

Wynne Hungerford

Down a mile-long driveway,
travelled by mother and cub,
through woods singed gold—
a ramshackle farm in need
of seasonal help.

Burrata, sardines, granola.
Meadow, hoop house, gate.

Rusted screws like witch's fingernails
nick my shins and forearms.
Five missing piglets.

Either wandered into the woods
or the boar's belly, who knows.
Grunting fills the night,
and dead chicks fill an empty
feed sack by the door.

The world is full of gross recycling.
All gummy feet and shit-stained
feathers and blue eyelids.

One dies in my hand.
One grows naked.
One drags a flimsy leg.
One hosts mites.
One splits in half and spills wet grain.

What is life worth?
Six dollars per pound,
if you're a pasture-raised chicken.
They have orange eyes

and when I visit at dawn
they drink the dew covering my boots.

I cry and think about all
us animals trying to survive,
then watch the Presidential address on Syria.

There's black cherry yogurt
every morning and mist hugging
each hill like a horny old man.
A rooster humping a Rhode Island Red.
A boy whispering about his little nuts.
An older boy wondering
when he can get a blowjob.

A farmhand mends fence,
asking if I smoke cigars
or cook for the big man
or have sisters that look like me.

Enough.

I am not hay-flavored ice cream.
I am not cream cheese.
I am the bug beating your eardrum.
I am snakeskin in chicken wire.
I am impatient.

Remember Halloween in Missoula?
My friends and I saw a pair of men
dressed as breasts—
their peach-colored shirts
stuffed with pillows.
Plunger nipples.

It's different when you see
a sow's swollen teats gently

swing over seas of mud
and know that's what keeps
a baby from shuddering
and slipping to black.

Halloween night, my friends and I
played guitar and made up songs, singing
with whiskey and space heater,
I don't wanna die,
I don't wanna die.

That's what animals sing
in the long pasture,
hemmed by russet hills.

We catch two sheep in the corner,
carry them upside-down by the legs.
They look like angels, but unholy.

They go to slaughter in a trailer,
and come back as stinking hides.
Unrolled on a pallet and salted,
the sheaths of skin that once
held testicles are emptied out
and swinging like bells.

The cows chime, too,
when they see me.

Shuddering for a quick reprieve
from flies in merciless hoards.
The Angus tagged #5 likes head rubs
and cool evenings when I offer apples,
that thick black and pink tongue
curling around fruit,
slinging saliva missiles.

He avoided slaughter once,
but I don't know how.

The song plays louder
in some heads than others,
escaping through the wet
cave of a mouth
as a long, deep croon.

The song is forecasted into infinity,
with rolling fog
and clear skies
and thunder.

The idea seemed so beautiful then,
when I was twenty-one years old
and trying my hand
at life on Earth.

But now I know the truth—
half the stars above are airplanes
skirting outer space.

No Regrets

Epiphany Ferrell

The Bridesmaid

We've said careless things to each other like "I need you" and "soon" and "together." We've gotten good at pretending.

I could confide in my roommate over honey chamomile tea, but she won't be my roommate much longer. Busy little bee, she is, planning her wedding. She can make almost anything. I helped her decorate some of the dried gourds, which I called "squash" until she corrected me, laughing at my inability to identify objects which to her are common.

She's so sure of her love. She imagines I want what she has. I smile for her and congratulate her decisions. She's adept at planning. Even the color of our bridesmaids' dresses is perfect—shrimp, a weird name for a color, but it brings out the blue of my eyes.

He won't be at her wedding. He isn't in our circle of friends. His wife, though, is the photographer. Who knows what she sees through filters and lenses? I feel his fingers on the soft skin of my back when his wife, the photographer, shooting the wedding-dress-selection party, focuses on me.

I lean toward my roommate, breathing in the lavender of the soap she uses, and look over her seating chart as though where one ought to be placed matters more than where one is.

The Bride

Everyone is excited, my maid of honor most of all. I hope she catches the bouquet. Misery loves company.

He's letting me have my way in everything. It's my big day, he said – and everything should be right, goddamn it, beyond reproach.

How does a woman know the difference between doubt and doom? Doubt is normal. How couldn't it be? Didn't I have doubts when I went off to college? Can't you see the tremor in my passport photo? Didn't I hesitate when I signed my first lease? And that all worked out ok. This will, too. In ten years, I'll look back and think what a silly girl I was.

We will have bright and attractive children, and I will drive a Lexus to soccer practice. It's a life many would envy. I'm an ungrateful woman.

I drove the long way home again today and lingered in the cemetery, reading long-dead names.

I was supposed to finalize my flower selection today. I don't care about the flowers. Rosemary for remembrance, pansies for thoughts, and rue. I forgot the others.

The Bridesmaid

Maybe he does mean those words, maybe he does.

The Bride

I had my chance to be an artist, he's right—that year I went to Italy. That year was my opportunity to produce something memorable. He says there are artists and there are people who make pictures. Pictures are nice, it's no shame to make pictures, he says. I took the restoration job he helped me find, and he's right, I was lucky to get it.

Safety, what is wrong with wanting safety? And quality sheets?

The Bridesmaid

I could never tell her this, but I don't like her future husband very much. If I told her I didn't like him, she'd think I was jealous. I wonder what it's like, to be as sure as she is.

She says she admires his strength of will, she says it takes a strong-willed man to hold her interest. She says she is flighty and impractical. These are not things I would say about her. These are not things I have known about her. These are not things I believe about her.

I'm helping her box up her life here, ready for her new life. Her oil paints have gone dry.

Saint Magpie of Loserville

Tiffany Promise

I like sleeping in Wal-Mart parking lots because they have spaceship-sized fluorescents that deter rapists, junkies, and hobos. I don't consider myself a hobo since I have a car, though I'm not too uppity to tangle with a hunky one if he has black enough hair or lungs.

My car's name is Ian, after a sexy, goth boy who was a couple years ahead of me back at Summit High (A.K.A. Slum-it High). Ian always had CD's, cigarettes, and mice in his trench coat pocket. I almost failed Biology because I spent the whole class daydreaming about climbing deep into that pocket: nuzzling up close to Ian's favorite stuff, turning myself into something sacred, something necessary, something that he'd never be able to live without.

The less attention he paid me, the more I pined; and unfortunately, I can count on my hands just how many times he let his baby browns pause on mine. I attributed it to his depression or his always being stoned. But really, I just hoped he was shy, and someday we could be shy together—far, far away from my whiskey-pickled Daddy and his punch-drunk knuckles and whatever Ian's slovenly excuse for a home-life was that forced him into smoking a pack of Marlboros every day and drawing pentagrams all over his backpack.

Five years after leaving Slum-It High, I'm still hoping with all my might that our paths will cross again someday; that I'll get to kiss him this time, maybe even fuck him. I especially want to do it in the back of my car. Ian inside of me while we're both inside of Ian—that kinda shit usually only happens on TV. *Serendipitous*, I think to myself, whenever I imagine us banging away in my backseat. I'm not quite sure if that's the right word, but it sounds sexy and slithery and filled with magic.

It's unlikely that I'll run into Ian any time soon though; I'm much too busy Losing. As my tires criss-cross state lines—from one side of the country to the other—I'm laboriously laying to waste all the bits and pieces of my body that were busted-up by Daddy. I already tossed a coffee-can filled with scabs behind a washboard factory outside of Columbus; dropped some molars into a wishing well in Gainesville; and buried a couple of petal-shaped fingernails in a donut-shop dumpster near Gary. I've still got a ways to go, but by the time I'm through, there won't be a speck of Daddy left in my blood.

This morning, while I was rummaging in my trunk for clean-ish socks, a bearded guy nodded at me as he walked by. Since a girl can't live on hope and good manners alone, I took his nod as encouragement to hit him up for the usual: a little change, a smoke, half of his BBQ sammie, a roll of toilet paper, whatevs.

Beardy surprised me by pulling a box of donuts out of his Walmart bag. I figured I was really pushing my luck, but I asked for some milk or OJ to wash them down with anyway; either would do, I'm not picky. As he abracadabraed a carton of Vitamin D, I spread a quilt on the concrete behind Ian. I figured a breakfast-picnic would repay any debt I might owe.

As the donuts dandruffed their powdered-sugar sweetness down the front of my shirt, I consciously chose to ignore Beardy's patchy facial hair and the flannel lumberjack get-up he was sporting. Instead, I focused on how much his Adam's apple bobbed just like Ian's when he swallowed. It reminded me of a Red Delicious plunked into a tub of water to be pecked at by blindfolded kiddies at Halloween-time.

After breakfast, Beardy tried to talk me into going home with him; I resisted. Men are always doing that to me: thinking they've found some lost child or broken-winged bird and their weird fatherly instincts kick in and all they wanna do is put my face on a milk carton or set my wing with a popsicle stick. Of course, sometimes they just wanna fuck me.

If I'm low on gas funds, could use a new pair of boots, or if I've been hankering for an unrequited banana split for too many weeks, I'll sometimes take them up on it.

You're much too busy to get caught up with this fella, Maggie Mags, I told myself, even if he does have the good kind of donuts, the good kind of milk, nice manners, pretty brown eyes, and when he smiles just the right way his incisor protrudes like Ian's...

Just a week ago, I'd ditched my buddy, Hatred, near the tracks in El Paso (A.K.A. El Trasho). He wanted to spend one last night swilling moonshine and smoking rollies with those homespun Texas homebums before heading off to Los Angeles. He tried to talk me into going with—his devil mouth extra slick—but I stuck my boots firmly in the dirt.

"C'mon Mags, Hatred'd purred, petting one of his thick-as-a-corncob dreads. "I'll take you to see X play at The Roxy and eat Oki-Dogs whenever you want. We can bang on that table where Darby Crash planned his suicide; it'll be killer."

Sure, punk rock and hot dogs are cool as shit, but I'd taken a break from Losing for a couple of days to hang with Hate, and I was itching to get back at it. It's not easy to Lose body-parts when there's someone else's eyes following you around, no matter how mashed up with junk they might be. And even though I secretly pine to Lose a toe in those famous California tar pits, I figure it's highly unlikely that Hatred'll even make it there in the first place. He'll get off-track somewhere along the line, tempted by some blue-eyed baby punk with bad skin and a homemade anarchy tattoo whose boyfriend's lip is in desperate need of a splitting.

"Looks like you've been living in this car," Beardy observes, fingering my empty toilet paper cardboards. We've been done with breakfast for forty-five, and he still hasn't skedaddled.

"Only for about sixteen months. Before that, I was squatting near Chi-town with this one-legged fucker named Chuckles. Since then, I've been doing my own thing, picking up a hitcher here and there," I say, feeling extra gritty.

"Really, kitten, you should take a load off. Spend a couple of days with me; it'd be nice," he offers. Some girls wait their whole lives to hear words like that. I'm, obviously, not one of those girls. Though when he says "kitten," I'm reminded of the time when dissecting cats in Biology class, Ian speared a cat eyeball on his scalpel and handed it to me like a rose.

"I'm right in the middle of something.... Something that works better when I'm alone," I try to explain.

"What are you, some kind of werewolf? I ain't skeered," he says, winking. The way the skin crinkles at the edge of his eye socket looks exactly like Ian's did when he'd listen to Nine Inch Nails on his Disceman during Lunch, air-drumming to the beat.

"Maybe," I growl, liking the idea of somebody thinking I could be part-beast.

"Listen, baby girl, I'll just drop you off before I head to work. I work eight-hour shifts, five days a week. Maybe more since we're right in the middle of this big highway project. How's that for alone time?"

He promises to throw in a couple bottles of Boone's Farm, some strawberry air fresheners, a car wash, and a whole Costco pack of toilet paper if I'll chill with him for a bit.

"Fresh razorblades, too?" I ask, only semi-hoping it'll push him over the line.

"Razorblades, cocaine, popsicles, pie, whatever you want, pretty girl," he acquiesces with a grin.

When we shake on it, I notice that his thumbnail looks like Ian's: a little jagged half-moon filled to the brim with dirt. I have a hankering to take my tooth to it—to scoop out the tobacco flakes, grit, oil, whatever it is that's got his hand looking so goddamned manly.

Instead of actually taking me to his house (he lives with his mom; "taking care of her" is what he calls it), Sorta-Ian springs for a hotel room. I'm not sure if the woman behind the counter thinks I'm a prostitute or drug-dealer or what, but she stink-eyes me so hard that I reckon I might sprout an extra head under her cursed gaze. I let Sorta-Ian finish checking-in on his own while I investigate the lobby.

I don't say it out loud, but I'm pretty stoked by this whole hotel situation. I've spent enough long nights picking ants off my underpants and trying to keep mice from shitting in my knapsack to know that I'm not into dirty dude rooms. Putting me up in a hotel is the kind of thing Ian would do if he had the cash.

It's been at least fifteen years since I've been to a place like this: That one time Daddy decided to act like a real daddy and took me and Bubba on a weekend trip to Galveston. Everything was fine until he left us alone with a handful of quarters to get dinner out of the vending machine while he spent the rest of the night getting wasted at the titty bar. But this hotel doesn't smell like sunscreen and bleach, it smells like rich folks instead: lilacs, warm leather, and verbena—whatever the fuck *verbena* is.

As I walk through the lobby and into the breakfast room, my eyes get swimmy in my head. It feels like I drank too much boxed wine too quickly: just unplugged that nozzle right in my mouth and let the sweet, red nectar flow. There's a little fake pond/waterfall near the omelette station, catty-corner to the glass elevator. Everything's so fancy-schmancy and rimmed in gold that I figure it's only minutes before security guards come over and escort me back out to the parking lot where I belong.

I sit on the edge of the pond, digging through my pockets for a coin to toss in. I take all wishing-opportunities equally seriously: coins in fountains, falling stars, wayward eyelashes, four-leaved clovers; I'm not one to squander.

I find a penny at the bottom of my bag; it's tarnished and mottled and looks like it came from inside a homebum's butt, but a wish is a wish is a wish.

I turn around, close my eyes and whisper: "I wish to run smack-dab into Ian. Not Sorta-Ian, or car-Ian, but Ian-Ian. I don't care when or where, though the sooner the better, obvi. He doesn't even have to fall instantly in love with me. I just want to see his handsome face, kiss his salty skin, etcetera etcetera."

When I turn back around to try and spot my penny as it sinks into the water, I notice for the first time that the pond is filled with loads of delightfully glittery goldfish.

"Hey, Mags," Sorta-Ian says, coming up from behind and startling me. "I've been looking for you everywhere." He kisses my neck right at the hairline. I didn't realize we'd made it to the kissing stage already, but I'm so stoked on the fish (and the omelette station! and the glass elevator!) that I let it slide.

"See these sweet fishy babies? I love them sooooo much!" I squeal, pointing into the pond. I tell Sorta-Ian about my pet goldfish, Flushy, that I'd had for years as a kid—like for way more years than you're supposed to have a goldfish—because Flushy had magic powers that made him impervious to everything from starvation to Mr. Bubble to cat claws and beyond.

"Good ol' Flushy," Sorta-Ian says, like he's actually listening to me talk.

"He was made up of sun particles," I say, remembering his effervescent shine. "Magical, death-proof sun particles.... But, then, when I was twelve, our stupid fucking neighbor, Mister Maggot—I really have no idea what his real name was that's just what I've always called him—came over with his dumb poodle-doodle dog and that stupid-ass stuck its snout right into Flushy's bowl and sluuurp!"

"Damned mutt! I'm sorry baby," Sorta-Ian says, pulling me into a hug.

"But don't worry! I'm like one hundred percent sure that Flushy is still alive in that fucker's belly. He like turned it into his perfect habitat or whatever: swimming around, pooping everywhere, and living the good life."

"Phew!" Sorta-Ian exhales dramatically, "I'm glad there was a happy ending, you had me worried there for a minute, girl."

"And what's even better is that *these* fish are orange and glowy *just like* Flushy." I point into the pond. "Which means he sent us his offspring! Or his clones! Shit, I don't know what they are exactly—*doppelgangers*?" I realize my voice is about four times louder than it should be, so I make it just a smidge

louder, hoping it can reach all the way up to the top of the cupola or whatever that domed ceiling way-up-yonder is called. *Cupola?* Sounds fancy enough.

“Looks like you made the right decision coming with me then, huh?” Sorta-Ian says, winking at me—that wink that reminds me so much of Ian’s NIN-listening face. “C’mom, giddy-up, your suite awaits, princess.

“But my Flushies...!”

“You can come back down and visit your Flushies later; they ain’t goin’ nowhere.” He wraps his big arm around my waist and pulls me with him to the elevator. He smells like pennies and summertime highways—somehow familiar—and he carries all my bags, even though they are pink leopard print and only held together with safety pins.

I spend a couple of hours in the hotel room just walking around and touching things while Sorta-Ian is at work. There’s a kitchenette with an electric stove with no macaronis glued to the burners, a big bathtub without cigarette welts, and central heat/air that switches back and forth with a click.

I take the longest, hottest bath of my life, not worrying about cranky water heaters or water bills. It’s been a long time since I’ve had access to a tub—trucks stop showers and McDonald’s sinks just don’t compare. Whenever the water starts to chill, I refill with abandon. I use a whole bar of soap on my oniony feet, and empty the entire teeny shampoo bottle onto my head. It’s too hard to wash each individual dreadlock—they puff up like sponges when they’re full of suds—so I focus my attention on scraping the oily crust from my scalp.

I try to boil-boil-toil-and-trouble myself into a shiny, more-respectable version that Ian might want to take to prom, or that Sorta-Ian might wanna screw. I pretend to throw in a couple of newt eyes, some frog’s breath, a pinch of mugwort, and I say a fake magic spell with mostly made-up words. Before getting out of the tub, I feed one of my dreadlocks down the drain. *R.I.P. hair; Memphis, Tennessee*, I think, recording the Loss and location in my brain.

In an effort to look my sexiest, I dig my least-holy tights out of my knapsack, put on a little leopard nightie, and slush apple cider vinegar under my pits. I rub glitter into my Chapstick, and then spend a couple of minutes at the window tapping Morse code messages to Ian—the studliest Hyundai in existence—down in the parking lot.

I love you the most. I promise I'm not cheating on you by sleeping somewhere else. Nothing will ever come close to cradling my ass the way you do, my tapping says.

I smash my glittery lips into the glass extra hard, leaving greasy kiss-marks speckled with tiny roses of blood. Losing a bit of hair and blood will just have to be enough for now.

A *Wife Swap* marathon is on TV, the mattress is memory foam, and the pillows aren't just made of wadded-up toilet paper, so I let myself daydream about a future with Sorta-Ian. There could be major benefits to marrying a nice union man who has money and health insurance and all that other blue-collar crap. Him: coming home from work tired and grease-stained; me: making Velveeta-stuffed-meatloaf in a cute, wifely apron. He would mow the lawn on weekends while I learn to knit. I've always fantasized about making my own socks and car-blankets and tiny booties for Ian-Ian's mice.

By the time Sorta-Ian gets back from work, I'm conked out on sleepers, and mostly-dreaming, but his body next to mine feels like a giant praying mantis, so I push myself into his prickles hard—hoping for at least a little bruising—and let his antennae graze my cheek. I will myself to learn insect-speak, thinking that maybe this thing could work—even if only for a little while.

I've always thought of Losing as a solitary act, like religion is for some folks. I wear it like a crucifix, I fuck it like a lover, I use it to light candles, and alter my body over and over again in accommodation. But maybe, just maybe, me and Losing and Sorta-Ian could have some kind of threesome. A menage-a-trois if you will; whatever the fuck *menage* means.

When I finally wake up in the morning, Sorta-Ian is gone. But, in his stead, he's left an ice-bucket-full of Flushy-twins pilfered from the downstairs-pond. I spend the first part of my morning whispering secrets to my new friends, and picking dry skin from the heels of my feet, cuticles, elbows, and lips to feed to them. When I sprinkle the skin-flakes into their bucket, all the Flushies dart to the surface at once, fighting over me. Gifting me with a bucket of Flushies is the exact kind of thing that Ian would do for me.

Later that night, as we're sitting down to dinner at a real-restaurant—not-Taco-Bell, Almost-Ian tells me to order whatever I want.

"Whatever I want? Are you sure?" I ask, batting my lashes at him over the menu. There are roughly fifteen kinds of margaritas listed here, all with

different kinds of tequila, different kinds of fresh fruits. I can't remember the last time I drank liquor that didn't come in a plastic bottle and/or bag.

"Anything," he says winking. "I've got myself a credit card." He pulls it out of his wallet and slaps it down on the table with authority.

"Holy shit, no way!" I squeal, grabbing it and instinctively sticking it in my bra.

"Don't make me come over there..." Almost-Ian is practically drooling like the Big Bad Wolf.

"Or else what...?" I lick my lips; I know how to play the part of the yummy Little Pig pretty darn well.

When Almost-Ian orders guacamole, I decide to give it a shot. Something about him makes me want to try new things, to be a new kind of person. As a kid I was really freaked out by avocados; I was sure they were some kind of evil alligator-demon food that would turn my skin green or make me sprout extra teeth. Then sometime around junior high I heard they were fattening and figured I wasn't missing out on much. Practicing Losing for so long has made me quite the pro at avoiding anything that could possibly lead to gain.

But, here, with Almost-Ian, swimming in tequila, I decide to indulge. Even if that means more meat, fat, fingers, eyelashes, a tail, what-have-you. I grin at him through filled teeth, and his mouth puckers just like Ian's would whenever he'd listen to Marilyn Manson in his Malibu.

"I wonder what the poor folks are eatin' tonight?" I say, suddenly remembering how my Paw-Paw (who I haven't thought about in years) would say that whenever we'd sit down to a fine meal.

"Looks like they're eatin' Mexican," Ian ribs back.

I try not to ruin the moment with my weirdness, but I secretly hope that depositing my next, hefty cheese enchilada crap into the Memphis sewer system will be enough of a Loss for now. I could always try to bury it in the flowerbed by the parking lot—something a bit more ritualistic than a flush—but I'm not sure how to transport poo without a plastic baggie.

After dinner, we have sex. It's more vanilla than I'm used to, maybe because neither of us is starving to death and having to break each other open like bread. He's on top, I'm on bottom. There's some humping and some groaning, his dick is a little smaller than I expected, but it does the trick. He definitely knows what he's doing with his hips and fingers. He flicks my clit until I come,

he licks my neck in long, languorous strokes. I worry a little bit about my skin still tasting like street-grime, about the fact that one bath can't do much to combat years of no-baths.

After it's all over, I feel cozy and complete. Like I'm a woman who has just made love to her man. Not like I was hacked open—from bellybutton to asshole—with a rusty chainsaw, how I usually feel after sex. I congratulate myself for engaging in something so grown-up.

Almost-Ian falls asleep quickly, cum drying on the tip of his wilting dick, his breathing heavy and ragged. I stay up late writing in my journal, carefully memorializing the Lost hair, blood, and skin of these last two days. But I'm having trouble figuring out what to call this new womanly-sex thing. Sure, I popped my cherry years ago; in fact, my virginity is stuffed deep in an underwear drawer at a closed-down Victoria's Secret in Houston (A.K.A. Bruise-town). But, suddenly, I've got this second hymen to commemorate. Maybe I'll call it *chastity*—that rings of sexual maturity.

As I record, I fantasize about a future in which I'm the kind of woman that can love every inch of herself—even the broken parts. Retracing Ian's tire-tracks—hopefully with Ian in tow—I'll keep the trunk filled with forget-me-nots to sprinkle on the graves of all of my Losses.

Our life together morphs into a sitcom; everyday a mimicry of the one before. Almost-Ian gets up early and goes to work, leaving me drooling on the goose-down pillow. I spend all day popping zits in the Hollywood starlet mirror and wiping the pus on the inside of the medicine cabinet. I waste electricity and water, watch *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* on the gay channel, nap, and feed my Flushies pieces of dead skin and scab. I make cup after cup of coffee on the weird little one-cup coffee maker until I run out of grounds.

“Hi honey, I’m home,” Almost-Ian shouts as he walks through the door.

“Hey babe, how was work?” I ask, jumping off the couch and wrapping my arms around his neck. I’ve started painting my toenails with Sharpie and brushing my teeth twice a day.

“Same old same,” he says, “Lookie what I got my girl!”

Digging my fists into his Santa-sack today, I find tea lights, roses, and a *Rolling Stone* magazine. Everyday it’s something new. I’ve already been gifted a Hello Kitty doll, whiskey, cookie dough ice cream, nag champa, fish food, cans of Coke, a book of Emily Dickinson’s poetry, a carton of Newport 100’s,

some quartz crystals, lavender/kelp bath salts, *The Satanic Bible*, and hella weed. It's almost like he's got mind-reading abilities. Or X-ray eyes that see straight into my heart. Or maybe he's just been following me around for years and taking careful stock of all the things my fingers have paused on in stores while contemplating that ol' free-ninety-nine fleece.

I'm officially the imp who got lured into a candy house. My witch just has a beard and drives an Oldsmobile.

After he's passed out from whiskey and dicking, I use the thorns on the roses to carve delicate lines into my skin, drawing just enough blood that my Loss feels sufficient for now. The tea lights make burning myself feel ritualistic. I'd always just used Bic lighters and books of matches before; I didn't realize I was forsaking so much romance for convenience. Even blisters look prettier when coerced by candlelight.

It's hard to keep track of time without mile markers accumulating in the rear-view, a gas tank that's always threatening emptiness, and when someone else is washing your sheets for you. So, I don't even realize that Christmas has come and gone—the lackluster old tramp that she is—until Almost-Ian shows up with champagne, strawberries, Twinkies, Cool Whip, and a sly smile peeking out from under his beard. He's ready to party hard.

"Happy New Year, baby girl!" He shouts, brandishing a champagne bottle like a holy grail. The droplets of condensation on its necks look like diamonds, but I don't even care.

"Oh no," I groan, "Hasn't been a New Year yet that I haven't ended up weeping." I pull my knees to my chest, stretch my t-shirt over them and hook it to my toes. I pull my arms inside, plunk my face deep into the neck-hole: snail-mode.

"It'll be different this year; you'll be kissing me!"

"Doubtful," I say, popping my head and arms out of the cocoon and yanking the champagne bottle from his hand.

"That's for midnight, silly," he reprimands, taking it back.

"You can do whatever you want with that other bottle over there, but this one's mine. Gimme!" The pitch of my voice makes him loosen his grip.

I wrestle with the cork until it zings across the room, sending a bolt of lightning down my spine. I'm not good with loud noises, even the ones I have control over.

I suck at the foam that's pouring from the mouth of the bottle, not wanting to let any of those precious dizzy-bubbles go to waste. I grab the tub of Cool Whip, the box of snack cakes, and the plastic crate of berries, and sit my ass down on the couch for a gorge-fest.

"Can I join you?" Almost-Ian asks, scooting in next to me before I have time to say *no*.

"You can do whatever the fuck you want," I say turning away from him and using the Twinkies like giant fingers to scoop out dollops of whipped frosting. I top each bite with a whole berry, and I have to stretch my mouth as wide as it will go—almost dislocating my jaw like a snake—to make it fit. I wash each bite down with a swig of champagne, straight from the bottle.

NYE was never any different than all the other days of the year; but something about the promise of a new beginning made Mom hanker for something better. Those nights she'd talk back to Daddy, or pack up the car, or do some other *strong woman* shit that she'd heard about on Oprah. Daddy would just keep getting madder and drunker and madder, and by the time midnight finally struck, Mom would be crumpled up on the kitchen floor and wailing. I'd be running around looking for somewhere safe to hide.

In an effort to protect myself from my memories, I set the A/C as cold as it will get and build an igloo-fort out of all the sheets, blankets, and towels that I can find.

"Can I get in there with you?" Almost-Ian asks, peeking his head into my fort.

"Hell no!" I say, sinking further into myself. I know it's not fair to be mad at him—he didn't make it New Year's Eve—but to have the audacity to want to celebrate this shit, there *must* be something wrong with him.

"But it's cold out here and you took all the blankets," he whines, his tongue thick with alcohol.

"You're a man; deal with it," I say, wishing he would just go away or fall asleep or something—anything—as long as it is far away from me.

Even though I'm hunkering deep inside my igloo—cotton balls stuffed in my ears, wearing both bathrobes at once—when the fireworks start blasting outside, I feel them reverberate through my bones. They sound like gunshots and behind my closed eyes I see a rain of blood.

My breath gets trapped in my chest, like when a bird accidentally flies into an open window and gets stuck in a room when all it's ever known is outside. The bird flies around in screwy circles, not understanding that the

window it just flew into is right there and if it could just fly back out, everything would be okay.

“Must be midnight!” Almost-Ian hollers from the couch. “Come out here and give me some sugar!”

I make myself count to ten, I look around my fort and remind myself that I’m safe. I visualize clouds and balloons and kites flying in the sky. I attach Mom and Bubba to the end of the kite strings; hoping that they can help pull me out of this panic. I do my best to imagine my lungs as envelopes coming unsealed, but nothing happens. My ribcage is bursting with the ferocity of one thousand bewildered pigeon wings.

Suddenly, when another firework blasts, this time even closer to the hotel, Ian—my trusty black stallion with door dings for days—begins honking in the parking lot: *Beep! Beep! Beep!* The lilt of his familiar chirp allows the breath to flow in and out of my pipes again. I gulp the air, tasting its crispness on my tongue, letting the coolness of it wash through my chest. It’s the best thing I’ve ever tasted—even better than booze.

Once my body is properly re-oxygenated and I can use my limbs again, I run to the window and tap Morse-code messages to Ian: *I love you. I’m sorry I’ve been away for so long. I lost track of time. I forgot what was important. I’ll be down soon.*

He beeps back: *I love you too. I forgive you. It’s time for us to hit the road. We’ve got a lot of Losing to do. I’ll always wait for you.*

I run back to my fort, avoiding Not-Ian’s grasping hands. *I’ll just spend one last night in my igloo, I tell myself. I’ll be out by morning. I’ll make like a library and book!*

“Why you runnin’ around here like a headless chicken, baby girl? Come gimme a kiss. It’s a new year. You and me together.”

Suddenly, the idea of kissing Not-Ian makes me wanna hurl. I can’t remember if I’ve been with him for a week or a month—everything’s blurred into a memory-foam-infused fog of television/sex/weed/booze/bubble baths/Pizza Hut delivery.

I’ve gotten lazy, I haven’t Lost anything more substantial than hair, blood, skin, shit, pus, cum, or spit—just the mundane stuff that regular people slough off every day. Not to mention that everything I’ve laid to waste for weeks (?!?) has been in this one shitty hotel room in this one shitty city. When I mark it on my map, it will be at least the size of a quarter: the Memphis

Mausoleum (A.K.A. Suckerville)—a big black smudge of ink. A testament to Losing my Losing. Losing myself when I'd meant to Lose something else entirely.

As I go to crawl back into my fort, I bump my head on the coffee table, hard.

"You dumb sonofabitch!!" I wail, pushing the table over with both of my hands. I notice that one of its legs wobbles more than the others, so I yank on it. *The squeaky wheel gets the motherfucking oil*, I think.

My fear transformed to anger, I feel as powerful as a superhero, like one those mothers who can lift a car when her baby is trapped underneath. I hate this stupid, fucking table, I can destroy this ugly piece of shit, I can make this crap my bitch.

"Babygirl, please chill the fuck out," Not-Ian urges, "It's a holiday, remember! We still have time to celebrate. Just you and me and a bubble bath?"

"Shhhh, I'm busy," I say, pulling and twisting the leg, not noticing that my palms are getting red and agitated with blister.

I twist and pull with all my might, until suddenly the leg pops free. It feels like popping that stubborn knuckle in my left thumb: a sigh of relief.

In my hand this table leg feels like a weapon. It's dense and erect with a sharp nail protruding right out of the end. It's archaic, a torture device; I could pluck Not-Ian's eyeball right out of his skull. But he isn't the one who needs to Lose something; I do.

I've been trying to Lose all the pieces of myself that were ruined by Daddy; to wipe him clean off the map of my body. *But that doesn't really make sense, does it?* Because he broke my rib in second grade when he hugged me too hard, and that sucker is still weaved into the basket of my ribcage, thicker now with callouses of calcium bound around the snap. Daddy gave me more black eyes than I can count—especially during summer when teachers weren't around to get suspicious—turning my whole socket a deep eggplant purple, the same color the bad girls in high school wore as lipstick.

Daddy, being Daddy, burrowed his way straight into my brain, my heart, my very soul; he's everywhere, like God. The only thing that could really snuff him out completely would be a gallon of bleach or some anthrax. A noose, a gas oven, a head-on collision. But I don't go there because I can't go there because I won't go there because...

"I want to live!" I scream to myself, to my memories, to Daddy's ghost that's always right here inside of me no matter what I do to try and get rid of him.

"I'm serious, Magpie, why don't you just calm down? We can order some chocolate mousse from room service! We can watch whatever you want on TV!" Not-Ian's freaking-the-fuck-out squeal breaks my reverie. I wish he would just leave already. I have this one last thing to do, and then I'm outta here.

"Get away from me; I'm busy," I growl, turning the table leg over and over in my hand, marveling at its size and shape, how shiny with lacquer it is. "I told you I was busy when we met. You should have listened."

"Seriously, girl, they have my credit card on file," he says, attempting to take the table leg out of my hands. I imagine his brain formulating Mr. Fix-It ideas: wood glue, hammer and nails, duct tape maybe. But I know that none of those things will work. It's impossible to really ever fix something that has been this broken.

"Miiiiiiine!" I scream, grabbing it back from him. I need to lose something right now or else I will never forgive myself.

I look at my hands. No. They are good hands. They feed me, they hold Ian's steering wheel, they record my losses. They take better care of me than anyone else ever could.

I look at my legs. No. I need them to walk, to run, to carry me far away from places like the Pear Tree Trailer Palace. Places like this.

I look at my feet—that's it! I remember hearing once about how ladies in the olden days had their baby toes removed so they could fit into pointy shoes. I remember how Cinderella's sisters cut off their own toes so they could easily slip into that glass slipper and fleece the Prince. I remember how Daddy used to always put his feet in a bucket of baby powder before he put his boots on; he was a hard man, but he had such soft feet. I remember someone telling me once that you break your little toe hundreds of times in your life, those times when you're just walking around your house and you stub it on the bedpost or the coffee table and it hurts like the dickens for a quick minute, it's actually broken.

"This little piggy cried wee, wee, wee, wee all the way to the grave," I say, turning away from Not-Ian and sitting down on the carpet to face the window. Fireworks are still blasting in the sky, flooding the room with weird

red and blue glows, but I feel calm now that I have a plan. Memories can't hurt me when I'm living in the moment.

I curl my right leg up and under me like a lotus flower. My left leg points straight out: an open highway, a freeway to freedom.

"Goodbye, little friend. We've been through a lot together, but this is where our journey ends. Losing you will set me free. Thank you," I say to my littlest toe, that cute cranberry-shaped thing with not much of a nail.

I take a deep inhale and as I exhale, I make one swift hack with the table leg. I feel a sharp, shearing pain run through my whole body. *Out of the frying pan and into the fire*, I think. The nail on the end of my weapon goes deep, hits bone. Blood spurts up like a fountain. *That's a good name for a metal band: Fountain of Blood*, I think, as I hear Not-Ian start retching somewhere behind me. I hope he makes it to the bathroom quick; I hate the smell of vomit.

I whack rhythmically, like a clock ticking, and pretty quickly, the nail has gouged a deep crater. In order to sever, I need to change my position—I need to stop poking this one hole over and over again, but poke more holes around the circumference of the toe. Eventually, the holes will just meld into one another, and tear like a perforation.

I have to bend my knee and bring my toe in a little bit closer to my body. It smells like the meat department of the grocery store.

I hack and hack until finally I can no longer feel pain. The nerves have been severed and all that's left is an intense throbbing. It feels like my heart has moved down to my foot and is beating harder than it's ever beat before. "We've got the beat, we've got the beat," I sing.

There's more blood than I expected. The beige carpet fibers suck it up thirstily, turning a deep maroon. I remember when I was four and spilled grape juice on my comforter. I hated that ugly, blah-colored thing and reckoned if it got ruined, maybe I could get a Care Bears one. That was when Daddy introduced me to his belt.

"Silent night, holy night, all is Lost, all is quiet," I sing, lopping away.

All that's still connected is a bit of bone. I'm going to have to crack it in half with my fingers; my instrument has done all it can do. *Blood on my hands*, I think, as I drop the table leg.

I pull my left leg up to me, now I'm sitting criss-cross-applesauce, which reminds me of kindergarten, which reminds me of learning the alphabet and finger-painting, and how many times I had to switch schools because teachers kept asking too many questions about my bruises.

I hold my foot steady with my left hand. It feels like a dying bird, heaving its last jot of life, still warm, but barely. I wrap my right fist around the wet, mangled pinky, and with all the force I have left in me, I snap downwards. My elbow hits the spongey carpet with a thud.

I look down and my toe is sitting quietly in my cupped hand.

Disconnected from my body, it looks like a gnawed-on chicken nugget, a piece of earthworm, a wad of chewed-up bubblegum. Definitely not human.

I start to sing “Hush Little Baby” as I cradle the toe in my palm, rocking it back and forth, putting it to sleep.

I reach over and grab my bag, I dig around until I find my favorite pair of underpants. They are red and silky with a black lace edge: the perfect funeral shroud. I carefully wrap the toe up tight—like a present. It will rest in the bottom of my knapsack for now, it will be safe there.

Standing up, I realize that I’m still too drunk to drive, the loss of blood has got me pretty lightheaded, and the way my foot is throbbing reminds me of that time I did a lot of Ecstasy at a rave and the deep thrum of the bass bumped up through the floor and made my body feel like it had to dance to stay alive. But I don’t think I should try to dance right now. A bath sounds like a better option. Water has all kinds of magical healing properties that are good for sucking out boozy toxins and cleaning wounds. I haven’t had gangrene yet, but Chuckles down in Chilly-cago warned me of its wickedness and taught me a bunch of hobo-medicine tricks like how to stop bleeding with spiderwebs and vinegar and how to dress a wound with toilet paper and a handkerchief. He even showed me how to fill a deep wound with honey, to kill bacteria and stanch the stank.

As I limp to the bathroom, I look over at Not-Ian. He’s strewn across the bed with little chunks of barf all imbedded in his beard. I’d kept hoping he’d shave off that scratchy, ugly thing, but now I don’t care if it grows so long that it touches the floor like some weird old Rip Van Winkle freak. Thinking about him touching my boobs makes me gag.

“What the fucking fuck, dude?” he slurs at my backside.

As I’m pouring my bottle of apple cider vinegar into the bathtub, getting the water all hot and fragrant, I remember how Bubba and I used to pour table salt in the tub with us to simulate swimming in the ocean. That time we’d gone to Galveston with Daddy, we were mesmerized by the way the sea seemed to patch up our wounds right quick, better than Mom’s kisses even. I had a split lip and some belt-burn at the time; he only had a skinned knee, but

when we got out of the water, we were halfway to healed. Bubba never had nearly as many ouchies as me.

"Boys don't need the same kind of manhandling, it's you womenfolk that's all full of sin," Daddy'd always say, trying to make sense of why he beat me and Mom so bad but left Bubba alone. I always figured Daddy himself was the most sinful of us all though.

I pour in the whole canister of lavender/kelp bath salts that Not-Ian had brought in his Santa-sack. This is bound to be my last bath for a while, so I might as well make it good. Since my water's as saturated with salt as the Gulf of Mexico, I decide to dump the Flushies right on in; *Surfin' USA!*

I hobble out of the bathroom and over to the bed where my fish-bucket lives. I have to be careful not to put too much weight on my left leg.

"What're you doin' now?" Not-Ian asks without even lifting his head to look up at me. Damn man can't hold his liquor, that's for sure. What kind of wimp have I been shacked up with for weeks?

"If you honey-buns are anything like the real Flushy, then you're only partially fish, but mostly magic," I tell them, as I carry the bucket into the bathroom. "Do a girl a solid and patch up this wound, kay?"

The Flushies are happy to break free of their confinement. When I climb in the tub with them, they nip lightly at my skin before jetting away. I probably taste familiar since they've been surviving on skin flakes and fish flakes for God-knows-how-long. I sing songs to the Flushies about sunshine-colored sea monsters biting the heads off of blood-clotted creatures while I soap and sponge. They tickle.

"Send your magical sun particles to my toe to hamper the bleeding, please?" I beg them, feeling awkward about my use of the word *hamper* but liking the way it sounds and knowing the fish will get it—they do have me inside of them after all.

The blood from my toe creeps into the water, changing the Flushies scales from traffic-cone orange to a more sunset shade. I scrub myself with Not-Ian's loofa, hoping that I'll be able to slough off a smorgasbord for the Flushies to indulge in; they deserve it, they've been such faithful pets.

I splash around happily, less guilty now that I've Lost a toe; only slightly bummed by the fact that I'm gonna have to leave my Flushies with Not-Ian. They don't seem like they'd be very good road-dogs.

I'm not sure where to bury the toe. I reckon I could stick it between the mattress and box spring, though I don't know how often the maids flip the

mattresses. Leaving it anywhere in this hotel room means that it would end up in a landfill, and that's a dismal place for such an important part of myself to rest eternally. I'll have to ponder it when my head's a little clearer.

I wake up from what feels like a minute of sleep—one of those weird, falling-off-a-cliff, heart-in-your-throat moments where your eyelids blink open and you can't remember ever having drifted off to begin with. Not-Ian is sitting next to the tub looking like he got bit by a rabid skunk. For some strange reason, he's naked. Maybe he barfed on his clothes? Or wanted to climb in the tub with me, but saw my Flushies and realized there wasn't room?

"Mornin' sugar-lumps. I's gonna git in there, but I fell," Not-Ian mumbles from the floor, his words sloshing around in his mouth.

"Um, okay," I mutter.

When I look over at him, some kind of veil lifts from in front of my eyes and I actually *see* him for the first time. His body is a weird mix of old man and baby: there's a blanket of thick, coarse hair lining his chest and privates, but underneath the fuzz he's pale and soft. No tattoos bleed from his forearms, no scars from knife fights or razor wire lace his chest, there's not even a fucking ingrown hair or a cat scratch to be found. He's pristine and unadulterated—life has barely grazed his shoulders. I want to carve an upside-down cross between his eyebrows. And lop off his pointer finger.

When I turn my eyes to revel at my own lived-in and martyred body, I realize that while I was sleeping, all of the bathwater drained away and I'm lying here dry as a bone, covered in dead fish. A few of them are cluttered down near my feet, but most of their tiny, shiny bodies are resting on my belly and chest. They tremble with my every breath.

"My Flushies are dead!" I wail.

"S'okay, baby girl, there are plenty more downstairs. I'll get ya another bucket-full later on."

"Don't you get it? There is no later on! You fish-killing bastard!" I don't know why I blame Not-Ian—I know that it's not his fault—but I can't bear the weight of thirteen deaths on my own shoulders.

I want to close the Flushies eyes for them, like I've seen priests do in movies, but since goldfish don't have eyelids, I have to think of something else. "We're all in this together now," I whisper longingly, looking down at my legions of dead friends. I guess these fake Flushies weren't nearly as tough as the original Flushy after all.

Since these poor, innocent souls consumed my skin and blood, the only right thing for me to do would be to eat them back. That should give them a chance at eternal life. It's the least I can do.

"Rest in peace, sweet, golden Not-Flushies," I blubber, carefully plucking their limp bodies from the graveyard of my chest. One by one, I place them in my mouth, making sure not to bite or chew. They slip down my throat, quietly, like secrets left unsaid. Washing them down with water from the faucet, I swallow and swallow and swallow—until they're all gone.

"Whut the fuck ya doin'? Anti-Ian slurs. "I must be fuckin' dreamin'." He goes to stand up, but his knee slips in a puddle of vomit. When his flesh slaps the floor, it makes a sucking sound.

"Listen, dude, thanks for everything. But as you can see, this just isn't gonna work," I say, trying to climb out of the tub without stepping in his mess.

"Where' ya goin'?" he mumbles from his spot on the bathmat, rolling over just enough to keep from getting stepped on. "I was gonna git in with ya...."

"This has nothing to do with you. I mean, yes it does. You just aren't the kind of person a girl like me can be with. I need someone who knows what it feels like to have razor wire rip their skin. Someone who's played one too many games of five-finger-filet." When I look down at the empty place where my toe used to be, pride swells my chest—which inevitably makes my boobs look bigger. I try to wiggle my four remaining toes, but it hurts too much.

"I've no fuckin' idea what yer goin' on about," Anti-Ian groans from the floor; he's holding his head in his hands. "Just come over here and sit with me. Daddy has a lap for ya. I'll make it all better."

"Daddy? Daddy? You've got to be fucking kidding me. Go *Daddy* yourself. I don't need you! I don't need anyone at all. I'm totally good on my own." I pull the towels down off the rack, letting one of them fall right on his head. "Actually, I'm better than good. But if I were to hook up with someone *for real* for real, they'd have to know how to make a shiv out of melting the elastic waistband of their underwear. They'd need to know what it smells like in the underbelly of the underworld. And they'd never ever—in a million years never—refer to themselves as 'Daddy'!"

"Huh? Under what?"

"Underworld, dummy. It smells like bellybutton and earwax and period panties and junkie swabs and puke. Like that time I threw up on Chuckles' white suspenders and turned them pink 'cuz all I had in my stomach

was boxed wine and Saltines. And he just kept on wearing them like that for weeks.”

I wrap a towel around my midsection tightly, and another one around my head. I want to feel like an Egyptian queen as I step out of this bathroom and into the next phase of my life.

“Uggghh, everything hurts. ‘Mind me never to mix champagne with tequila again.’ Anti-Ian’s shoulders heave as he retches yellowish spit into the rug.

“I need someone who isn’t afraid to slice me open, debone me if that’s what it takes. *You’ll* never be the Sid to my Nancy. Someone might be, but it’s not you.” I pull the bathroom door shut behind me. I try to slam it for emphasis, but it just thumps lamely in the frame.

My belongings are strewn all over the room, mixed up with the bait-&-fuck goodies from Anti-Ian’s Santa sack. I don’t want any of his gifts though; excess stuff is not an asset when the primary goal is Losing. I hobble around—trying to keep the majority of my weight on the un-wounded foot—plucking my junk from amongst the rubble. It feels like an Easter egg hunt. Except this time Daddy didn’t fill the plastic eggs with dead bugs and bullet casings for a laugh. This time, I’m hunting for what’s mine.

Everything I own fits perfectly into my two backpacks and one duffel—just like it always has. I check three times to make sure I’ve still got the toe; I apply extra eyeliner and dress my wound with coconut oil, tissue, and as much self-love as I can muster.

“Later, alligator,” I say to the bathroom door as I’m leaving.

Anti-Ian doesn’t respond. Or if he does, his voice is too hushed for me to hear.

It’s early in the morning, so the continental breakfast bar is still steaming. I’m not hungry now—I’m too full of fish—but the Hobo Code of Conduct states that passing up free food is a sin worse than murder. I fill my pockets with toast, sausage, dry pancakes, and honey packets—which I’ll be able to use on my wound when my coconut oil supply has run dry.

As I walk through the parking lot towards Ian, I feel my spine straighten; the sun tangles itself into my dreadlocks like a crown. Crawling behind the wheel, I thank myself for having had the foresight to Lose the toe on my left foot instead of on my accelerator foot.

“I’m not psychic, but my Losing is,” I whisper, giving Ian’s dashboard a celebratory kiss.

Everything feels just right, like when Goldilocks found the porridge that wasn’t too hot or too cold. The way Ian’s seat cradles my butt, the way my hands feel on his wheel, even the way he smells like a mix of strawberries and the stuff you pick out from under your fingernails with a toothpick. Perfection.

Ian doesn’t care that I have fish burps, that no matter how much I Lose, I’ll always have Daddy’s eyes staring right back at me—out of my very own face—in the mirror. Hell, I might even still have some of Anti-Ian’s sperm swimming around in my lady-parts; Ian always accepts me exactly as I am.

“First thing’s first, lover,” I say, pulling the map out of the glovebox. “We’ve gotta find the proper resting place for this toe. Just anywhere won’t do. This sucker’s a testament to my Losing, my survival, my whole damn life. This thing woke me the fuck up! We have to bury it somewhere super special.”

I lay the atlas across my lap and the whole United States opens up before me like a fully-bloomed rose. I close my eyes and swirl my finger over the map, drawing invisible snakes and ribbons and hearts in the air. I count to thirteen—Ian’s favorite number—and then plunk my finger down.

When I open my eyes and look, I’m pointing right at Texas. The motherfucking Lone Star State: full of big-ass stars and perfume-blooming sage, my dang birthplace, Daddy’s homestate, and all that other hokey-pokey shit I’ve tried to forget. Of course Texas is the destination; it’s always been the reason.

As I drive from one broken-down town to another, I’m scared of running out of gas—filling stations are few and far between in these sparse Mississippi-to-Louisiana parts—I play Nirvana’s *Nevermind* on repeat for luck. I once saw Ian writing the lyrics to “Drain You” on the back of his binder; it’s my favorite song on the album.

A few hours in, the Flushies start rumbling in my guts. Before I have time to find a regular bathroom, I pull off the highway and pop a squat in a stranger’s backyard garden—which, of course, is a much more respectable resting place than the sewer system of Bumfuck, Nowhere. I reckon the fishiness of the shit will add more nutrition than regular fertilizer. Hopefully the gardener will win World’s Biggest Tomato at the state fair and Flushy’s magic will live on. Daddy always loved tomatoes; especially with sprinkles of

salt, pepper, and vinegar. I fantasize about him sitting down to eat a big-as-a-house motherfucker, and the thing rolling right over him and squashing him flat.

It takes a good nine hours, but once I hit Houston, skyscrapers, spaghetti-bowl interstates, and Chili's restaurants sprout up at every angle. I decide to head to Galveston to look for that sunscreen-stinking hotel where me and Bubba'd stayed with Daddy. I want to connect the dots between the two hotels of my life, to see if there's meaning in the mapping.

When Daddy'd left me and Bubba alone in the hotel that night, we'd had actually had a blast. He left enough quarters for us to get Cool Ranch Doritos, Twix, salted peanuts, gummy worms, and a Coke from the machine. Bubba didn't want stupid nuts with so many other more-delicious options, but I made him eat them for the protein. I had tiny bites and sips of everything—I was already deep into my Losing—and let Bubba take the bulk. We jumped from bed to bed, watched TV all night, and wrapped the whole room in toilet paper as if we were decorating for a birthday party.

The next morning, when Daddy got home from the titty bar—still-drunk and broker than before—I got less of a beating than I'd anticipated: his knuckles were just sloppy enough to barely break the skin. My lip swelled up some, but I just pretended it was a gummy worm that got stuck to my face when we were partying, a relic from our bygone night. Then, Bubba and I got to swim in the ocean while Daddy nursed his hangover; so overall, it was a win-win.

“Galveston, here we come. I’m gonna lay this toe deep in your tar-riddled sands, right on the edge of that stinky, old Gulf. She’ll sit everlasting, just waiting to be swallowed up the next time the earth quakes on its axis and forces the sea to open her mouth too wide.”

Out of nowhere—a sign pointing towards Sugar Land pops up in the ditch. Something old and reptilian, from the backwater part of my brain takes control; I veer onto the exit ramp. Holding the steering wheel with my left hand, I run the right one through my dreads, over my cheeks and lips and chin; I let my thumb linger in that concave of my collar bone, the place where the tendons of the neck meets the width of the chest. “The thumbprint of our family’s sin lives on our skin,” I tell Ian. “Sometimes we have to shed our entire selves in order to find freedom.”

I'd forgotten all about Sugar Land (no nickname needed), how as a kid I imagined all the houses were made out of graham crackers and gumdrops, but had been disguised to look like regular houses so the grown-ups didn't get mad. I'd spent the best summers of my life there, in my grandparent's rambling, trinket-filled farmhouse. They'd always catch me licking the walls, looking for frosting. But instead of a spanking, I would get a kiss.

"Whatcha know good, Miss Magpie?" Paw-Paw would say whenever he saw me, wrapping me up in his big, cigarette-reeking arms, a piece of hay stuck between his teeth.

"I know nothin'!" I'd holler, hoping that if I could be empty enough, he'd be forced to fill me up.

Driving down Treasure Trail, it all comes back to me: Paw-Paw plucking his old guitar, while I played fake-hopscotch on the checkered floor. Me-Maw baking and baking so the whole house smelled just like the inside of a gingerbread house should smell. How both of them would tuck us in bed at night under hand-loomed quilts and take turns reading stories.

There was always a jar of candied apricots sitting on the kitchen counter, and when no one was looking, I'd sneak a bunch of pieces into my pockets. Since the apricot chunks were goldfish-colored I thought that if Bubba and I ate enough of them, they'd make us more like Flushy: strong, brave, safe from Daddy's belt.

"Screw Galveston, Sugar Land is where thou shall be bequeathed," I tell the toe. I don't really know what *bequeathed* means, but it feels like the right word for the moment.

As I drive through the old neighborhood, I notice that the houses all looks smaller than I remember them, their lawns are all deader too. But there's something in the air that surges with life, like when it's really hot outside and the space above the asphalt vibrates in rainbowy waves. It's January, so it can't be heat. Maybe it's memory. Or ghosts. Though, really what's the difference?

As I pull in front of Me-Maw and Paw-Paw's house, I'm disappointed to see the windows boarded up and the garden waist-high with weeds. I wonder who moved in after my grandparents died. I wonder if they had kids that played in the yard, if they ate hand-churned, strawberry ice-cream in the summertime. If they swam in a cleaned-out horse trough when it got up to over 110 degrees, if they hunted crawdads, if they made crowns out of clover. I hope that these kids got to do some of the things that Bubba and I did before Daddy decided to end to our visits.

"The old folks are spoiling these little leaches. The stink that comes off this one especially..." Daddy would say, grabbing my arm, "...worse than shit on a stick."

One night when Daddy had socked Mom harder than ever before—so hard that a chunk of her septum was hanging out of her nostril—Mom told me to go and pack up mine and Bubba's clothes; that we'd be staying with Me-Maw and Paw-Paw for a while.

But when Daddy caught us piling into the car near midnight, he grabbed his shotgun from the rack in his pick-up and used the butt of it to smash out the headlights and windows of Mom's El Camino. We couldn't drive anywhere like that.

It was the middle of the night, so me and Bubba were in our pajamas and barefooted. As we were shuffled out of the car and back into bed, little bits of glass got all stuck up in the soles of our feet; we knew better than to complain.

When I woke up the next morning, there were bloody footprints tracking our steps from the driveway through the house; it reminded me of how Hansel and Gretel left breadcrumbs in their wake. I wished that someone would stop by, see the blood trails and set out on a mission to rescue us. But, since no one ever did, it was up to me to pick the glass shards out of our feet with Mom's eyebrow tweezers.

I put Ian in park, shut off his ignition, and crawl out of my seat. I stretch my arms and legs. The air smells clean here, even though it probably isn't. I remember Me-Maw always worrying about the chemical plants nearby and then Paw-Paw went and died of brain cancer and proved all her worrying right. I take a deep breath anyways.

Right smack-dab in the middle of the front yard, the same old pecan tree is still standing; a ladder to damn-near heaven. This very tree produced the nuts for Me-Maw's award-winning buttermilk/pecan pies, the recipe of which she took to the grave.

I wrap my arms around its trunk, pretending for a minute that it's my grandparents.

I'd had so much fun as a kid, sitting here and kicking these nuts around, arranging them in fake-hieroglyphics across the yard. Because I liked to collect things, Paw-Paw gave me an emptied-out coffee tin to keep my treasures in. I

put a ton of pecans in there, along with other special things like heart-shaped leaves, locust skins, and wishboney twigs.

Before bed, I'd ceremoniously pluck a couple of pecans out of the jar and use the Christmas nutcracker to bust them open. I was always extra careful not to drop any of the nut pieces into Me-Maw's mustard shag. After arranging the nuts meticulously on big leaves (what I called "fairy plates")—in a happy face formation—I'd set them on the windowsill, shell-less and glittering with easy consumption. This was my offering to the outdoors kingdom of critters. I wanted to give as much as I could. I wanted to make lives outside of mine feel taken-care-of and special.

When I'd check in the morning, the nut chunks would always be gone.

I'm thankful for the trees' presence, for its strength, its hope, its ability to withstand destruction, pollution, hurricane, drought. Here it stands, crown almost touching the sun, a symbol for all the pain and suffering and Loss that I've survived. That *we've* survived.

At the base of the tree, I start digging a hole with my hands. The grass comes up easy. Under the grass, the dirt is moist just like it always is in this part of the country: ripe for growing rice. The perfect resting place.

As I dig, the soil and sludge creep up underneath my nails, it reminds me of digging my fingers into Me-Maw's homemade playdough. She put almond extract in it, so it always smelled like cookies.

I'm careful to avoid disrupting the roots. I wouldn't want to do anything to disturb this tree's stalwart growth. But I dig deep, finding bugs and stones and worms. I remember when Paw-Paw taught me that if you cut an earthworm in half, it would regrow its tail. I've always wondered if the same thing might happen to me, if my Losses would come back. If someday I'd just wake up and all the spots that I thought were bound for eternal emptiness would be full again.

My fingers move through loam, humus, and bottom-soil—all kinds of dark substances that have never known sunlight. I dig and dig as the moon moves across the sky: a big glowing belly guiding my hands.

I'm almost shoulder-deep, when finally, a silence arises from the opening and I know I've gone deep enough. I put the toe at the bottom of the hole, still shrouded in my red-&-black panties.

"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Give us this day our daily bread. Like a snake eating its own tail, I hope to return someday. Like I have today. Again and again and again to honor this baptismal Loss. Blood sugar sex magic.

Peace be with you.” I throw a handful of dirt on the toe, look to the heavens, and smile.

Filling the hole back up is much easier than digging it. In only a few minutes, the ground is back in place. I stamp down hard with my boots, making the earth look as if it were never disturbed. I mark the grave with pecans, clover, and some honeysuckle filched from the neighbor’s vine.

I sit down on the burial plot and take a deep breath. “What’s next?” I ask the tree, Me-Maw and Paw-Paw’s empty house, the moon. Things suddenly feel different. But I’m not sure what to do with this difference. I dig around in my pocket for a cigarette; I need something ritualistic to mark this moment. But my fingers come in contact with a tiny box of razorblades instead. Aha, a blood-letting! Even better.

I slit the pointer finger on my right hand, it’ a quick, sharp burn; nothing I can’t handle.

I think about writing *Magpie + Ian 4-Ever* inside of a heart: the same thing I’ve written time and time again: on notebooks, on the bottoms of my shoes, in the dirt of Ian’s windshield, on bathroom stalls in truck-stops across America.

But instead, I write *Magpie Forever* right on the bark of the old pecan tree.

“If I keep on Losing with the patience of a saint, then maybe, someday, it won’t even hurt,” I shout, my voice echoing off the emptiness of the cul-de-sac.

A bird caws somewhere in the distance, but I doubt he’s talking to me. Maybe someday it won’t even hurt.

Other People's Land

Claudine Jacques

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Translated by Patricia Worth

*And then, one day, you latch onto
a cause greater than you.*
Marylin At-Chee

The noises were coming towards her, strangely distinct, a feverish clamour, screams guttural or piercing, all of them harsh, from deep down, engines over-revving, authoritative commands, dull explosions of teargas grenades, whistling, scuffling and more coarse, raspy shouting and insults.

She was tempted to get closer to them, to join in, disappear into the tumult.

But held back.

Clung to the first tree she came to.

A kind of calm fury rose within her. She couldn't define this new feeling that had nothing to do with anger, its rashness, its blindness. There was this fire inside her, pulsating in her belly, this ice paralysing her brain.

Nothing was as strange as this.

"Get out of here," ordered one of the aunties. "Quick. The men are angry. They're fighting down there. Some of them are injured, a lot of damage."

Yet, haltingly, she went back into the house, denying any haste that would have made her a suspect in her own eyes. Everything was ready. The briefcase containing the official papers and the origins of the conflict. Her bag, a few personal things.

Before stepping out the door, she turned round.

This place was a stopover where she was not leaving much that was tangible. Yet infinitely more. Namely hope, friendship, brotherhood and trust. Farewell to long evenings chatting over a tea or a milk coffee with a few sticks of fried cassava or a bowl of hot rice; gone were the possibility of a fight, dreams of victory and certainly her own utopian ideas.

“The beginning of exile,” she mused.

She adjusted her sunglasses, pushed an unruly strand of hair behind her ear and headed for the car that lay idle under the oleander hedge. She opened the door regretfully, knocking herself on the branches, and sighed as she sat behind the wheel. She turned the key over and over to get the old Peugeot 305 to start and was surprised to see her hands shaking.

When she left the clan, it was midday.

The sun was beating down in murky waves of silvery heat onto the tar, an astonishing colour of burnt liquorice.

She drove past some police vans with window grilles, full of mobile gendarmes; one of them gave her a friendly wave. He was young and red as a newborn.

“If he knew who I was,” she thought, not smiling, “he wouldn’t wave at me like that. He mustn’t read the papers!”

In the press they spoke of her as a woman to bring down. For once, the idiom was protecting her; a woman to beat up, rather, is what she had read between the lines, a woman to stone like in Afghanistan. The “Taliban” journalist, paid or manipulated to humiliate her, had not dared go that far in his commentary, but it’s what his whole article screamed. For some weeks, indeed months, rumour had it that she was the face of a movement, the militant devotee of land claims, the clan powerbroker, what else?

She couldn’t remember.

The punching bag, more like it! The troublemaker!

You’d think she made decisions alone.

But they knew little about her family, her big brothers and her uncles. What she had going for her, because she had an education, was a fluency in French and a good sense of epistolary retort. It was this that had determined her function in the heart of the clan, nothing more. The position was vacant, deserted by her father. Because, her father, well, he had long ago chosen the camp of the powerful.

Of course, she had put herself in danger!

They had photographed her in a mission dress, mouth open, wide-eyed, intentionally fierce, standing before banners written in big black letters, *Give us back our land ... Attack on the dignity of the first people ...* before trucks blocking the roads, before aggravated men.

She was not the only one venting her anger but she was different, more visible, almost white, unusual. In close-up. That was the photo they selected, the worst one. The best way to make her seem antagonistic.

No, even if he had seen this picture of her, the red young man would not have recognised her.

Driving under the Païta bridge, she was still asking herself: How can it be done differently? Not betraying, not hating? How can we progress?

Thanks to those she was leaving today, she had found a hunger in her soul and had satisfied it.

She had gone to them, torn, not by suffering, but torn like a piece of paper, from one end to the other. There was the white culture part of her on one half, the strange and foreign part on the other. One part had been written, the other was blank.

They welcomed her, recognised her.

So she stayed there.

Tried as best she could to bring the two edges of the paper together, even if time had badly damaged them.

And then she taped up the sheet of paper without much care; her only desire was to be one, whole, indivisible.

It was there beneath the adhesive strip in its deceptive brilliance that hundreds of small wounds were produced with every alteration of the paper. Because it's not about juxtaposing one's identities, one must also blend them, make of them a new thing, brand new.

But this was something she had only just come to understand.

She arrived at a small courtyard where she swapped the 305 for a Fiat in even worse shape, and dirty as well; she transferred her things, her spirits low. Tried to cover the stained seat with a sarong, tying it behind the headrest. Gathered up into a plastic bag the empty cans, greasy papers and various fruit peelings lying on the floor, and not knowing where to put them, locked them in the boot.

So where were her comforts? Her air-conditioned car? Her cosy apartment? The friends she used to have? And the man she had loved so much?

"Come on, this is just a bad spell you have to get through," she muttered to boost her courage, "be brave!"

But enthusiasm was most definitely lacking.

She started the car. Checked the fuel level. Fortunately, the tank had been filled, she wouldn't have to go to one of the local service stations where she could be recognised.

She took to the road immediately and headed for Noumea.

Where better to hide than in the city? Among its population who were now her enemies.

The radio tuned to Radio Djido was broadcasting *Kaneka* music but she was hardly listening.

Lost in thought.

Besides, she preferred Vivaldi, or Chopin, or Bach, depending on the day...or her emotions.

Through her teenage years she lived with a certain amount of pride as a Westerner, moulded by white thought, protected by her barely tan complexion, her Chinese eyes, her education, her impeccable French, her ambiguous, exotic beauty and her clothing in the latest fashion. She was young, carefree, in love. She didn't have time to look around; she had to structure her life, earn a living, taste life and enjoy it.

Days and nights too short, ideas too immediate, confused, no perspective.

And then, of course, on a clearer morning everything took shape.

Curiously, the image of the *Disembarkation of the Thousand* led by Garibaldi thrust itself upon her. Who knows why? The red shirts of the Italians of 1860 were confused with the red scarves of the Kanaks of 1960. Or was it the other way round?

What had happened in her country since then?

The slow rebellion against the colonial State, the land claims, the events of 1984 and their bloody drama, the promise of rebalancing, peace accords signed, nickel-dusted handshakes.

And then the natural consequence of promises not kept, of restitution forgotten.

Her clan, suddenly a pariah, excluded, dispossessed of its rights, had become an undesirable tenant on other people's land. Other people's land!

How could they accept this spoliation?

Without raging, without yelling, without fighting?

So, she immersed herself in the claim, made it her own.

Admittedly, she understood the economic stake for the developers who bought these properties beside the lagoon, wanting to make a housing estate for rich people; it was her white side, that of reason. But also disgust.

She especially felt the suffering of her people who were seeing the land of their ancestors taken from them, and were rebelling; it was her black side, that of the belly. It was in this choice that everything had shifted: she had favoured the belly.

Yet she so wished she could propose something else!

A different path that leads everyone towards peace.

She had tried.

Now loneliness was flirting with her.

Her man, with his hugs and promises for the future, took off at the first ill wind. He didn't want to hear her new, woeful voice, or accept the entire, complete, total sense of her commitment.

He was afraid. He kept saying: "You upset things, you're putting us at risk, I've got a job and clients. I know people. I can't be involved in this."

One day, he didn't come home.

She experienced the empty bed, the unanswered phone calls.

"He's just in a bad mood," she thought with a shudder, "one of those moments when you ask yourself questions, when you have doubts."

But soon the bailiff was at her door, a divorce procedure in his hands.

The meeting was arranged. At the media library at Rivière Salée she would leave the vehicle beside the transformer in the car park, someone would be there, over near the laundrette, waiting for her but not openly acknowledging her, who would bring her back a bit later.

Then, without a signal, she would go up the street to the graffitied wall, as on the day when they scouted for a location.

Behind a wild hedge of false pepper trees she would find a small tarnished gate in an outdated blue, a key hidden under a flat stone, a door, a place to stay.

She entered the musty house, put her bags on the kitchen table, noticed the presence of the mobile phone, its charger and Liberty recharge cards, and checked it was working.

Then she hastened to slide the glass door of the living room open a fraction, just enough to let the air circulate.

A surprised lorikeet flew away.

The sarong curtains fluttered and diffused the harsh midday light. She took a careful look outside to admire the vegetation in the tiny enclosed garden, then decided to go out onto the shaded patio.

From where she was, she could hear the jumbled commotion of the two neighbouring houses, the end of a meal, the clatter of dishes and laughter of children, but the view was partly obstructed by a wooden fence visible here and there through red cordylines and yellow lianas. A Hawaiian hibiscus flower had opened, white with an orange heart, the size of a saucer; a jasmine vine perfumed the air, and in a corner a young flower-laden mango tree was abuzz with bees.

“A year for cyclones,” she murmured.

She went upstairs, looked into the two bedrooms, chose by reflex the one she would sleep in because of the key in the door, and went back down.

She was hungry.

She opened the cupboards one by one: soups, cans of meat, crispbread, Sao biscuits, coffee and tea, soy sauce, salted butter in the fridge, a few slices of pink ham in a plastic pack, some bottles of water, a hand of bananas on the kitchen dresser with a huge barely ripe pawpaw, good, good, for now she would be fine.

They had spoilt her.

She put some water on to boil in the aluminium kettle sitting proudly on the gas stove that was armoured with foil, and, with her teeth, tore open a packet of prawn soup and sat down.

Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are--”

She stopped, pen mid-air, and shook her head. Culture, her culture, straightaway quoted what was familiar. She was tempted to cross out the phrase, then resisted; those receiving this letter would be sensitive to the cliché.

...which are Caesar’s. No, we will not buy our crabs and our yams at the Sunday market, no, we will not cultivate the very small plots of land that will be granted to us ... no, we will not be tenants in our own country ... These lands are ours, the lands of our chiefdom ... we reclaim them.

With each mention of her land, she choked with emotion. Her land, her dead buried there, all those from whom she had been born.

The disquiet she felt was the same as when her clan chief had led her along dusty tracks in white light down to the mangroves, to the small

cemetery knocked about over time! He had defined for her the boundaries of their home, from the foamy reef scattered with islands, to the craggy bare ridges; from the peak where the sun rises to the bay where it sets. Then he had told her the age-old myths to which only the initiated should listen; feet in the sand, eyes in the distance, he had guided her heart on a long, still journey beside the fire.

It was only afterwards that he had spoken to her of the *indigénat* ...¹

"I'm one of the last pillars of the clans of the sea," he had said to her with the kind of solemnity that gives weight to evidence, "never forget my words...."

That day she became the inheritor of her story, of History, enlightened about her blood. She stored it all away: what had been said, like what would be kept quiet.

The phone rang. The number displayed was not one she knew.

"Hello, it's Ginette. Hello, can you hear me?" The voice was jerky, strangely hoarse.

"What's happening?"

"I'm calling you from the phone box outside the hospital. The Old Lady, the Old Lady's in Emergency."

"What?"

"Yeah, the Old Man tried to take the excavator to scare off the mobile gendarmes. The Old Lady tried to stop him, I think she got between him and them. He didn't see her. She fell, he ran over her leg."

"Is it serious?"

"Yeah, very serious. She's lost a lot of blood. The doctors don't think they'll be able to save the leg. And then after the accident our brothers were arrested. Almost all of them. I wanted to warn you."

"Thanks. Call me again as soon as you hear anything new. Doesn't matter what time it is. Promise me!"

"Hey, OK, I promise. Poor us."

Without realising it she had slipped down the wall and was sitting on the floor, head bent down onto her chest.

¹ French colonial status subjecting the Kanak people to reserves.

She could not contain the feeble groaning coming from her mouth, a throbbing lament, dull and deep, that she had never cried before, that had something animal about it.

Tomorrow, she would give herself up.

Tomorrow, they would put her in police custody.

Tomorrow, she had no doubt at all, they would put her in prison to await trial.

At the announcement of the verdict, her anger was spontaneous, a ball of fire in her head, like she had been punched in the stomach, an urge to shout injustice at the top of her lungs!

And, at once, her exasperation was countered by the gross and grotesque insignificance of the sentence, given like punishment to an unreasonable brat, amid a pitiful stirring of the crowd, their jerky movements, their stunned faces.

Two years in prison, one without parole. That's what the State, the righter of wrongs, demanded of her for having disturbed its certainties.

Suspended sentence for the others.

She was paying for everything, for everyone. And dearly!

Apparently, she was the danger. She and she alone ... the half-White!

A year, a year of non-parole in prison for having been the mouthpiece for her clan's land claim!

She softly uttered:

"The past was the time of colonisation. The present is the time of sharing.... The future, that of the common destiny. Spoliation, appropriation, lies There's a long way between what's promised and what's accomplished."

And the fear that she had trampled down for months rose up out of the very ground beneath her. She could feel it, a liana sly and fetid, worming its way up into the soles of her feet, paralysing her ankles, climbing the length of her calves, tickling the back of her knees, scaling her thighs, filling her belly. Her legs began to shake. She staggered briefly then regained her composure, and to save her strength she forced herself to think this was a bad dream or a Sunday telemovie, one of those appalling films you forget the minute it's over.

But the delusion was beyond belief: she was imagining her own drama in it.

Then with her whole being she stepped back to better examine the scene and engrave it on her memory.

She would never forget that moment!

In a short while, tomorrow and every other day, there would be the prison, the cubicle of three square metres where she would isolate her dreams; her body cramped, abandoned to despair.

She, alone.

She, locked away.

She, covered in opprobrium and venom.

She, sobbing.

While waiting, she needed to smile. Smile and lift her head. The final provocation.

She had to smile.

Ginette threw her arms round her, held her tightly and whispered:

“Look, our brothers have shaved their heads.”

“Why?”

“To be with you.”

Tears burst forth, bottled up for too long; she didn’t try to wipe them away.

When she left the courtroom in a stunned silence, a police officer on either side, she walked tall.

And more noble, or more dignified.

La Terre des autres

Claudine Jacques

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*Et puis, un jour, tu empoignes
une cause plus grande que toi.
[Marylin At-Chée]*

Les bruits couraient jusque vers elle, étrangement clairs, clamEURS enfiévrées, hurlements gutturaux ou stridents, tous âpres au plus profond, moteurs d'engins en surrégime, ordres péremptoires, explosions sourdes des grenades lacrymogènes, sifflements, empoignades et cris encore, rudes et réches, insultes...

Elle eut la tentation d'approcher les bruits, de les rejoindre, de se fondre dans le tumulte.

Puis se retint.

S'accrocha au premier arbre venu.

Une sorte de fureur calme l'envahit. Elle n'aurait su décrire cette sensation nouvelle qui n'avait rien à voir avec la colère, ses précipitations, ses aveuglements. Il y avait en elle ce feu qui palpait dans son ventre, cette glace qui immobilisait son cerveau.

Rien n'était plus bizarre.

– Sauve-toi, lui intima une tante. Vite. Les hommes sont en colère. C'est la bagarre là-bas. Il y a des blessés, beaucoup de dégâts.

Elle rentra pourtant dans la maison à pas comptés, niant cette hâte qui aurait pu la rendre suspecte à ses propres yeux. Tout était prêt. La serviette contenant les papiers officiels et la genèse du conflit. Son sac, quelques affaires personnelles.

Avant de franchir la porte, elle se retourna.

Elle ne laissait pas grand-chose de matériel dans ce lieu de passage. Mais infiniment plus. Cela avait pour nom espoir, amitié, fraternité, confiance. Adieu les longues soirées à discuter autour d'un thé ou d'un café au lait avec quelques bâtons de manioc frits ou un riz chaud, fini les hypothèses de combat, les rêves de victoire et certainement ses propres utopies.

Début d'exil, songea-t-elle.

Elle ajusta ses lunettes de soleil, repoussa une mèche rebelle derrière l'oreille et se dirigea vers la voiture qui dormait sous la haie de lauriers. Elle ouvrit la portière à regret, en se battant contre les branches, s'installa au volant en soupirant. Elle s'y reprit à plusieurs fois pour démarrer la vieille 305 et constata avec surprise que ses mains tremblaient.

Quand elle quitta la tribu, il était midi.

Le soleil hurlait en ondes troubles une chaleur argentée sur le coaltar d'une étonnante couleur de réglisse brûlée.

Elle croisa des fourgons grillagés remplis de gendarmes mobiles, l'un d'eux lui fit un signe amical. Il était jeune et rouge comme un nouveau-né.

S'il savait, pensa-t-elle sans sourire, qui je suis, il ne me saluerait pas ainsi. Il ne doit pas lire les journaux !

Dans la presse on parlait d'elle comme d'une femme à abattre, pour une fois ce minuscule a de plus, ce a de trop, ce a abusif, la protégeait, femme à battre avait-elle pourtant lu entre les lignes, à lapider comme en Afghanistan. Le journaliste taliban, payé ou manipulé pour l'abaisser, n'avait pas osé aller jusqu'au bout de son propos mais tout son article le criait. Depuis des semaines, voire des mois, la rumeur la donnait comme l'égérie d'un mouvement, la pasionaria des revendications foncières, l'éminence grise du clan, quoi encore ?

Elle ne savait plus.

La tête de Turc, plutôt ! L'emmerdeuse !

À croire qu'elle était seule à décider.

C'était bien peu connaître sa famille, ses grands frères et ses oncles. Elle avait pour elle, parce qu'elle avait fait des études, la maîtrise du français et le sens de la riposte épistolaire. C'est ce qui avait déterminé sa fonction au sein du clan, rien de plus. Cette place était libre, déserte par son père. Parce que son père, lui, il avait choisi depuis longtemps le camp des puissants.

Bien sûr qu'elle s'était exposée !

On l'avait photographiée en robe-mission, bouche ouverte, yeux écarquillés, féroce exprès, dressée devant des banderoles écrites en grosses lettres noires « *Rendez-nous nos terres... Atteinte à la dignité du peuple premier...* », devant des camions qui barraient les routes, devant des hommes exacerbés.

Elle n'était pas la seule à crier sa rage, mais elle était différente, plus visible, presque blanche insolite. En gros plan. C'est cette photo qu'ils avaient retenue. La pire. La meilleure façon de la rendre antipathique.

Non, même s'il avait vu cette image d'elle, le jeune homme rouge n'aurait pu la reconnaître.

En passant sous le pont de Païta, elle se répétait la même chose : Comme faire autrement ? Sans trahir, sans haïr ? Comment avancer ?

Grâce à ceux qu'elle quittait aujourd'hui, elle avait trouvé son âme manquante et s'en était rassasiée depuis.

Elle était allée vers eux, déchirée, non pas de souffrance, mais déchirée comme un morceau de papier, d'un bout à l'autre. Il y avait sa part de culture blanche, d'un côté, sa part étrange et étrangère de l'autre. Celle-ci était écrite, celle-là était vierge.

Ils l'avaient accueillie, l'avaient reconnue.

Alors elle s'était arrêtée là.

Avait tenté, tant bien que mal, de rapprocher les deux bords de la feuille, même si le temps en avait salement abîmé les bords.

Et puis, elle avait scotché la feuille sans prendre trop de précautions, toute à l'envie d'être une, entière, indivisible.

C'est là, sous le ruban adhésif, dans sa brillance trompeuse, qu'était né, à chaque altération du papier, un millier de petites blessures. Parce qu'il ne s'agit pas de juxtaposer ses identités, encore faut-il les mélanger, en faire quelque chose de nouveau, de vraiment neuf.

Mais ça, elle venait seulement de le comprendre.

Elle arriva dans une petite cour où elle troqua la 305 contre une Fiat encore plus mal en point, et sale de surcroît, elle transféra ses affaires, le cœur en berne. Tenta d'installer un *manou* sur le siège maculé de taches en l'attachant derrière l'appui-tête. Ramassa dans un pochon les boîtes vides, les papiers gras et les diverses épeluchures qui traînaient sur le tapis de sol et ne sachant où les mettre, les enferma dans le coffre.

Où donc était son confort ? Sa voiture climatisée ? Son appartement douillet ? Ses amis d'avant ? Et l'homme qu'elle avait tant aimé ?

— Allons, ce n'est qu'un mauvais moment à passer, murmura-t-elle pour se donner du courage, hauts les coeurs !

Mais l'enthousiasme n'était décidément pas au rendez-vous.

Elle démarra. Vérifia le niveau d'essence. Heureusement le plein avait été fait, elle n'aurait pas à se rendre dans une station du coin où l'on pourrait la reconnaître.

Elle prit la route aussitôt, en direction de Nouméa.

Où mieux se cacher que dans la ville ? Parmi les ennemis qui la peuplaient désormais.

La radio, branchée Djido, diffusait du *kaneka* mais elle ne l'entendait qu'à peine.

Perdue dans ses pensées.

D'ailleurs, elle préférait Vivaldi, ou Chopin, ou Bach, suivant les jours... ou ses émotions.

Pendant tout le temps de son adolescence elle avait vécu dans une petite fierté d'Occidentale, moulée dans une pensée blanche, protégée par son teint à peine halé, ses yeux de Chinoise, son éducation, son français impeccable, sa beauté ambiguë, exotique, et ses vêtements à la dernière mode. À elle était jeune, insouciante, amoureuse. Elle n'avait pas eu le temps de regarder autour d'elle, il lui fallait structurer sa vie, la gagner, la goûter, en jouir.

Journées et nuits trop courtes, idées trop immédiates, confuses, sans recul.

Et puis, bien sûr, un matin plus clair tout avait pris forme.

Bizarrement l'image du « *sbarco dei mille* » conduit par Garibaldi s'était imposée à elle. Allez savoir pourquoi ? Les chemises rouges des Italiens de 1860 s'étaient confondues avec les foulards rouges des Kanaks de 1960. Ou bien était-ce l'inverse ?

Que s'était-il passé dans son pays depuis ?

La lente rébellion contre l'État colonial, les revendications foncières, les événements de 84 et leurs drames sanglants, les rééquilibrages promis, des accords signés pour la paix, les poignées de mains chargées de poussière de nickel.

Et puis le corollaire des promesses non tenues, des restitutions oubliées.

Son clan, soudain paria, exclu, évincé de ses droits, devenu locataire indésirable sur la terre des autres. La terre des autres !

Comment accepter cette spoliation ?

Sans rugir, sans hurler, sans se battre.

Alors, elle s'était fondue dans la revendication, l'avait faite sienne.

Certes, elle comprenait l'enjeu économique des promoteurs qui, ayant acheté ces terrains en bord de lagon, souhaitaient en faire un lotissement pour gens riches, c'était sa part blanche, celle de la raison. Le dégoût en plus.

Elle ressentait surtout la souffrance des siens qui, voyant partir la terre de leurs ancêtres, se rebellaient, c'était sa part noire, celle de ventre. C'est dans ce choix-là que tout avait basculé ; elle avait privilégié le ventre.

Pourtant elle aurait tant voulu proposer autre chose !

Un chemin différent qui conduise chacun vers la paix.

Elle avait essayé.

Aujourd'hui la solitude lui faisait de l'œil.

Son homme, celui des étreintes et des promesses d'avenir, s'en était allé dès les premiers vents contraires. Il n'avait pas voulu entendre sa voix nouvelle et douloureuse, admettre le sens entier, complet, total, de son engagement.

Il avait eu peur : Tu déranges, lui répétait-il, de plus en plus souvent, tu nous exposes, j'ai un boulot, des clients. Je connais des gens. Je ne peux pas me permettre.

Un jour, il n'était pas rentré.

Elle avait fait l'expérience du lit vide, du téléphone aux abonnés absents.

Une quarantaine de mauvaise humeur, avait-elle songé en frissonnant, un de ces moments où l'on se pose, où l'on se remet en question.

Mais l'huissier avait sonné un jour, une procédure de divorce entre les mains.

Le rendez-vous était fixé devant la médiathèque de Rivière salée, elle y laisserait le véhicule sur le parking, à côté du transfo, quelqu'un serait là, vers la blanchisserie, à l'attendre sans la reconnaître ouvertement, qui le reprendrait un peu plus tard.

Alors, sans un signe, elle remonterait la rue, comme au jour du repérage, jusqu'au mur tagué.

Derrière une haie sauvage de faux-poivrières elle trouverait un petit portail terni, du bleu d'un autre temps, une clé cachée sous une pierre plate, une porte, un coin où s'arrêter.

Elle pénétra dans le logement qui sentait le renfermé, posa ses sacs sur la table de la cuisine, constata la présence du téléphone mobile, de son chargeur et des cartes Liberté et vérifia qu'il fonctionnait.

Puis elle s'empressa d'entrouvrir la baie vitrée du salon, juste assez pour que l'air circule.

Un loriquet surpris s'envola.

Les rideaux en paréo qui tamisaient la violente lumière du midi frémirent, elle jeta un œil prudent à l'extérieur pour apprécier la végétation du minuscule jardin fermé puis se décida à sortir sur la terrasse ombragée.

D'où elle était elle pouvait entendre le remue-ménage confus des deux maisons voisines, la fin d'un repas, des bruits de vaisselle, des rires d'enfants, mais la vue était interrompue par une palissade en bois que des cordyline rouges et des lianes jaunes dévoilaient par endroits. Un hibiscus d'Hawaii avait éclos une fleur blanche au cœur orangé de la taille d'une soucoupe, un jasmin exaltait l'air, dans un coin un jeune manguier chargé de fleurs n'était que bourdonnement d'abeilles.

– Une année à cyclones, murmura-t-elle.

Elle monta à l'étage, visita les deux chambres, choisit par réflexe celle qu'elle habiterait à cause de la clé sur la porte et redescendit.

Elle avait faim.

Elle ouvrit les placards les uns après les autres : des soupes, des boîtes de viande, des biscuits, des Sao, du café et du thé, du soyo, du beurre salé dans le frigo, quelques tranches de jambon mauve en sachet plastique, des bouteilles d'eau, sur le meuble une main de bananes, une grosse papaye à peine mûre, bien, bien, dans l'immédiat elle serait bien.

On l'avait gâtée.

Elle entreprit de faire chauffer l'eau dans la bouilloire en zinc qui trônait sur la gazinière cuirassée de papier d'argent, et déchira avec les dents le paquet d'une soupe aux crevettes puis elle s'assit.

« *Il faut rendre à César, ce qui appartient à...* »

Elle s'interrompit, stylo en l'air, et hochâ la tête, la culture, sa culture, reprenait d'emblée des citations connues. Elle eut la tentation de raturer la phrase puis renonça, ceux qui recevraient ce courrier seraient sensibles à ce poncif-là.

« *à César. Non, nous n'achèterons pas nos crabes et nos ignames au marché du dimanche, non, nous ne cultiverons pas les lopins de terre minuscules que l'on nous aura octroyés... non, nous ne serons pas locataires de notre propre pays... Ces terres sont les nôtres, celles de notre chefferie... nous les revendiquons.* »

À chaque fois qu'elle évoquait sa terre, l'émotion l'étreignait, la saisissait à la gorge. Sa terre, ses morts enterrés, tous ceux de qui elle était née.

Le même trouble que lorsque son chef de clan l'avait emmenée sur des chemins de poussière et de lumière blanche jusqu'aux palétuviers, jusqu'au petit cimetière chahuté par le temps ! Pour elle, il avait défini les limites de leur maison, du récif mousseux semé d'îles jusqu'aux crêtes escarpées, pelées, de la pointe soleil levant à la baie du couchant, puis il lui avait raconté les mythes immémoriaux qui ne s'écoutent qu'entre initiés, les pieds dans le sable, les yeux au loin, il avait guidé son cœur dans un long voyage immobile auprès du feu.

Ce n'est qu'ensuite qu'il lui avait parlé de l'indigénat...

— Je suis l'un des derniers poteaux des clans de la mer, lui avait-il dit avec cette solennité qui donne du poids aux évidences, n'oublie jamais mes paroles...

Elle était devenue ce jour-là l'héritière de son histoire, de l'Histoire, retenant tout en un éclair de sang : ce qui avait été dit, comme ce qui serait tu.

Le téléphone sonna. Le numéro qui s'affichait lui était inconnu.

— Allo, c'est Ginette, Allo, tu m'entends.

La voix était saccadée, étrangement rauque.

— Que se passe-t-il ? questionna-t-elle.

— Je t'appelle de la cabine devant l'hôpital. La Vieille, la Vieille est aux urgences.

— Comment ?

— Oui, le Vieux a voulu prendre la pelleteuse pour faire peur aux mobiles. La Vieille a tenté de l'empêcher, elle s'est interposée je crois. Il ne l'a pas vue. Elle est tombée. Il lui est passé sur sa jambe.

— C'est grave ?

— Oui c'est très grave. Elle a perdu beaucoup de sang. Les médecins pensent qu'ils ne pourront pas sauver sa jambe. Et puis, après l'accident, nos frères ont été arrêtés. Presque tous. Je voulais te prévenir.

— Merci, rappelle-moi dès que tu as du nouveau. À n'importe quelle heure. Promets-le !

— Ahou, je promets, Pauvre de nous.

Sans s'en rendre compte, elle avait glissé le long du mur, s'était assise sur le sol, la tête fléchie sur la poitrine.

Elle ne put contenir le faible gémissement qui sortait de sa bouche, une plainte lancinante, sourde et profonde qu'elle n'avait jamais émise auparavant et qui avait quelque chose d'animal.

Demain, elle se rendrait.

Demain, on la mettrait en garde à vue.

Demain, elle n'avait aucun doute là-dessus, on l'emprisonnerait en préventive.

À l'énoncé du verdict, la colère, impétueuse, une boule de feu dans sa tête, l'estomac comme après un coup de poing et l'envie de hurler l'injustice en un cri démesuré !

Et simultanément, son exaspération neutralisée par l'insignifiance grossière et grotesque de la sentence, donnée comme une punition à une sale gosse déraisonnable, au milieu d'une agitation dérisoire, de mouvements de foule saccadés, de regards abasourdis.

Deux ans de prison, dont un an ferme. Voilà ce que lui réclamait l'État justicier pour l'avoir dérangé dans ses certitudes.

Du sursis pour les autres.

Elle payait pour tout, pour tous. Et cher !

Ainsi c'était elle le danger. Elle, et elle seule... la demi-Blanche !

Un an, un an de prison ferme pour avoir été le porte-parole de la revendication foncière de son clan !

Elle murmura :

– Le passé a été le temps de la colonisation. Le présent est le temps du partage... L'avenir, celui du destin commun. Spoliation, appropriation, mensonges... Il y a loin de ce que l'on promet à ce que l'on accomplit.

Et la peur qu'elle piétinait depuis des mois surgit du sol même, en dessous d'elle. Elle la sentit, liane sournoise et fétide, s'insinuer sous la plante de ses pieds, paralyser ses chevilles, monter le long de ses mollets, lui chatouiller l'arrière du genou, escalader ses cuisses, remplir son ventre. Ses jambes se mirent à trembler. Elle chancela une seconde puis se reprit, se contraignit à penser, pour économiser ses forces, qu'il s'agissait d'un mauvais rêve ou d'un téléfilm du dimanche, de ceux, exécrables, que l'on oublie à peine vu.

Mais le leurre était trop énorme : elle contemplait là son propre drame.

Alors tout son être recula pour mieux examiner la scène afin de la graver dans sa mémoire.

Jamais elle n'oublierait cette minute-là !

Tout à l'heure, demain et tous les autres jours, il y aurait la prison, encore, le box de trois mètres carrés où elle isolerait ses rêves ; son corps serré dans l'abandon.

Elle, seule.

Elle, enfermée.

Elle, habillée d'opprobres et de bave.

Elle sanglots.

En attendant, il lui fallait sourire. Sourire et lever la tête. Ultime provocation.

Elle devait sourire.

Ginette se jeta sur elle pour la serrer dans ses bras, elle chuchota :

– Regarde, nos frères se sont rasés la tête.

– Pourquoi ?

– Pour être avec toi.

Des larmes jaillirent, trop longtemps contenues qu'elle ne tenta pas d'essuyer.

Quand, encadrée de deux policiers, elle quitta la salle d'audience dans un silence de cathédrale, elle était droite.

Et plus grande ou plus digne.

Lexique

kaneka : style de musique créé par les Kanaks dans les années 80

manou : cotonnade utilisée en pagne par les hommes

robe-mission : robe ample et pudique, à l'origine imposée par les missionnaires

Sao : marque de biscuit feuilleté australien

« *sbarco dei mille* » : « expédition des mille », épisode de l'histoire de l'Italie lors duquel Garibaldi débarque à Marsala, en Sicile, le 11 mai 1860, à la tête d'un

millier de volontaires, à la conquête du royaume des Deux-Siciles, et qui mènera à l'unification de la péninsule italienne

soyo : appellation courante de la sauce de soja

Tear Stacks

Warren Decker

北京站到了

We are arriving at Beijing Railway Station

HELLO SIR WHATS YOUR NAME WHERE ARE YOU FROM

Passport

Wallet

iPhone

2000 RMB

Beijing subway map

Contact numbers

Antibiotics

Textbook

*apocalyptic
boisterous
clandestine*

The teacher of the Level 1 class is beautiful like a friend's tough big sister. The teacher of the Level 2 class is intimidatingly beautiful with stark cheek bones, a tight black skirt, and high tan leather boots. But it is the teacher of the Level 3 class who is the beautiful woman you knew you would meet in Beijing and fall in love with so intensely that you would have to leave your job and home and wife and children behind and start everything over. You see her through the glass classroom door where she is smiling as she listens to a student, and nodding with wide sympathetic eyes. She brushes her long black hair behind her ear and turns to face the whiteboard, pausing with a red marker in her right hand, her left hand resting on her side with her slender fingers extending over the soft white fabric of her skirt.

**Once upon a time a man and a woman lived in
a small apocalyptic village. One boisterous spring,
they fell in clandestine love. The woman wanted to
get married. The man said, “Let’s go to Beijing. In
Beijing I can make money. I can buy you a house.
Then we can get married.”**

“Sir, we understand that this visa was valid for three years when it was valid. However, it is no longer valid.”

“It doesn’t expire for another two years.”

Walking alone through Beijing, there are people. There are people wearing pink high heels, zebra-stripe tights, green skirts, black fur coats, opaque-lens tortoiseshell-framed sunglasses; people eating roasted pork on sticks, Kentucky-fried chickens, fermented cabbages, salted peanuts, duck intestines boiled with chilies; people licking green-tea ice cream; there are people...

崇文门站到了

We are arriving at Chongwenmen Station

HELLO SIR WHATS YOUR NAME WHERE ARE YOU FROM

Passport

Wallet

iPhone

1756.2 RMB

Beijing subway map

Contact numbers

Antibiotics

Textbook

*disillusioned
ephemeral*

Misty makes you nervous by always leaning too close and smiling and putting her breasts on the counter and speaking to you in fast Mandarin. Your lips are chapped when she talks to you. You swallow. You forget words you once knew. You tell her you want to be in the Level 3 afternoon class with Lǎoshī even though it is too difficult for you. That afternoon you meet the only other student, a woman from France with pink-pastel framed glasses who takes up three desks with her bags and coats, and two iPhones that are both plugged into the classroom’s only electrical socket. All afternoon, you listen as she speaks in Mandarin and makes Lǎoshī laugh. She says something in Mandarin

and they laugh. Lǎoshī says something in Mandarin and they laugh. You can't understand anything. You can't speak. You need to tell Lǎoshī.

So the man and the woman travelled to Beijing. It was a long bus ride from their village. When they arrived they were disillusioned. They had to live in a very small room. It was a hot ephemeral Beijing summer. They had no money for meat.

“We understand that your visa has not yet expired. Unfortunately, this particular visa is not valid in conjunction with your passport.”

“But I just renewed this passport.”

...drinking civet-shit coffee; people listening to transistor radios and spinning in the Summer Palace courtyard; people screaming into phones; people riding rented bicycles, scooters, motorcycles, three-wheeled carts piled high with enormous loads of Styrofoam-stuffed plastic bags which bounce under tightly cinched rubber cords; people driving black BMWs, blue emission-free cars; people beeping horns; there are people...

前门站到了

We are arriving at Qianmen Station

HELLO SIR WHATS YOUR NAME WHERE ARE YOU FROM

Passport

Wallet

iPhone 1632.5 RMB

Beijing subway map

Contact numbers

Antibiotics

Textbook

*fermented
graceful*

The girl at the Qianmen Station luggage inspection gate is girlishly beautiful, a young woman in the big city for the first time. She waves the metal-detector wand around your crotch. She pats your phone in the chest pocket of your blue North Face down jacket. She smiles.

Every day they ate fermented vegetables stir-fried in oil. Then one day, in the fall, the woman found work. She did very well at her work. Soon she gracefully made a lot of money. The man did not do well at his work. He felt very sad. Soon the man and the woman felt embarrassed to be together.

“Sir, I’m afraid you are not allowed to remain here without valid identity documentation. Unfortunately, you are also not allowed to leave.”

“Wait-wait-wait-wait-wait. I don’t understand.”

...smoking Zhonghua cigarettes, hand-rolled cigarettes; people hawking, coughing, spitting; people selling eggs, sesame biscuits, chicken feet, raw noodles; people playing cards, chess, mahjong; people praying at Yonghe Temple in clouds of smoke; people with skateboards and bulky headphones walking through dusty hutongs, looking for the real Beijing; there are people...

和平门站到了

We are arriving at Hepingmen Station

HELLO SIR WHATS YOUR NAME WHERE ARE YOU FROM

Passport
Wallet
iPhone
1402.5 RMB
Antibiotics
Dictionary

Textbook

*hierarchical
impartial*

The French woman and Lǎoshī are laughing and looking at you expectantly. You understood a single word in their conversation, *winter*. You don't say anything. You have to tell Lǎoshī through the homework stories. You could write about travelling to Beijing and falling in love with your teacher. After a month of romantic courtship, walking hand in hand in the Temple of Heaven, you travel with her to a village in the outskirts of Xian where you meet her parents and stay with them for the Spring Holiday. At dinner, you get the coin in your jiǎozi and the whole family thinks it is auspicious. Later that night, Lǎoshī collapses with her head on your chest, sobbing and laughing after a convulsive orgasm. You stroke her long black hair behind her ear, pulling it away from her tear-filled eyes and her bewildered close-lipped smile. Her delicate nostrils flare as she tries to catch her breath.

**The woman moved out and bought a
hierarchical house. She was very busy. Soon the cold,
impartial Beijing winter came. The man could not pay
for his room anymore and he moved into a park.**

“You do have the option of revoking your current passport.”
“Can I get a new one?”

...shouting “Hello sir what's your name where are you from” at Tiananmen Square tourists; people being young and beautiful beautiful beautiful beautiful beautiful; there are people digging plastic bottles out of trashcans; people begging for money with buckets and misshapen swollen heads; there are people...

宣武门站到了

We are arriving at Xuanwumen Station

HELLO SIR WHERES YOUR NAME WHAT ARE YOU FROM

Passport
Wallet
Phone
943.8 RMB
Antibiotics
Textbook

jubilant

A woman with densely freckled skin, a warm smile and black teeth, gestures for you to sit at a rough, sticky table across from a frowning man who leans deeply into his plate and smacks his lips as he eats. You point to something on the menu that has the Chinese character for vegetables. Five minutes later, the woman serves you sour fermented cabbage stir-fried with salty fatty meat steaming on a red plastic plate. It tastes like greasy kimchee.

Every day the woman would jubilantly stack her money. Her favorite thing to do was to stack her money into bigger and bigger stacks. Then she would eat two roasted Beijing ducks while looking at her stacks of money. She didn't eat fermented vegetables.

“Unfortunately, we can't confirm whether or not we can issue a new passport unless you relinquish your current identity.”

“But what happens then if I can't get a new one?”

...sitting on the handrail of the terrace overlooking the Forbidden City, with their arms wrapped around their boyfriends' necks and tight-denim legs wrapped around their boyfriends' waists, whispering something, then laughing, then licking their boyfriends' ears; people in bulletproof uniforms standing on the sidewalk with shotguns as people put money into ATMs from armored vehicles; there are people...

长 chun 街站到了
We are arriving at Chang 椿 jie Station

WHERES YOUR NAME HELLO WHAT ARE YOU FROM SIR

Wallet*ludicrous*

iPhone

622.0 RMB

kinetic

Antibiotics

You wake up at midnight sweating. Your dreams all happened in a stuffy office with ceiling fans and sliding wooden doors. Men were discussing your stomach **Passport**. You feel weak and can't remember where the bathroom is. A slippery, bubbly **mystical** fermented cabbage squish is coating your tongue and gums and teeth and rising sourly and caustically from your throat and into your nostrils. You shouldn't have had that café latte, but you wanted to talk to someone before coming back to this room alone. You pointed to the smallest cup. The woman at the *mystical* counter, frowning, gave you the largest one and no change for your light-green 50 RMB bill. You said xièxie but she didn't reply. You walked out with the paper cup, sucking the hot milky coffee through the hole in the plastic lid. On the sidewalk people flowed around you. Now the vegetables and latte are writhing and bubbling **kinetically** in your stomach.

The man had no money. Every day he sat in the park and cried. It was ludicrously cold. It was so cold that his tears froze as soon as they came out of his eyes. He took his frozen tears and stacked them into bigger and bigger stacks. All he could do was stare at his big stacks of tears and cry.

nebulosus

"It is true that your identity may become temporarily **nebulosus**. Shall we commence the disintegration?"

"What will happen to me?"

...wearing white gauze masks, black masks, blue masks, plaid masks, fox masks, panda masks, cat masks, heavy duty industrial 3M masks with special filtered valves; people waving metal-detector wands around crotches; people buying things with paper; people stacking frozen tears; people digesting fermented cabbage; people puking; people shitting; there are people...

Fuxingmen 站到了

We are arriving at 复兴门 Station

SIR WHERES YOUR NAME HELLO WHATFROMARE YOU

Passport Wallet

iPhone

antibiotics

oblivious proverbial

345.2 RMB

The vomit leaps out of you angrily. You lean over your small trashcan, puking undigested meat and white foam over the empty water bottle and single ticket stub from the Temple of Heaven. There are four crashing vomit waves. You are sweating.

You sit up.

“Please place your passport into this machine. It will first be shredded and then pulverized...

Then one day, there was a big change in the oblivious world. After that, everyone saw that proverbial money was only paper with nice pictures and writing on it.

qualmish

You lay back down again. You stand up. You fall down in your bed. The curtains are drawn against the qualmish Beijing winter afternoon. You are trembling and you pull wool socks over your sweaty feet. You pull your fleece hat over your residual eyes. The men in your dreams speak to you for

a moment and then a pocket of air moves in you. There are six distinct exhalations from your anus, filling the room with a sophisticated putrid smell. You need to get to class. You have to get your story to Lǎoshī.

residual

...then liquefied. The liquid will be dried at a high temperature until it is reduced to a fine blue powder which will be scattered..."

"Please wait."

sophisticated

...pushing past people getting on and off the subway; people walking past people; people stopping in front of people; people walking towards people; people walking around people; people looking at people; people looking through people, people being peopled; people peopling people; people with no names; there are people...

LOARE 到 FRNAMESIR 门 *arriving* WHEOMREHEL

We YOU are at Fu 成 Station

Of course you can not use paper to buy things.

阜 chengmen 站 WHATYOUR 了

Antibiotics

Twenty minutes later you limp to the bathroom and realize that each of those six anal exhalations contained an opaque squirt of tan liquid that has soaked into your underwear.

You take these from around your feet as diarrhea dribbles from you into the toilet below.

You wipe, then stand to wash the underwear, but you are too weak.

Transient

Many people had no food. Many people had no water.

Uncertain

“Yes. Thank you, uncertainly sir. You may stack your transient frozen tears over here. Now, just place your
passport
story into the spinning shredder blades.”

You are trembling violently again. You splash your underwear with cold water, then hide them under a mop that sits in the corner of the bathroom. Your pajamas also stink, but they are mostly dry.
xenoglossia

The woman was very thirsty and alone in her big wistful house

You stuff a handful of toilet paper between your butt cheeks the pull on your pajamas.
then walk down the hallway with its erratic flickering xenoglossia light.

You have to get your **Passport** to Lăoshī.

“I don’t know my name.”

Your tears are melting.

You have to get home.

...who have food; people who have water: people who want to rip everything apart, until they make a little rip and see themselves,
in a puke-stained
threadbare tweed
sport coat and
shit-soaked
lime-green
sweatpants,
lying
unconscious

on the sidewalk
under the
Number 2
Ring
Road
overpass
in the
orange haze
of
a
freez
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Bei
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北京站到了

We are arriving at Beijing Railway Station

HELLO SIR WHAT ARE YOU FROM WHERES YOUR NAME

Passport

Wallet

iPhone

15.2 RMB

Textbook

*youthful
zealous*

After three days, and a full course of antibiotics, you stop sleeping with the trashcan next to your bed. The dreams fade and the trembling subsides. You still stuff toilet paper in between your butt cheeks. Your stomach gurgles and chirps and bubbles with volatile gasses and liquids. You skip the morning classes and eat a piece of dry white toast. You still don't dare fart on the crowded subway. The school looks unfamiliar after a three-day absence. Misty puts her breasts on the counter and says she was worried about you, but you know she wasn't by the way she laughs. You give your story to Lǎoshī. You could ask her to scan your WeChat QR code, but you know that you will never see her again. After you have said zàijiàn, you are shitting in the toilet. Hot liquid is spilling out of you and filthy cold water is splashing back up. You hear Lǎoshī call your name. You wipe quickly, stuff toilet paper in your butt cheeks and rush to see her. She asks you to sign the attendance sheet. There are three open spaces for the classes you missed. You sign the last open square at the bottom of the grid. You say zàijiàn again and walk out of the school with toilet paper clenched in your ass, knowing you can never return.

When the youthful Beijing spring came, the man's tears began to slowly melt. They melted into clear and delicious water. The man took his tears and found the zealous woman in her house. Together, they drank the clear and delicious water.

"Passport."

“Nǐhǎo.”

“OK. Next!”

“Xièxie.”

...dying; people being born; people stamping passports; people falling in love, out of love, back in love; people arriving at the airport; people hugging; people writing stories on parchment paper; people ripping the stories apart, scattering them on the floor, shitting, spitting, puking, and pissing on them. And there are people collecting the pieces of parchment paper, drying and bleaching each fragment in the sun, layering and pasting the pieces back together. With careful brushstrokes, there are people writing stories.

Interview with Opwonya Innocent

Assisted by Coauthor Kevin McLaughlin

Opwonya Innocent was born in a time of great civil unrest in the northern portion of Uganda. Abducted at the age of ten, he was forced to become a child soldier in a rebel force known as the Lord's Resistance Army. His astonishing story of escape, and the long road back to a normal life, are chronicled in *Innocent: A Spirit of Resilience*.

Coauthor Kevin McLaughlin facilitated a conversation between *Sunspot* and Opwonya. In keeping with the journal's dedication to honoring all languages and making the pieces accessible to as many readers as possible, the interview is presented here in English and the Luo language of Opwonya's people.

SL: When you were kidnapped by the rebel soldiers, your father was killed. You thought a lot about your mother and siblings while you were held captive. How are the individual members of your family doing today?

OI: Thankfully, all of my family members are doing fine now. My elder sister has three beautiful daughters now. My younger sister is planning to complete university in one's year time, with a degree in Education. My mother is only growing younger and younger every day. My younger half siblings are yet another wonderful source of happiness in the family; they are funny, focused and full of energy.

SL: The traumas child soldiers endure are truly horrific. What would you recommend that people do when they face situations that seem insurmountable?

OI: Yes, the trauma is indeed life changing. My mum once told me that HOPE is the most valuable asset in life. Once you lose hope, you will have lost everything. No matter the situation you're faced with, my advice is to keep your hope alive; whether you can see it right now or not, you are tougher than the situation.

SL: When you were rescued and taken to a counseling center, what one thing helped you most as you struggled to return to the life you once knew?

OI: What helped me most at the counseling center was the constant reminder that I was loved no matter what I had done. It first made me feel so guilty at the beginning but slowly I learned to love myself and let go of the past.

SL: As you began to build a new life, a few people who said they would help let you down. How has this impacted the way you approach new people today?

OI: Through all the hardship I faced, I learned it was best to give people the benefit of the doubt, because everyone is different and faces challenges one is unable to see with the eye. Although I was disappointed many times in life, I knew there was never enough reason to stop trusting the people I cross paths with. More than anything, being let down rather caused me to be quite sure about a situation before making a promise, because I know how much it hurts when they go unfulfilled."

SL: A great deal of your life has been dedicated to obtaining a formal education and other types of experiences that can make your life better. What actions or steps would you recommend for teenagers who want to make the most of their lives?

OI: I would advise young people to practice self-love above anything else. If you love yourself enough, you will extend that love to another child or human in need, just like I was. Education is the only wealth that no thief can steal. Once acquired, it stays with you and paves the way to a more self-sustaining life. Let's join hands and support education of our youth. Keeping them busy is in itself reducing crime rates and opening doors to a better future.

SL: What would you say to people of any age who want to change their lives for the better?

OI: I would encourage all individuals to always look at the positive side of life. Sometimes it's the hardest thing to do when you are in the middle of sadness, trauma, loss of direction, and all sorts of negativity but that is exactly where a strong one rises. Everyone has that inner strength and we should always exploit it. Falling does not mean you are weak, provided you have the determination to rise again no matter how many times you fall down.

SL: What do you have planned next for your life?

OI: My biggest dream is to work hard and open an orphanage for children living on the streets in my home town and many others in dire need. Children

are the future and the present. The future should not start tomorrow but rather now; this very minute and second.

Interview with Opwonya Innocent in the Luo Language, as Spoken by the Acholi People of Northern Uganda

Assisted by Coauthor Kevin McLaughlin

SL: Ikare ma lukwena gumaki, babani kineko. Ibedo ka tam tere-tere pi mamani ki ilum. Lugangwu gitye ningi ikare eni?

OI: Dano gangwa weng gitye maber. Lamera madit manyinge tye ki Lutino Anyira adek maleng. Lamera tye katyeko kwane iunivasiti imwaka manyen gi degree ipwony. Mamana tye pud nyen anyena. Lutino wa weng gitye twon yomcwiny igangwa kun gimede ki keto cwinygi gi gubu madit.

SL: Peki me wic ma lutino mony matino kato gi iye dongo ma pe wace. Tam ango ma imiyo ki dano ka gitye ite kare matek?

OI: Jami ma akato gi iye ni oloko kwona matek tutwal. Mamana yang owaca ni bedo ki GEN aye lonyo madit loyo ikwo. Ka irwenyo gen ci nongo irwenyo jami weng ikwo. Kare mo keken ikwo, omyero iket genni obed tek daki makwo.

SL: Ikare ma ilwi ki ilum giteri i gang me ywako tam, ngo kikome ma okonye oweka irwenyo tam maraco ki iwii?

OI: Ngo ma okonya loyo gi inywako tam ni aye kare ma tere-tere gi poyo wiya ni an gimara. Kong omiyo lawic iwiya ento mot-mot angiyo kwede gire.

SL: Nia ma icako roco kwo ni, dano madwong gucike me konyi ento gu bwoli abwola. Lakit tim man odiyo kwoni iyo ma ningi madok ikom kit ma ineno kede dano?

OI: Dano obwola ikare malac oweko ikare mo kwo konye oduku pekeo. Aneno konya kwo oduku peke pien nino weng nongo cwinya tye ka cwer med ki pig wang mapecok. Ayinyo lagam pi peki ma onongo atye ikwona ki ma gangwa ento pe anongo. Mamana aye opoyo wiya ni abibedo languna ka awaconi amarogi ento pe amaro kwona kekena me rwenyo tam me dene ni. Tyen lok acel ni pud akwo bot gangway onongo yom cwiny madit mukato kakare.

SL: Dit pa kwoni odok i kum kwan ki nongo ngec mapat-pat, yo ango ma bulu matino ma gitye ki cwiny me miyo kony gitwero konyo kede dano mukene?

OI: Amiyo tam bot bulu mi mare kekengi. Ka imare kekeni ci ikubu ma ne bot dano mukene magitye ipeki mapat-pat. Kwan obedo lonyo acel kenen ma lukwo pe kwalo. Ka ikwano yabi yo me jami mapol dak weko icung ki tyeni keni. Waribu wunu cingwa me konyo kwan pa bulu. Kwan weko bulu bedo busy dak juku lebol me bal.

SL: Tam ango ma imiyo ki dano me mwaka mo keken ma gitue kamito loko kwo gi?

OI: Acuku cwiny dano weng me neno but kwo maber. Cawa mogo peyot gire tutwal ento en ikare meno aye dano macwiny gi tek gi ile malo. Dano weng tye ki gubu enoni icwiny gi ento cawa mogi waluo tic kede. Poto piny pe tere ni kwo oloyi pien dano weng poto ento ka ipoto pe igak piny.

SL: Yub ango ma itye kede pi kwoni me anyim?

OI: Leka madit loyo aye me tic matek wek ayab gang ka gwoko lutino kic ki mogo ma gibutu iteng gudi. Lutino aye anyim wa. Anyim peni omyero ocake diki ento anyim aye tin; idakikani, I sekoni.

Callin' Mary

LD Sledge

When the wind was right you could hear him singin' just as plain. His voice was deep and sad and the air would somehow carry it so you could hear it real clear, and then it'd fade and you couldn't hardly hear it at all. It was a mournful, scary sound that'd come and go on the wind.

He'd sit on his porch and rock and sing in the evenin' just as the sun went down. It sounded sometimes like hollerin' at the top of his voice. But when he started callin' for Mary the hair'd stand right up on the back of my neck.

I was ten and Miz Mary Bogan had been dead just about all of my life.

His house was way off out in the middle of a ol' field and you could see a patch of his rusty ol' tin roof from our front porch. It set right smack dab in the middle of a bunch of great big old sycamores that must have been there forever. I remember him raisin' corn in that field when I was real little, but for a long time there wasn't nothin' raisin' in it 'cept weeds and briars.

One July evenin', me and Bobby, he was my best friend that lived down the hill, we decided we'd find out what ol' man Bogan was doin'. We'd been hearin' him holler at sundown so long we just had to see him do it up clost.

When the sun dropped behind the treetops we run through the field and snuck up on his house. We come up behind his henhouse. The chickens had done gone to roost and when we passed, they started makin' a fuss so we scooted on by in a hurry. His old hound come up and started beatin' us with his tail and whinin', so we had to pet him to shut him up.

The whole yard around his house was hard-packed dirt without a blade of grass. What the chickens didn't pick clean he scraped with a hoe and swept a broom made out of brush tops tied together. He didn't want no lawn or nothin' like it. Didn't have no lawn mower. Wasn't no sense in cuttin' no yard grass after workin' hard at the mill all day.

His house set up about three foot off'n the ground on stacks of bricks. His dog and chickens stayed under there when it rained. The house hadn't been painted ever, I don't reckon, cause the old boards was gray and stained, and the old screens had holes all over. Bugs could get in if they wanted to.

The evenin' settled in real quiet-like. A Whippoorwill whistled out in the field. Daddy once told me a Whippoorwill was sayin' "Chip fell out of the

Whiteoak." Ol' bird wouldn't really say that but daddy told me that's what he said, and that's what his daddy told him. I knowed better. He was just whistlin'.

We ducked the overalls and the long-john underwear hangin' on the line and waddled under the house like ducks. We got to where we could see him through some knot holes in the porch floor and we squatted there head to head tryin' to get a good look.

Old man Bogan had onct been a giant of a man and had worked in the loggin' woods cuttin' logs for the sawmill. It was told he could take a crosscut saw and cut a pine four foot across all by hisself. Then he'd chop all of the limbs off with a single bit axe so that big pine would look like a phone pole in less than 30 minutes.

Onct he chunked a baseball from home plate all the way over the fence at center field, but he could tap dance and was as light on his feet as one of them fancy dancers--big as he was. They said Miz Bogan used to have flowers growin' everywhere around that old house. He was a hard man, but mama said his favorite was daffodils and Miz Mary growed a yard full of 'em just for him every spring.

He set in his rocker with his baldhead down between his old knotty fingers 'a cryin'. His heavin' sobs shook the whole porch. He'd moan and hit the arms of the chair and then beat his chest.

"Oohh, my sweet Lord. Come get me. Come take me now. Maaayreee. Where are you? I miss you so much, my sweet baby. Ohhh, pleeeeze come back. Maayyreee."

When he started callin' for Miz Mary, me'n Bobby got real clost and looked all aroun' like she might jus' come a bustin' right up out of the ground somewhere any minute. We was scared enough to take off like scalded dawgs, but then he tuned up and start hummin' a little louder.

It was a deep rumblin' at first, like comin' out of a cave or somethin'. And then he bust out singin' so deep I thought things was gonna start vibratin'.

"Rock of Ages, cleft for me. Let me hide myself in thee." He got louder and louder and finally it was like hollerin'.

When Rock of Ages played out he went straight into Amazin' Grace. He leaned his head back and opened his mouth so wide you could see his pink gums where his teeth was onct at.

He would call out Maayreee ever now and then.

He went on for a long time and then he sort of burnt hisself out and set there without rockin' or movin'—just lookin' out in front of him. I knowed he wasn't lookin' at nothin'.

He unhitched the galluses on his overalls and let 'em fall down. He helt on to the chair arm and stood up unsteady-like and walked through the front door.

Me'n Bobby slipped out from under the porch and looked over the wore-out boards. He pulled open the screen door to the livin' room and went to the mantel over the fireplace where there was a bunch of old pictures in fancy little frames.

He squinted at each of 'em and finally took one down and come back out on the porch where there was yet some daylight. He trembled and sniffed a long sniff, lookin' at that picture. We could see it good from where we was, peepin' over the boards. He was too overcome to notice us just a few feet away.

The picture was of a lady of a pretty good size with a fancy lace collar standin' alongside of a tall big man in a suit and tie. He looked at it in the fadin' light and run the tips of his fingers over the glass.

He put the picture back and stood there, just lookin' blank at the mantel, with his ol' galluses hangin' to the floor, fore and aft.

After a little he sucked in a deep breath and sighed. He looked real tired and pale and like he had done emptied hisself out, kind of. He shuffled to the bedroom on the front corner, next to the porch. The windows was long and come all the way down to the floor and they was all open.

He took his overalls off and dropped' em on a chair. Old man Bogan had on a full set of long 'hannel underwear with a baggy trap door in the back. He sat down in the middle of that saggin' old bed I thought it was gonna bust cause it squeaked somethin' fierce. In the almost dark he laid there a 'lookin' up at the ceilin'. His lips was a movin' but I couldn't make out what he was sayin'.

He closed his eyes and in a minute was snorin' loud enough to keep the skeeters off.

Me and Bobby run through the field under a early full moon. When we got to the trail down the hill to Bobby's house, we caught our breath and stood there for a moment and just looked at one another. There just wasn't nothin' to say. He turned and run to his house.

The singin' and hollerin' an' callin' went on through the rest of the summer 'til late fall when it started gettin' cool. Then it stopped.

One Sunday Miss Vitae Mae Wiggens from the Church stopped by his house to bring him a hot lunch. She found him settin' in his rocker on the porch, stiff as a poker, wearin' a suit and tie.

He was just a' settin' there, holdin' that little picture, the one with the fat lady and the man in the suit. He had a bunch of flowers in his other hand.

Miss Wiggens said he had on the happiest smile, and a look on his face like he was a' talkin' to somebody that he was really glad to see. That was true, 'cause I had to go to the funeral and pass by the coffin, and I seen that for myself. The undertaker couldn't have got that smile off if he'd tried. Even dead, old man Bogan looked happier'n when me'n Bobby seen him through that knothole.

We had done had a couple of good frosts by then, and the funny thing was, them flowers was daffodils, and they just grow in the spring. Them he was holdin' was fresh picked.

Ernest Seton Thompson, Malcolm X and Me. A Sort of Book Review.

Guinotte Wise

A few books have cut through the bumps and clutter of my gray matter, made changes up there, negotiated the neural mazes and worn paths of their own. Ernest Seton Thompson's *Wild Animals I Have Known* is one of the earliest. It taught me to regard animals as what they are, not Bambi creatures with happy Disney/Pixar endings. Our fellow passengers on this deteriorating mothership, wild animals, are the most admirable of creatures--they put their lives on the line every single day. Root, hog, or die. Birds that are wounded beyond flight join the food chain pretty quickly. Old coyotes grown feeble have no assisted living or Medicaid safety net.

I learned crow calls from that book. I could call crows from across a pasture with a "Come look at this!" three rapid caws repeated. Instead of all the crows flying over to take a gander, they'd send one recon bird (if the call was good enough). That crow would scope out the source of the call, determine it was a human, fly back and communicate that fact to the others. They would either ignore any future calls or fly away.

I cannot find my boyhood crow call so will have to order another online and try my hand and lips at it again. I imagine it will be expensive, having bowed to inflation exponentially. I just looked them up and, good God, they have electronic ones! What would be the fun or accomplishment in that? The breath-driven models look about the same as my old one and can be had for ten bucks up. I'll check Ebay.

I have two books by Ernest Seton-Thompson. One is by Ernest Thompson Seton, (?) titled *Rolf in the Woods*. I don't remember anything about that one except its ornate cover and great plate art. Both are quite old. Rolf has an inscription, *Cyril & Mick, 1918*. They are my dad and my aunt. In 1918 they'd have been quite young, three or four. That book has a 1911 copyright.

Wild Animals has a barely legible pencil inscription of August 1918 from Jules (a great-uncle of mine) also to Cyril & Karleen (my aunt Mickey), then it is over-inscribed to me from Aunt May, Dec. 25th, 1950. Its copyright is 1898. I would have been twelve that Christmas, and at the age where books were

probably quite a disappointment as gifts. Why not a Benjamin air rifle? A Hornet model airplane engine? A rocket-making set? But this Scribner's book, this collection of animal wisdom, with its gold leaf and embossed cover, its beautiful illustration plates (also by Ernest) is the single most reverberative book of my lifetime, echoing and reechoing down through the years.

Oh, other books of my youth, *Giant*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Catcher in the Rye*, the Mickey Spillanes and the Raymond Chandlers, the lurid-covered pocket books, the good, the great, the bad, the prurient, all had their effects. The beat books. Burroughs, Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti, Kerouac. The books of the protest era and Vietnam. Too many to mention. But surely cumulative in my love of words connected and placed with one another to form new chains of thoughts, awe at the writers' ways of using them. Later years brought the pleasures of Didion, McGuane, Barry Hannah, Anne Beattie, Annie Proulx, Cormac McCarthy, many more. Pure word wizardry.

But the tectonic upheaval years offered me books that I read to try and understand the world and my small place in it. Books like Marshall McLuhan's *The Medium is the Message* and Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*. Napoleon Hill's *Think and Grow Rich*, Maxwell Maltz's *Psychocybernetics*. Mind-expanding books with deep value and application to more than the moment.

The assassination years (how awful to be able to say that) of JFK, RFK, MLK, Malcolm X brought books and more books. I read them then and I read them now. We had murderous men in government bureaus then. Sociopaths who felt they could right the ship of state just by jettisoning cargo, killing the "dangerous ones." Even our own government admitted that, yes, there was "probably a conspiracy" involved in the death of JFK. Coverup books like the spurious volumes of The Warren Commission really do speak volumes about that. One must read between the holes, the Arlen Specters and the magic bullets, the suspension of physics and logic, and counter it with the damning evidence of the Zapruder film, the threatening of witnesses, the coloration of testimony. These books are among the worst ever published. The above few words will be the only review I give that set of horrors, as it galled me to look through them. Out of this scarification of the truth and justice came a book I cannot recommend strongly enough: Sylvia Meagher's evenhanded *Accessories After the Fact: The Warren Commission, the Authorities & the Report on the JFK Assassination*. She fine-sifted through the 26 volumes, and completely

destroyed any credibility the report claimed to have. Her book today remains one of the best of the JFK case, standing the test of time and mountains of new information. It's no rush to judgement or a rubber stamp to conspiracy theories. It stands alone.

I related to all the assassinated leaders, except for Malcolm X. He had angered me after Kennedy's death with his famous statement that chickens had come home to roost. He'd missed the point, I felt. He'd muddied the waters. I wanted to know more about him; what was his game.

It turned out he had no game. He was quite real. After his own assassination, I read his autobiography which was really a collaboration between him and Alex Haley. I had read conflicting things about this man, but no one denied his powerfully charismatic presence, his magnetism and dedication to cause. It's why they killed him in the end; they couldn't stand his heat, his visceral authenticity. As Maya Angelou said after meeting him, "His aura was too bright...a hot storm eddied around him...making my skin contract, and my pores slam shut."

I picked up the autobiography with some trepidation; I didn't want to read about myself as some over-privileged White Devil, and it wasn't about that. I wanted to know more about why he'd distanced himself from the Black Muslims and why anyone would want him out of the way. I knew why they wanted JFK and MLK gone--they were powerful, they were loved, they were now martyred. RFK would meet the same fate in 1968. Che Guevara was martyred for no real reason that I could see. He wasn't quite what he claimed to be, yet ended up as a t-shirt symbol for self-styled revolutionaries. I recall an overalled farmer spitting Red Man and saying, "Any preacher with more than two suits is a hypocrite." The same could go for a closet full of berets and Rolex watches. We're all poseurs to some extent; Che was just one of the more successful. Maybe he deserves the t-shirt, the logofication. The deification. Probably as much as Father Junipero Serra deserved sainthood and statues, but that's a whole 'nother complicated essay, with sepia-tinted Jesuits in my own family album, eyes glowing like coals.

I keep veering away, prefacing, ambling and preambling. I want to get this right. How I feel, and how I felt before and after reading his autobiography. I don't want to preach, or absolve, or misrepresent. The first feeling that comes to me now when I think of, or am reminded of, Malcolm X

is admiration. I have saved a magazine picture of him from the sixties; it is a side view, head shot. He is wearing a fedora, short snap-brimmed hat in the style of the times. He looks like an adman or an FBI agent. Many of us did back then, dark suits, skinny ties, fedoras before we cast off that uniform in favor of others.

I have dug through my books to try and find the 1965 Grove version of the autobiography, but like so many other important books, I may have lent it out or otherwise misplaced it. This is unfortunate because that early edition had an epilogue that said a lot. It had my margin notes of the time, my buts and question marks, which subsided after I was about a quarter of the way into it; I was reading rapt, in thrall, side notes be damned. What could I say in the margins or in a notebook about this man?

Black Americans who read this book, back then and more recently, say it changed their lives. It rocked them high up on some African-American Richter scale of kickass. Lemn Sissay says so. Spike Lee says so. This is a club that doesn't admit me, but I don't require admittance. The book changed my life, too, in that it skewed me to a slightly different reading, as a compass needle might be changed by the introduction of a ferrous metal, or a Geiger counter sounds at a more excited pitch. I don't pretend to understand Malcolm X on the level that blacks do, but I cannot be stopped from admiring the man he became at his zenith, or marveling at his resilience and journey from virulent racist to a more tolerant tone. But only tolerant to tolerance, not oppression. And god knows he was oppressed, as was his family.

The book itself was missing some chapters which only recently have come to light in a sad case involving Rosa Parks and her lawyer Gregory Reed. It appears that Reed may have sold many Parks artifacts and memorabilia, valuable items that should have been earmarked for African American history museums. History lost forever. But that's an ongoing story that unfolds daily. Why it's mentioned here is Reed bought those Haley/Malcolm X chapters from the Haley estate in 1992 for more than \$100,000. In those days, Reed was known as a "prominent attorney" and his client list, which included Motown greats, was impressive. The chapters were considered too explosive for publication and they were locked away in Reed's safe. When he declared bankruptcy, the chapters were sold at auction to New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

Fortunately, the pages didn't suffer the same fate as many Rosa Parks ephemera and books, and are deemed an extremely important find. They

possibly show, more graphically, why Alex Haley changed his co-authorship to “as told to.” He didn’t agree with Malcolm X on certain points. And the original publisher, Doubleday (who had advanced \$30,000 on the project) canceled when Malcolm X was assassinated, citing fear for the safety of its employees. This has reportedly been regarded as one of the most disastrous, perhaps *the* most disastrous publishing decision ever made. Grove Press picked it up and, eventually, six million copies of the book sold by 1977. Plays, movies and other publicity enhancing events and news items returned it to the best seller lists, and the book sales increased by 300% by 1989.

Max Elbaum wrote in *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao and Che* (2002) “*The Autobiography of Malcolm X* was without question the single most widely read and influential book among young people of all racial backgrounds who went to their first demonstration sometime between 1965 and 1968.”

I was hardly a Sixties radical, though I was one of those “young people of all racial backgrounds” who read the book. When I finished it, I was changed. Few books have done that to or for me. I regarded Malcolm X as a stalwart, a man from whom to learn tenets of dignity, perseverance, belief in one’s worth. A man to emulate in many ways. To me, he’s never been a myth, though some say the book made him one. I disagree. The book showed him in conflicting beliefs, very disappointed in the Nation of Islam’s leader, and having to forge ahead with the painful knowledge that the mentor in whom he’d invested so much was not at all who he’d seemed or purported to be. And, as far as desegregation and integration, Malcolm X has been described as “lukewarm.” If I was black, I wouldn’t care so much about integration as I would rights. Civil rights. Equal rights. *Human* rights. I think that’s what he was after.

His words, “The white liberal differs from the white conservative only in one way: the liberal is more deceitful than the conservative,” were not designed to endear him to either group, and to be real frank, he didn’t give a rat’s ass, and neither do I. We put such foolish and pompous store into “speaking truth to power.” Well, he was one who *actually* practiced it daily. Minute by minute. He was a rare man. He didn’t spit when he talked or yell curse words to egg himself on.

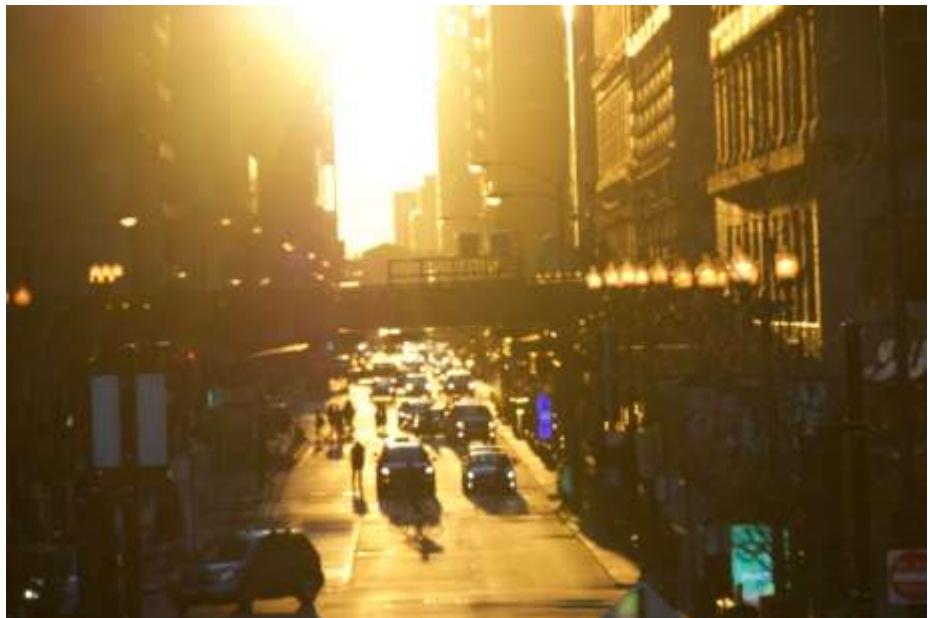
When he was wiretapped, it’s ironic that some of the listeners were reported to surmise that Malcolm X wasn’t a firebrand nut, but a rather

levelheaded leader who just didn't brook a lot of bullshit. (My words, to describe what I read about their feelings.)

When I was about seventeen, I worked in a filling station, and a nearby carwash, with a black kid my age. One day when he was running late, he missed the streetcar to take him home, and he asked me if I would drive him, beat the streetcar, to a stop where he could still catch it. We were hauling ass in my old Ford, a cop magnet on its own due to loud pipes and lowering blocks, when we were pulled over by a motorcycle cop.

He asked me some questions, checked the interior, then said, "Well, it just looked funny, you know, a white and a Negra, driving together." And we were free to go after I explained we were looking to catch his streetcar. I didn't know what to say to the kid but I could feel the heat in my face. If it made me angry, what did *he* feel? Not much, it turned out. He was used to it. He would have to sit in the rear of that streetcar once we'd caught it.

I hope he read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.



ChicagoHenge / Daniel Weinberg

Million Dollar Highway to Silverton, CO

Savannah Carlin

The edge of the road, invisible in its proximity to my passenger door, falls hundreds of feet into crumbling slate and tin-sided mine shafts. The road thrashes back and forth and the gray rock walls soar up too close for another car to fit. In an instant, snow is billowing around us. We slow down, but more time on this road means more time that a pickup could rush us off the ledge around the next corner. Bob Dylan is playing.

*How does it feel, how does it feel?
To be on your own, with no direction home
A complete unknown, like a rolling stone*

There are signs for rock slides as the incline steepens downhill and the wheels whine with the downshift. One turn, another, and miraculously we only meet one car on a thirty-five-yard straightaway. The edge seems to crawl beneath us as we pull over. A fall buffered only by skinny lodge pole pines. Dylan's now on Highway 61.

*God say, "You can do what you want Abe, but
The next time you see me comin' you better run"
Well Abe says, "Where do you want this killin' done?"
God says, "Out on Highway 61"*

The snow is still fluttering, blocking out the glowing grey mist orb of sun. The aspens overtake the pines in rippling seas of yellow leaves and tremulous trunks. Smooth ground soft in moss and roots. We leave the mountains and they overtake our windows, unseeable in their entirety. I am infinitesimal. I dream sometimes of falling forever. The smallness of the mountains is enveloping in the same way the air in my dreams is. I am held by them. The air is steel cold, too cold to smell. Smells come with things dying and being born. Bacteria eating up and being eaten. But here the mountains are in control of the energy reserved for chirps and heat and musk.

My Dad and I are quiet almost the whole ride. Before the snow we had gone to a shrine to the Lady of Guadalupe in a tiny mining town. He had gone there with Mom when they drove to California twenty years before.

Walking up the hill to the shrine the mountains sucked out the air from my lungs, leaving the thousands of bronchioles burning. Little holes in the stones of steps crumbled under my feet around the crimson moss and lichen. The wind whipped the edges of my ears, whistling in the rocks. The shrine was pathetically, heartbreakingly cheap. Cinder blocks placed by hand, yet cemented askew. The original mural, medieval in its unwilling lack of perspective, chipped at the edges. Mary's hands outstretched, gazed out over that small town, embraced it.

The town trickled out before us, scant, metal-roofed, and cut off from the outside world in winter. Dad looked at the shrine and me with the embarrassing intensity and trembling eyebrows reserved for when I wore grown up dresses or looked at colleges. I tried not to meet his eye in its seriousness. My teenage self couldn't meet him in his graying vulnerability.

I didn't feel anything from kneeling at her feet and saying an Our Father and Hail Mary with him. I expected to. If not now, when? In the midst of mountains and near immediate death I could not feel her, want her, need her, as those miners had, as my father had, as my mother had. Shaft collapses, lost parents, sadness that needed a bigger explanation than bad luck.

And I expect the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Empty and flat, she could not hold me like the mountains, even with her arms outstretched. Make my own sadness and discomfort with myself seem even smaller than me. Instead I felt the choke of incense and the cold drops of water flung on my face at Easter and the constant vigilance of my own unworthiness that God somehow cared enough about to make me recount but not enough about to stop loving me. I didn't think that then. I think of it now and I felt it then.

Ice Dancing

Ron Pullins

A God who counts minutes and pennies,
a desperate sensual God, who grunts like a pig.

A pig with golden wings, who falls and falls,
always belly side up, ready for caresses,
that's him, our master. Come, kiss me.

Celine

Journey to the End of the Night

Bar

It is midtown, Kansas City.

There is a bar. Large plate glass windows face the sidewalk, face cars parked along the street, face out onto the street, then across the street to trees bared by winter and dark brownstones. It is snowing.

A man walks by on the sidewalk, huddled in his coat, his hands in his pockets. A hat. He pauses. He looks in the bar through the window. Then he walks on.

The bar is located, we should say, in midtown, on corner where a main thoroughfare crosses a street that leads to nowhere in particular. There is some traffic on the main street, cars with their lights on. It is evening after work, and the car lights move through the snow. It is snowing, as we have said, and there is slush on the streets. The cars are muffled, quiet, as if the traffic holds its breath. Snow. Evening. Friday. All those things, together, in midtown Kansas City in December.

A thick oak door with beveled glass leads out the corner of the bar. Or in, depending on perspective. Or needs. Or point of view. Other glass windows stretch down the bar along that dark, pointless street. Snow collects on cars parked there, and on the cars parked on main street which have been splattered with slush.

A man—perhaps the same man who walked by the bar earlier, perhaps

someone else—for this is midtown and it is after the workday on a Friday and this bar is a gathering place for the young, the employed, the lonely, all sorts, men and women, coming and going, together, or in groups—this man enters. He wears a hat, a dark cashmere coat, his hands deep in his pockets. He hangs his coat on the rack by the door. There is space to hang his coat because it is early evening, and many who come here in cars have not yet arrived. He wears a blazer, tan pants, and he keeps his hat which he puts back on his head. He sits on a stool at the front. The bar runs under a mirror which hangs high on the wall.

He has a drink now. He settles in on his stool. From there he can watch the city pass outside, the cars, the snow, the slush, those who walk by. The windows are fogged over from the breath of people. Who isn't tempted to write something in the fog on these windows? Something temporary. Pithy. What would you write? 'Stay home.' 'Stay away.' 'Come in.' 'Beware.' Would you write it so you could read it inside, or so it could be read outside? Say something.

He can see the men and women at the bar and beyond, sitting or standing, drinks in hand, laughing sometimes, flirting often, looking at each other, and looking about, and looking at their drinks, and drinking.

He can also see the mirror and into the backroom. There she sits. He has been paid to kill her.

She sits in a booth, sitting on the edge and she faces out, turned towards to the crowd and the bar. She holds a brandy with soda and ice. She shakes her glass as if it were a friend. The ice clinks. She turns to the women who sit there, huddled with them over the table. They have been talking to each other, but not to her. She is with them, but not one of them. They barely acknowledge her except as an inconvenience. Not even when she leans in and completes the huddle, which she does from time to time. Not even when she says a few words, when she adds to their conversation, not even then to they seem to care.

"Men are pigs," she says.

They don't care what she says.

It is a quiet evening. Outside it is snowing. People enter and exit, bringing in snow from outside. The glass on the windows and front door is frosted from the bottom up. It is fogged with the breath of all of us inside. People have written obscenities in the fog.

Outside there is no wind. A soft snow falls. Streetlights make circles in the snow. They make inverted cones as the snow falls through the light. A car drives by, its tires slushing the fresh, wet snow. Then a heavy truck, a snow plow, pushes through, throws up snow, reveals the frozen truth of roads.

Inside it is warm. People stand, or sit, some quiet and alone, some talk. It is early evening. This is the ritual of this bar in Kansas City. Perhaps it is the ritual of all bars.

The man sitting at the bar near the front stares into the mirror. The bartender dips dirty glasses into the sink, wipes the glasses clean, stacks them on a shelf in files and rows that shine under the lights, each sort of glass its own shelf and sparkle.

"Warm," the man says. "In here."

"People," the bartender says. "They warm the place up." He dips another glass in the water, wipes it with a cloth, looks at it through the light, then places it on the proper shelf.

"Not so many people here," the man says.

"No. It's early."

"I'm not here either," the man says.

The bartender says nothing, only shrugs his acknowledgement. That's his, 'okay.' His, 'if that's the way it is, then that's the way it is.' They don't know each other. Maybe no one knows anyone. Just courtesy and ritual. But the bartender knows, when the man is here and wants to be here, he's here, and when he's not, he's not. No one notices. No one cares. This is the man who wears a hat, who has come in, and orders a Scotch, and sometime he will go. That's all.

The bartender wipes another glass clean, and places it on its shelf and thus returns some small order to the universe.

She stands up. Her friends at the table lean forward, talk among themselves, laugh, act as though she wasn't there, although she is. Although they know it.

She is dressed in black, black shoes, black coat, black sweater, with a long red scarf and a knitted cap to match. Her long black hair cascades out and down from under it.

"Men are pigs," she says again.

"What did she say back there?" the man on the barstool asks. He is well across the room and hard of hearing anyway. He nods, and then tips his glass of ice and Scotch in such a way as to indicate that woman he has been

staring at.

"Men are pigs, I think she said," the bartender says. "She says it all the time," he says, "when he's not here."

"Ah, him," the man says. "And, when he's not here, what does she say?"

"When he's here, she says something else," he says. "Him here, or not, that changes everything. My brother."

Her face is pale, ghostly snuggled in blacks and reds. She stands, then looks around, then sits. She breathes in deep, then exhales. There is some incompleteness. Something unfinished.

"You want another?" the bartender asks.

The man spins his glass a bit slowly on the bar. It is empty, all but ice.

"What I do, I do," the man says. "I do what I do to have a little money. That's no excuse, but it's my reason."

"Don't we all," the bartender says.

"We all need to earn a little money from time to time," the man says. "Just my fair share. That's all I ask."

"My fair share. That's asking a lot," the bartender says.

The man sets his glass down, pushes it across the bar. The bartender takes it, dumps out the ice as if it were garbage, shovels in fresh ice, then cascades Scotch down the slivers.

"Just enough money to buy a little Scotch. That's not asking so much."

She spots him across the room, at the far end of the bar, there by the window, there where the bar makes an elbow. It is not like she has failed to see him before. Everyone has seen the man in the hat. He comes in often, sits there at the bar, night after night. But this evening it's different. He looks at her, and looks, and looks, sometimes at her, sometimes at her in the mirror above the bar.

"Quit staring," she says.

It's not a constant stare he gives. Only from time to time does the man look up to see her reflection. Sometimes he catches her staring back. Then she smiles to let him know she has seen him, and then he smiles to let her know that he has seen her see him. At such times their eyes meet.

"God," she says. Then she rolls her eyes and turns away. She nurses her brandy, stares down at it, then takes a sip.

"What's a girl to do?" she says, looking back up to where he still looks at her in the mirror. He cannot hear her across the room, above the mumble

and the bumble of the conversations, laughter, ice clicking in glasses, the opening and shutting of the door, snowing tumbling in across the welcome mat. But he does see her move her lips.

“What’s she saying?” the man asks the bartender.

“I think she says, ‘What’s a girl to do?’” the bartender says. “She says that all the time. Even when he’s here. That, and ‘Men are pigs.’ Those are most of what she says.”

“I mean,” she says again, her lips moving again, her voice too far away to be heard “What’s a girl to do?”

This time the man correlates the movement of her lips with what the bartender has suggested, and he knows she is speaking to him.

But she is waiting for someone. His brother. He knows that, but he knows much more, more than she knows.

He knows who she is waiting for, as well as he knows he will not come in tonight, not in time anyway to be with her, he’ll not come in while she is here. That is the plan. When he comes, if he comes, she will be gone, with him, the man in the hat, the man who sits at the crook of the bar, and who stares at her from time to time in the mirror.

She is waiting for her lover, and she doesn’t know this man and her lover are brothers, and his brother will come in later, too late, and ask if she is there, and find out she is gone, and he will ask, ‘Oh, where is she?’ or ‘Oh, and why did she leave?’ and “Oh, who did she leave with?” And no one will know because no one will know his brother. Just a man in a hat.

They are two brothers and one has been hired to do a job, and the other is has done the hiring. That’s the way that is. She doesn’t know any of this.

“Staring at me,” she says to his reflection. “Quit the fuck. Or come over. Take me home. Buy us some wine on the way. For you and I. I’m tired of waiting. I don’t even like the guy who’s coming. You and I, we’ll have some fun when we get home. My home. That’s not so far. We’ll read some of the Russians. Those Russians, they can write,” she says. “There hasn’t been a novelist since the last Russian died.”

He seems to understand what she is saying, although she sits so far across the room. In a literary sense, he agrees. And she is exactly like the woman his brother described her as being. She knows what she has said, and he knows what she will say and do, because his brother had told him as they

made the plan.

She laughs; he doesn't. Then he looks down from the mirror, looks at his fresh drink, rolls the ice around, less to stir it than to have something to do. Timing is everything. He must posture in just such a way. That's part of the plan, part of the training. Then the man looks up again.

"Maybe Tolstoy," she says. "Or, better, Dostoevsky. You look like a Dostoevsky kind of guy."

The crowd in the bar stands between them. Their chatter buries any real words. Many comings and goings. The door opens and closes, brings in the cold. The hungry. The eager. The passionate. The lonely. Some leave. The snow tumbles in, bumbles across the welcome mat. He sees her speak, but the man cannot hear her words.

Outside snow falls quietly on the sidewalk. Flakes fall through streetlights, are tainted red when they fall below the glow of the bar sign. The snow falls through the light from the headlights of cars that roll through the snow, roll over new snow as if the tires are wearing pads, as if the tires wear slippers on their way to bed. Slow moving tires crushing the snow and, from time to time, trucks scraping away snow that hides the street from us.

The man tries to remember his favorite Dostoevsky. He tries to remember his favorite passages from Dostoevsky. There's that chapter in *The Brothers* everyone always talks about. He remembers he likes the writing, the stories, the infinite labyrinth of relationships. Their disaster of a family. There are several brothers in the novel. There is a father. The story goes along, about all them, something like that.

"You ever read any Dostoevsky?" the man asks the bartender.

The bartender is no help. The bartender may or may not have heard the question, or he may or may not have read any Dostoevsky, or, if he has, not recently, and anyway after washing and wiping all those glasses, and after pouring all that Scotch, Dostoevsky would have faded from anyone's memory, you or I even, or the bartender may or may not have any idea who Dostoevsky is in the first place. How many do, you wonder.

The bartender wipes another glass clean, admires its transparency in the light, then places it appropriately on the shelf.

"You're not so bad looking," she says from across the room.

She is flirting, he thinks. Good. Or, perhaps he imagines her saying that. The plan gains motion. His brother has predicted this in laying out the plan.

"Did you hear what she said?" the man asks the bartender. But the night is getting busy, and the bartender has more and more to attend to.

She speaks to the mirror and gives her words shapes. She twists her head a bit. A signal, perhaps. An invitation.

"I'm tired of waiting," she says. "I hate waiting for pigs to make up their minds. Pig minds. Make up your mind."

She's calling me a pig, he thinks. He smiles. He is a man. Thus, there is some logic in her thinking. And of course, he admires his brother all the more, for foreseeing how this all would unfold. Not that that is enough to redeem his brother in his mind. He doesn't like his brother, and his brother doesn't like him. It's one of those families. But from time to time his brother needs things done, and he remains a convenient one to do them. He charges minimum for dirty work. He never argues price or task. And he's discrete.

And he has nothing else to do, nothing that pays money, nothing that involves a woman, and it seems pointless to spend time sitting in a bar with a bartender who doesn't have the time to talk Russian novels, who's too busy to be existential.

Anyway, just telling his brother he'd do a thing is no guarantee he'll do it. He will follow what continues to interest him, and this does.

She bends down low to the tabletop with her friends.

"Soon my man'll come," she says. They barely notice her. "You know the one. Who looks for me. Every night, you know. He's late. So when he comes," she says, "and asks for me, for where I am, if he comes in — I'm sure he will—assuming that he does, and he'll here, he always does, you tell him that I've gone, but don't say where—you won't know, and I won't know until I'm there. Say that. Say, she got tired of waiting. Yeah, tell him that. Tell him she left here with someone else. Yes, that would be nice. Someone prettier. Someone nice. Someone who likes me. Who'll buy me wine, and things like that, and not cheap wine, like he does. Tell him that. And cheese, and stuff. Someone who's got me hot. Tell him someone at the bar. A stranger I don't know. Someone who doesn't have a name."

She nods towards the man who wears a hat and who is looking in the mirror, and her friends look up, then quickly look away, and he looks away, and then the women at the table resume their chatter, again without her in their huddle, among themselves, as if they do not care, as if nothing has happened. She looks again in the mirror.

"Come on over, buddy boy. Check out the goods. What's taking you so long? Make a pass. Make an offer."

He smiles, adjusts his hat, look for the money to pay his tab. She turns to her girlfriends and smiles, but they don't care.

Her sweater is black. Her hair, coal blue. Her lips blood red like the scarf around her neck. Her face, unnatural white. The dark around her eyes makes her face look whiter.

"Men think too fucking much," she says. She turns back to her friends. "Too fucking much." She taps her head. She looks back at the mirror and speaks as if he hears. "Too fucking much!"

He lays out cash on the bar to pay for his Scotch.

"Come over. God. What's a girl to do?"

The bartender takes the change. Elbows on the bar, drink in hand, the man looks outside. It is snowing. Soft. Quiet snow. It is winter. It is somewhere where winters bring dark and heavy snow early on November Friday evening, Kansas City. There is a comfort in the dark. To the erasing of all, except here, and now, and this room, and these lights, and the fog that creeps up those windows.

Timing is everything. He waits for the moment.

She spins her glass in her hand around, and finally the man at the bar swivels his barstool, turns to the man who sits next to him, something the woman cannot hear, his head turned away from the mirror so she doesn't see.

"He'll come over," she says to no one. "He'll act all this and that, and pig like, and big deal, and like he knows me, see. All googoo and nice, and 'What's your name?' and 'Aren't you pretty,' and all the shit men say. Wait and see. He'll act like we've met before. Like, 'Don't I know you?' and like, 'Didn't we fuck once in the dark?' He's a pig, you know," she says. "They all are."

She looks at her drink, turns the glass in her hands, spins it softly, slowly, then looks up, looks at him, looks in the mirror. Then slowly, impatiently, "Kiss my ass, then, if you're not coming over!"

She almost gives up. Or she seems to give up, not to care. Timing is everything. She'll seem less fearful, less strong, less eager for him, if she can seem not to care. That might move him to come. Move him to come quicker. Now. She is ready to leave.

More elements of Friday night have arrived. Especially women. You know the type. Dressed for work, and ready for a night, and equal to everyone, and indifferent now or later or whatever.

He picks up his tab, doesn't study it, why would he? picks up his change, calculates a tip. Then, coat over his arm, he adjusts his hat and crosses the room. Comes to her table, looks into her eyes, and smiles. As planned.

"Staring at me," she says, before he says a word. She has an odd pleasant voice for one with such a sharp face, in fact an ax for a face, and he likes that, he likes character, and dark hair, red scarves, red woolen hats.

Then she goes on. "Like you know me, or shit. Like you own me or shit. Like I'm going to pick up and go, or some shit like that."

Her friends at the table are silent, but they listen.

"Now," she says, "say something sweet. You know, how men do. Entice me, or something. Tempt me, or something. Lie like a man. Tell me I'm beautiful, or some shit like that. Or let's buy us some wine on our way to my place, or some shit like that. And cheese." She looks away, like she doesn't care. Attitude is so important. Indifference. He stands in front of her, his coat over his arm, and says nothing.

He puts out his hand. It is bare, and warm, and he's wearing no gloves.

She pauses. "Men are pigs," she says. "But you know that, being a man. And, just so you know, you all make me sick."

She takes his hand. Smiles unexpected. Almost normal. Almost as if she is surprised.

"Let's blow this dump," she says.

She stands, waves goodbye to the gaggle at the table.

"You see," she says to them, turning back to her friends. "Staring at me. You know what they want. You see what they're like."

She takes her coat from a hook, and he helps her with getting it on. It is also black, like her hair, like her shoes. She adjusts her red scarf, adjusts her red wool hat. Then turns to her friends, bends down to their table, leans into the huddle.

"See? Men. They stare. And they stare. And they get themselves hot. Then they come on, make a pitch like they got some big-assed car. They might give you a ride, promise you wine, real fancy wine. And maybe cheese from some place you never heard of."

She buttons her coat, brushes off lint.

"So, if you are coming to my place," she says to the man, "we need to

get wine. And not cheap wine. Not wine like he gets," she says, tossing a look back to the table. "My friend," she says, "who didn't show up." Then to him. She takes his hand and guides him out.

"And don't worry about him. He's a stranger to you. As for cheese, I like good cheese. Something fancy is nice. Perhaps something French. Or cheese not from a cow."

He pulls open the door and lets in the air. All as was planned. She walks out the door, into the winter. He follows, as he puts on his gloves.

A man walks by on the sidewalk, huddled in his coat, his hands in his pockets. A hat. He pauses. He looks in the window. Then he walks on. Past the two of them who are already crossing the street.

Snow

Now, standing outside, in the snow, under the light, near where the snow has been shoveled from the path — like pathways, networks leading along the streets, across the streets, and up to businesses (and then into businesses), and to steps that lead up to brownstones, and to houses (eventually to little gates in wrought iron fences, but those are miles to the south), then on into the suburbs and ad nauseum, networks of uncovered snow, a complicated and lovely grid for Kansas City. The issue is how best to use this grid to get from where one is to where one wants to be, from A to B, and prefatory to that, to know where B is, and what it is, (A being where you are so no ambiguity there) for the grid itself is nothing, only a guide to the process of going. Getting there is all consuming. Arrival ends the process, and that what. One wonders.

"Where's your car?" she says.

She stands outside the bar, beyond the sidewalk, in the road, huddled in her coat, pulling it closer and tighter around her, looking about, seeking. She is dark as the night is dark, except for the lovely red of hat and scarf, and she shivers.

"What car?" he asks.

"Your big-assed car," she says. "Surely you have a big assed car. You all have cars. Men. The way you acted back there. Like, 'Come with me.' Like, 'Come have a ride in my big assed car.' Like, 'Let's go in my big assed car and do the funny things.' People who say things like that always have a big-assed

car."

"I didn't say that."

"But you have a car."

"I have a Ford."

"A Ford?"

"A Ford."

"Guys who come to a place like this, who pick up women at a place like this, say things like you said to a woman who comes to a place like this, you all always have a big-assed car."

"I only have a Ford."

"The guy I was supposed to meet, he has a big-assed car. And now I'm here with you. God. Where will this end? Me in some fucking Ford."

"It's what I have." He pauses. His hands are deep in the pockets of his coat. He has buttoned his coat and turned up his collar. You can see his breath in the cold.

"A Ford? A plain fucking Ford? Well, I don't normally go out with guys who have plain fucking Fords," she says.

Cars on the street are covered in snow. Other cars drive by on the street, moving softly across the snow, their headlights shining through the snowflakes which fall softly on the streets. A snow plow drives by and throws snow up on the sidewalk. Throws the slush up, too. Splattering against the cars. One of which is probably his Ford.

"How far do we go?"

"I live across the street."

She points to the brownstones across the street, and to one a few brownstones towards town.

"That's not so far. We can walk, I guess," he says.

"I guess," she says. At the curb she is up to her ankles in snow. She steps between two parked cars, then onto the street, and she dodges cars that drive along.

They pass a store with large windows, well-lit inside, and two signs flashing: "Open," "Liquor." He enters, then exits moments later, carrying a bag.

"Got it," he says.

Two brownstones down, she goes up steps which lead to a heavy oak door. She unlocks it and it sweeps away snow as she opens it and enters. He follows her in. It is cold inside, but not as cold as out. Still, not as warm as he wants it to be.

Inside is another door. Further inside it is warmer still. The hallway is dark, the floor is wet, the stairs are heavy and worn. She leads the way, up three flights, and he follows her, one step at a time, two steps behind her. When she lifts her foot to another step, he lifts his foot to another step, her right leg, his right leg, and then she pushes her body forward, lifts herself up, pulls herself forward and he pushes his weight forward, then lifts himself up, pulls himself forward. He follows like a rat following cheese, a cat chasing twine, a hawk circling in warm rising air stalking mice.

She stops, turns back, looks down. He stops, looks up.
“What?” he asks.

She doesn’t say anything, but she turns back and steps up, and they continue their syncopation.

The third floor is the top floor, and there she follows a hallway deeper to the rear. He expects the drunk he finds sleeping in the hallway, a bag in his hand, a bottle in the bag. He is careful not to trip over the legs, as he feels his way forward through the dark with his toes. It is a long empty hallway, flooded with dark and the smell of urine.

She finds her door, unlocks it. He follows her in. Her place is dark, too. The front door enters at the kitchen. At the far end are the windows, blinds which look out to the street. Some light comes in from the street.

She pulls a string. Overhead light comes on.

“Nice place,” he says.

“Fuck you,” she says. The door swings closed in the dark. “It’s a dump.”

The room, let me say, is long rectangle that fades from the harsh light over the table, from the lights outside, through the Venetian blinds, through the archway towards the couch, folded out now for sleeping — always folded out, for its various reasons — with covers, pillows, sheets, an over-stuffed armchair with its stuffing exposed along the arms. There are probably colors in all this, albeit they are faded now, as it is too dark for us to see. All we see is light, the shades of gray, the absence of the light in the many shadows.

He sets the wine and cheese on the table, then stands, surveys for us, his coat still on.

“You got crackers,” she says. She pulls things from the bag.

“Crackers,” he says.

“I hope you got cheese. I don’t have any cheese.”

“I got cheese,” he says. “Not French, but it’s cheese.”

The sink is filled with dishes. Water drips from the tap. Not a fast drip, but slow and steady, so long between the drips you start to feel a growing anticipation for each next drip, which takes long enough between the drips you start to wonder if it has stopped. Then a new drip comes, and you sigh relief, and you think you can go on with other things, your life, but you have forgotten by now what so once possessed you, the anticipation of a drip so overwhelmed your attention you have forgotten where you were, what you were thinking before, and this wondering left with an emptiness full of lost memories. A fridge by the stove hums softly along. An iron skillet on the stove holds white congealed grease.

“Cozy,” he says.

She empties the bag.

“And you. You’re pretty.”

She looks up quick.

“Who says that I’m not?”

“Your place is nice.”

He beats snow off his coat and stomps snow off his shoes. He still stands by the door.

“Yes,” he says. “Very nice.”

“Fuck you. It’s a dump.”

She looks close at the cheese. There are four bottles of wine.

He takes off his gloves, puts his gloves in his coat, and takes off his dark, cashmere coat.

She turns on another light. Then another. Then another. She twists the faucet, stops the drip.

“Maybe I should go.”

“Stay. Why not?”

“Perhaps.”

“Do what you want.”

She takes off her coat, folds it over a chair, stomps the snow off her feet. Then sits at one of the two chairs pushed up at the table and takes off her shoes.

“But leave the wine.”

“The wine,” he says. He holds up his hand like he is inspired. “I’ll open the wine. Yes.” Almost gleeful to have a purpose.

He pulls the wine from the bag, two red, two white. He unscrews the cap.

“And glasses?” he says.

“Jelly jars.”

She nods towards shelves which hang over the sink.

“Nice jars,” he says when he has opened the cabinet.

“Fuck you.”

He holds a jar, pours wine, looks at light that passes through the jar and the wine. And sits her jar in front of her where she is working on removing her shoe.

“To wine. And to us. And to whoever you are.”

“Kay,” she says.

“Kay?” he says.

“Kay,” she says. A shoe drops to the floor. She rubs her toes which are cold.

“Kay. Like the letter?”

“Kay,” she says. “Like kiss my ass.”

“I’m Jay.”

“Jay,” she says. “And then there was Jay, sitting at the fucking bar, sipping his fucking drink, staring at me.”

“I didn’t stare at you,” he says. “Looking. Not staring.”

He toasts the air. He sips. She sips hers. Then they both sip again. They have a ritual. They look at each other.

He sits in a wooden chair at the table. It wobbles. She sits in the other chair. They fill their jars again. The jars sit on the table—light passing through casts red shadows.

Their faces. Shadow and light. His brows. His cheeks. His perfect straight nose. Her whiteness. Her skin. The red muffler she wears. Her red hat. She still wears them both. Outside it is night. There is less traffic than before. And three floors up, it is quiet.

“You were creepy down there at the bar,” she says. “Like you know me or something.”

“I’d like to know you.”

“Like anyone can know anyone.”

He sips his wine. Looks at her.

“Like maybe they can,” she says.

“I wonder.”

So, there is a plan in place.

"The plan is," his brother says earlier, "you get her to go with you. Pick her up at the bar, you know. Take her home. You can do it. Go to her place, if you can. I don't care. Your place, if you have to. She'll be waiting," he says. "Waiting for me. There at the bar. And she will have waited so long she'll be angry. At me. At men. She's always angry at men. It'll be easy for you to work this thing."

"Then what?" he asks.

"Then, so, she's all pissed off, see, and you catch her eye, and let shit happen. Shit'll happen. It always does. Tempt her along. Entice her to go. You got your ways, brother dear. Just make it happen, you know how it is."

"Then what?"

"Then she takes you to bed, it's as easy as that. Then I wait a while, for an appropriate time, let things happen, then I storm in, knock on the door, yell, and shout, and come in with a gun."

"Then what?"

"Then there you are. And she's dead. You've killed her."

"You want me to kill her."

"You can or you can't. You do or you don't. You don't, there you are. A strange man in her bed. Naked and all. You with my girl. So I do the killing. Who can blame me for that? Not a jury in the world. If it even comes to that."

"You kill me?"

"Oh, no. You get away. Who knows who you are. Some stranger there. But she's dead. That's the plan. A man's screwing his lover, he finds them in bed, he shoots her dead, the man disappears. Then, I get on with my life. With the woman I've married. With my family and all. My work. She's abnormal. You'll see. I don't love her anymore. I never loved her. Who could love her. You'll see. And I can't go on. This can't go on. Any more."

That's what was said. Then some discussion of money, and family, and all. But that was the plan.

We are back at the table, this guy is there at the table, and the table wobbles as he pours wine, and his chair wobbles, too, as he gives a toast. The floors are cold. The bed's not made. The drip from the faucet has resumed, a little slower, but again.

"You're interesting."

"Fuck you," she says.

"I mean, unique," he says.

“Fuck you.”

He sips his wine and pauses.

“You know what I mean,” he says.

“I hope the fuck so.”

She sips her wine and pauses. She stares across the table.

“Your friends at the bar. They are not at all like you.”

“They are not my friends.”

She looks at down at her wine, then sips.

“At the table. The women you were sitting with. You always go there when you go there at night. At the bar. Before we left.”

“Bitches. Not my friends. Friends of a guy who was supposed to show up. But he didn’t show up, did he? Or maybe he was late. Too late now. Maybe he’s there now. But if he would have shown up, if he had been there on time, you wouldn’t be here. Men are such pigs.”

“I know,” he says.

“You know shit,” she says.

He drains his jar.

“I know you,” he says. And he smiles.

He sets his jar on the table, unscrews the cap to the wine with a snap of the wrist, pours more red. It’s the first from the second bottle.

“Staring at me. All night,” she says, holds out her jar for more. “Like you know me, or shit.”

“You

“You’re interesting, I’m sure.”

“Right. Interesting. Fuck you.”

He picks up the cheese. It is a round oval, encased in wax. He spins it. “This is the cheese,” he says. She stares at him. “Let’s start over. I’m Jay.”

“Staring at me there at the bar.” She shakes her head, then look deep into the glass as she drinks.

“Much night is still left.”

He is thinking of the plan.

“It sure drags the fuck out,” she says.

“I make you uncomfortable.” He tilts back his chair on its legs and rocks back and forth. “I don’t mean to,” he says.

“You don’t.”

She is still wearing her coat over her sweater, her long red scarf, her red knit hat. A draft slides down the window, leaving frost on the glass, flows

to the floor, across the floor, then over their feet, across to the door, under the door, then into the hallway, and on beyond caring.

“From the beginning, again. You are lovely. Lovely to look at. Your neck....”

She pauses, tilts back a bit, takes off her hat, unwraps her scarf. “I’m going to bed. If you’re interested.”

Feet

She turns on the night lamp that sits by her bed, that fold-out couch we talked about earlier. The lamp sitting on the table there is tall and skinny, with fringe around the shade, and the shade itself stained, brown spots on the yellow. Books are stacked on the night table. Books with markers hanging out from the pages, or dust jackets folded into the depth of the read. Other books are open, rest on their pages so they sprawl from that moment when reading ceased, as if time stopped and the books awaits. Books piled on books, straining at the spines, wails to be turned over, read, finished, all’s well with the world, closed, returned to order on some shelf.

There are no bookshelves. There are other books on the floor in the shadows.

She takes off a shoe. It drops to the floor. She holds up her toes. She wears no stockings. She wiggles her toes and reflects on them and wiggles them again. Then takes off the other shoe, and drops it to the floor, and she sighs. Freedom.

Thoughts locked in her feet are unlocked. Are free. She wiggles her cold toes as if they can speak. They do. They dance, and grow warm. She can think again, with her mind, her toes. Foot binds unbound. She wonders why, what does she want? what is revenge? why revenge? what is just? what is justice? why didn’t he show up? what does it mean this man is upstairs? what does he want? what does what will happen next mean now? what will happen? in what order will events unfold? why that way and not another? what is the good? and why is that? She wiggles her toes. It frees her mind. She takes enormous pleasure in that moment.

He sits at the table under the light above the kitchen table, a bare bulb that hangs by a wire and from which dangles a pull string. He has removed his coat and gloves, his hat which sits in the center of the table, there with the

wine, and his jar with wine still in it. He stares at the wine, the color it makes, the shape of the light on the table when he moves the jar. Angles. Refractions. He still wears his blazer, his white shirt, his tie.

“Stay if you want. I don’t care,” she says.

“I was wondering if I was welcome.”

“There, if you need someone to say it.”

“Thank you,” he says. But he doesn’t move. Then, seeing her, and seeing that his own wet shoes are, from crossing the street, from stepping into snow and slush plowed against the curb, and because he had to climb over the snow to get to the sidewalk, because he followed her, and now that the snow has melted, and his shoes are wet, and his feet are cold, too, so he takes his shoes off, one at a time, so one drops to the floor, then the other, but he leaves on his socks, he decides to leave them on, long calf-high black socks. He wiggles his toes still covered by socks.

“Shoes shrink when they dry,” he says. “The leather shrinks.” He rubs his toes. “It is a little-known fact, but your feet grow bigger as you age. Not when you die, not like toenails or hair, which can grow when you’re dead. But your feet relax, the theory goes, over time. The ligaments and all that, the glue of the bones, spread out, your feet get wider, relax, did you know. And they can grow longer. But mainly wider,” he says. “So, say your shoes when you are old are size ten and a half, it should come as no surprise when you are really old, that you need a size bigger, say as big as a twelve. Women, too. It’s a fact. At least for some.”

He rubs his toes. Yes, his eye lids relax with the pleasure, of warming his toes, or feeling freedom from shoes, from wet.

“Most people don’t know that,” he says. “So, they end up with tight shoes. And they get all cranky and pissy. You go in, and you buy shoes, and you’re not any taller, or even fatter, so you buy the same size. For god’s sake, you’re old. Change is behind you. So you get the same old dependable ten and a half, and for the next year or so, you’re all pissy. Not because you are suddenly old and pissy, but it’s only because your shoes are too tight, because your feet still grow when you are older.”

He takes off his socks. That’s even better.

“You probably know that,” he says. “Feet. Growing bigger and faster than most people think.”

“I had to walk in the snow,” she says. “My feet got wet. I expected a ride.”

"You just live across the street."

She's laying in the bed.

"I expected a ride. In some big fat-assed car. Now my feet are wet. We could have ridden. Even across the street. Even in some fucking old Ford."

"I like Fords."

"Now my feet are wet. And cold. And so are yours."

She stands and her sweater drops from her shoulders to the floor.

"If your shoes are tight, don't blame me. Or if your toes are cold, shit happens to everyone. Anyway, we made it, I guess. Across the street anyway."

"Across the street," she says. "That's all."

"Yes."

"No big fucking deal."

"No big fucking deal."

She pulls off her dress. It drops to the floor. Her back is bare as she crawls under the sheets, unknotting the covers as she stretches out under, then pulls the sheets over, then puts her pillows behind her on what is the back of the couch, so she can sit up and look at him.

"Back at the bar, looking at me," she says. "God."

She shakes her head and finishes undressing under the sheet.

"Staring at me. Then you came over. You know how you did. Then, those things you said. Then, when you got what you wanted, when you got your own way, when you picked up a stranger, when I went with you, from back at the bar, then you made me walk home, lead you here. I don't even get a ride in your big-assed car."

"I didn't say anything back at the bar. It just happened."

"Your eyes on me. Your eyes said it all. You look at a person, you don't have to say shit. People know. Everyone knows."

Off comes her underwear, out from under the sheet, and then it drops on the floor.

The light shines on the table, down on his hands. Cool wine in the jars casts lights and shadows. He pulls the cheese from the bag, but he doodles with the box of crackers, pulls open the flaps, but doesn't take the crackers out, wrapped in cellophane. He thought he saw a bug in a shadow on the table, but that could not be.

His feet are flat on the cold floor, bare and dry.

"You made us walk. No fucking car."

"I had a car. You walked. I didn't make you."

"A fucking Ford," she says. "That's what I heard."

"If we had needed the car, I could have gotten it. I was lucky I had found a place to park."

"The way you looked. In the mirror. At the bar," she says. "I'm glad I live just across the street. I'd rather walk than ride in some fucking old Ford, anyway."

She pulls the sheet to her nose. Looks over the sheet.

"Then we get to your place," he says, looking not at her, but at his feet in the shadows on the floor. "You lead me up three flights. I follow your ass like it is cheese on a string."

"You follow my ass like a rat after cheese," she says.

She picks up a book that sits on the table.

"A girl knows what you're saying when you do things like that."

"I'm not a rat."

"I'm not a cheese."

Moments pass. She pulls a book from the pile on the table, one from the top, one she's recently read, something she's worked her way into. She puts pillows behind her so she can sit and read, pulls up her knees and rests her book on them.

"*Madame Bovary*. Ever heard of it?" she says.

"It's a big book," he says.

She leafs through the pages.

"That's what I've remember," he says. "It's been a long time since I've read it."

"Fine," she says. "If you don't want to remember, don't remember. Remembering is not the same as now. It's like a dream. And what can you do with a dream? Bore someone?"

She stops browsing somewhere near the middle of the book and reads.

"At the bottom of her heart, however, she was waiting for something to happen," she reads. "Isn't that the truth?"

He doesn't move. He is watching his toes.

"If you're coming to bed, bring the wine," she says. "If not, still, please bring me the wine before you go. I'm not getting up. The floors are too cold. And my feet got cold, and wet, because you didn't want to drive. You didn't want to show me your fucking Ford." She leafs through more pages. "But if you leave," she says, "turn out the lights. All of the lights. Light hurts my eyes. Light makes me sensitive."

"You can't read in the dark."

"There's nothing in this book I don't already know."

It's as much because his feet are cold as any other reason, but he stands, and carries the wine to the bed, the last of the red, and he fills up her jar, sits in an overstuffed chair on the bed near her side, looks at her reading.

"Same fucking thing. Same fucking book, every time," she says.

She flips the pages, one after another, with a vigor, then a vengeance.

"God," she says. "Isn't anyone ever going to write something new? Something I haven't already read a thousand times. It's all the same stupid books with the same stupid stories. It's all the same stupid shit."

Jay sits on the edge of the bed, holding his jar in one hand, the empty wine bottle in the other. *"Bovary* dies in there, you know."

"No, shit? Well, now you've ruined it. There's no point for me to keep on reading."

She closes the book.

"Get naked," she says. "Climb in. And turn out the light."

Guns and Roaches

He didn't, of course. He resists. He resists whatever he is told to do. He rarely does it. He has not killed her. He may not. Not now, not ever. It was an interesting idea once, but it is less interesting now. But he does turn out the light.

His socks dry as they hang over the chair. The steel radiator hisses beneath the window. He sits on the arm of the chair near the bed.

"Free the piggies. Remember those days?"

"No," she says.

He rubs his toes.

She has crawled under the sheet, has spread the sheet over herself, unwadded the blankets, pulled them over her body, up to her chin. She looks at him.

"I never had any of your 'free the piggies' days."

Moments pass.

"I should leave."

His feet are not as cold now as they were when they were wet.

He takes off his blazer, drapes it over the back of the chair. He wears a white shirt, a tie, his pants, and a gun is in a holster strapped to his chest. She stares, and she smiles.

His hair is wet from the snow. He combs his hair with his hand, splayed fingers through his hair, which makes his hair shine. He sits back in the chair draped with his blazer, rocks back and forth, his feet near the radiator, toasting his piggies.

“There’s your boyfriend, after all.”

“There’s no boyfriend. Some fucker who doesn’t show, he’s no boyfriend. He’s gone forever.”

“The guy in the bar. The guy who didn’t come. The one you were waiting for. I thought you loved him.”

He looks out the window and sees things of the city. Buildings, and lights, and the reflection of lights on the bellies of clouds.

“I don’t want to talk about him.”

“Me, either,” he says.

The radiator clangs in the walls, as if struck with a hammer. Hard. Several times.

“I need a new book. One you never heard of. One you can’t ruin by telling me the ending.”

He sips his wine and plays with how light turns red as it passes through wine as he holds it up. He swirls it about.

“Night makes me sensitive,” she says.

He says nothing.

“What about you?”

“Night is simply absence of day, you know. Like black, absence of light. Cold, of heat. There is something, or nothing,” he says. “The universe is not Manichean.”

“You must be cold, sitting out there. In your absence of heat.”

“I’m not cold.”

“Turn out the light in the kitchen. Come to bed.”

“I wouldn’t call that a kitchen. This is all just one room.”

“There’s a stove. There’s a fridge.”

“It’s a part of a room with a stove and a fridge.”

“Turn out the fucking light. Come to bed,” she says.

He walks to the kitchen, pulls the string on the lamp, turns it off. Now the only light is the lamp on her nightstand and light from outside that filters

through the blinds from the bar across the street, from the streetlights below, forming patterns on the ceiling, bands of light across the ceiling. She lies in bed, against a pillow, a sheet up to her chin, her eyes peering over.

“What’s he like? he asks.

“Who?”

“Your boyfriend who didn’t show.”

“What’s he like?” ‘What’s he like?’ People use words too goddamned much. Things are what they are. God. Nothing’s like nothing else. Shit is. That’s all,” she says. “He’s shit.”

“He is? What else?”

He pours more wine for himself, then pours more wine into her jelly jar.

“What about him?”

“He likes to fuck,” she says.

“Yes, well, that’s a boyfriend.”

“He bores me, believe me.”

“I don’t know,” he says.

“Believe me. Believe something. Believe someone sometime.”

“So, he likes to fuck?”

“Yes.”

She sips her wine. He stands by her bed, jelly jar in one hand, wine bottle in the other. Except for light through the blinds, and light from the lamp, it is dark in the room. Light comes from under the shade of the small lamp and circles the floor, creates a circle on the ceiling.

“Yeah.”

She sips her wine.

He sits on the edge of the bed. His bare feet on the cold wood floor.

“Yeah?”

“So, I shot him,” she says.

“You shot your boyfriend.”

“Men are pigs.”

“That would’ve been in the papers. ‘Guy shot by girlfriend.’ I didn’t see it.”

“Maybe it didn’t make the papers.”

She sighs, pulls the sheet taunt up to her chin, bends her knees up so she makes a tent underneath.

“People get shot all the time. Die all the time. No paper can put it all

in."

She raises her feet and makes the tent larger.

"Get naked. Come visit."

"Everything is always in the paper. If anybody's anybody. If anything's anything. Maybe it wasn't important enough."

"It was important," she says. "God."

He sits on the edge of her bed, near the bottom of the bed, on the part of the couch that swings out and folds the couch out to a bed.

"Men think too fucking much," she says.

He lays down on her bed, his head near her feet, his feet near her head, on the bed that is a couch folded out. His head rests on an elbow and he looks at her, at her silhouette, half her face in shadow, looking over her legs which she bends up and under the sheet. His wine is red as light passes through.

"Fucking staring at me. Fucking thinking all night. You're probably brain dead by now."

"You shot him," he says.

"Yes."

"What with?"

"Quit thinking."

"I'm thinking about you shooting him. Like, where you shot him. Like, what he looked like when he saw what you were doing. Like, did he see the bullet hit. Like, if he fell to the floor right away, or later," he says.

He stands now. Then he sits.

"On the bed, or where?" he says. "And where is he now? And why were you waiting for someone who's dead? Did he say anything? Did you say something back? Did you say something to him when he was already dead?"

"He didn't die."

"You shot him."

"I shot him. But I didn't kill him. You don't believe me. Fuck you."

"It makes no difference if I believe you or not. You say you shot him. That's your story."

He stands again. He walks to the window.

"It makes a difference if you believe it," she says. "It makes a big fucking difference."

"Not to me. If you shot him, you shot him. In the newspapers, or not, you shot him like you said. That's fine with me."

A couple who have left the bar are walking outside down the street,

walking close to each other, holding each other, leaning in, laughing, perhaps at what one says to the other, or at nothing at all, or because they have been drinking. Their footsteps leave a trail and snow is falling, so the further they go the less remains of where they have been.

“I shot him. But I didn’t kill him,” she says. “That’s my story.”

“It should have been in the papers. That’s all I’ll say.”

“All he wanted to do was fuck. I got tired of it. So, I shot him. Why not? What’s a girl to do?”

It is quiet. Moments pass.

“I’m hungry. I’m thinking cheese,” she says.

She lays naked on top of the sheets and the blankets on the bed. She thumbs through her book. The table light is on. It glows on her lap, up to her face, but it stops so that all above on her face is in shadow.

“Crackers. And cheese.”

She doesn’t look up. She shuts the book she’s reading and goes through the stack on her nightstand, looking for something new, finds Dostoevsky, open half way. She turns it over, sips her wine, and reads.

He walks barefoot across the wooden floor. It is cool in the apartment. Light filters in under the door to the hallway, and light comes through the Venetian blinds, fanning across the ceiling. It is quiet now, all through the building. Outside. Even the steam in the pipes is quiet.

She scans the book, goes through words on the pages.

“*I am a sick man. I am a spiteful man...*,” she says.

She looks up.

“I like it already. I’m finishing this one.”

“You were halfway through before.”

“I’m starting over. This time I’ll finish.”

“You don’t always finish your books?”

“I read them in pieces. Here. There. Random pieces. It lets me wonder, what’s next? What’s happened before? Why now? I make up my own stories from the pieces of what I read. I’m no slave to some fucking author. Anyway, front to back is usually disappointing.”

“I’ve known disappointment.”

“Haven’t we all?”

He’s in the kitchen, looking through cabinets.

“Where are the crackers?”

“In the fridge.”

“No one keeps crackers in the fridge,” he says.

“I do.”

The fridge has short, rounded shoulders, and a straight chrome handle which he pulls, and the door opens. Once white, the fridge has yellowed. Bright light from inside streaks across the floor. He grabs a bottle of white wine, and cheese, and crackers. Inside things move. Run about. Crawl. Lots of things. Brown things the size of a nickel. They run. They scurry.

“Roaches,” he says. “Fucking roaches. Hundreds. Thousands. Roaches in your fridge.”

“It’s not the Plaza,” she says.

She turns the page.

They move, crawl on the cheese, slide on the ice. He grabs crackers, shakes off bugs, shuts the door, crosses the room which is all that much darker without the light from the fridge.

“The Plaza has roaches.”

“They like it in there,” she says. “It’s a Plaza for roaches.”

“How do you know?”

She turns the page.

He unwraps the crackers.

“Because I live like a cockroach.”

“None got out.”

“Good. They are at peace. They can dance on the ice.”

Cheese

“You cut cheese and the cheese stays cut. I like that about cheese. You never know about people,” he says. “They never stay like you want them to stay.”

“You cut people?”

He pulls the light chain on the light over the table, and the light goes on, bearing down on the table, funneled through the shade into a circle of the light.

He puts the Gouda and crackers on the table, pulls open drawers as he searches for a knife, feels carefully in the drawers, finds a knife, a long dull thing, light, cheap, not well settled into its handle. He tests the edge with his finger, but it is what it is. He uses it to bear down on the Gouda, first cutting the cheese in half, then holding the two halves together turns the wheel ninety

degrees, cuts the cheese again, holds it together again, turns it some forty five degrees – a half of a quarter of a circle, seven and a half minutes on a clock, then cuts it again, turns it then a quarter of a circle, and makes a final cut. The cheese is now in eight equal wedges. He places half on a plate with crackers and carries it to bed. Oh, wine, he thinks, and he returns to fetch the wine.

“The man in the bar,” he says.

“Yes?”

“The one you were waiting for.”

“Yes?”

“Do you love him?”

“Him?” she says. “Don’t get me started. For one thing, he’s married. Like that makes a difference.”

She piles pillows behind her so she can sit up in bed, look out, eat cheese, crackers.

“But don’t get me started on her,” she says. “Married to her. Married to him. What a joke.”

She delicately picks up a wedge with two fingers, and bites into it.

“People don’t eat the wax,” he says.

“What’s that?”

“The red part,” he says. “People don’t eat the wax.” He peels the wax off his own wedge.

“I do,” she says.

“People like it with fruit. Particularly with pears. Isn’t it odd, something from the udder of a cow tastes so good with something that falls from a tree. But it’s quite good with pears. So, I suppose that’s that.”

“Fruit and cheese. Very different parts of a supermarket,” she says, chewing cheese and wax. “People are fucked up.”

“So, you know his wife?”

“I know her enough,” she says. “All I want to know. Maybe too fucking much. Maybe I know too much about too fucking much.”

He turns on the light over the kitchen table. There is only light is from the lamp by her bed. He sits on an overstuffed chair next to her.

“Those two,” she says. “They do weird shit. I know things that would put them both in jail for the rest of their lives. But what difference would that make to me? In jail. Out. He pays me to keep my mouth shut. About him. About her. About what he does. About me. Yes. There. About me. No one knows about me. Well, those at others at the bar. They know. But he pays them, too,”

she says. "Maybe you can get him to pay you, too."

She picks another wedge of cheese from the plate.

"I could talk," she says. "I could tell her things about him, too. One call from me, she'd kill him. That's what I'd do if I wanted him dead. But, of course, then he'd kill me. And my friends, if I had any. All those girls at the table. Everyone who knows what he does."

This time she is peeling the wax. She is learning.

"But I love him," she says. "So, what do I do. Only, I wish he paid me more. Then I'd be happier to keep quiet. I wouldn't have anything to do with the likes of you. And I wouldn't live like I live. Look at this dump. No friends. Just roaches."

"I don't see roaches now," he says.

"They come out in the dark. Do you feel cracker crumbs when you walk? That's what I feed them. They love me. They dance when I want. If I had fruit, I'd have rats, too. I'd teach them to dance, too."

She holds up the cheese marked by her. Then she eats it.

"But who can afford fruit? So I don't have many friends. Or dancing rats."

Moments pass. Thirst returns. He gets a new bottle of wine from the table. With a twist of his hand, he opens it. She holds out her glass.

"Wine," she says. "I love it. We grow the grapes, pick them, kill them, crush them until they bleed, then germs eat that mess until they die on their own biproducts. We strain what's left, age it a bit, bottle it, then drink. Here's to you," she says in a toast.

Moments pass.

"It's a fact," she says. She twirls the wine around her glass, then sips it.

"Yes, I know his wife," he says. "I know the whole rotten lot of them."

"She's just another him, a prick without a prick. One soul divided into sexes. One prick between them, but it is still one price too many. Come, give me a hug," she says.

For the first time she sees his gun, its holster, its handle, under his arm, outlined dark against the white of his shirt.

"It's the same with cheese, you know," she says. "Mold eats milk, some kind of mold, I don't know what, then spits out what it's eaten. We let it age, and it dies, and it rots, and then we cut it up, and wrap it up, and let it get old,

and sell it by the pound. Cheese. The longer it's dead, the better it tastes. Wrapping it in wax, though, that's new."

She peels the red wax from the cheese, then bites into the wedge.

"What kind of cheese is this?" she asks.

"Gouda."

"I've never known anyone who ate Gouda."

She nods towards his holster. "In that bar. Staring at me. Like you want to kill me or something. I thought that before I even knew about the gun."

"It's something I wear. It's nothing," he says.

"You are an outlaw," she says.

He pulls the gun from his holster, turns it over, shining dark in the dark. He hands it to her, and she turns it over, sees it shining dark in the dark.

"You ever kill anyone?" she asks.

"I could if I wanted to. If I had to."

"You ever want to?"

"Sometimes."

"You ever had to?" she asks.

"Anyone has to when they find out what shit life really is," he says.

He bites his cheese again.

"Everyone knows that," he says.

She reaches for more cheese, still chewing on wax.

"People don't know shit," she says.

They both sit on pillows, facing the kitchen at the far end of the apartment where light from the street splays across the ceiling. He pulls off his sheet and sits up, turns, his legs on the floor, and looks at the wall. She turns on her lamp and his shadow appears. It moves when he moves. It is still when he's still. If he holds up his hand, and two fingers, something like a rabbit appears on the wall in shadows. His arm, a bent wrist, his fingers wiggling, a duck.

The plate is empty. The cheese is gone.

"That was quick."

Moments pass.

"There's more cheese," he says. But he doesn't move. Half of the gouda cheese remains on the table, halfway across the room. He thinks of the cracker crumbs on the floor, the roaches that feed there in the dark.

"If I move my head right, my shadow moves to the right. Look," he says. "If I move to the left, it moves left. It's a copy. But then my right's its left, and its left's my right. So, a copy, but fucked."

He moves his head to the right, then left.

"Dependable, though," he says. "Gravity is like that, too."

"Is there any more cheese?" she asks.

"One thing always depends on another. And another on another, you know. Light connects us to walls. Connects walls to us. And gravity to everything. But don't get me started on gravity."

Moments pass.

"But there had to be something there once, something other at the beginning," he says, "to start all this connection stuff."

"A bang," she says.

"Perhaps," he says, staring into the dark. "Now all we are are the remnants of connection. Destroyed by a bang. I wish it could have been different. Maybe gravity will save us."

"Gravity makes me sick," she says.

She combs her hair back with her fingers. Then again. A small clock on her nightstand marks time with numbers that drop one at a time, in sequence, another, then another. It is worth watching, though, because it is so right.

"Things should settle down soon," he says. "Time should settle into a pattern so, it's this, then it's this, then it's this, then this. And, then, that's the end of it. There has to be a last number, then there it is, and so long, Charley."

Another minute flips down on the clock.

"Things have to settle down. They always do. Fall into the pattern. It always happens. Time is waiting for things to adjust and readjust to the pattern. Then I can rest. Then I can say, 'Oh, look. There's the pattern. Now I understand. Now we can rest.' At least until the end."

"Then, 'So long, Charley!'"

She shoves some books off the nightstand, and places her half full glass of wine there.

"Are you going to take your clothes off?" she asks. "Are you going to get naked? Then get into bed."

He doesn't move. He's staring off, thinking of that cheese sitting on the table in her kitchen in the dark.

“I sure like that Gouda,” she says.

She is in bed—the foldout couch—holding the sheets up to her chin.

“There must be a god of Gouda,” he says. “The Greeks had it right. All good things are ruled by a god.”

One wonders.

“Gouda makes me sensitive,” she says.

She bites into it, chews it, looks up at him.

“Love is cheese,” she says.

She takes the last bit as a bite, and chews.

“Love makes you sensitive?” he asks.

She sits up.

“He’s paying you to kill me,” she says. “I know it. He’s always had that plan for the end.”

There is a stillness in the room, a quiet in the night.

“What can one really know about a thing,” he says, “until its sliced and eaten.”

She shakes her head.

“You are a lovely argument.”

He leans back in his chair, lets himself sink into the chair, and lifts his legs so his feet rest on the bed.

“You killing me is such a waste,” she says. She stares up at the ceiling, tin in some 19th century pattern. “If he wants me dead, he should pay me direct,” she says. “Who needs the middle man. And, I’d do it right. Then I’d have all the money I want. All I need. Money to buy wine I like. Good wine I like. Not that cheap wine men think they can get away with buying me.”

She reaches over to her nightstand and pulls a gun out of a drawer. Dark. Steel. Stubby. Like a fat turtle.

“Look,” she says. “I have what I need. I can do it myself, if someone pays me.”

He looks it and doesn’t move, no words, just chews his cheese.

She looks at the gun, turns the gun in her hands, feels the soft oily iron that shines in the light from the table lamp. She sits it on her nightstand, with her books, light, and clock, and picks up her wine.

Moments pass.

“Go, if you’re going. Otherwise, stay. That’s fine, too,” she says. “Or kill me. Or not. But if you’re staying, get in bed.”

Moments pass.

“If you go, turn out the lights. I’ll read.”

She falls back on the bed.

“You can’t read in the dark.”

“Fine,” she says. She shuts the book and returns it to the pile on the nightstand. “I don’t care. Nothing in here I don’t already know.”

He stands and moves to the edge of the bed, neither leaving nor staying. He is probably thinking. He does have his task. For his brother. To do it or not. There is the plan. And there are other things he might do for himself. To stay or not. Merge one thing with another. Or be alone. Choose to be alone.

He is a younger brother, and decisions are hard for him to make. Turns in the road. Choices. Hard to make. Especially when your older brother has the plan.

“The light,” she says. “I don’t want to lay here dead with the lights in my eyes. God,” she says.

“I’ll turn out the lights.”

“And don’t stare. I don’t want to lie her dead with you staring at me.”

“If the lights are off, you won’t know.”

He does not turn out the light. He sits back into the green overstuffed chair, falls between its arms, and stares at the topography of her face beneath the sheets, the rise and fall of her breathing.

“Come back, if you kill me,” she says. “Be the one to find me. And feed my roaches, will you? Just leave some crackers on the floor.”

Killer

The arms on the chair near the bed are worn down to stuffing. He folds his tie and hangs it neatly over the back. He still wears his white shirt, khaki pants, no shoes, no socks, his gun in his holster is still strapped to his chest. He stands, steps her way, sits on the edge of the bed, touching the sheet that covers her long warm body, his finger racing on her thighs beneath, her arms, his finger across the white curves. He folds his legs, and lies there, watches. The in-bending crest of her waist. Her hip. The slope of her thigh. She bends her knees and makes the tent beneath the sheet.

“So, you shot him,” he says. “You had some gun.”

“I’d do it again. He’s a prick,” she says

“He’s your boyfriend.

“You don’t know him.”

“Whatever ‘knowing’ is,” he says.

His shirt is white Oxford, cuffs heavily starched, the button-down collar buttoned down. His collar open. His bare feet stick out from the cuffs of his khaki pants.

“Did he stare at you?”

“I hate shit like that,” she says. “I could’ve shot him for staring.”

She holds out her empty jelly jar.

“Cheap wine. That’s why I shot him.”

He pours the last from the bottle.

“For himself, for his friends, for his family out there in Shit Park he buys the best. Nothing too good. Good schools. New car. Good home. Fucking kids. I hate people like that. And for me, the cheap stuff. I’m tired of the cheap stuff. Look where I live. Fucking dump. Fucking food even the cockroaches don’t want. And I have to walk in the snow. So, I shot him,” she says.

“For buying cheap wine.”

“For asking too many questions. I got tired of his fucking questions. All the time, fucking questions. So, I shot him.”

“For asking questions.”

“I didn’t kill him. God. I could have killed him. For asking too many questions.”

He unfolds his legs, stands and goes to the kitchen. Street light coming from outside washes across the ceiling at the far end of the room. He walks between the window and the table, his shadow crossing the ceiling, across the bars of light in the ceiling. The pattern falling then on his white shirt, stripes of light on the white Oxford clothe, the button-down collar.

Light comes from the fridge when he opens the door. He finds wine, shakes off roaches, closes the door. It’s dark again. With a twist of the cap it cracks and he opens a new bottle of wine.

Then back to her, his shadow across the ceiling again, across the bars on the ceiling again, bars of light on his shirt, past the nightstand, the lamp, the heat, to the bed. He refills her glass. She is under the sheets now, turned away, his back to her, and he lies down, his thighs pressed against the back of her thighs, under the sheets.

“I didn’t mean to kill him. I meant to shoot him. And I did. In his face.”

“So, now your story is, you shot him in the face.”

"So he'd see the scar for the rest of his life. Every fucking morning, looking in his mirror, he'd see his face and think of me, a gun in his fucking face."

"He would remember that."

"Anyone who brings me cheap wine, I'll shoot. Anyone who asks too many questions, they're dead."

"No more questions."

"Take off your clothes. Or leave them on. Get under the sheets. Or lay on top. And quit staring. Turn out the light. Light makes me sensitive."

He reaches over, turns out the light, stands, takes off his trousers, folds them over a bookcase next to the wall. Then he lies back on the bed, his head near her feet, his feet towards her head, lying on his side, his head propped up by his forearm, as they lie opposite each other. He looks at her feet, sips wine. He still wears his shirt, white Oxford clothe, button-down collar, his gun in its holster.

"That shut him up. He stopped asking questions. He quit staring," she says.

Not looking at him, she talks to the wall, looks up at the light playing on the ceiling.

"Fucking rich people. Did he send you to kill me?"

"What do you think?"

"I've quit fucking thinking."

Moments pass.

"Good wine," she says. "Lucky you. I wouldn't've shot him if he would've brought me good wine. Do you make love on your head like that? God."

"I would have read about it, if he'd been shot. In the newspaper."

"Maybe you did and forgot."

"It was not in the paper."

"Oh, so now you read the paper. Now you are a little paper reader."

"From front to back. I work the puzzles, too."

"I wanted his picture on the front page. I wanted his mother to open the paper, see his face with a big fucking hole in it. They're from one of those families."

"I thought he lived with his wife."

"His wife, too. The whole fucking family. So they would see him every morning with a hole in his face."

The sheets are cool. He arranges the blankets, the pillows so he can rest his head while on his side, his face near her feet. Her feet stick out from the sheets.

“Families,” he says.

“One of those families that get their stories in the paper. But only shit that’s nicey nice. Money coming out their ass. The bad shit, you never hear about that.”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know shit,” she says.

“Yes. I’ve quit fucking thinking.”

Moments pass.

“I’ve fucked him for years. Me, mistress. Him, money coming out his ass. Him, Kansas City Country Club. Me, living in some shithole.”

She sits up now and looks at him. The tent disappears.

“He’s been trying to kill me. He sent you, I know.”

“Because you shot him, is that what you think?”

“Like he needs a fucking reason,” she says.

“It’s better with reason.”

“Shit happens. Present tense. No reasons. No excuses. End of story.” She flops back on the bed. “He’s trying to kill me. For no reason at all. I love him anyway.”

“You can love a guy like that?”

“Why but for love would anyone kill anyone. If you want someone to suffer, let them live. But if you love them, kill them. God. Read your Bible.”

“Who was this guy?”

She lays back against three pillows she has arranged behind her. The light is on. She looks for a new book.

“He put stuff in my food. Poison. To kill me. It didn’t work. Nothing has worked. You’re here. I’m here. We’re both fucking living.”

“After you shot him.”

“He took me places. Nice places. The Plaza sometimes. The Savoy downtown. Nice places like that. And they put shit in my food. He pays them to do it. Fucking waiters will do shit for a few extra bucks. They tried to kill me. Poison me. Drive me insane. Fuck them all. Him and them.”

“Are you sure he did that?”

“Am I sure?” ‘Am I sure?’ I didn’t eat what he ordered. Or, if I’d eat it, I’d puke. He didn’t kill me. That’s for sure. So, now he’s sent you....”

"Still you were waiting for him at the bar."

"He didn't come, did he? So, you can't say I waited. You can't say I waited for something if that something never was. I was there at the bar and he didn't show. So, he sends you to kill me. Fuck you. Patterns."

"I haven't killed you."

"Men are pigs. Pigs with guns. 'Fuck her,' men say. 'But kill her somehow.' That's what men want. That's what he wants. Maybe that's what you want. Me dead. Real nice. He'll even pay you. So, he can be alone. So, he can have it all. Everything I have. Or have someone else. And he won't have to bother with me. He won't have to show up when he says he'll show up. He won't have to take me where he has to take me now. Places where he has to pay. Where he has to buy wine. And not the cheap wine, either, or I complain. Complaining, that's what gets him. That's why he wants to kill me. And cheese. I'm always wanting cheese, he says. Good cheese, too. Not the cheap stuff he'd buy me, if he ever bought me anything. And, if I'm dead, he can come up here anytime he wants, sit in any chair he wants, look out the window, or not. He'll have the whole fucking place to himself. My fucking roaches will be his fucking roaches. And I'll be lying here dead on the floor. Him staring at me. The fucking lights in my eyes. Maybe that's what he wants. Maybe that's what you want. Maybe that's what all you pigs want in the end."

Moments pass.

She turns off the light. She touches his shirt, unbuttons it slowly, opens it carefully, traces his holster with her fingers.

"Kill me. I won't care. Make him happy, if you want. Do your job if you want. Or get naked. Get in where it's warm. In the bed. I'll make a house."

"I'm not a killer. That's not what I want."

"We are all killers, pig man."

"My name is Jay."

"Pig man."

Steam heats the apartment through the stubby iron grids that sit under the window. Steam is created in the boiler below, in the far distant basement of the building, deep in the earth, and there the heat is made, oil burns water, makes steam that rises, wends through pipes, through the walls of the brownstone, up near the windows, into the grills, that Clang! Clang! The pipes and the iron grill. Clang! Hiss! Then, Clang! Far away. Clang! Noise in the pipes in the night, bearing up heat, steam.

Her sheet falls away.

"I wouldn't care if we were dead. Both dead. If that's what you want. We all die. That's what we want. Don't we? Don't you? Won't you? With me now."

"But are we all killers?" he asks.

She threads his shirt off one arm, then through the straps that hold his holster, and she casts the shirt away, while his holster and gun remain strapped to his chest.

"And don't fuck it up," she says.

"I won't."

"A good killer. I know," she says.

"If that's what we want."

Death

The lamp is on by her bedside. She is propped up by pillows, a magazine in her lap, and weed in a baggy beside her, loose weed in the crease of the magazine. She rolls a joint, then lights it up. Inhales. Pauses. Exhales. He smells the bitter smoke.

"The fucking people you meet at stupid fucking bars," she says.

She exhales, shares the joint. Now she wears his white shirt stained with wine on the sleeve. She smells of talcum powder, as now his shirt smells of talcum powder, too. He stands by the radiator in front of the window, stands on a warm spot on the floor, feels the heat radiate from the grill, hears steam wheezing from the valve at the end. He inhales, then exhales.

"He's my brother, you know," he says. "The one you were waiting for. The man at the bar. The one who didn't come. With the wife. And the kids. And the money. All of them living out there in Shit City."

"No," she says. "His brother's dead. He's told me all about his little brother."

Acrid smoke in the dark. He sits on the bed, his back to her, head near her feet, and she pulls the sheet to her neck, a thigh exposed, both feet. She wiggles her piggies.

"One day, long ago a train killed his brother. That's what he told me. When they were young. On their way to school," she says.

"I didn't die."

"They picked up pieces of his little brother for days. Scattered along a

mile or so of track. That's what he said when I asked."

"There were no pieces. No train. Nothing like that," he says.

"He says you were a big disappointment up to the day you were hit by the train. Up to the day you died."

"My brother loves me. I'm his little brother. He trusts me."

"Is that what you think?"

"I love him."

"And he sent you to kill me."

He sits on the edge of the bed.

"You're stuck being his brother," she says. "I'm stuck getting screwed. Outside it's snowing. Things are what they are."

Moments pass.

"He was an ugly baby," he says.

She sits up now, the sheet falls to her belly.

"Ugly baby. Yes. I can believe that. There is nothing worse than an ugly baby. Babies should be beautiful," she says. "How sad that is. How something like that makes all the difference."

"Red faced, stiff curly hair," he says. "Even as a baby."

Now he lies flat on his back on the bed, his hands cupping his head, staring at the ceiling.

The radiators clang. He closes his eyes. Clang!

"Stubby. Ugly. Legs splayed out, then curved back to his feet so he looked like a horseshoe. I had this long, beautiful hair. Blue eyes. Legs perfectly proportioned to my waist. A face an angel would die to have. Boyish beauty. All aglow."

Moments pass.

"Now you do his dirty work," she says.

"What is 'do'? What does it mean?"

He stands and turns and rises from the bed, walks to the window, looks out, his body stripped by light coming in through the blinds, light from the sun that is almost rising.

Moment pass.

"All things have beginnings," he says. "I was there. He was there. Now we are here. Not he and I, but you and I, and he is someplace else. But here in now. Things move around, after they begin, but only on the surface. Below there is a pattern. Mathematics. In and out. Come and go. Here and there."

"Kill me," she says.

She falls back on the bed, laughs, her head at the foot, her neck at the end, her head hanging over the end, she sees him by the window, upside down, looking out, stripes of light from the street coming in through the blinds.

“An ugly baby,” she says. “Yes.” She sits up, finds her stuff, and rolls another joint.

Moments pass.

“It was different for me,” he says. “Me, the pretty one. Both from the same womb. But different lives.”

It is quiet in the room. Three flights above the city. Before the dawn. She is in bed. He sits and watches the faint light glow in the sky. He reaches out and touches the window, the cold glass, and light comes through this thing, sees, images of things on the other side, a blood red sun.

“How can a person get over being an ugly baby?” she says.

Moments pass.

“It’s stopped snowing,” he says.

She turns over. Her hands cast a shadow on the wall. The shadow of her hand merges with the shadow of him sitting between the bed and the window, on the arm of the overstuffed chair. She pulls him to the bed, pulls him down by his shadow. He lies down, his head near hers, and he pulls a cover over himself, over his body, up over his face. He descends, his shadow and hers, and they hold each other, his shoulders press into hers, her warm breasts press warm against his cold chest, his bare back lays back against the sheets, and they twist into a tangle of love and dreams and meat.

“Don’t leave me, pretty baby. I don’t care you never smile.”

“It’s too dark. You can’t see if I smile or not.”

“It’ll be morning soon. Then we’ll see. You’ll smile.”

Older Brother

She is under the sheets, a sheet pulled over her, over him as well, and she pulls the end up over her head and tucks it under her head, then pulls the sheet up for him as well, so they are both under the sheets, held taunt at the far end by her feet, and held there by his feet as well, and her knees are bent to lift the sheet, to make a tent, a house, and she is in the house, under that sheet, and he is in that house as well, and they both are naked and he turns to face her, and

he still wears his gun, and he turns on his side towards her, and braces up a part of their house with his elbow.

"So, this ugly baby wants me dead. He sends the pretty baby here to kill me. Quite a story," she says.

She reaches out and twists a strand of his hair. Then she lets it go, lets it untwist and fall on his cheek. Her fingers trace his holster, the straps that hold his holster on, feels his gun in the holster, that heavy feel of oiled iron.

"And then this happens," she says.

"I didn't ask him any questions," he says. "And he offered no answers to the questions I didn't ask. But I wondered, what anguish has led him to do this, to ask his baby brother to do this thing, his beautiful brother to do his dirty work. Why didn't he show up while you were waiting, and why would he kill you, and why would he think I would do that for him, now that we are here, and I'm here with you, in our little house."

"Anguish," she says. "He cherishes the anguish."

"Love drives him. Or fear of love. Perhaps you said something to him that set him off. Or you didn't say something you should have said. Or said something he misunderstood. Or he waited for you to set him off in some different direction and you didn't. So, he poisons you. But he fails. So, he comes to me. This pattern. It's anguish. And it drives us on."

He turns under the sheet, flat on his back, his nose holding up the sheet, tight. His toes, his penis, his chest, his arms, his nose, the top of his head, all outlined beneath the sheet.

"He didn't explain anything," he says. "I waited. He said nothing."

His lips move under the sheet as he speaks.

The windows face east, out through the blinds, out to the street, over the streets to that part of the sky that fades to blue, less dark than the back of the sky is dark. He pulls the sheet down to his neck and looks outside. Not even glass stops him from seeing images outside, the rose of the morning in full bloom, dark apartments in silhouette. Solid glass. What is this thing about light. He sips the last of his wine, white wine stained red from the earlier red wine so it is pink like the sky to the east now. He embraces the sheet, rolls towards her and it tightens around him, he rolls against her, feels her warmth through the sheet. The tent has collapsed. She turns away, lies on her side, on the curve of her side, the dimples of her spine and her neck to him, her dark hair lying on white sheets.

The radiator clangs. Clang! And the room grows warm. She flops on

her back, sighs, looks up. Her arms and shoulders above the sheets, her long white arms on white sheets.

"I don't mind if I die," she says. "I don't know how I can care."

"Who does? We go forward. Then we stop, turn around, see what has been chasing us. Gravity. Time. Too late, if it matters. Pulls us. Pushes. Good or not. We turn and go on."

He turns his head to the side, away from her, towards the window, out the window, staring at morning coming on.

"The sun will rise. The sun will set. Then we'll know. Don't you think?" he says.

"I don't fucking think anymore," she says.

Knocking

Morning changes everything.

Her room, let me say, is a long one, and I might call it a flat, or a small sort of home that hangs in the city. The kitchen is small, I would say, if you call it a kitchen, of yellow tiles and Formica. A stove in avocado. A fridge in avocado. Grease on the stove. On the fridge. Four chrome laden chairs covered in plastic. Avocado. A window above the sink faces the city, short curtains over the windows. Ruffles between her and the city as she washes dishes in the sink by the window one dish at a time, wash them, stand them on a rack to dry. The room is full of light. It is morning.

Morning changes everything.

She wears rubber gloves as she stands at the sink, washing dishes, her hands in the water. The water loaded with suds. She wears nothing else. Well, she wears that apron with ruffles. That's all. Nothing else. Also shoes. That's all. And socks with canaries embroidered in them.

The dining room table is a large opening apart from the kitchen, through an archway, and placemats are set on the table in the dining room, and he sits in a chair at the table, a wicker and tubing chair that rocks as he bends and sits back, small wooden arms, and his plate is in front of him, Fiestaware, empty.

"Good morning," he says.

He keeps his hands in his lap, his socks in his hands. He is naked, except for his socks in his hand. His gun in its holster.

"Good morning," she says.

Her hands deep in water, she washes a dish. A jar. A jelly jar. One of two. With suds.

Morning, light coming from nowhere, it seems, from beyond the city, from across the sea, rising up from the sea, in that cold red streak above the sea, below the sky, and it spreads across the snow, in and among buildings, then over the cars, then over other cars, then as a bright streak of light through ice encrusted trees, then over the top of another snow covered car, up the brick side of her old brownstone, in through the window, through ruffled curtains, strikes the suds in the sink where she washes the dishes. Jelly jars. Suds. Radiator, Clang! Hiss.

He stands, goes to the window. It is quiet outside. Quieter than it was before. The snow has stopped. The bar across the street is dark, except, yes, a janitor inside perhaps, or someone from the cleaning crew, or perhaps the manager is counting out the registers, preparing for the day. A stranger comes up to the door of the bar across the street, a corner door with frosted glass and beveled edges, his coat a long dark cashmere thing, a hat, and gloves, knocks on the door, to the bar, and knocks again, and finds the door locked, turns and walks away, puts his hand up to the window, peers inside the bar and grill, then looks away, then tries the door one last time, then turns again and walks away, leaving his shoe prints in the snow, prints that lead up to the door, then away from it. It is no longer snowing. It is cold. The prints will last some time.

He gets into his car. The man who tries the door and finds it locked. A Ford. He shuts the door and snow falls off his Ford. He starts his car, assuming it is his car, pulls away from the curb, his car or not. The tires squeak in the snow, then they muffle the sound of his car on the street as he drives away. Snow covers everything. Snow hangs from the trees, except for the ends of twigs in the trees which are covered with ice.

She puts her hand on his uncovered shoulder. She stands beside him now, just behind him, her apron upon against him now. She wears rubber gloves that cover her hands, her forearms. Avocado gloves. For washing dishes. Gloves and apron. Nothing else. And shoes. And socks.

"I've seen a lot," he says.

"You've seen enough," she says. "That's for sure."

"He took my car."

"Yes, he did. It's gone. If it was ever there."

She returns to bed, takes off her gloves, her apron, takes off her shoes,

keeps on her socks, opens Dostoevsky at random.

"I had a Ford once. A dark blue ford. A '49 Ford," he says. "The blue of that car was as deep and dark as a Kansas night. A summer night. The radio. That car. Those soft tires. Soft fat tires. They touched the road so gentle. Especially in the summer. Especially when she was there. You don't know her. You weren't there. Tires touching soft Kansas roads in summer, she touching me, music on that radio. You know the music, though. You know the songs," he says.

"It was a different time."

"But it was still my car."

"Your car is gone," she says. "If it ever was."

"Hard to say it was my car, if it's gone. Now that someone else has it. I hope he loves it like I did. Cherishes it. Like I did. Mine or not. But he can never be in Kansas all those years ago. Beside her then. All those songs. He can't have that."

Moments pass.

"I would like to have it back, though. That old Ford. That radio as well. Those tunes. Those times. Her beside me, too. And I would like to be who I was then again. But you probably wouldn't want to come along, be the one there beside me, in the summer night. I only had a Ford."

Moments pass.

She shuts her copy of mostly unread *Notes from the Underground*, puts on his shirt and goes back to the kitchen.

"It's time to eat."

She turns a knob, but no blue flame blossoms from beneath a kettle.

"Tea?" she asks.

"Coffee."

"I don't have any coffee."

"Tea," he says.

"We have no gas, apparently. So, no hot water."

"Wine," he says.

"We're out of wine."

"Then never mind."

Moments pass.

His hand reaches up to touch the glass pane through which the light is passing through as if glass is nothing to the light. As if nothing is between him and what he sees. Things. Or the images of things.

Stranger

He stands in the bathroom as he puts on his shirt. It smells of talcum. The door to the bathroom is open to the bedroom. The door to the bedroom is open to the living room, an archway, the dining room, to the kitchen. And she's in the kitchen, and from the bathroom he can see her, and she can see him leaning against the sink, his thighs against the sink, his face near to the mirror, as he stares at his face.

"Pretty baby," she says.

She shakes her head and smiles.

He looks in the mirror and smiles. He puts on his tie, looks in the mirror, ties the knot. He folds his collar, buttons down his collar, adjusts his tie, looks back in the mirror, and smiles.

A light, inquisitive knocking at the door. It stops.

Moments pass.

"Is that him at the door?" he says.

"He may be there," she says. "Or not."

"Someone is there."

"There is knocking," she says.

She stands by the window, looks out at on the street, naked, except she has socks on her feet, socks embroidered with large canaries.

"He must wonder why we don't answer."

She looks different in the morning. Naked. Lovely. Lonely. Fearful. Long white neck. Socks with canaries.

He stretches his mouth from side to side, touching his face here and there, staring at the mirror

"I'd like to know where he is," she says. "I'd like to see him."

"Really?"

"No."

He shakes his head, and opens his lips to bare his teeth, up close to the mirror, smiling in the mirror, then a grimace, then a finger on a tooth, then making a sucking sound from air between his tongue and tooth.

His socks have been warming and drying, draped over the chair near to the heat. He takes them now, holds the warm socks to his cheek. Closes his eyes. Feels the warmth.

He sits in the chair and pulls on a sock. The socks run up his calves and are embroidered with French fleur-de-lis, although no one will see the

fleur-de-lis when he wears his pants. He'll know they are there.

She looks out of the window, but she sees no one.

He brushes his hair back with his hands, with his fingers, which he combs through his hair, and again, daubs oil in his hand, then runs his fingers through his hair again so it lies flat against his scalp, and shines, as if it were wet from the melted snow.

It is early morning. She pulls back the Venetian blinds, stares through the cracks between the blinds.

"They want me to make a good impression on our customers," he says. "They don't care how I look otherwise. As long as I make a good impression. Smile, they say. They prefer a happy-go-lucky look down there at the office. Other than that, they don't care if I'm dead. As long as I make a good impression. As long as I sell something. To someone. For cash."

She plays with the stick to the blinds, turning the stick so the slats open, then close, then open again.

"Or credit. If a customer has good credit," he says. "Good credit is the same as cash. That's what they say."

Opens, then closes.

"He's not out there. He's taken your car," she says.

His socks warm his feet, and, being snug, they give pleasure to his calves.

She sits at the table, one leg crossed over the other, drinking tea, leafing through her Russian novel, not reading but looking at the letters on the page, the shape of the letters, shapes the letters make when they are printed on paper, rivers of white that pour down through the words, pages bound in a book, different sounds in different lines, noises the letters make inside her head, that make her lips move silently. She tips her cup so it reaches her lips, then sips some tea, then places the teacup back in the saucer, and she cannot read while she sips tea. Then she only sees the bottom of the tea cup. Sitting the cup down on the plate creates a delicate china sound.

He looks out the window. There is snow in the street, in the trees. Looking down on a tree, he sees mostly the snow that has been caught in the branches. It is a cold outside, and grey. The rouge of dawn has dissipated. Now it's day. There is ice on the tips of the twigs.

"Do you know anyone who might have knocked on the door?"

"No," she says.

"Some old lover."

“No.”

“A ghost from your past?”

“No.”

“No one?”

“No. No one.”

“Maybe someone from work,” she says. “Someone you know. Knocking for you.”

“No.”

“Maybe your mother.”

He pauses. Moments pass.

“No. Not my mother.”

“A child you’ve forgotten.”

Pause.

“No. Not a child.”

“Yourself in your dreams. You arrive and wake yourself, fearing a train is coming to tear you to pieces.”

Pause.

“No.”

The knocking comes again. They stop, they sit, they sip their tea, then stop sipping, listen. But now it is quiet. Even the streets, the city, is quiet.

“It comes and goes,” she says. “The knocking.”

“Yes.”

“A pattern.”

Moments pass.

“I’d like to know what to make of such patterns.”

“If patterns mean anything more than they are patterns.”

“Patterns are patterns. Something to hang onto.”

Moments pass.

“It’s quiet now,” he says.

“Quieter than before.”

“It was quiet before. But, yes, quieter now.”

“Footsteps,” she says. “Can you hear?”

“I hear footsteps.”

“They fade.”

They fade, indeed. There is a creaking in the floor outside, behind the door, in the hallway of old slats, subfloor, loose nails, aching from pressure applied on the surface of the wood. The mass above is pulled down by gravity

onto the planks, and the wood is bent, nails creak. More creaking now, less loud. More creaking. More creaking. Less loud. Less loud. Away. Then further away. Then silence again.

“No more knocking.”

“Knocking makes me sensitive,” she says.

“Today is my day on the phones at work. First ring, they say, jump on it. They like the phones to be answered quickly. Cheerfully. Phone calls are customers. First contact. Tone is important. A lilt, they like. Disarming those who have called and have cash. We sell things for cash. Sales are the good.”

He takes a notebook from his briefcase, his book of lists, of things to do, of things to buy, of names to remember, the numbers of things, formulas for potions, passwords, words of the day, short poems to memorize. He opens it on the table, and with a stubby pencil, wets the end of the pencil with his tongue, then writes.

“One. Answer the telephone nicely. Quickly. Cleanly. Do not hesitate. Two. Await the response. Three. Initiate contact with the other. Four, transact. Five, settle for cash and provide for the payment.”

He sits in the chair, pushed close to the window, close to the radiator, props his feet on the sill, looks out the window, nurses his tea, and makes a notation in his book of lists which he holds on his lap.

“This tea is cold,” he says.

“It’s water.”

He wears a white, Oxford shirt with button down collar, a tie. Underwear. The gun is strapped to his chest. Socks cover his calves to his toes in black and fleur-de-lies that no one will see when he wears his pants. It is cold in the room, but his feet are warm as he holds them over the radiator. Hiss. Clang. He stares outside. The streets are quiet. It is morning.

“Hello,” he says.

He writes that down.

“I am here. Dare I ask you who with whom I am transacting?”

She looks out the window, through the blinds.

“He’s gone. Departed,” she says. “He is no more.”

“And how do we want to pay for that?”

“When you come back, bring wine and cheese.”

He pauses, looks up, imagines.

“Ah, wine and cheese. Those were the days.”

“Gouda, if they have it.”

“Ah, Gouda. A smooth cheese. A robust mold. And it goes well with fruit.”

“No fruit. It brings rats.”

Newspaper

She stands at the table, a towel on the top of the table, and irons his pants on the towel. He wears khaki pants, so-called cargo pants, that are wrinkled, and she has them on the table, on a towel, ironing them. It is morning. He has coffee in a white coffee mug, sitting without his pants as he stares at the door. She also stares at the door, then down at his pants, and she irons.

“Perhaps the paper is here,” he says.

“Perhaps,” she says.

She looks up at the door again as she irons. He looks at the door. She looks down again and irons. He continues to stare at the door.

“This coffee is thin,” he says.

“It’s tea,” she says.

“This tea is thin, then, and cold.”

“We have no gas. The water did not get hot.”

“That explains that,” he says.

“It’s likely the paper is out there,” she says.

“Likely. But not certain.”

He continues to stare at the door.

“Yes,” she says. “It is not certain.”

She nods towards the door, then looks down at the table, at the towel on the table, at the khaki pants on the towel, the legs of the khakis smoother now than before. There are no cuffs, which simplifies ironing a great deal. She bites her tongue as she irons, presses down hard on the hot iron which presses down hard on the khakis. There is steam.

“I’d like to read that paper,” he says.

“It’s morning,” she says. “I don’t see why you shouldn’t read the paper.”

The iron is heavy and hot. The cord is a tangle.

“I love the morning paper. Memories of yesterday, all organized and printed. News. Sports. Things to buy. And puzzles,” he says. “I especially love the puzzles they put in the paper.”

He looks at the door and sits at the table, his hands on the table, and

waits.

"I particularly like the puzzles," he says. "I sometimes skip the news. It is so easy. And go straight to the puzzles."

Moments pass.

"I'd like to have the paper now," he says. "If I had the newspaper right now, I'd read it, and get to the puzzles, get started right off, let another day loose, so something can happen, so we can 'do,' as you are always saying."

He stares at the door.

She presses the hot iron down hard on his pants, thus creasing the legs, giving a shine to the khaki. Steam comes off the trousers.

Moments pass.

"I wish he would knock," he says. "I could feel more comfortable, knowing he was there. I could stop worrying. Now, if I open the door, seeking the paper, he might be there. You never know. Unless there's knocking."

"That bastard's could be out there. And not knocking. That'd be just like him."

Moments pass.

"You can't know unless he knocks."

"Fear defines us."

"But there is comfort in that."

"There is only the awful truth."

"Awful."

Moments pass.

"I miss his knocking," she says. "Those were the days."

She irons, shakes her head, presses down on the pants, ironing the crouch. Steam rises.

"When they deliver the paper," she says, "they leave it outside that door. Sometimes up against the door. You open the door, it falls in."

"That'd be nice."

"No guarantee. But it happens."

"No. No guarantee. You think it's there now?"

"I don't see why not."

"Ah. Now we are counting on reason to carry us through."

He pauses.

"If I open the door quietly, quickly," he says. "Stick out my hand, grab the paper quickly, quietly...."

"Assuming the paper is there."

“Assuming the paper is there. Grab the thing quick, before he can think, before he knows, pull the paper in, shut the door quickly. Then that will be that....”

“Assuming the paper is there, of course.”

“Assuming the paper is there.”

“Then that will be that.”

He goes to the door, feels the door, feels the old paint on the wood, touches the handle, a wobbly old iron door handle, then he turns the handle slow, not making a noise, unbolts what is bolted, unlocks what is locked, then....suddenly! he opens the door, reaches out! quick! feels for the newspaper! finds it! grabs it! pulls it in! Then...

“Ha. What a fool.”

Shuts the door. Bolts the door. Locks the door. Leans back against the wood. Holds the newspaper to his chest. Eye closed.

“I got the paper.”

“Did you see him?”

“I have it now. To the puzzles, I say.”

He sits at the table, in shirt and tie, no pants. She's ironing his pants. No cuffs, thank god. His socks reach up to his calves. Socks embroidered with fleur-de-leis. No shoes. Slips the rubber band off the paper.

“Thank you, Jesus,” he says. “Now for some answers.”

Eggs

He sits at the table, in tie and shirt, an empty plate in front of him. Fiestaware in vibrant colors, with saucer, cup to match. He holds his paper in front of him, leaning his forearms on the table, the pages lying open on his plate, and reads. Turns a page. He wears socks, no pants, no shoes.

“No one's been shot. Not in the face.” He turns the page.

“One egg or two?” she says.

“Two would be nice. Two, twice as nice.”

She opens the carton.

“There's only one egg left.”

“One is better than none,” he says.

He turns the page.

She turns on the knob for the gas, but there is no heat. She stands at

the stove, cracks an egg, lets it drip into the pan. The grease is white. She wears an apron and socks embroidered with canaries. Nothing else. Shoes.

“Would you like your egg with the sun shining up or scrambled?” she asks.

“I like to see the morning in my egg, my dear. God knows, the day will scramble itself.”

He sits in his chair at the table, turns towards the window, newspaper in hand, and looks up from time to time at the city. He plays with the blinds, twists a rod so slats open, twists it back so they close, then opens them again, then closes them again. Light filters it as stripes on his body, fading as he closes the blinds. He holds his paper in his other hand, light from the windows shining across it.

He fluffs his paper.

“Your egg is served,” she says. “Sun on the upside.”

She carries the skillet to the table and pours his egg onto his Fiestaware. She brings him a knife and a fork, a paper napkin. She pulls back the blinds and looks out the window.

“Dear?” he says.

“Yes,” she says.

“This egg,” he says.

“Yes, love?” she says.

“It looks like snot.”

“Yes,” she says.

Cars line the street below, parked by meters, under trees. The snow has been packed down to a dirty yellow crust.

She wipes her hands on her apron, a lace thing of two parts, the top of which hides her breasts, and on the bottom she wipes her hands.

“Earlier,” she says, “I had the same thought. Quite a coincidence.”

“It isn’t cooked,” he says. “That’s why it’s snotty.”

He pokes the egg with his fork and breaks the yoke. The yoke flows over the clear white of the egg.

“You know what eggs are?” she says.

She looks out of the window, looking for the Ford, or for the man who was there, or for people in the bar across the street, or for someone walking down the street, or for snow to fall, or for something to move. For anything at all. Nothing moves. Not even snow is falling.

“Chickens eat bugs. Live in the dirt. Sit on dirty nests. Eggs come out,”

she says. "They call that laying eggs. We eat them."

"You must heat the pan to cook the egg," he says.

"You must have the gas to light the flame," she says.

"Then turn it on."

"We have no gas."

"Then eggs won't cook."

"No, they won't. They'll look like snot when I pour them out."

Moments pass.

"That also explained the tea," he says.

"If I recall."

She has put her rubber gloves back on and cleans the skillet in the sink.

"You don't like my cooking. So why do you care how it is done?"

She wipes her eyes with the hem of her apron.

"After all I've been through," she says. "All that time I spend on you, waiting on you, cooking your food, doing your laundry, ironing your pants. Thank god, no cuffs. Reading Tolstoy to put you to sleep. I trusted you. You are a pig."

"I love you," he says.

He turns a page. Fluffs the paper. Clears his throat.

"You make me sick."

"You make me sick."

The knocking resumes. A rational knocking. An organized set of knocks. Persistent. Soft.

"We live in a zoo."

"You are a monkey."

"You clean the cages."

"You throw the peanuts."

Moments pass.

Knocking.

Turns the page.

"Should I answer?" she asks. "It could be your friends."

"I have no friends."

Moments pass.

"Do you have enemies?"

The knocking resumes. A soft, regular pounding, muffled somewhat, as if someone out there is hitting the door with the palm of his hand, or her hand, again and again, asking a question, seeking an answer.

"You're the one with the enemies," he says.

"You're the one with the brother."

"My brother doesn't care. He thinks I'm dead."

"The pretty one. The pretty baby. Who wouldn't think things would be better if you were gone. No wonder he comes over here at night and knocks on my door."

"Maybe he'll leave," he says.

"No," she says. "He's here to kill. To take you from me. And then I'll die. I hate you both. I'm glad I shot him. Men are pigs."

The knocking stops. He turns the page.

Moments pass.

"Nothing today in this paper about any shooting."

Moments pass.

"No? That's because they only do nicey nice. What do you expect?"

"There's nothing at all. Nothing about any shooting. If it happened, it should say right here who he was, when he was, where he was and if it was in his face. If it happened. If it was like you say it happened. And if you did it. Or someone like you. And why."

He fluffs the paper. Turns a page.

"But there is nothing," he says.

"That's nice," she says.

She hands him pants, pressed, folded and creased. He stands and puts them on and threads his belt around his waist.

"There is, however, an interesting article on Gambia," he says.

He sits and resumes his reading, with a fluff of the paper.

He turns a page. She wears an apron, a skirt and blouse, and crinolines, and heels. She has put her hair up nice. Outlined her smile with lipstick as red as roses.

"That's nice," she says.

"Peculiar goings on in Gambia. We should be paying more attention to Gambia than we do. What kind of president do we have?"

He shakes the paper, turns the page, turns a page.

"Like a pig," she says.

"He's a man."

"Men are pigs."

"Yes, dear. That's nice. That's very nice."

He fluffs the paper, turns a page, then turns another page.

She has gone to the bathroom now and stands in front of the mirror. She bends towards the mirror, as close to the mirror as her crinolines allow. The door is open to the bedroom, the bedroom door to the living room, through an archway, to the dining area, to the kitchen where he sits reading the paper, and she sees him, from the bathroom, and looking up he sees her, too, from the kitchen. She picks at her cheek.

“Very peculiar things, what goes on out there in Gambia.”

“Yes, dear. That’s sweet,” she says.

She opens the curtain on the bathroom window so sunlight enters, and it floods the bathroom with light. The porcelain. The tiles. The tub. Avocado. The sink.

“Today Gambia. Tomorrow, somewhere else,” he says.

“Yes, dear,” she says.

“Always something.”

“That’s nice,” she says.

“Then, tomorrow, Gambia again.”

“No doubt,” she says.

“Somewhere in this there is a pattern,” he says.

She smiles at him and wipes powder on her face to dull the shine. Her face is less than interesting now. More normal.

“Yes. Zambia could be the pattern. Gambia. Zambia. Then Arizona. It could be like that.”

“Yes. I see,” she says.

“Peculiar patterns.”

“Which is a comfort, I suppose.”

She looks deep into her own eyes, her lashes, brows, the fine points on each side of each eye.

“But there is nothing in here about anyone getting shot,” he says.

“It should be in the paper, if it happened, sure enough.”

“Nothing at all. Only all the nicey nice.”

“Well, they only publish stuff about the rich. Can we be surprised?

She stands in the doorway to the bathroom. She is a silhouette against the brightness, crinolines, heels, a pearl necklace.

“Thank god, they still have puzzles. Always close to the comics section. New puzzles every day. Good puzzles mostly. Somewhere between too easy and impossible. That’s the market. A man can count on the puzzles he finds there. If there’s a market. They all have answers, too. My fondest hope is

to find the answers before tomorrow. Before they print the answers and ruin it all."

"Men are pigs."

"I know you take delight in such," he says.

"Better to finish the puzzle today than to argue about the answers tomorrow."

She walks to him from the bathroom, through the bedroom, to the living room, through the archway to the dining area, and from there she quickly makes her way to the kitchen where she sits. As she walks, her hands at her sides, palms horizontal to the floor, one foot in front of the other, in a line from here to there.

"It is a joy to find answers on my own. To discover patterns. Words. Numbers."

He opens to the puzzle, folds the paper into quarters, a pencil in his hand. He places the paper in his lap and bites his lower lip.

The pounding resumes. They pause, look up, and suddenly it stops. All is quiet. Quieter than before.

"The knocking has stopped," he says.

"So it seems."

It stays silent for the moment. He pauses. She listens. They wait.

"So it seems."

List

He paces from the door, through the kitchen, through the archway to the dining room, through the double louvered doors to the bedroom, around the bed, to the bathroom. Then he turns and goes back, but he pauses by the window.

"I have to go."

"Liar."

"I can't stay here."

"Liar."

"I've overstayed my time. There's nothing there."

"Maybe he's here. Out there." She points to the door. "Looking for you. Looking for me."

He looks at the door. "Maybe not."

"You have your newspaper. What else do you need? Things! Things!"

"I've finished the puzzle. And the rest of the paper is all about yesterday. Yesterday is over."

"They stole your car. You'll have to walk. There's snow on the ground. Your feet will get wet. Stay with me. Be warm. I'll show you how to make a tent. We'll take off our clothes. We'll lay your pants out nice so they don't wrinkle. You can come inside our little house. I love you."

"I already know how to make a tent. Making tents is really stupid. I have to go."

She sits at the kitchen table across from him.

"We need some things," she says.

"What things?"

"You'll need to get some things and bring them home."

"What things do we need?"

He gets a pencil and pad of paper from his pocket, wets the pencil with his tongue, and is poised to write.

"Eggs," she says. "Get eggs. Bring me eggs."

"Eggs," he says. "You know where they come from?" He writes down 'eggs.'

"Wine," she says. "We need wine. White. Red."

"Wine," he says. "You crush the grapes and bacteria eat that, and alcohol comes out of their bodies...."

"Chilled."

He writes 'wine' down. Then 'chilled.'

"Milk," she says, looking in the fridge.

"Oh, god. Milk. The thought," he says. But he writes down 'milk.'

"Eggs, wine and milk," he says. "We need so much."

"We need to eat."

He writes down 'cigarettes.' Then he says the word, "Cigarettes."

"Oh," she says. "So that's what's going on. I'm going out for cigarettes. I'll be right back." Then, 'Fuck you.' I know all about that."

"I'll come back."

"Liar."

She stands, and follows him as he paces about, opening cabinet doors, and drawers, and doors to other rooms.

"I'll take my coat," he says. "It's cold outside. I'll need my shoes and socks. Not because I'm leaving you. No. Nothing like that. But there's snow

out there. A lot of snow. I'll just run out and get some cigarettes."

He puts on his coat, dark heavy cashmere, and he paces and writes in his list. He carries his shoes in his other hand and rests the list on the soles of his shoes so he can write.

"And I'll stop and see if I can get the gas turned on."

"We don't need milk."

"I'll get wine. Gouda, too, I think. And crackers like we had before. Remember that?"

"Those were the days," she says. "And perhaps next time, there'll be no knocking."

He stops, he pauses. He is not far from the door, and he looks at the door, old wood, painted, wobbly knob of iron. "I rather enjoyed the knocking. Once I got used to it. It broke up the flow of things. There would be knocking. Then there would be nothing. When there was knocking, it came, knock, knock, knock, like that, so there was space in between the actual knocks. That made it interesting. It created a pattern. A progression."

"I won't miss it."

"We are so different."

"Men are pigs."

"Will I remember? And if I do, and if I see you again, and you me, and you look, and I look will I remember? Or will we not know?"

"Let's not, pig."

"Will I not know and just wonder."

"Pigs never remember. Never wonder."

He still paces. He goes to the window, opens the blinds, reads his list.

"Cigarettes," he says. "I'll be right back."

"Cigarettes," she says. "Fuck you."

She sits on the edge of the bed. He picks up his briefcase – yes, he had a briefcase from work, and he had had it at the bar, there at his feet at the bar, and when he got up and approached her he remembered his briefcase, and he carried it with him while he walked with her down the street that night, held it as he climbed those few stairs behind her, and he left it on the floor, not far from the fridge, and now that he was leaving he remembered it – and he fills it now with his papers, books, his pencil. He pulls out his gloves from the pockets of his coat and puts them on. Then he pulls out her gun from the drawer on the nightstand. Checks it. Smells it. Strokes it. Then he hands it to her.

"Something to remember me by," he says. "Your godforsaken gun. The

gun you shot him with. In the face. Remember that? Those were the days."

"If you come back, and I am dead, turn out the lights. If you're not coming back, please turn out the lights before you go."

She fondles the gun while he packs. Heavy iron, and oily, black.

"I don't want to lie here forever with the lights in my eyes."

"Why don't I turn out the lights now just in case. Nothing will happen you don't already know."

He buttons up his coat, a black cashmere thing, puts on his hat, his scarf, buckles his belt, looks in the mirror, looks at his teeth, picks something out of his teeth, then touches his hat, and nods his head towards her.

"Thank you," she says. "I don't think I will be knowing you if we meet somewhere else. Some other time."

Her eyes are closed.

"It's just a river anyway," she says.

He goes to the door, unbolts the bolt, unlocks the lock, turns the old iron knob on the door, the painted wood door, and it opens a crack. He looks out. He opens it further. Looks out for anyone. The hallway is empty. He stands straight and walks out. He shuts the door behind him. He opens the door again, reaches in through the door, just a hand in a glove, and he turns out the light. Then again, shuts the door behind him.

Then it is quiet. Very quiet in the room. No steam from the radiators. No knocking on the door. She sits on the edge of her chair at the table that sits beneath the light which is not shining, only light from outside comes in. It is less light now than before. It has grown dark in the room, but that makes what little light that comes in seem more than that is. The sun is setting. The day has elapsed. Nothing has happened. Nothing worth recalling. She sits with the gun, her hands on the table, the gun on her hands, her hands palms up. Gravity presses the gun pressing down against the palms of her hands and in such a way it is held there.

She holds the gun as she opens the blinds, looks out at the city, the street, and lights comes in through the glass, and she sees things apart from her, or she sees the light that connects these things with each other and with her, or she recreates these things by thinking them, by adding light, like memories.

Cars drive along the street, tires compress snow, ice covers the ends of tree limbs. She is inside behind the window, absorbing light, gun in hand, feeling weight, wrapped in gravity, connecting things.

A roach runs across the table. Another darts this way and that.

The door is closed. She goes to the door, one foot in front of the other, locks it.

The gun glows, a dark, oiled thing.

She sits on the chair and holds the gun in her lap.

Her head falls down on her arms. No doubt, she weeps. It is dark in this place. The sun has set. There is that noise. A trigger. The expansion of gas. An expression of lead hitting bone.

Blood, let me say, also flows like a river.

Bar

The bar is nearly empty now. It is a midweek evening. Towards the front, just inside the window, a band is putting together instruments, microphones, speakers, testing instruments, harmonizing with each other. Soft sounds of jazz to be drift over the small crowd who will pay them no attention.

Jay sits at the bar, a man beside him. Maybe they know each other. Maybe not. Jay faces the bar, leans on his elbows, bends forward with his drink in both hands. He looks up from time to time at the mirror, sees the band. Across the room he sees the booth where a group of women sit, huddling together. One seat faces out, empty.

"Women are animals," he says. "Fucking animals."

The man beside him, his back to the bar, leans back against the bar, leans back on his elbows, holds his drink in front with both hands. Everywhere the gentle chatter, genteel laughter, the shuffle of shoes, ice clicking in half empty glasses, discordant sounds of a band warming up. Jazz. It is Wednesday.

Outside the sun has set. It has snowed not long ago, but snow remains, piled up on curbs, dirty, used, crystalized.

He looks at the booth, expecting to see her, if not now soon, sitting on the edge of her seat, as if she might bolt from her seat, or speak across the bar to him, call him something, say something. 'Men are pigs.' He remembers. He spins his glass. He stares at the booth, at the empty space where she isn't.

"See that seat over there? The empty seat. She hasn't come. I'm not waiting for her. But she might come. Tonight, perhaps. I don't know."

He lifts his glass and sips his drink and sucks out the olive. The man beside him talks to someone on his other side, and laughs at something said.

He wears his blazer, his white Oxford shirt, button-down collar. His hair is fine, and blond, and brushed back oily as if he uses his fingers to comb it back. He comes here every day. He sits at the bar. He is alone. He keeps his gun concealed.

"She's usually waiting for someone," the bartender says. "Maybe you."

He pauses, spins his empty glass which the bartender takes, drops it in the sink, and finds a fresh glass for a new martini. Scotch just doesn't do it for him anymore.

"She carries a gun, just so you know. Women with guns. Fucking animals."

He turns to the bartender, holds up two fingers, and the bartender drops two olives in the glass.

"She shot a guy. Lonely, you know. Anxious. A friggin' gun."

He looks from one end of the room to the other, from the far dark end to the front where the window lets in the light of the streets, and cars drive by, lights from stores along the street, and he hears the faint beginnings of soft jazz. A perfect evening will be complete when it is over.

The bartender wipes off the bar, then sets the fresh martini down. The man pushes money from his pile of change, enough to pay, a bit more for tip.

He looks at the man next to him. The man looks back. Then he turns away, sips his drink. Behind them the sounds of voices chatting, glasses clinking, shoes, boots, the door opens and closes. The beat picks up in the jazz. Beyond, out front, cars of the city drive through the light.

"Yeah, I hooked up with him," he says. "For ten minutes or so." He laughs. "Then got out as quick."

He looks. She is not there.

"If she comes in and sits at that seat, I don't know her. That's the deal. I'm not here, see. And if I see her coming down the street, I'll cross over to the other side and pretend I don't see her at all. I'll just walk on, you know? Strangers. If she sees me and waves, I'll not see her, you know? If she hollers out, I won't hear. That's for the best."

At last the jazz begins. He looks away, then at his drink.

He looks up at the mirror, sees the table, the women huddle over the table, talking and laughing, but she is not there. He scans the mirror left to right, but nothing has changed, nothing at all, except she is not there.

Something small, and dark, full of fear, races across the bar, then around and under it on the other side. Then he sees another on the dark sticky

floor.

“Did you see that?”

The guy beside him looks at him, then behind him on the bar, then looks away.

“A cockroach. Or two.”

There is shuffling of feet, and the clicking of glass and ice, the mumble of many conversations and light laughter.

“I guess they’re out. Someone opened the door on the fridge. And they got out,” Jay says. But no one hears.

Outside the jazz picks up, a West Coast jazz that drains the night of thought. He raises his finger and the bartender sees and turns to shake another.

“Or somehow we got in. And someone shut the door.”

It is midtown, Kansas City.

There is a bar. Large plate glass windows line the front. These windows face the sidewalk, face out to cars parked along the street, then out onto the street. And it is evening.

A man walks by on the sidewalk, huddled in his coat, his hands in his pockets. A hat. He pauses. He looks in the window. Then he walks on.

Contributors

Thomas Boos recently graduated from the University of Pittsburgh with a degree in creative writing. He is applying for MFA programs and submitting work for publication.

Roger Camp is the author of three photography books including the award-winning *Butterflies in Flight* (Thames & Hudson, 2002) and *Heat* (Charta, Milano, 2008). His work has appeared in numerous journals including *The New England Review*, *New York Quarterly*, and *North American Review*. His work is represented by the Robin Rice Gallery, NYC.

Essayist **Savannah Carlin** graduated in 2016 from Babson College with a degree in business. While at Babson, she won an MLK Creativity prize for her prose poem “On Nantucket with Katrina,” which ignited her engagement with creative nonfiction. She currently works as a designer in New York. Her articles have appeared in *Forbes* online and *Worth Magazine*, while her essay “Almost Breast Cancer” appeared in *Juxtaprose Magazine*.

AD Conner is a freelance writer and editor. She lives in a small Kentucky town along the Ohio River. When she's not in her nest, composed of books, lit mags, and lots of raggedy notebooks, she can be found wandering the woods or diving in the river, searching for new ideas.

Warren Decker's writing has appeared in *The Best American Poetry 2018*, *The New Ohio Review*, *Fifth Wednesday*, *Frogpond*, and elsewhere. He hopes to become a brilliant light wave of pure compassion, but for now he ripples dimly with good intentions in Osaka where he writes and teaches.

Epiphany Ferrell writes most of her fiction in Southern Illinois at Resurrection Mule Farm, so-named after a mule survived a lightning strike there. She received a Pushcart nomination in 2018, and her stories appear recently in *The Slag Review*, *New Flash Fiction Review* and *Pulp Literature*, and she blogs intermittently at Ghost Parachute. She is a reader for *Mojave River Review*.

Although **Mary-Chris Hines** recently concentrated primarily on fine arts, she has played with writing poetry since she was a wee tot. The poem in this edition comes from raising a son who was very different than she was. He is

far beyond his teenage years now, and somehow, they have come to be more alike than before. She is grateful.

Wynne Hungerford's work has appeared in *Epoch*, *Blackbird*, *The Normal School*, *The Boiler*, *Okey-Panky*, and *SmokeLong Quarterly*, among other places. She received her MFA from the University of Florida.

Opwonya Innocent is the author of *Innocent: A Spirit of Resilience*. The book reveals, in his own words, his struggle to heal from the trauma he experienced, a desire to help others, and his tireless effort to realize meaningful, positive change. Innocent's inspiring story embodies the triumph of hope and determination over pain, trauma and fear.

Claudine Jacques was born in France, moved to New Caledonia in her teens, and is now a much-published novelist and short story writer. Island life and her cattle station are rich sources of inspiration for her writing. She is a founding member of l'Association des Écrivains de la Nouvelle Calédonie (Association of New Caledonian Writers).

David Joseph is a graduate of Hobart College and the University of Southern California's Graduate Writing Program, where he was awarded the Kerr Fellowship. His writing has been published in *The London Magazine*, *Wall Street Journal*, *LA Times*, *Doubletake Magazine*, and *Rattle*. A recipient of the John Henry Hobart Fellowship for Ethics and Social Justice, he spent the past two decades as an educator and nonprofit executive in Los Angeles. He has taught at Pepperdine University and Harvard University, where he was a recipient of the Derek Bok Award. He lives in San Roque, Spain with his wife Karen and sons Jackson and Cassius.

Claire Lawrence is a writer and visual artist living in British Columbia, Canada. Her writing has been published in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom and India in numerous publications including *Geist*, *Litro*, *Ravensperch*, *Brilliant Flash Fiction*, *Curating Alexandria*, and *Bangalore Review*; her work has also been on BBC radio. Her art has appeared in *Black Lion Journal*, *Esthetic Apostle*, and *Fractured Nuance*. She was nominated for the 2016 Pushcart Prize. Her goal is to publish in all genres.

Roeethyl Lunn is a retired educator, grandmother of three, and experimental writer. She has a BFA in Broadcast Media from Morris College, Sumter, South

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Kevin McLaughlin, coauthor of *Innocent: A Spirit of Resilience*, has a background in policy and communications work at the local, state and federal government levels. He currently resides in Durham, North Carolina, where he works with local government, nonprofit agencies, local businesses and religious institutions to address issues surrounding social justice, inclusivity, and community development. He earned a Bachelor of Arts from Miami University in public administration and American studies, and a Master of Public Administration from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Kerry Muir has obsessions that crop up with staggering regularity in her screenplays, stage plays, short films and literary nonfiction. These include: the surprise element of beauty within the grotesque. The surreal. The drunk and disorderly yearning for love, even for love gone bad. She's prone to write characters who live on the margins, in severe isolation, who simply don't belong.

Tiffany Promise has been published in *Black Clock*, *Blanket Sea*, *High Shelf*, and *Gingerbread House*. She received an MFA from CalArts a few years ago, and is currently figuring out how to juggle motherhood and writing. She just completed her first novel.

Ron Pullins is a fiction writer, playwright, and poet working in Tucson, Arizona. His works have been published in numerous journals, and his plays have been produced across the country. He sees his work as an adventure in thought and language. His fiction has been published in numerous journals including *Shenandoah*, *Kansas Quarterly*, *Sunspot*, *Southwest Review*, *Dark Ink*, *Steel Toe Review*, and others. More can be found at pullins.com.

Judith Ralston Ellison writes short stories and microfiction. She won two prizes for microfiction from Rochester Writers. Her fiction has appeared in *Third Wednesday*, a collection *Flash Fiction for Flash Memory*, and *The Mentor*, published by the Michigan State Bar. She writes four-hundred-word essays for *Art and Sole*, the inhouse publication of the Detroit Institute of Art. She retired from her position as an administrative law judge in 2009.

Claudia Reed spent seventeen years as a news writer, during which she won an award for investigative journalism. Many of her reports covered actual or potential environmental damage and related health problems. She now facilitates memoir workshops and devotes her time to short fiction and a memoir. A short epistolary memoir was published in *The Letters Page* project at the University of Nottingham. Two short stories took awards in the 2009 Prose Contest sponsored by the California Writers Club's Redwood branch, and "Damnation" received honorable mention in the 2005 EM Koeppel contest.

Steven B. Rosenfeld is a retired New York lawyer, a graduate of Columbia College and Columbia Law School, who began writing short stories in 2015. Since then, his stories have been published or are forthcoming in *The City Key*, *Inigo Online*, JewishFiction.net, *Reflex Fiction*, *Good Works Review*, *Flatbush Review*, *The Rush* and *Magnolia Review*. His story "Separation" was a finalist for the 2018 Short Story America Prize, and will be published in the 2019 Short Story America anthology. His flash piece "For the Rest of Our Lives" won the 2018 Writer Advice contest. He has participated in fiction workshops at The Writer's Voice at the West Side Y in New York and at One Story. He is a member of the Columbia Fiction Foundry.

Lory Saiz is an Italian artist, a writer, and a sword-owner particularly interested in LGBT+ media, transformative works, and their intersection with politics and tech.

Jesse Sensibar's work has appeared in *The Tishman Review*, *Stoneboat Journal*, *Waxwing*, and others. His short fiction was shortlisted for the Bath Flash Fiction Award and the Wilda Hearne Flash Fiction Prize. His first book, *Blood in the Asphalt: Prayers from the Highway* was published in 2018 by Tolsun Press and was shortlisted for the Eric Hoffer Book Award. You can find him at jessesensibar.com.

LD Sledge is a professional author and ghostwriter. He is eighty-four and has accumulated many books, articles, blogs, poems and short stories over those years. He lives in Clearwater, Florida.

Jodee Stanley's work has appeared in the *Mississippi Review*, *580 Split*, *Hobart*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Electric Velocipede*, *Queen Mob's Teahouse*, and elsewhere. She is the editor of *Ninth Letter*, the literary journal published by the creative writing program at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

Pamela Sumners is a constitutional and civil rights attorney from Alabama. Her work was published or recognized by thirty journals and publishing houses in 2018 and 2019. She was selected for inclusion in 2018's *64 Best Poets* and had been nominated for 2019's *50 Best Poets*. She was nominated for a Pushcart prize in 2018. She now lives in St. Louis with her wife, son, and three rescue dogs.

Bob Thurber is the author of *Paperboy: A Dysfunctional Novel* and two collections of short stories. Over the years his work has received a long list of awards and honors, appeared in *Esquire* and other notable publications, and been included in over sixty anthologies. Selections have been utilized as teaching tools in schools and universities worldwide. *Paperboy*'s second edition was released in 2016. Bob resides in Massachusetts. BobThurber.net.

Born in Celaya, Guanajuato, Mexico, **Jose Trejo-Maya** spent his childhood in the rural pueblo of Tarimoró until he immigrated in 1988. His inspirations include Netzahualcoyotl, Humberto Ak'abal, Ray A. Young Bear, and James Welch. His work has been published in literary outlets in the UK, US, Spain, India, Australia, Argentina, and Germany. After being nominated for the Pushcart Prize in 2015, he placed in the El Centro Canario Estudios Caribeños–El Atlántico–2016 poetry contest. He was a *New Rivers Press Many Voices* finalist in 2018. While in ceremony with Chololo medicine men in the Tule River Reservation, he dreamt the prophecy written in his poem.

Daniel Weinberg is a pen & ink and colored pencil wordartist who sometimes collaborates with musician Chico Feinstein. He has had a number of group shows and two solo shows in the Chicago area, and has read at poetry open mics for over thirty years. He started taking photographs in 2019. After travels to Germany long ago and Israel not so long ago, he realized that the world is inhabited by people who sense distances in different ways. The spaces between people are flexible and prone to change. His website is www.artpal.com under the search term "weinbergsart."

Melinda Winograd studied poetry at the University of North Texas, and currently studies fiction writing at Southern New Hampshire University. Her work has been featured in the *Tulane Review* and High Shelf Press.

Guinotte Wise writes and welds steel sculpture on a farm in Resme Speed, Kansas. His short story collection *Night Train, Cold Beer* won publication by a

university press and enough money to fix the soffits. Five more books since. A five-time Pushcart nominee, his fiction and poetry have been published in numerous literary journals including *Atticus*, *The MacGuffin*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *Rattle*, and *The American Journal of Poetry*. His wife has an honest job in the city and drives a hundred miles a day to keep it. Some work is at <http://www.wisesculpture.com>.

Patricia Worth is an Australian literary translator. Her translation of George Sand's *Spiridion* was published in 2015, and two bilingual books of New Caledonian stories have been published recently. A number of short pieces have appeared in journals in Australia, New Caledonia and the US. Her translation of Jean Lorrain's fin-de-siècle collection *Stories to Read by Candlelight* is forthcoming in 2019.

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