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Table of Contents

Electroencephalography 1
Darby Larson

Charging the Inspiration 10
Cameron Gray

Arrow 11
Nadine Darling

Drive Thru 18
Kenneth Darling

Hello Goodbye 19
Lavie Tidhar

Aliens 22
Jordan E. Rosenfeld

Not in the Yellow Pages 37
Lesley C. Weston

The Intrigue of Being Watched 39
Rusty Barnes

The Prophet: eyes detail 40
Ilona Taube

really nice on drugs 42
Your personal ground zero (to franz wright) 43
Moving Boxes 44
Timothy Gager

Spring 45
Magali Cadieux

Natural History 46
Gini Hamilton

Unzipped 57
Steven J. Dines

The Trial 66
Christopher S. Cosco

Hunting Season 67
Rusty Barnes

Growth 68
Caleb Morgan

Max Velocity 69
Leslie Claire Walker

The Illiterate Sky 90
David Lenson

The Banker Calls for Three Martinis and a Pipe 92
Sisyphus of the Staircase 93
Cami Park

Steps to Darkened Ends 94
Ali Al Saeed

In the Dark 95
Sean Melican

The Prophet: two figures 108
Ilona Taube

Fear Not Heaven's Fire 110
Jaine Fenn

Experiment: Love 120
Brian Conn

Anything 126
Matt Bell

Torso Twenty-one 134
Christopher S. Cosco

Women of the Doll 135
Nisi Shawl

The Gods of Houston 160
Rebekah Frumkin

A Doorbell 172
In Defense of the Boll Weevil 173
Catholic Girls 174
Kenneth L Clark

Item 27 176
Mike Procter

Mad Dogs 179
Christian A. Dumais

Jimmy's Luck 196
Tammy R. Kitchen

Contributor Biographies 199

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Electroencephalography

Darby Larson

PART ONE

On a Wednesday afternoon in the middle of summer, on Seventh Street just outside his house, as he was walking home from the grocery store, he almost tripped over a cardboard box full of nuts and bolts and large metal springs. He set his groceries down and inspected the contents. Each spring was about a foot long, six inches in diameter, sturdy. The nuts and bolts were the size of fingers with rings.

At that moment, Dean decided he would build a robot, a human-sized robot that would perform tasks like loading and unloading the dishwasher and dragging the garbage cans out to the street the night before trash day. He only needed to acquire energy converters and metal skin. He set the box in his garage, because in his garage, he decided, was where the robot would be built.

The effort involved would be considerable, but the reward exquisite. He wouldn't lift a finger for the rest of his life.

- - -

Dean's house was one of only three along Seventh Street. His father owned all three houses, suburban replicas of each other painted slightly different shades of gray, and lived in the house next to Dean's. Across the street was a field of weeds, home to a family of moles. Seth, Dean's brother, lived in the third house with his wife Misty and six-year-old daughter Michelle.

Dean regarded Seth as an idiot who would rather spend his time laboring than stopping to think about what he could be doing so as to not have to labor so much.

Seth was a welder by profession and ran a small auto-body and welding shop from his garage. Dean had no profession and lived off an inheritance entrusted to him and Seth two years ago when their mother had died of heart failure.

The day after Dean found the box of parts, he went next door to his brother's house and made a deal with Seth to deliver several mangled pieces of sheet metal, taken mostly from wrecked Cadillacs, to his house the following day, in exchange for his fixing his brother's broken computer.

- - -

The morning after he fixed Seth's computer, Dean walked outside to find a large pile of scrap metal on his driveway. A Post-It note was attached to the pile. It read:

thank you Dean for fixing my computer, it works great, you are truly a genius, here's the metal you wanted, I gave you a little extra, love your grateful brother, Seth

Dean needed the metal to be inside his garage because inside his garage was where the robot was going to be built, not out on the driveway. Did Seth think he was going to build a robot out on the driveway for all the world to see?

- - -

Neal, their father, a skinny man with long silver hair, was a genius like himself, and so it was his father who Dean approached about energy converters.

Dean entered his father's house and found him sitting in the living room in his favorite leather recliner, reading a newspaper.

"Dad, I'm looking for some kind of converter that will produce electroencephalographic current."

"Check the basement."

- - -

Dean carried a cardboard box full of energy converters from his father's basement to his garage and set it down next to the other cardboard box full of nuts and bolts and springs. Each converter was a small metallic box about the size of a Rubik's Cube, with a tiny spindle for winding it up and several wires protruding from two opposite ends.

The scrap metal was still out on the driveway. He walked out and picked up a small piece of metal, brought it into his garage, and placed it next to the two boxes. He looked back out at the pile of metal. At that moment, he began to get a real sense of the amount of physical effort he would have to exhaust in order to build the robot. The design and schematics were in his head, no problem, but the task itself would require the use of welding tools, a hammer, wrenches, a soldering iron, forearm muscles.

He sat down at the desk he kept in his garage, rested his head on the wood surface next to his computer, and fell asleep.

- - -

Neal and Seth were in his garage when he awoke. They were standing over the two cardboard boxes, looking down at them. He

asked them what they were doing. They said they had come to ask for a favor: would he mind watching Seth's daughter Michelle tomorrow while the two of them went to the city to salvage some metal from a recent automobile accident.

"Where will Misty be?" Dean asked. Getting her hair done. He thought quickly, then said that he would watch Michelle in exchange for them building his robot for him. He would draw up the specs, his father would have no trouble interpreting them, and Seth could weld and hammer.

"I'm in. Sounds fun," his brother said.

"What do you need a robot for?" his father said.

Dean decided he would baby-sit his niece at his father's house next door because there was more food there and Michelle, who already weighed a hundred and ten pounds, ate more than the average six-year-old. They also agreed that Dean would watch her for two days, the first day while Seth and Neal went to the city and the second day while they built his robot.

PART TWO

On Dean's first day of baby-sitting Michelle, he let her play in the back yard of his father's house while he read a newspaper in his father's leather recliner, a piece about how corporate greed was destroying America, about how greed was one of the most primal sins.

Michelle came into the house, leaving muddy footprints all over the kitchen floor, then took a pint of strawberry ice cream from the freezer.

In the bathroom, Dean ran the bath water, took her clothes off, and set her in the tub while she ate ice cream with a large metal spoon. He went back to the living room and finished reading while she took a bath.

Hours later, he awoke on his father's couch to silence, sat up, and went to the bathroom to check on Michelle.

She was floating face-down in the tub, the empty ice cream pint bobbing next to her head. He took her wrist and felt for a pulse. Nothing.

Her heavy, soaking body dripped as he pulled her from the tub and carried her to the basement, where he laid her on her back on his father's old table saw. Sawdust and spilt motor oil covered the basement floor. Above a dusty green sofa, a few energy converters sat on a shelf next to some ancient textbooks. A large iron safe

about the size of a miniature refrigerator, with a combination lock and four little iron legs, stood next to the table saw.

Dean quickly took a couple of energy converters from the shelf, set them next to Michelle's head, picked up his father's electric drill, and switched it on.

He dug the spinning drill bit into her head a few inches above her left ear, pulled it out, then dug into her head again an inch above the first hole.

Using a soldering iron—though not entirely sure how well solder would attach to anything biological—he began to connect the wires from an energy converter to Michelle's neurons, now exposed through the holes in her head. The solder seemed to attach okay.

He made an incorrect connection and, with frustration, disconnected the entire converter. Without thinking, he set it down, wires tipped with hot solder, atop the iron safe next to the table saw. The safe suddenly came to life, turned itself around on its four stubby legs, and waddled away, up the stairs and out of sight. Dean watched it curiously, then returned to Michelle's head and began connecting a new converter to her neurons.

Every electroencephalographic energy converter is pre-wound, lasts a few hours, and then needs to be wound again. The safe would wind down eventually. So would Michelle.

Dean took off his watch—a wind-up watch—a gift from his deceased mother, and carefully disassembled it. He rigged the gears of the watch to the small spindle that stuck out of the converter, then reassembled the watch.

As he made the last connection of converter wire to the final neuron, Michelle opened her eyes.

He mounted the energy converter to the outside of her head and let her sit up. She hopped off the table and ran back up the stairs. Dean fell onto his father's dusty old green sofa and, stricken with exhaustion, fell immediately asleep.

- - -

Later that evening, when Seth came by to pick Michelle up, he asked about the large metal box attached to the side of her head.

"It's nothing," Dean said. "Just a little experiment, you wouldn't understand, and if you wouldn't mind winding up the watch attached to the box before she goes to sleep tonight, I'd appreciate it."

- - -

On his second day of baby-sitting Michelle, Dean brought her back to his house and they sat in the corner of the garage while Neal and Seth built his robot.

The noise in the garage, heavy steel against heavy steel, soon became unbearable, so he moved to the front lawn, sat down against a tree, and watched Michelle run in circles around the pile of scrap metal still in his driveway. He drifted in and out of sleep. At one point, his niece stopped running, instinctively picked up a cockroach that had scurried out from under the pile, shoved it in her mouth, chewed, and swallowed.

- - -

It was dark when Dean awoke, staring up into the tree he had fallen asleep against. He stood, stretched, and walked past the diminished pile of scrap metal in his driveway. The mood was quiet; everyone had left. He looked into his garage. His robot stood motionless in the exact center of the floor, staring back at him.

PART THREE

When Neal's wife Angel had died of heart failure two years ago, a few weeks after the funeral, he had dug up her remains in a fury of mourning and brought her back to his house in the middle of the night. He had cut off her head, attached an electroencephalographic energy converter to her brain, attached her head to the top of an old mahogany grandfather clock, and attached the spindle of the converter to the pendulum of the clock. Since then, she had remained attached to the clock against the wall in their bedroom, unbeknownst to the rest of the family.

Early on, she was content, talking with him about current events and laughing at his jokes, but over time she grew agitated, stopped responding to him, cried violently for no reason, tried to bite his finger whenever it was in range, screamed at the sight of him.

He stopped winding her up as often as before and began to relish the time she was left unwound.

Worn out from helping Seth build Dean's silly robot, he stood in front of her now, debating whether to wind her up a little. It had been at least a few months since she had last been ticking. The last time, he had tried to gag her mouth with a sock so she wouldn't scream, but she had managed to spit it out.

He went to his dresser and extracted a sock, came back, and stuffed it in her mouth much more tightly than last time. He turned the wind-up key near the torso of the clock a few notches. The pendulum rocked and her head, which had been resting to one side, slowly lifted.

She made eye contact with him and tried to scream, but the sock did its job.

Even though there was no conversation, he found comfort in just seeing her eyes open again, her head full of motion.

Then a noise came from the living room, and he left to investigate.

- - -

As soon as Neal appeared from the hallway, Dean's robot, standing in his living room, ran toward him, its shiny metal hands open and aimed at his chest.

- - -

While Neal was unconscious, his old iron combination safe, the one he had kept in the basement, walked toward him, opened its door, sucked the wedding ring from his finger, then closed its door and walked away.

- - -

When Neal awoke, he looked down at his chest and saw an energy converter attached to his heart.

The converter had been modified. There was a hole where the spindle ought to be. He stood up and looked around.

Back in the bedroom, Angel had spit out the sock and was looking furious, breathing heavily through her nose. Neal took the wind-up key from the grandfather clock and inserted it into the energy converter attached to his chest, wound it as tight as it would go—which wasn't very far because it was already pre-wound—then inserted the key back into the clock.

Angel screamed at him and he instantly put his hand next to the pendulum, stopping it from moving. Her head fell to the side. He grabbed a handful of her hair, ripped her head from the top of the grandfather clock, and dropped it on the floor.

He lay back on his bed and smiled at the ceiling. He was having a sudden and overwhelming realization that he was more evolved than any other human. He was a genius, had invented the

electroencephalographic energy converter on his own, had invented life, could control life.

He turned his head and caught a glimpse of his own reflection in the bathroom mirror. Admiring himself, his utter superiority, his shiny silver hair draped across the pillow, he fell peacefully asleep.

PART FOUR

Seth lay on his back, sweaty and spent, Misty attached to his arm like a leech, licking the length of the vein bulging from his giant biceps. The wall clock in the living room struck one.

Misty's sexiness was dangerous. She relentlessly kept herself in shape, addicted to health.

Years ago, she had been professionally diagnosed as a nymphomaniac. Seth had thought it funny, that something like that was diagnosable.

Veins turned her on, she had told him, made her feel like they were animals.

She kept licking up and down the length of his vein until he asked her to cut it out, get some sleep. She got out of bed and went to the bathroom.

Seth got out of bed also and walked to the kitchen. There he found the refrigerator wide open and empty, remnants of food and containers strewn about the kitchen floor.

Michelle was passed out on the couch in the living room. Seth stood silently over her, watching her sleep. He soon realized she wasn't breathing. He held his hand to her nose and felt nothing. He poked her shoulder a few times, said her name, grabbed both shoulders and shook her back and forth.

She awoke for a moment, then passed out again.

Seth looked at the metal box attached to her head. He had forgotten to wind the watch on it like Dean had asked him to. It was now stopped.

He wound it a few times.

Michelle suddenly came to life, grabbed her father's pinky, and bit into it, down to the bone. Seth pulled his hand away quickly and shouted. Michelle hopped off the couch and ran out the front door.

"What's wrong?" Misty had come into the living room.

"Michelle bit me."

"Where is she?"

"I don't know."

"What happened to the kitchen?"

Together, they left the house in the warm night to look for Michelle, Seth in a blue robe and Misty in a pink nightie.

A strange metallic noise was coming from Dean's garage. They walked next door, calling their daughter's name.

The robot stood in Dean's garage, exactly as Seth and Neal had left it. The noise had been coming from the robot, but it ceased whatever it was doing as soon as it made eye contact with Seth.

Dean was lying on the floor next to the robot.

Seth was momentarily awestruck on seeing the robot again, that his brother could be such a genius as to have thought of it.

"What the hell is that?" Misty asked.

When they took a few steps toward it, the robot ran at them, thrusting its hands toward their chests.

- - -

Across the street, Michelle sat in the field of weeds and sucked the meat from the thigh of a mole she had caught.

- - -

When Seth and Misty awoke, they were sitting next to each other against the wall in the garage. Attached to their chests were energy converters, fully wound.

Misty suddenly slid to the cement floor and succumbed to orgasmic convulsions. Seth stood to move out of the way.

She finished a few minutes later, stood, and braced herself against the wall of Dean's garage, catching her breath.

"You okay?" Seth asked.

Again, standing near the wall, she experienced inexplicable sexual intensity. She fell and crawled awkwardly out of the garage toward the lawn, where she wriggled and screamed in the grass.

Seth turned around and studied Dean's garage. There was no sign of the robot or Michelle. Dean was still passed out on the floor.

"Dean," he said.

Nothing.

Out on the lawn, Misty screamed, "Oh my fucking God!" then fell silent.

He looked down at his brother again, noticed a metal box attached to his chest. Then he looked down at the metal box attached to his own chest.

He walked over to Dean's desk. The computer was turned on; he sat down and jiggled the mouse a little. The screen filled with the design and schematics of the robot. Seth stared at every line, every variable, all of it mysterious and beautiful, desperately trying to understand it the way Dean did.

PART FIVE

The robot stood motionless in the exact center of the floor, staring back at Dean.

His back aching from sleeping against the tree in his front yard, Dean stood just outside his garage and inspected it. Then he said to it, "Please take all the remaining scrap metal in the driveway back to Seth's garage, then empty and refill the dishwasher. Thank you."

The robot stood still.

Something was wrong. It would be sinful for a robot to disobey a human.

He approached the robot, opened the panel on its chest, and extracted one of several energy converters from within it. He shook it next to his ear to listen for loose parts, then let it drop to the floor. He went to his desk, where a pile of extra converters had been left, and replaced the old one with a new one. He shut the panel door to the robot's chest.

Instantly, the robot shoved its metal hand through Dean's ribcage and pulled out his heart, shook it next to its mechanical ear, then let it drop to the floor. It attached and wired up a fully-wound energy converter directly over the hole in his chest.

Dean fell to the floor atop his lifeless heart.

- - -

Some time later, he awoke to the sound of heavy iron scraping over the concrete floor of his garage. His father's iron safe was standing next to him. It opened its door and Dean felt the wallet in his back pocket slip out. The safe closed its door and walked away.

His head fell back onto the concrete, eyes closed.

He fell into a deep sleep and never opened his eyes again.

Cameron Gray

Charging the Inspiration

Arrow

Nadine Darling

What happened was this: I woke up and the arrow was there, wedged through my breastbone and into my heart like a trowel. And, you know, I was shocked but not surprised. I thought, Well, this explains that sinking feeling I've had for the last thirty years. I grabbed for the phone and it fell. I eased onto my side and searched beneath the bed until I felt it tip into my hand, then I called work and told them I'd be late.

"Not again, you won't," said Randy.

"There's an arrow in my heart today," I said.

"Yes, and last week you had a sore throat. Do you like your job?"

"I like it all right," I said. I ran my fingers down the arrow's shaft and plucked a bit at its fletching. The feathers felt very familiar. There was something very festive about them.

"If you like your job, you'll come in and do it," said Randy.

"Okay," I said.

"That's not the tone of a team player."

"Okay," I said, and "Goodbye," and I hung up.

I found a blouse and cut a hole in its breast. Then I cut a hole in my coat.

It wasn't a surprise to anyone, certainly not anyone who knew me. Examining the arrow, Dr. Clark was almost delighted by his foresight.

"Didn't I tell you?" he asked, as I sat there in a snowflake-printed gown on a table lined with paper, my arrow tenting the fabric like a ghost or the barrel of a gun. And he had told me. He'd told me once during a physical. He'd said, "Of all my patients, you're the one I see with an arrow in her heart."

"My, it's a good one," he said.

"Thanks," I said.

"Aluminum, by God, and built to last!"

He clipped one of my X-rays to a lighted board and showed me where the arrow had pierced my pectoral muscle and my chest plate and entered my heart on a slightly downward slope. He did not seem to think it serious. Quite the opposite. My arrow was lodged in the right ventricle. From what I've gathered, if you have to

sustain a traumatic penetrating chest wound, that's the place to get it. The great vessels remained intact; there were no rib fractures. My arrow is what is referred to as non-invasive. My heart accepted this foreign object almost immediately. The tissue of my heart pushed up against the arrow and grew around it, frayed vessels touched and reconnected, blood flowed, muscles closed around the submerged shaft like a soft-palmed fist and held it. There is something neat about that, I think. Something mournful and surrogate. It's ruined my life, you know, but I appreciate the sentiment.

Manual removal was something I seemed a poor candidate for. At times, if the arrow is in an ideal position and not terribly deep, the jutting proboscis of it can easily be removed with a circular saw or Cool Touch laser, leaving only the smallest of wooden nubs, which can often be passed off as tattoos or as extra nipples.

But the doctor seemed to think that I would be reinfected—i.e., shot again—even if he could manage to cut off the first arrow. And if that was true, then it seemed illogical to even try. I mean, how many extra nipples could I have?

This is a beautiful time for me to be alive, and I know that because some asshole with a degree in something told me. In the past, people like me were treated like lepers. People thought we were infectious and uneducated, that you could catch a case of us and die. Of course, very little of that is true; we are completely safe to be around, even for kids and old people, and very few individuals even lose eyes during contact with us, although that does vary depending upon height. The doctor gave me a pamphlet entitled Twelve Shocking Things About Being Shot with an Arrow, and I was thankful for this, though honestly I would have wagered there were more than twelve.

- - -

I will not lie to you; this sort of thing has happened to a lot of people in my family because, unlike car payments, we take infatuation very seriously. I had an uncle on my dad's side who was also plagued by the arrow. He used to stagger by our house every six months or so when I was a kid, and if he didn't have an arrow, he had a bottle. Sometimes, on holidays, he'd have both.

It's a very negative affliction, despite what Hallmark and American Greetings would have you believe. People see you and they don't think you're in love, they recognize that you are unlovable. What I have is decidedly less valuable than, say, Gonorrhea, because at least

"Gonorrhea" sounds funny. Nobody wants to be in love; I've come to terms with that. Everyone always assumes that they want to be in love, but it's a real damn drag when it happens for real, like being a homeowner.

I will say this, though—because I've made my peace with the thing to some great false extent—it is a beautiful arrow. The shaft is aluminum wrapped in carbon—very light and clean—with beautiful hand-tied wild-turkey fletching. The head, though barely glimpsed even in X-ray, is believed to be a brass bullet point, which is rare. It was built to last, like the doctor said. It's a lovely, functional arrow, you know, and it's not going anywhere.

- - -

I'm in an arrow support group that meets every Tuesday night at the Y. Our group, if I may, is pretty meek, four girls and five boys, and all about my age, in all the muted colors of your basic "It's a Small World" ride. We're led by a man named Brian with kind eyes and a backwards baseball cap who makes us sit in a circle on the floor and instructs us to live our best lives and encourages us to talk about our pain.

He asks me, "What do you remember?"

"About what?" I say. I am that kid in Arrow Class. I sit back like I'm waiting for a bus and laugh at poetry in a way that makes me feared and respected by substitute instructors everywhere.

"About the arrow becoming lodged in your body."

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"I hit the Nyquil pretty hard," I say.

Then the girl next to me stands up and performs an interpretive dance about her arrow and the rest of us just have to sit there and take it.

- - -

I have consulted the devil, sure. I don't generally run in those circles, but I was in a particularly bleak spot—what with the arrow and all—and let's just say that I knew a guy who knew a guy.

The devil showed up at my place one evening—it was the day Barry White died, I remember—looking exactly like this freak named Rory Epstein I used to date when I was nineteen. Not a wise choice on my part, but that occurred during the nineties, a pointless, garish decade in which nothing of value happened and a young Arsenio Hall

taught us the great moral lessons of the day, such as that white people are lame and women are gold diggers with big asses.

"What are you doing here?!" I said.

"This isn't what you think," said the devil.

He looked like Rory Epstein, but he was wearing a cashmere-blend trench and a plum-colored three-piece suit that made him look like one of those personal-injury lawyers who advertise during the soaps and the daytime judge shows. I'd never seen Rory Epstein in a suit, not even during the varied court cases against him, to which he generally wore pajama pants and T-shirts from the Lillian Vernon Catalogue imprinted with things like "Shut Up, Bitch!" or "Who Farted?"

The Devil shook my hand, and he didn't have paws or hooves, just plain skinny white-guy hands, with big crazy joints and hair on the backs and knuckles. He said he'd tried to take the form of someone I trusted and was comfortable with, and I said, "Swing and a miss," and he laughed. He laughed, and because he was Rory Epstein, he had jacked-up teeth and the pink, overwhelming gums of a baleen whale. I felt no doom in the man's presence.

The Devil took off his fine cashmere trench and asked if he could lay it out over the arm of my sofa and I said sure, just mind the dog hair. He said it was cool, but then later when he went to collect it and there was dog hair on it, he acted all pissy about it. I felt bad; how could I not? He had to go to his next appointment—perhaps with a luckless songwriter, perhaps with a high-powered Wall Street broker with an addiction to supermodels and smack—with dog hair all over his fine trench, and certainly such an imperfection would detract heavily from his authority.

He wanted to strike something up, because he was the Devil and it wasn't really that unreasonable. He had a thing for me to sign.

I said, "You know, look, I don't care what happens to me, but I can't hurt anyone and I can't do anything especially wicked. To make this thing happen I can't, say, spit on a nun or anything."

"What is it that you think I do?" asked the devil with such grandiose disbelief that he nearly sounded like my mother, like anyone's mother faced with dirty socks on the kitchen table, at the pinnacle of I'm-not-running-a-boarding-house-here-ness.

"I thought you would know," I said. "I thought you would know the outcome in advance."

"If I'd known, would I have come here at all?" asked the devil, and now he was angry. I saw a flash of something in his eyes that

temporarily overrode the bruised, runny misery of Rory Epstein, something petulant and sneering and male. I clutched the flesh around my arrow and staggered back, my palms and feet tingling. It felt as though someone had secured a foot against my chest, grabbed hold of the arrow with both hands, and pulled once hard. The arrow went forward and the rest of me went back, as though my heart was trying to spit it out. There was a moment, not even that really, when I felt a slip, a release, and I felt the arrow begin to ferret its way out, no longer violent, punishing, or malevolent but, in retreat, careful and slick as a tongue. My fingers came away from my arrow hennaed with blood. Then the muscle caught around the arrow like a fist and held, and it felt like a throat clearing and for a second I was rocked back on my heels, body swaying toward the floor; the arrow was the only thing holding me upright, lodged fast in my heart like a tether. My heart cleared its throat again—harder this time—and the arrow made up whatever distance it had lost and added a centimeter or two for good measure. My heart stopped—I felt it stop—then it readjusted to the arrow and pressed back into it almost apologetically, as though it and the arrow had fought and were making up—all forgiven, all forgotten—and began to beat again.

I bit down so hard that my front tooth snapped on the diagonal and a shard of it flew from my mouth and struck the devil squarely in the lower lip, where it teetered for a moment before slipping down his neck to his collar. The devil collected the tooth between his thumb and forefinger and examined it. He slid it into his back pocket like a dime. He cupped the side of my face in his hand and eased my lower lip down with his thumb, peering into my mouth. Then he touched my arrow too, cautiously, as though what I had might be catching.

"Well," he said.

"I thought you knew," I said, my breath whistling past my ruined tooth. It sounded weary and bereft, like the axle of a wheelchair, the bent, creaking wheel of a shopping cart. "I thought you knew everything."

"I'm not Santa Claus, dear," he said.

Those were the devil's parting words for me, seconds before he collected his hair-peppered coat and wandered out into the fine July evening—the air still flush with heat and ash and freshly-mowed lawn—with half of my tooth wedged into his pocket: "I'm not Santa Claus." That, and he called me "dear."

- - -

You know what's coming up? Arrow Camp. There is a brochure. The cover shows a group of white people with arrows in their hearts wearing softball uniforms and giving each other high fives. I study the photos very carefully. The people look happy, but uncomfortably so, distantly so, like they all just won Cadillacs but none of them know how to drive.

This camp, it's a place in Southern Oregon where people like me can be together and ride horses and go swimming and enjoy life and live music. It's a nice idea, but they get really terrible celebrity endorsements. Like once they had a guy who'd guest-starred on M*A*S*H, but nobody recognized him because he'd spent the entire episode he was in completely swathed in bandages; once they had the band Nelson. Patrick Duffy was supposed to be there once, but then he pissed off to film an infomercial about erectile dysfunction.

"There will be so much learning and so many fun activities!" says Brian.

I raise my hand, the palm shimmying atop the wrist like a belly.

"Archery?!" I ask.

Brian ignores me.

"Archery?!" I ask.

"I can't help you if you don't want to be helped," says Brian.

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One week, after group, a small girl called Matilda hands me a slip of paper, and on this slip of paper is a phone number. "It's for when there's nothing else," says Matilda, and I nod, because there is nothing else, and reach for my phone.

It is a doctor's office. He doesn't have a receptionist. He answers the phone, "Kathleen?!"

I tell him who I am and what is wrong with me. I tell him that there is nothing else.

"Come see me," he says.

He says, "No cameras."

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The doctor's name is Carrion. His office is downtown, somewhere between Friendly's and the mortuary. The neighborhood is fairly bad. The cabbie lets me out four blocks away from the doctor's office. He will not go any further.

I arrive at the office, which is deserted but not, and knock. A voice says, "Are you a cop?" And "You have to tell me if you're a cop!"

"I am not a cop," I say, and the door opens.

He is tall and very thin. There is no arrow in his chest, but a strip of white bandage runs down his torso like a sash, spotted with red. He makes me sign a thing. He says, "Look, you have to sign a thing."

He lays me down on a table, which is not lined with paper—and there is no gown with a snowflake print.

"Does this involve lasers?" I ask.

"You'll be pretty doped up," he says.

"Is that the medical term?"

Carrion pulls my arm out straight and pushes a needle into it.

I ask, "What will it be like after?"

And Carrion says, "You won't care."

I blink and he says, "You won't care," again, and I believe him. I won't care and I won't care that I don't care, so what's the use in worrying about it. It's pointless. It's like thinking about yourself in your grave after you die and wondering whether or not you'll be cold.

"Try to relax," says the doctor. The phone rings and he answers it, "Kathleen?!" There are half-moons of something greenish-gray beneath his fingernails.

I try to relax. There is color—kaleidoscope-diamond reds like a movie-theater carpet—then no color. Vaguely, I hear the muted flick of a lighter.

"Oh, Jesus," says the doctor, "a bleeder."

A bleeder, I think. I think about how in my next life I will be a guy in a bathrobe who sits in a room of television blue and never leaves, never speaks, and how I will know for sure things that other people don't want to know—like how it's a lie, every breath of it, and how I will never marry, and how happy I will be. Maybe, I think, I will be an otter.

Carrion is above me, leaning down, cigarette inches from my face, saying, "Wake up, wake up…."

But his face changes and his voice changes and there is this light, warm as splayed hands, against my face and all at once I am so tired, so tired.

Wake up, says the first voice. The second voice says my name.

And the thing of it is this: I only have the strength to answer one of them.

Drive Thru

Kenneth Darling

Not yet dawn. Approaching jetliners bisect the twin iron bridge struts. Maybe one hundred feet above. Or two. Life-size and loud. The fishermen standing on either side are unfazed. They catch nothing but heavy-metal exhaust. Iron. Lead. Cadmium. Settled onto their shoulders like electric talc. Styrofoam coffee cups at their feet. Cigarettes.

The donut shop is pink and orange. Spit of land zoned for nothing ever again. Salt marsh preserve beyond the parking lot. Filthy harbor across the street. Logan Airport right there. All around, airliner shadows seep like spilled ink. We queue for coffee.

Ahead, a woman screams into the menuboard mic. Compensation for sudden jet turbines. Her order is lost to decibels. The reply is lost. She tries again. Louder. Blueberry muffin. Skim latte. She repeats the order.

I ask for two coffees, pull forward. The window slides open; a kid reaches through. His arm is mottled with something. Maple glaze or ketchup. He asks for three eighty-five. We paid thirty cents less yesterday. I just give the money. He passes the coffee and leers into the car. I see this all the time. He wants to know—what's it like to fuck her?

The sun breaks, throwing blades of light. Bait buckets are made molten. Bridge rust glints as though on fire. Airplane bellies flash over a white phosphor sea. I squint through the windshield glare. She takes my hand.

An airplane banks hard above. I imagine passengers startle and shield their eyes. Press to the windows. Yearn for the earth.

Hello Goodbye

Lavie Tidhar

Paul is dead now.

I miss him, miss him, miss him.

Baptised: the wine fumes go up his nose and make him sniff, then giggle. Baptised: the dark red liquid is a pool in the desert, a wide circular lake dug in Sisyphian sand, under the banner of two red moons, two lascivious rubies.

Baptised by the Baptist, he says and giggles again, and stares up at the moons and takes a deep breath. He lies flat on his back, holding in air, and his body becomes a dirigible floating on water; he is a Phoenician sailing ship, going to Ur, a merchant of wine and souls.

Baptised by the Baptist, he says. Isn't that right, John?

Yochanan doesn't answer; his hands, his head, his erection are buried underwater, and he swims towards him with an intensity that doesn't befit a hermit.

Play us a tune, he says.

The dark presence underwater unbalances him, pulls down his trousers; a calloused thumb rubs at his Johnny. He feels himself harden.

A good hymn... he whispers. An unseen mouth closes on him below, a man's lips, and he wants them, wants him, with an urgency that makes him breathe harder and tread water.

A good hymn for a baptism.

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You need four to form a band of brothers, the dragon says. There were four brothers in the Hebrew Haggadah, it says, shaking its great golden head above the man lying down on the rocks below. The Wise, the Innocent, The Very Bad, and One Who Asked No Questions.

Three men in a boat, the man below says. Four, if you count the dog. What's your point?

Jerzy, the dragon says, and it shakes that great head until golden scales fall and the man below jumps and curses him. You are not the second, and you are not the last. Are you wise, or very bad?

Jerzy cocks his head and looks up at the dragon, his hands on his hips (in an oddly feminine gesture, the dragon thinks) and a secret smile at the corners of his mouth, which is wide and sensual (the dragon thinks, with a desire that sometimes overwhelms it).

I can be, the man says. He looks up into the dragon's eyes, spearing him with a look. I can be if you want me to.

The walrus is Paul.

In the pool of dead blood baptist and baptised conjoin. In the pool of red mud the walruses sing. Richie Rich, show me your rings. Richie Rich, come take a swim.

The weremaids puddle heavily on the shore. They wear heavy braids and piddle on the floor. Richie Rich, beat us a beat. Richie boy, give us a treat.

The man stands on the shore and watches the lovers in the deep, dark waters. He ignores the pleadings of the maidens. He is adding numbers somewhere in his head, then speaking them aloud. His voice is clear and carries across in the night air. One, two, three.... He seems lost then, as if trying to remember a secret, long forgotten.

Richie boy, drum us a beat.

He turns and flashes a grin at them like an ID. Pretty girls blue, he says, show us yer tits.

They are offended, and puddle away. He turns back, watches the two in the lake, adding sums. One plus one makes two. Two plus one makes three.

He thinks, I miss him.

This is the house of Paul.

The man shouts exhalation into the rush of oncoming air, gripping the mane of the dragon in big, capable hands. His fingers dig between the scales, rub the dragon's soft spot, sending a shiver of flame into the clouds.

Are you sure this is safe? he asks.

The dragon rushes forward with a beating of giant wings. Jerzy crouches lower against the winds. His body is warm against the beast's, and the dragon falters, and another hot flame licks the sky.

The dragon says, Men are sly.

Just get us there, the man says. Can you see it?

Can you see it? The dragon looks down at the desert. Its

eyes are blood-stained rubies, the moons reflecting in them like a swearword.

Can you see them?

Can he see them? It glides lower, over the desert, towards the pool of dark blood congealing under the moons. He can see them. He can smell the musk of their flesh and he can taste their passion on his great forked tongue.

Men are sly, he says again, and swoops lower still, towards the waiting lake.

Paul's dead, man. Miss him, miss him, miss him.

He comes underwater, unable to breathe, an asphyxiated orgasm that sends his body into convulsions, into fabulations, that sends him floating to the surface, lying flat on his back with his pants lost somewhere in the murky water. He isn't breathing now, doesn't need to any more. One and one and one make three, assembled on the shore.

The man with the dragon turns to his companion and whispers, Does it turn you on?

The dragon roars.

One and one and one make three. He floats in the water as in a glass coffin. He would wave, but he has no breath left with which to do so.

You took your time, Georgie-Porgie, Richie says.

Jerzy shrugs. We had things to do. Cities to rescue, maidens to roast. Where have you been all these years?

Running rings, Richie says. Yochanan grunts and turns away from them, shading his eyes. They watch their friend float away upon the waters, two jets of foam trailing in his wake.

They crack open bottles of beer and get drunk, roaring at the moons. It is a wake, he is awake, and it is beautiful and ugly and sad all at once, just like a pop song.

Fabulous, the dragon says.

Aliens

Jordan E. Rosenfeld

The Handbook at Tempe's Vegan Raw Food restaurant here in Sedona requires only that we wear black bottoms and white tops. This leaves room for the broadest possible range of clothing to fit the wait staff, from the wide polyester slacks that Rosalie, our bassoon-nosed manager, wears, to my modest Amish pencil-skirts, to the wedge of electrical tape that Nadia passes off as clothing.

Across the dining room, nubile Nadia giggles and jiggles over a silver-haired type with a ponytail and lots of turquoise on his neck and wrists. I swear to God, Arizona is the only state in the U.S. where men can wear jewelry and get away with it. I've got his number just by looking at him: he believes in UFOs because he's seen those weird lights that everyone eventually sees in the desert. Or his second cousin thinks she was abducted by aliens as a kid and has the scars to prove it. Or he's here to contact the mothership in the hopes that its powers will make him a swinger with the chicks, or more powerful in his business, or bolster his Karma.

And Nadia, who is like a deadly fruit, gorgeous in a way that's painful to look at, is over there shaking tips out of him with her fancy parts. Why do women with large breasts get away with everything? What is so damn fantastic about a pair of jiggling mounds of fat dressed in skin?

I slap a plate of stuffed mushrooms with water chestnut soufflé down at table forty-two. Seated there is a thin redhead, pale in that ethereal, near sickly way, like she's been recuperating from scarlet fever in a dark room. Across from her is a chubby yet handsome Native American man, I'll guess Navajo. They look mismatched.

Redhead looks up at me, then down at her plate, then across at her stone-faced beau. He's wearing a bolo tie with a gorgeous piece of jasper cut into the shape of...well, it looks like California to me. Maybe that's just because I'm homesick. She sticks her finger into the soufflé and I can tell she's seeing the dubious beige pudding not from the point of view of customer-beguiled-by-presentation, what with the fancy red cabbage and kale garnish, but as suspicious-meat-eater-being-coerced-into-eating-here. I feel for her.

"It's good," says Bolo-Beau, then digs into his buckwheat-noodle jicama-papaya bowl with an exaggerated enthusiasm,

opalescent noodles disappearing wetly between his fat lips.

Redhead unwinds a soft green pashmina scarf from around her neck. "What's inside these mushrooms?" she asks Bolo-Beau. He must have bribed her to get her to eat here.

I glance at Nadia across the floor; her massive bun slowly unraveling, giving her the look of a Slavic warrior-princess. She is leaning down over a table in section four, which is where all the good tips come from—even if you don't have enormous breasts—because of the panoramic windows; the dramatic southwestern light works its magic on the desert and the patrons. Right now, a rosy sunset dusts the mesas. Gradient shades of pink and peach halo Nadia's head, which is just her luck, as these are her colors and, in their glow, she could be the next Miss America, reaching out for her crown. Her mascara is a tiny bit smudged below her eyelids, an effect that only accentuates her green eyes, even from across the room. I can see the very bottom half-moons of her ass where it peeks out from under the Band-Aid skirt.

Rosalie doesn't reprimand Nadia for slutty dress habits. Her flesh revealed keeps the customers happy, and she was raised on a hippie commune in Siberia, so not only does she have an exotic accent, she "gets" the food concept and can encourage people—like Miss Sneering Redhead here—into eating food they might otherwise be too afraid—or too wise—to consume.

What is it about Nadia that makes me want to break something?

"Can I get you anything else?" I ask Redhead and her Bolo-Beau.

She smiles. "Tea?"

"We've got kombucha and chai—though it's unsweetened—plus bancha twig tea and a list of other greens." I hear the apology in my voice for these teas that sound as tasty as kinds of mold.

She winces and shakes her head. "Just water, then."

"Do you want water with ginger added?" I offer.

She sneers; Bolo-Beau sighs. Has she failed some test of his?

"It, uh, cleanses the taste buds," I add.

"That would be great," she says. As I am about to walk off, she adds, "I'm from Ohio. We like meat with our meat, you know?"

I laugh but Bolo-Beau heaves a larger, more disappointed sigh. Nadia intercepts me on my way to get water, shoots me a smarmy smile, then grabs my shoulder and leans in, conspiratorial, like we are really best friends.

"Ugh, Ameeelia, anudder freak who vants show me his scars of UFO," she says, referring to the turquoise-encrusted fellow.

I laugh inwardly.

"Vat you are doink avter vork?" she asks.

"My laundry. Then cracking open a nice new bottle of white Zin that's been chilling in my fridge and getting my tired ass in bed."

Nadia frowns, as if she expected just such a spinster's life from me.

"Vis me, you come. No say no."

Nadia, while friendly, has never asked me to join her in any reindeer games. But damned if I am not curious to see how the other half lives. We're both single, but in Nadia's world, 'single' means something different from my empty bedroom for months on end and late nights watching old seasons of canceled shows on DVD, like The X-Files. Nadia is also a self-proclaimed artist, though I have never seen the art she makes. I have seen photos she's brought in of herself as another artist's subject, naked except for body paint in wild renderings of famous portraits across her body. There's Starry Night, with her breasts two 3-D versions of Van Gogh's signature swirling clouds, Cezanne's fruit—easy to imagine what part of her came in handy—but my favorite is Nadia as Mona Lisa, that famous aloof smile deftly recreated across the yawning vista of her flat stomach.

Nadia and I have also slept with a man in common, which I only know because he also slept with another of Tempe's waitresses, poor hyperthyroid Annie who couldn't gain weight and who took the job because she hoped it would help her kick her smoking and occasional cocaine habits. Annie told me about the man we shared in common, because after me he moved on to her, knocked her up, and took off after Nadia while Annie was out of commission from the abortion.

I find it odd that he slept with all three of us, different as we are. Perhaps we were his muses, or maybe his furies. Less odd that we all three slept with him, despite the fact that his name was Herman and he was all brain and long fingers. He had beautiful brown eyes and a beguiling way with words. I'm tall for a woman, six feet, small of breast and big of foot and, well, I have a hair problem. Not that you'd know it; I pay a pretty penny to have my follicles brutally slathered in steeping hot wax and the marauder hairs ripped free.

At any rate, I think Nadia saw the sharing of one man as some kind of blood-sisterhood through carnal means. It grosses me out

just to think of it, but at least I was the first. Poor Annie was never the same. She got nowhere near kicking her habits, and last we heard, she'd had some kind of psychotic break, brandishing enema bags in the aisle of a Rite-Aid in Phoenix and threatening to beat some poor old man with them.

"Yoo-hoo, Ameeelia." Nadia waves her hand in front of my face.

"Where do you want to go?" I ask. I can feel the eyes of the thirsty redhead on my neck. "I've gotta get some water for that table over there."

"Oh, he is disgustink, how you say, peer-veert," she says, referring to Bolo-Beau. I want to tell her that she ought not to encourage him with the twine she's passing off as a skirt.

"I don't know about pervert. Food Nazi, maybe. I don't think she wants to eat what he ordered for her," I say. "Not that I blame her."

Nadia smiles. "But zees food ees good for you."

"Raw food gives me gas," I say.

"Only in beginnink. Your body, it gets used to zis. So, you are comink tonight vis me, please? I have good time in mind; I am friendly wit so little of women." Nadia flicks her hair away from her face like a camera flash might go off any second.

"I'll think about it," I say, and retrieve the tall pitcher of ginger-water and a fresh glass. I am suddenly very thirsty, looking at that water. When I return to the redhead's table, her beau is gone.

"He's testing you by bringing you here, isn't he?" I ask, feeling bold because we seem to share the same opinion of the food.

"Trying to change me into the kind of woman he can love, I guess." She laughs.

"Hmmm. And stuffed mushrooms are the path to his heart?"

She drums unlacquered, obviously-chewed fingernails on the table, but considers my question rhetorical.

"God, I wish I had a cigarette right now," she says.

There is a pack of Marlboro Reds in my purse. I only smoke one a day, but that one is crucial, building up a thin wall of smog inside my head and heart, keeping the past at bay.

"That co-worker of yours, she's—"

"A little bit trashy?" I offer.

"I was going to say Ukrainian," Redhead laughs.

"Oh, no, she's Russian."

"Unusual accent of hers. I'm Ceal, by the way."

"Short for Celia?"

She shakes her head. "Like the sea mammal. My parents were being creative, I guess."

She lifts a mushroom cap that is as large as her palm and holds it up to the light. The sunset is doing an audacious routine outside, turning from pink to a shocking shade like an Orange Julius.

"What's it stuffed with?" she asks.

"Um, well, it's a purée made from root vegetables and water chestnuts."

She grimaces. "Yum."

"Apparently it's very good for you," I say. My legs feel very tired just now and I want to take the empty seat opposite her.

"He's not my boyfriend," she says, pointing to the empty space where Bolo-Beau sat slurping noodles moments before.

"Oh?"

Nadia bounces past us and whispers, "Tonight!"

"He's my lover," Ceal says, looking wistful, nostalgic, like he has already left her for another woman/a gay boyfriend/the priesthood.

"Sedona sees a lot of that," I tell her.

"I've never had a successful affair. I don't know why I keep at it."

Bolo-Beau is striding back from wherever it was he went.

"I've got a pack of cigarettes in my purse," I whisper hurriedly. "I take a break in fifteen if you want to join me out back."

Delight flickers through her clear green eyes and suddenly I feel brave, reckless. I like her already. There is another person in this city of spiritual healers and chakra cleansers who eats red meat and craves cigarettes. There is another woman in a messy love affair uncertain of what she is doing.

She makes me homesick. Granted, almost everything makes me homesick. Even though home was bad for me according to my therapist, and home was heartbreaking because of my adopted brother Neil, and home was painful due to my mother's refusal to speak to me. I came here to heal, and I'm so fucking healed I'm a thick, hard, impenetrable scab.

I watch nimble Nadia work her sections like a ballerina's understudy, wishing I could shave inches off my height and add them to my bust. Being tall but not inclined toward modeling, basketball, or warehouse-stocking as modes of employment offers little satisfaction in such height. In movie theaters, people move away when I sit down. Men don't dare to ask me out, and when your mother

and father are both under five foot three, it's easy to believe you don't really belong to them either.

At seven forty-five, I pull my purse out of my employee cubby and pass conspicuously by Ceal's table with a raised eyebrow. She says something to Bolo-Beau that I can't hear and, after I've already lit my cigarette in the temperate evening, she joins me near the dumpster.

"God, how do you work here?" she asks.

I produce a cigarette before she has to ask for one and light it for her.

"I don't eat the food."

Ceal tosses her coppery hair and, though it should strike me as odd that we two strangers are smoking like old friends, I don't mind. If I had to choose between a night out with Nadia and a night standing around with Ceal doing not much more than this, I'd choose the latter.

"So do you live in Sedona?" I ask.

"Now I do. We'll see how long. Michael is challenging, but love is like that."

I nod, trying to come up with a savvy response that doesn't give away my own unfortunate history. I can just about feel Neil's gaze on my neck, as if he's right there behind us. That brooding force of his when morals got in the way of things. I don't want to miss him, but I do.

"And you?" Ceal asks, letting her cigarette burn down, awfully careless for someone who claimed to crave one.

I feel the unusual urge for a second one.

"California. Not really that far."

Might as well be on the other side of the world.

"Ahhhh." She nods like she has just taken a psychic backseat inside my head and is reading the contents of my life. How nice, to be instantly known, to never have to explain oneself or beg for understanding.

"Can I ask you something?" Ceal says, stubbing out the half-smoked cigarette under her red snakeskin boot.

I nod and gaze regretfully at the dead butt.

"Do you think I'm a terrible person for sleeping with a married man?"

Smoke catches in my lungs, or maybe just doubt, and I find myself deep in a coughing fit. Ceal pats my back with firm, splay-fingered repetitions.

"I guess that's a yes," she says when I can stand up and breathe again.

"No, no!" I say. "I don't...I'm no one to ask about morals. And I don't even know you."

Her green eyes ask a question I don't want to answer, but something about her, something about how much like me she seems, makes me willing to.

But maybe the aliens have their own agenda with me, or maybe the vortex everyone is always talking about has taken hold of the situation, because Nadia peeks her head around the corner before I can reveal a single detail of my history.

"Psssst, Amelia! Rosalie, she looks for you."

Ceal seems horrified at being found back here, though all signs of her cigarette are crushed into the red dirt at our feet. She actually sneers at Nadia, and for a moment it feels like Ceal is just a projection of my mind created to say and do things I cannot. She smiles, apologetic, and runs off without another word.

Nadia's expression is grim, like a child stumbling on her best friend trading secrets with another girl. "You know zat woman?" she asks.

Though it isn't in my nature to lie when I don't have to, I do anyway. "Yeah, from California."

Nadia blinks.

"What does Rosalie want with me?"

"Beats me," Nadia says, clearly proud of this little piece of slang she has mastered.

I tuck my cigs away in my purse and slouch back inside, longing for the smell of onions grilling, chicken roasting, things smoked and burnt and animal.

Rosalie is at the computer, sweating. I have often thought that what with her preference for synthetic fabrics and fast food, if she weren't the owner's niece, she would never be allowed to run this place.

"What is it?" I ask her, approaching the computer. Rosalie clicks somebody's tab up and prints it without looking at me once.

"Yeah, look, I'm sorry to do this to you like this, but I'm gonna have to let you go."

I search for the crack of that big yellow-toothed smile of hers, a loud "Just shitting you!" to come flying from her mouth. She has been known to play practical jokes.

"Excuse me?" I say. "My shift isn't even over until ten."

"We're slow tonight; you can go home early."

I scan the restaurant for some sign that might illuminate this moment. Redhead and Bolo-Beau are gone and I suffer a flash of anxiety that something I said to her led to this.

"Why?"

"Well, to be perfectly honest, your smoking habit is really not in line with the concept of this restaurant."

I want to smack Rosalie's glistening pock-marked cheek, a battlefield where acne has proved victorious. I want to grab her by the hair and toss her to the ground, start a catfight with claws out and lots of public yelling.

"That's not in the Handbook," I say. "It's perfectly legal to smoke outside." And what about your artery-clogging cheeseburger habit, you disgusting troll? "That's it? My smoking is getting me fired?"

"Yeah. That and I don't like you very much."

I blink, then stroke my earlobe as if to tune in to the station that delivered Rosalie's words.

"I don't know if you're aware that I can take this to court. Firing someone because you don't like them is illegal!"

Rosalie scratches her nose, actively, and then sniffs. "Yeah, well, you always take extra-long breaks—which you've been warned about—longer than the allotted fifteen minutes. And besides, you have no proof of shit."

I gawk at Rosalie, trying to understand this sudden cruelty. She's never even said a mean word to me. Granted, she hasn't exactly been friendly either.

I glance over at Nadia, who is looking at me, and it hits me, she knows. Though I want to spend time with her about as much as I want to gorge on shiitake mushroom pudding, now I have to go out with Nadia tonight. To pump her for information.

"Well fuck you very much," I say, taking off my apron. Throughout this whole conversation, Rosalie hasn't looked at me once.

I walk to the center of the dining room and announce, "Well, why would I want to work in a place with cockroaches running around? And what's the point of lying to customers, huh? I mean, lard is animal fat, Rosalie, no matter how you swing it."

For the first time, the whole restaurant has ceased eating to pay attention to me, including UFO Man. And Nadia.

"See you tonight, Nadia. My place, ten-thirty!" I say and shoot out of there, feeling tears of injustice just waiting to break on through.

Out the door, out into the last minutes of daylight. I turn toward the horizon and catch sight of something I have always heard of but never seen: that mysterious flash of green at the finale of a sunset that seems to signify a transition. Bitter tears streak my foundation as I walk home to my apartment.

Once home, I shower and change into jeans, a soft T-shirt, and a cardigan. As I tuck my wallet into my pocket, I realize that I left all my tips in the apron I so cavalierly dropped on my departure from Tempe's. I can kiss that money goodbye.

It is still only nine o'clock and I have to wait for Nadia for another hour. I'm regretting my decision to go out with her more as every minute passes. I could be out when she comes by. Or I could take a few of the Vicodin I have left over from ankle surgery and be in a deep, imperturbable stupor.

Instead I slip in a disc of The X-Files, comforted by insecure, fact-seeking Scully, whose red hair reminds me of Ceal. Rather than try and figure out why a stranger would ask me such a personal question about her infidelity, I remind myself that a waitress is in a position to be projected upon at all times. She becomes whoever the client wants her to become. Nadia could practically run a service getting guys off just by serving them food in her skimpy arrangements.

So then, why is it that a waitress cannot be what it is that she wants to be? Why is it that I could not be the upstanding daughter that Dick and Virginia Batz thought I was? I can hear my mother's voice drilling into a high whine, the kind that signifies horror and lack of understanding. "How...could...you?"

And me, bent forward like a penitent sinner begging forgiveness, my knees wet with tears where my face and skirt had momentarily been joined.

Why did I come to Sedona?

On my television screen, Agents Mulder and Scully are haggling out the details of an impossible crime. Mulder thinks it's aliens again; Scully is demanding the truth of the situation, listing out rational courses of action—though she seems to know it's hopeless with Mulder, a determined believer. Their onscreen sexual tension is palpable, and almost as forbidden as my own love.

Two episodes later, Nadia is knocking at my door, or so I hope.

I peek through the tiny porthole in my door but see no one, and I am in no mood for practical jokers or ghosts. I open the door to find Nadia kneeling, tying the laces of a pair of definitively

un-sexy tennis shoes. She's wearing khakis and a shapeless blue shirt. Her coat of slick work makeup is gone and she hasn't applied any party-girl makeup. Her hair is pulled back in a ponytail. Her complete under-transformation is as shocking as if she'd shown up naked, painted like a Van Gogh again. While she could never be completely unattractive, in the dim light of my hallway, a man wouldn't look twice at this Nadia.

"Vell," she says, in that beguiling, cute accent. "You've had rough night."

"Yes," I say. Now that she is not doing something worthy of derision, and not in her usual mode, I feel shy, like we are on a blind date.

"You are not too tired?" she asks.

"I'm exhausted, but what the hell? I might as well have some fun before the new job search."

Nadia glances around my apartment as if looking for something specific. Then she takes my arm. "Let's go," she says in a very convincing American accent.

"Oh, cute, can you do other accents too?"

She sighs as we walk to her car, a maroon Honda. She lets me in and then gets in herself.

"Yes, but I prefer the Russian one." Again, she says this with a very accurate American accent.

"You mean the American one?"

She laughs and then adopts a hysterical California valley-girl accent. "Like, Amelia, I totally would've thought you'd have seen through this by now."

I stare at her. Flagship Awareness docks in my brain.

"You're not Russian?"

"Well, I am by blood."

I shake my head as Nadia begins to drive. Naturally, I want to ask, "Why the subterfuge?" But I've got a feeling the truth is just going to come oozing out of the cracks any minute, no matter what I do. It's the feeling you get right as you realize that everything is about to be revealed, the curtain pulled rudely from before the wizard's chamber, the audience about to gasp with horror and delight—a quivery sense of wanting it all to stop and wanting it all to move faster at the same time. Just like I felt before I left home.

I can still see my mother twisting a napkin into a tight spiral over the dinner table, glancing nervously at my father and at Neil and saying, "You're not ashamed of your family, are you? I mean, we wouldn't embarrass you in front of your young man."

Neil casting his eyes downward. Oh, how I wanted to kiss the crown of his head just then.

My father, reaching for the salad bowl, pausing, looking up at me with that cruel squint at the corners of his eyes. "You're not a lesbian, are you?"

Who would have foreseen that Neil, in his urge to defend me, would have given us away? "Stop badgering her. She's not a lesbian. She doesn't bring home any guys because she's...with me."

My unspoken thought, But it doesn't stop you from bringing home girls!

My mother laughing first, because of how little sense his statement made. My father choking on a carrot.

"What do you mean, she's with you?" he demanded.

And Neil, oh Neil. I felt the world shift underneath me then, the table and the food and our parents crumbling into fragments.

I wanted to believe he did it out of love, but I am beginning to think, with time and distance as powerful lenses, that it was the only way he knew how to stop: by turning them against me.

"But he's your.... You're not serious.... Ohhhhhh." My poor mother.

"We're adopted! Not the same blood!" I remember crying, throwing my napkin up in the air like I had just graduated from somewhere. My grandmother's old green light fixture over the table swung as if someone had pushed it out of their way.

"You're awfully silent," Nadia says. "I didn't mean to shock you."

I turn and look at her soft skin and thin, pretty neck. I can't get used to this modest, American Nadia.

"First, where are we going, and second, why are you being so secretive?"

"To my studio. I don't think of it as secretive, more like discriminating."

"Art studio?"

She nods.

"You knew I was being fired, didn't you?"

Nadia turns left down a road lined with scraggly junipers and we park. I don't see any studio.

"I knew. Rosalie's just a bitch."

We get out of the car and I suck in that tangy southwestern air that smells like spit on a metal pole.

"I don't see any studio."

"We have to walk a little way. Not far. I have a flashlight."

We begin to trek out over a rocky hillside and I am surprised by the emotions passing through me like sonic vibrations, making my torso clench and shiver, tears dance behind my eyes. I have no friends here. I have no lover. I have no family.

"Did she tell you why she fired me? Did she tell you she 'just didn't like me'?"

Nadia laughs, though it doesn't seem to be at me.

"She said it was cutbacks, that the restaurant is losing business. Oh, here—" Nadia pulls an envelope out of her pocket. It's full of cash.

"My tips?"

"I rescued them for you."

I tuck the envelope into my back pocket, and then I trip over something I can't see, a small pothole or a rock. Nadia reaches for my hand and pulls me up. Before long, we are at a small gardener's shack, or so it appears in the outline of her flashlight.

She digs a key out from a hiding place I can't make out, unlocks the door, and ushers me into what is a fairly bare room. No canvases are strung on the walls, nor any sculpture or collage. There is one bouquet of dried roses on a small table and four wardrobes with mirrors on their doors and a Chinese screen depicting rather lewd, though beautifully drawn, characters. I have a sudden urge to run, Nadia transforming into some crazy serial killer in my mind.

"Um, there's no art," I say, my voice shaking.

She nods, like she has only just discovered this fact. I wonder for a moment if she might have some kind of multiple personality disorder.

"Watch." She opens a wardrobe and pulls out a handful of clothing, then disappears behind the screen. I shiver, though it isn't really cold.

She is humming something that sounds like a Billy Joel song. "Just the Way You Are."

When she steps out from behind the curtain, Nadia as I recognize her is completely gone. I see a teenage girl, not more than perhaps sixteen, hair in side pigtails, short Catholic-schoolgirl-style skirt, white T-shirt. It's not really the clothes, though; it's some attitude, some persona she's embodying.

"Excuse me," she says. "Do you know what time the bus gets here? I'm s'posed ta meet my mom in an hour at the mall."

Nadia then snaps her posture up into adult Nadia, though in her getup the effect is a bit jarring. "Performance art on a real-life scale," she says.

"You're an actress?"

She extends her arm in a flourish, like a dancer.

"Nay, arteest, not actress," she says in her Russian accent, which, with reality on my side, I realize is a little off, as Ceal must have noticed.

"For what? I mean, I don't get it."

Nadia doesn't answer. She opens another wardrobe and points to a tree of wigs.

"Put one on," she says.

I shake my head. This all feels so weird, so overwhelmingly bizarre.

"Try it. I don't have lice."

I look over the assorted fake scalps: a shiny red bob, a curly mane, a Cher-like trail of long black hair. I choose that one, so different from my own frizzy blonde hair.

I put it on and Nadia adjusts it for me, tucking my hair in properly until it does actually seem as if this hair could have grown from my head. She sorts through other wardrobes until she settles on a dusky purple prom-type gown with spaghetti straps and a tight bodice. She hands it to me and, though this whole scenario is strange, there is something I like about permission to transform into someone else.

I move behind the screen and slip off my jeans and T-shirt, kick out of my tennies. The material of the dress is cold and smooth and I slide into it with ease. Despite the fact that it is made for a woman with bigger breasts than mine, when I come out and peek in the mirror, I like what I see.

Nadia smiles.

"Why do you keep all this out here away from civilization?"

She strikes that teenage pose again. "Don't want to offer lots of explanations to prying boyfriends," she says.

And I thought I had secrets.

"Nice, isn't she?" Nadia points to my reflection in the mirror.

"Weird, maybe."

"Is this some kind of sexual fetish?" I ask, afraid that I'm about to find myself in a compromising situation.

She laughs.

"No. I just believe the only way you get to know yourself is by knowing who you aren't, and who you are capable of being."

"So it's a spiritual thing?"

"If you want," she says.

I stroke my satiny sides and wonder what Neil would think if he could see me now. And wonder what I want this to be...me to be.

"Where are you from originally?" I ask. Some part of me wants a magical answer. That she's another of the strange and beautiful mysteries of the desert, that she's a dryad emerged from cactus, that I am in a dream and she is my guide.

She walks across the room and pulls the dead flowers from the vase, then opens the door and tosses them out into the night.

"Cincinnati," she says.

The woman in my body in the mirror looks a bit like a princess. Maybe a princess-in-training.

"What do you think? You can't tell me it doesn't feel good to be someone else for a moment?" she asks.

"I'm in love with someone I shouldn't be." I say this more to the girl in the reflection than to Nadia. I want someone to explain it to me, even though I can isolate out the parts for myself. Knowing all my life that we shared no blood, I never saw Neil as a part of the family, as my brother in the official sense of kin. I saw him as mine. As made for me.

Nadia takes out her pigtails. "Says who? His wife? His attorney?" It sounds as if the question comes from experience.

"Our parents."

I realize I have never admitted this to anyone. I wait for her to turn on me, call me disgusting, look horrified at me like my mother did. She stares at me for a moment, and then it is as if I never said a thing. She turns and vamps for the mirror again.

"Now try this one." She passes me a different wig.

I slide the short red A-line bob onto my scalp. It feels dense and slick, like silicone. "Can I borrow this one?" I ask her.

She nods her approval.

"He was adopted," I say. "We're not related by blood."

Nadia smiles and shrugs. The night feels surreal, like I will wake up with a terrible hangover and find out that I finished that bottle of wine all by myself.

"I made out with my actual brother once," she says. "We were both high; it was gross. Is yours in California?"

"Yeah."

Headlights flash outside the shack and I freeze, imagining that we are about to be caught at something, at pretending to be people we are not.

"I think I need to see him again. Clear up some things. I've been avoiding it."

Nadia laughs. "Avoidance is the number-one reason people come to Sedona. Not for the food, that's for sure." She wrinkles her face.

"You hate the shit they serve at Tempe's as much as I do, don't you?"

Nadia smiles. "Now you're figuring me out."

I step up to the wardrobe and look for a wig that Neil would like, then settle for one that I like, a curtain of tawny ringlets beneath which I feel familiar to myself, if only for this moment.

Not in the Yellow Pages

Lesley C. Weston

I stare into strangers' apartments, especially at night when we walk the dog. I stop and steal glances while he tugs the leash, dragging the dog away from the flowers to the curb. The walls in those rooms look so perfect and white, the ceilings unblemished. I look away if there are people inside the rooms. I don't want to see the people, living their lives.

He asks, "Do you remember when you used to love me?"

"I remember," I say. The roof of my mouth and my teeth ache, like they did when I was a kid wearing braces.

I want a room with a light that spills through a curtainless window at night. I want a room no one is in, a room with smooth ceilings, and walls without paintings or photographs, bookshelves, or bric-a-brac. One apartment above the park has a red room. I wonder how it would be to stand in its center, surrounded by those womb walls. Could a person live in such a room? Two people walk in, and then one of them leaves. Someone would have to leave, yes?

"And you?" I ask. "Can you remember that far back?"

At work, I lock my office door and read the yellow pages, especially in the morning after I have the sugar-thick coffee I'm not supposed to drink. The names of hotels line up in a column, tidy and oh-so-black on the page. The names like an invitation. I memorize them, and all day the names hide in my mouth. Sometimes I whisper them under my breath.

"Oh, so, it was that long ago?" He arches his eyebrow as if to laugh.

I want to rent a hotel room with a bed, a desk, and a small, clean bathroom with a big tub. I do not want a telephone. I want a hotel room that isn't listed anywhere. I would bring a suitcase I'd never unpack. I'd bring a small shopping bag, very small, from the grocery.

"Even feeble-minded as I am, I can remember one second ago," I say, bringing the merry-go-round to a stop.

He yanks the leash, makes the dog sit, and roughly pats its head. "Good, boy," he says. He takes my hand.

One hotel on my way to work has a very, very small marquee.

It is not in the yellow pages. I wonder how it would be to take a taxi there one day, pick up a key at the desk, and hang a Do Not Disturb sign on my doorknob, to unbutton the collar of my blouse and sit on the bed or in the bathtub, melting sugar cubes on my tongue.

The Intrigue of Being Watched

Rusty Barnes

Slipping onto the jetty at midnight where our feet
slip hard on the rocks and kelp just under water
you say 'I think those people are watching us.'
I'm thinking carnal thoughts—seawater you know,
like the taste between your thighs. It's warm like
a sex flush as we walk a little deeper, trying
to reach just that point beyond which it will no
longer be safe to go, where the tide takes over.

Tomorrow morning I might wake you
with coffee or by nuzzling your tenderest
parts while I listen to you trying to snore me away
but right now it's just past soft midnight
and with wet feet we're headed slightly NE
for that slight crack in the sky over Nahant,
the big and dark-blue night where rising stars
might meet fallen angels: your soul and mine.

You. Yeah you. The one watching from the near shore.
I bet from where you stand with your leashed animal,
your strained eyes, you'd swear we were walking on water.

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The Prophet: eyes detail

Ilona Taube

really nice on drugs

Timothy Gager

there's no squeaking
no squawking
no angry
pushing or shoving
all nice and smoooooooth
like a cat's,
relaxed eyes close
to Vivaldi

Your personal ground zero [to franz wright]

Timothy Gager

there are no planes that crash
no one to call us
to where we pray
a sign of the cross
for the empty pews
of water-damaged wood
saying that the voices
are not god
and to get out
stay out
stay damaged, beaten, crusted
voiceless
as to believe
what you have left
is a huge undertaking

You see
it is only your
small plot of land
that is all
for the dedication
BUT,
it is all
that needs to be rebuilt

Moving Boxes

Timothy Gager

They sit like office furniture,
like martyrs,
white cubes,
full of contained memories.

Things are in there.
Your things, My things
those things
that have
been here before—our important things,
labeled to new and different addresses

I'd like to create something out of them
Perhaps a sturdy bench.
One where I could dedicate
something to someone,
with a shiny gold marker

these boxes
become more
than strong white cardboard,
now loaded with books
and beauty products,
document the recent failure
of our once great relationship—
like my plants,
now recently withered

they were so full of life,
when you were around

Spring Magali Cadieux

Natural History

Gini Hamilton

1.

Dead birds had a way of suddenly appearing in Sarah's path. After Parker had died, after she'd loaded most of his art into a truck bound for storage, a crow dropped out of the pear tree in her backyard. Just dropped, like something on *Laugh-In,* like when the little guy is riding his tricycle and *bam!* falls over.

Then, years later, after she had started painting again, Sarah found a yellow-breasted warbler lying on her front porch. Still warm, but lifeless. Bright yellow, but not for long. By the time she had photographed it, scanned it, drawn it, the blue and yellow feathers were becoming a single shade of light brown. She drew feathers, following the contours of muscle, and imagined its delicate skeleton. She drew feet as poetic as any dancer's. After her cataloguing, Sarah buried the songbird in her front garden, about a foot down; put a stone on the fresh dirt hoping to ward off scavengers.

They were like bookends, those birds. Margins. Boundaries. That crow was a heavy curtain that separated her from the life of thought and expression she had shared with Parker. But the little warbler's quiet arrival made a delicate opening, just enough for Sarah to see light, to feel a breeze soft as her son's sleeping breath. At night, it sang from its garden grave the softest reminder of...something Sarah couldn't quite make out yet. Something about life after death, after sorrow, after loss.

2.

The first bone Sarah bought had been a prairie-dog skull found at a flea market for five dollars. The intricate shapes and soft shadows. She'd had no idea you could buy the remains of a dead animal at a street fair from the same table where you could pick up a Road Runner juice glass or a pair of black pearl earrings.

Years later, on the southern coast of Puerto Rico, where she had gone with the French photographer for a fashion shoot, she found dog bones. She had been walking through the dunes, the

soles of her feet burning through inadequate shoes. Looking for shade among the wind-twisted small trees that grew in the gullies where sand began mixing with dirt. There, in a small oasis of brush and palm, a pile of bleached white bones. Vertebrae, jaws, teeth, the whole works in a neat little pile. She gathered them all in her long skirt and headed back to the hotel, hardly believing her luck. Talking to the hotel staff, she learned that there had been a dog blight on the island a few years before and that almost all the dogs had died. She imagined them dropping in their tracks, their fur, skin, muscle carried away by sea breezes and scavengers. Now only bones lay where their pink, thirsty tongues once wet the sand with drool and their sharp yelps once sang to the tide.

Over the next week, in the afternoons, when it was too hot to work, Sarah went off scavenging on her own. At the end of each day, she arranged her gatherings on the terrace of her room. Each square beige tile held a treasure: shell, tree root, flower, stick, or small grouping of bleached bones as white as her skin. When the photographer and models came for drinks before dinner, or when her assistant came to discuss the next day's schedule, they had to step around the items in her collection. She could have arranged them on a table or in a basket, but it pleased her to see the individual pieces in a grid, laid out like an anthropologist's findings. Arranging the artifacts was not unlike editing the photos back in the office, laying out beautiful elements, rearranging them until everything felt in the right place. On the terrace, Sarah took photos of the arrangement in the late-afternoon sun with the models' thin feet straddling pink shells. She imagined being able to organize her world on an eternal grid, purposefully and carefully claiming small bits of beauty. It was true that she related more easily to a pile of dog bones than to the people she worked with all day. To have those people interact with these bones, even peripherally, wove her a vital, however tentative, connection to the world.

Before going to sleep each night, she would call Parker to report what she had added to the collection that day. She imagined him taking notes, cataloguing her finds the way he kept track of his own possessions. The first time Sarah had visited Parker's apartment, only months before this trip, she had been thrilled by his obsessive orderliness. Every tiny thing—every spoon, every piece of paper, his paints, paper, tapes, books, his comb—everything clearly had its own place. For weeks after that one visit, Sarah had been able to recall

the placement of every single object she had seen. She could have walked back in there in the dead of night during a blackout and found a No. 3 pencil. It was a clue to what she herself needed.

When she called Parker from her island hotel and reported the placement of another dog jawbone, she told him precisely on which tile it had been placed and in relation to what other artifact. Sarah's whispered cataloguing and Parker's meditative breathing on the other end were the opposite of phone sex, designed to calm rather than excite. If that bone is there, and that shell is there, and Parker is there, then I must be here.

3.

When Sarah came across the dead frog lying in the street, flat and dry as leather in the desert, it stopped her in her tracks. She had been hiking alone through the dunes, heading back to the small house she had rented at Cape May.

Those were the early days. Sarah was still making art. She and Parker had married just months earlier at his mother's beach house in North Carolina and Sarah had had her first panicked thought that she had made a mistake. There on the porch, surrounded by her new family and looking out over the expanse of the ocean, damp from the salty air, Sarah had felt dried out. Pinned to the road she was taking. It would take many solitary excursions like this one to Cape May for Sarah to relax into her shared life with Parker. Over those first years, she would go off on her own and then return, to be surprised each time that he was still there, solid and steady, as if she had only run down to the deli for butter.

She knelt to look more closely at the frog. All four limbs intact and flailed to the four corners like a sleeping baby. How long did it take for all the fluid to dry out? A month in the sun? A few days? Discarded cardboard litter made a spatula for gently prying the frog from the asphalt. Light-headed, Sarah carried her find to the house. She was glad Parker was not there to wonder what kind of person would collect roadkill. In her studio back in the City, the frog later became part of a construction, one of several that Sarah exhibited in a group show.

Back at the house, she wrapped the frog in tissue paper and slipped it into a pocket of her suitcase. She drank glass after glass of cool water; ate plums, letting the juice drip down her chin. She took a shower, smoothed apricot lotion into her wet skin, air-dried

her white limbs as she walked through the small cottage. It was mid-afternoon, and though the sun beat down relentlessly outside, the rooms were dark and surprisingly cool. She imagined herself as a ghost, floating, light against dark, free of connection. She concentrated on being fluid. On moving fluidly and on an awareness of her bodily fluids. Blood filling her veins, rushing to muscles being used. The wetness of her eyes. Isolated drops of water still soaking into the roots of her hair. Pee building up in her bladder from all the water she had consumed.

If Parker had been with her, he would have watched her every naked move. He liked to look at her, turn her around. After a day in the sun, he needed to see whether her skin had changed color at all. It never did. Frog-belly white and just as smooth.

There had been a time when Sarah couldn't stand being observed by anyone. A time when she had been required to walk barefoot atop a hospital conference table wearing nothing but underpants. Six or eight pairs of curious medical eyes following her as she approached or retreated, her sweaty feet leaving tracks on polished mahogany. Doctors sat at the viewing table, nurses, physical therapists. Who else? Perhaps a friend of the doctor. Let me tell you what we had on the table today, she imagined the pock-skinned hood-eyed doctor telling his neighbor. You should come see sometime. The whitest girl you've ever seen. Too bad about her spine. At thirteen, she's crooked as an old man.

Whispered discussions around the table as Sarah passed, phrases floating up like needle-tipped whips. Compromised pelvis... lateral curvature...polio. Once a month for two years Sarah trod the table. In between displays, she was x-rayed, twisted, immersed in a hot-water tank with other children who were limp without their leg or back braces. During that time she started her period, had her first kiss, cut her waist-length hair to her scalp, stopped talking for three weeks, buried her rosary in a gully. Started wearing a bra, which had to be unfastened during her tabletop trek so that they could see her whole spine, as if missing the half-inch covered by elastic would alter their analysis of her progress. She had walked, then, holding the bra in front, its straps loose on her shoulders. Elbows tucked in to her ribcage, damp palms plastering the slim cotton shield to her chest. Often she closed her eyes. She had memorized the path. Three steps up the ladder they set up for her. Fourteen sweaty steps to the end of the table, turn, fourteen sweaty steps back. On the table,

Sarah held herself as straight as her crooked little spine allowed and walked slowly, as instructed, with her chin up. Once down, she ran from the room, burning with humiliation.

Years later, when she walked down city streets with Parker, when he always walked on the curb side like a Southern gentleman, when he took her arm as they crossed streets, she would imagine that he had been beside her on the hospital conference table. In that way, the memory was bearable. He would have taken her arm as she climbed the short ladder. He would walk between her and the hood-eyed doctor and, when she turned to walk back, he would cross to stay on the dangerous side, keeping her from the dirtying splash of those deep-set dark eyes. Parker would hold her elbow as she climbed back down the ladder and they would walk slowly, heads high, out the door. Perhaps he would tell her a joke and they would laugh just between themselves, leaving the scrutinizers to wonder how a girl so crooked could laugh so lightly.

By the time she'd met Parker, of course, she had strengthened her back and learned to twist herself straight, and if you didn't see how one hip rode high and one so low as to be flat, you wouldn't know how crooked she had once been. After lovemaking, Parker often traced her spine with his finger and felt it curve like a slowly undulating river. The flow of it mesmerized him, he said. It was like a gentle river of milk, as white and calming as the rest of her.

4.

The iguana was Sarah's idea. After the trip to the desert, where she'd lived for ten days with the freedom of all that space, surrounded by air, not things, remembered how it was to be as quiet as a rock, she bought a lizard and put him in a cage.

When she first brought him home, he was six inches of mostly tail. A slowly-smacking pink tongue that showed itself to be a hard-working muscle. Toes drawn by Michelangelo as an illustration of arthritis: knobby and curved.

At first he lived in a large glass fish tank with an elevated wire bottom layered with wood chips, a piece of driftwood, and his food dish and water bowl. Very young iguanas need live protein to augment their vegetarian diet. So Parker bought pinkies—newborn mice—and fed him, while Sarah locked herself in the bathroom, cleaned the tub, any distraction from the cruelty of infant devouring infant.

The iguana sat on her shoulder, or he sat on his branch while she stared at him. She drew him sometimes, but mostly she watched

him blink and eat and look back at her. She watched her iguana instead of TV. She grew reverent around him, and when anyone questioned the wisdom of raising an animal that had no fur, couldn't purr, and didn't bark, she said, It's like living with a dinosaur, don't you get it?

He grew to be almost six feet long, still mostly tail. He would sit on the windowsill sunning himself alongside her cat. He gorged himself on beans and zucchini. He farted and he blew white residue out his nose, dotting his woodchip floor. Though she cleaned his cage regularly, her apartment took on a faint sour smell that she found oddly pleasant.

When Sarah became pregnant with Sam, she gave the iguana to the Staten Island Zoo. Imagining her baby crawling on the floor with the iguana—it seemed much too dangerous. The zookeeper said hers was the healthiest male iguana he'd ever seen in captivity. Sarah swore she would never keep another wild animal, but that was before her son begged for snakes and lizards and mice.

5.

Sarah couldn't take her eyes off the hotel workers at the island resort. They reminded her of Easter Island, Aztec paintings, ancient rituals: exaggeratedly slanted foreheads, broad noses, serene and still expressions above stocky bodies. Just two days before, she and the photo crew had left a snow-drifted city to shoot summer clothes on the deserted beaches of this island off Panama.

The afternoons were too hot for work. Sarah was strolling from the hotel through a small wood of scrub trees, a back path to the beach, when she came across a group of men and a giant sea turtle. A group of five small men were hunched over the animal, which lay on the sand. In the grove, the air was alive with minute insects and with a raw kind of energy. She was excited to see the immense and beautiful creature, then horrified to understand that it was dead. One of the men waved at her to join them. She moved forward, wanting to be closer both to the creature and to these men. She was glad, for once, to be small, to have left the earlier environment of six-foot women wearing strappy sundresses for a world where she, the men, and the turtle were all squat, solid, and covered. As they made room for her, Sarah gathered her long skirt and knelt beside the turtle. Her wide-brimmed straw hat cast an inverse halo over the turtle's head.

It's so beautiful, Sarah said quietly.

Yes, beautiful, one of the men said. He had knelt beside her on one knee, and now placed his hand gently beside Sarah's on the shell.

How did it die? Sarah asked, and all at once she realized that they had captured and killed it. She saw that one of the men was holding a large knife, a machete. And then she saw the huge copper cauldron and understood that they would cook and eat this creature, parts of it, and she imagined then that their wives and mothers, the ones left at home in other countries while they made meager wages at this island resort, might be cooking and eating another creature in another grove far away.

She knew that Sam would be having his afternoon snack right about now. He would have organized the pile of Cheerios on his high-chair tray into a neat row ready for sacrifice to his hunger. Sarah had been concerned, when she was pregnant, that Parker would have a hard time with the messiness of a child. She needn't have worried. If it's true, as the Buddhists say, that babies choose their parents while between lives, then certainly Sam had chosen well, either out of kindness to Parker or out of his own leftover craving for order. Parker, who she knew would be bone-tired at this hour of the day, would be watching from a nearby armchair.

Sarah became aware of the ground under her knees, sand and dirt mixed together, cool through her thin skirt. A breeze caused stippled shadows to sway on every surface, and it seemed for a moment as though the shadows were the air itself made visible. Sand and dirt mixed here, a little away from the sea, and death and love—her quick love for the turtle and these small men—and hunger.

That afternoon, on the steaming-hot day of the turtle, Sarah had called Parker before setting out for her walk on the beach. I'm scared, she'd said, and what she'd really meant was that she could hardly breathe, that she couldn't bear another minute of being here while he was there. Will you be home on Thursday, he asked, and she knew that was the deadline, that if things hadn't improved by then he would have to go back into the hospital. Yes, of course.

How could she last until then? Debating the importance of whether a model sat on that beach chair or this poolside wearing something that meant nothing while her own husband was dying. She had taken this one last job because they needed the money. His treatments were expensive and only partly covered by the only insurance they could afford with her freelance earnings. He hadn't worked in over a year and Sarah had turned down too many jobs

in the last few months, not wanting to leave him. When the call had come from this old client, Parker had answered the phone and had accepted it for her. His sister Jane had already moved in with them, helping with Parker and now with Sam too. He would be fine without her for a few days, he had said, and then she would come back shiny and warm from the tropical sun.

That evening, the evening of the turtle, Sarah sat at a table with six people she hardly knew while the hotel staff served them colorful drinks with little umbrellas and glasses of wine, blackened fish and skewered lamb. A small mariachi band in white shirts played festive music and everyone in the dining room stared at the beautiful women and beautiful men who sat at Sarah's table, who talked of Paris and Africa and of other beautiful women and beautiful men, whom they would see when they flew off this island to their next job. Sarah did not talk about the turtle or about Parker. She watched a waiter place a bowl of brilliant purple soup in front of her and then place a gleaming soup spoon on the white cloth with the same brown hand that had earlier held a large knife.

6.

Parker was embarrassed by the radiation burns on his face, but Sarah said they made him look like a warrior. Red stripes that slashed his temples. I don't think I can fight any more, he said, and she said, That's all right, but she didn't mean it. She was secretly angry with him for giving up. Even though the doctors all agreed that there was nothing more that would hold the tumor at bay, even though with each day he grew weaker. A year later, Sarah would describe his last days as "noble." In those last days, however, she longed for him so much that her skin hurt. She looked at him so hard, drinking in every detail, that she developed double vision.

During those days, Parker meditated and he slept and from time to time he would smile at Sarah, who whispered to him story after story of their life together, as if needing to push back into his heart memories that seemed to be slipping from his brain. And always, Can I get you anything? Can I help? Can I make it better? And not said: Can I make you stay? His last request was for something small that he could hold while meditating, something to help him focus. The joy of being asked for something that would help! Sarah rushed from his room and told his family that he wanted something. Quickly, they agreed that Parker's mother would stay with Sam, asleep and

cradled in his portable car seat. Sarah thought for a moment, in her double vision, that he was sleeping in an upside-down turtle shell, and that he looked so safe and embraced.

With Jane and the nieces and nephews, she rushed to a park on the hospital grounds. A scavenger hunt! Uncle Parker might like this piece of bark, don't you think? Here's a green acorn! They delivered their finds to Parker an hour later, but it was the perfectly round white stone Sarah presented that he held at the last. While the children had raced from one object to another in the park, Sarah had spotted the stone from fifteen feet away, gleaming at the base of a flowering pear tree, sitting serenely in the midst of fallen white blossoms. She wondered, when Parker took it from her, whether he remembered the earlier stones.

In the early days of their marriage, Parker and Sarah had spent a weekend with friends at their new house on the north shore of Long Island. They'd gone shopping at garage sales and architectural salvage yards for furniture and fixtures. The house was on a small inlet off the Sound. The shore had rocks, not sand, and Sarah was fascinated with them, their subtle but infinite variety of yellowed white, their smooth surfaces, their almost uniform size. The domes of bird skulls, she thought, in a sacred burying ground. If I turn them over, will there be tiny beaks and eye sockets? While Parker and their friends arranged furniture and made salad, Sarah watched the stones in their anchored solidity as water gently washed over and over and over their surfaces. Only the ones at the very edge lost their footing. Every day, she collected a skirtful of the roundest ones and brought them up to the house, where she laid them out on the deck to dry. She and Parker drove back to the city grounded by the weight of a hundred stones and, once home, Sarah spread them over tables and shelves. For a dinner party, she used them as place mats. She rearranged them constantly, and Parker would come across a neat pile in a corner of a hallway looking like stones on a grave. Or he would follow the single line from the bedroom to his studio, early-morning light illuminating them like markers on a runway. He finally tired of them. The cats knocked them off surfaces when they jumped, or a stone would gouge Parker's instep as he hobbled to the bathroom in the middle of the night. They're blocking my every move, he said. Sarah removed them reluctantly, a few at a time, and rearranged them on the sidewalks surrounding their loft building. It only took days, she noticed, for their whiteness to become soiled.

After Parker died, after she took home his few things from the hospital—the cards, his last faded jeans, his small statue of Buddha, and the little white stone; after she slept in the old corduroy-covered chair in their bedroom, not willing to go near the bed that first night of never-again; after waking to rain and cats still wanting to eat, Sarah walked through their apartment. She hadn't cleaned in weeks. The cat litter was pungent. Parker's studio was a still photo of what he had last touched. From the doorway, she scanned the room. On a shelf above his drawing table, next to pots of sharpened pencils and pens organized by point size, sat one of her sculptures, a miniature tent mounted on wheels. She had given it to him on their first anniversary, and he'd always said it was a reminder to him not to hold on too tightly, to try to let go of controlling too much. Sarah had laughed every time he said it. Maybe you could let go of alphabetizing the cereal cabinet, she would say.

The tent was one of the first pieces of hers that Parker had commented on when they met. They'd been in a group show together, had gravitated across the gallery to each other's work. Sarah had run her fingers over a Plexiglas box that encased the outrageous universe that Parker had trapped inside. It seemed to her that he had stolen energy from everything that was alive.

He, across the room, had been struck dumb by her work. Tiny white bones and soft feathers, sticks and leaves and bits of tree bark, minutiae of the natural world arranged, it seemed to Parker, in homage to decay and death. One piece in particular captivated him. It was a two-inch replica of a Mongolian Yurt, a gypsy tent woven from strands of moss and mounted on golden wheels. Peering inside, he saw a single tiny white bone suspended like a hammock by golden thread. This was what made all the rest bearable. One could pick up and move on in this little mobile home.

7.

The horse's skull arrived by FedEx as Sarah was leaving for a birthday dinner with friends, her first real social outing since Parker's death a few months before. It was packed in bubble wrap, sent from Arizona by Jane. Sarah fingered the open crevices of eye sockets and ran her hands over the smooth swells of cheekbones as she had countless times caressed Parker.

The teeth, though loose, were almost entirely intact. It was comforting to know how firmly they held after a lifetime, after death.

Through these nostrils hot breath had once streamed on cold nights and through tiny ivory channels signals had run between hoof and belly and brain.

Sarah had always identified with animal tribes that traveled on out of necessity as their dead members stayed behind. As far as she knew, animals kept no mementos of their dead. Sarah, however, had thought more than once that having a bone of an ancestor would be more tangible proof than fading photographs in an album that she was part of something more, something longer and deeper.

When it finally came down to it, though, she didn't keep a piece of Parker, but gave him a parting gift when he died. At the funeral home, when Sarah said her last private goodbye, she placed the small sculpture, the tiny tent mounted on wheels that worked, under his right hand, hidden in the folds of satin.

She kept his last little white stone in her pocket, in what would become a lifelong habit. At any moment she remembered that she was alone, she would finger the stone. She would look around for something beautiful to focus on. If that leaf is there and that stone is there, she would think, then I must still be here.

Unzipped

Steven J. Dines

We could have died from a blink in that godawful desert heat. So we did not blink, or we blinked in our tents with nobody to watch. I thought it was a ball. You came along and spotted it lying in the hot sand. You pointed at it, giggling. You did that funny crablike run all kids your age do when their legs are new, rushing over to it, scooping it up, grinning, and looking around for grown-up approval. You shook it, held it to your ear, listened to its innards. Maybe you had a sister with a pull-string doll. Maybe she went out to play with her friends and you sneaked into her room to hear it talk. Maybe you were sad and no one talked to you the way her doll did. The ball had something to pull, too, didn't it? You pulled it because you wanted to hear it talk. And it talked, all right; it fucking sang—to you, to me, to the other nurses and doctors roaring, rushing, reaching toward you. I can't get over it, kid; can't steer my mind around the fact that I saw it lying there in the Iraqi dust and sand a few minutes before you picked it up. I blinked.

Back in Chicago, I avoid driving by playgrounds on my way to darkened rooms that creak and crack to swings and nine-tails. I don't think about you as seven-inch spiked heels needle my balls; I think about the pain. But Mistress only walks all over me until my time is up, and then I walk out. I always walk out. There has to be a way to lock that door forever.

Tonight, it's on to the mall, where it usually takes me an hour, sometimes longer, to buy a carton of milk. I like standing in front of the convex security mirrors; I like how they make me look different…flexible.

When I arrive back at our two-bedroom apartment, Laura is in our room talking to her girlfriend Angel on the phone. Angel is a nurse, too. But the closest thing Angel has ever seen to a war zone is chronic diarrhea in a seventy-two-year-old patient who cared not where he shat. BFD. Big Fucking Deal.

Laura sees me then bye-byes Angel until she finally hangs up. She sits on the edge of our bed and sighs heavily as she watches me step out of my clothes.

"I need a shower."

"How many is that today?"

"As many as it takes."

The rushing water feels like a hundred cold baby-fingers drumming against my head, neck, shoulders, and…balls; my balls ache. The water's touch there, instead of soothing, feels strange, making a choppy sea in my stomach. When I step onto the bathmat and Laura asks if I'm feeling refreshed, I hear myself say "Go hump yourself" a moment before our five-year-old son Darren appears in the doorway.

He's clutching a ball in his left hand. Suddenly I'm measuring the distance to the toilet.

"Give me that," I say.

His smile melts. "Mommy?"

"Give it to me. Right now. Hand it over." I'm trying to sound calm, trying not to rush him or yank his arm off as I confiscate the thing in his hand on my careening path through the bedroom, into the living room, and onto the sofa, pursued by shocked and inquiring looks. I don't need to turn around to see; I know them well, I know this well. They're holding their breath like they're afraid I'll take them too.

"Richard…it's okay."

That pause, that tone. I won't let this happen, it says.

"Mommy…is Daddy okay?"

Now that pause, that tone—the feeling I'm no longer in the room with them but somewhere else, someone else. I can't stand it.

"Richard, it's for you anyway," Laura says, pulling at her fingers as she steps closer to me. "Darren was bringing it to you. Take a look. I bought it today. I, uh…I thought it might help."

I look at the thing in my hand. It's not a ball, it is a ball, it's not a ball. It's a foam stress-toy the size of a fist, with the words We Love You stencilled on it.

We Love You.

What it feels like is your kidney, the one I found two days after I let you pick up that thing that wasn't a ball. It was shrunken and dried by the sun. Only this thing has a message on it. In a way, I guess, so did yours.

I thank both of them then excuse myself to the bedroom, where I open a drawer under the bed to a cornucopia of squishy foams—a baseball, a hockey puck, a tire, a lobster, an apple, a sheep, a pumpkin, a snowman, a toilet, a globe of the world, two burgers, an onion, several dice, and a blowfish. But no body parts: she knows

that much. What she doesn't know is the texture of your kidney after forty-eight hours in the heat. But she tries her best, like the doctors and the get-you-through-the-days they prescribe.

As I close the drawer, I notice Laura standing in the doorway.

"I'm going to Angel's tonight," she says. "Can you look after Darren?"

"I don't know, can I?"

"Don't you like your gift?"

It ought to be funny. Laura's ducked more bullets since I got back than I ever did in my time over there. It ought to be funny, all right, but it isn't.

I stand and step back from the bed, the drawer. "What time are you leaving?"

"Seven. But I'll cook you both something to eat before I go. Honey, try to see tonight as an opportunity. You haven't spent much time together recently. I'm sure he'd like to. Is chicken all right?"

I've dropped bomb-blasted amputated limbs into air-sealed bags as one might do with a half-eaten drumstick to be saved for later. "No, not chicken," I say. "It tastes like surgery."

"Then I'll find something else. Spend time with him, Richard. I mean it."

That tone again. I won't let this happen.

Then she is gone.

- - -

I've left the boy in the living room with the TV on and a comic book to look at. When I hear his screams, I think he's ventured around back of the TV again, like when he was four and opened it up using a screwdriver I'd left lying around. "Want to see how it works," he said. But it isn't electrocution; he's opened his thumb turning a page of Batman, or Badman as he'll likely call him now. Now he's screaming and running, running, screaming, doing laps around the sofa to outdistance the pain. It won't work, kid. It won't work.

Part of me yearns for the shredded limbs, shattered bones, and cracked chests of the desert. I've massaged fighting men's hearts. I've talked to a private as I helped take his foot. That shit makes for closeness, a oneness I cannot achieve with a crying five-year-old and his fucking paper-cut thumb.

In the bathroom, I disinfect and then Band-Aid the cut, more for his comfort than anything else. Then I lead him back through to the sofa. He sits eyeing the comic on the floor as I select a DVD for him to watch. Bambi. At least there's an amount of truth to the

part where his mother gets blown away. Once the boy's settled I slip into the bedroom.

First I close the door. Maybe I should invest in a lock. Then I boot up the computer. Type in the password. Cut off the Start Windows fanfare by killing the speakers. Hearing it is worse somehow. Desert wallpaper appears. No man is a desert—or is it an island? No matter, because I am. Double-click Internet Connection. Click Dial…dialling…verifying username and password. Check the door. Check there's no sound. Open a browser window. Type the web address. Check the door. There it is. Right mouse button. Save Target As…. And somewhere in the recesses of the hard disk, hidden in an innocuously named folder, a file appears.

Check the door.

Check the speakers.

Open....

- - -

Laura returns home to find Darren and me on the sofa watching something—I don't know what—on TV. I can move fast when I need to. Not always fast enough. But then you know that.

Seeing Laura after what I've just seen is what it must have been like as the sun rose over Hiroshima the morning after. She emphasises my ugliness with her Mia Farrowesque face, draws attention to my vulgarity by standing before me thin and curveless in jeans and a flat blouse, though she's sexless to me now because you're with me, always, like a shadow scorched onto a stone step.

Laura shines down on us from behind the sofa, and something in me knows she'll set later than usual tonight. It's those minutes I have been dreading, when the sweating starts and a man's imagination runs free and out of control. Suddenly I want to stay with my son, but she's telling him it's time for bed and there's only four more sleeps until he turns six and I didn't know or I forgot and Daddy's going to read you a bedtime story…. I am? I am, while Mommy slips off to our bedroom and waits for a different kind of story to begin.

Half-asleep, Darren shuffles through to his room like one of the undead. It's uncomfortable to watch. He oozes under the duvet then waits, steeple-fingered, while I clear my throat once, twice.

I read to him, silently praying these short fairy tales and rhymes will send him off to sleep, but they seem to revive him into wakefulness, instead. There's little truth to them, and what there is is hidden behind cute animals and saccharine Happily-Ever-Afters. This is my son, I think.

He ought to be prepared for what lies in wait for him. He ought to know. So I close the book; it makes a satisfying whoomp! Then I tell him a tale I believe is closer to the truth of this world.

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall. Humpty Dumpty did not have a great fall, at least, not yet. Half a dozen men pulled up in a white van with sand in its tires. They stood before him, and poor Humpty was scared, terrified in fact. But he was on top of the wall with nowhere to go. One of the men took something from his pocket and threw it toward the base of the wall. It bounced off and rolled a short distance back. Humpty thought it was a ball, but it wasn't. It was a rolled-up blindfold. "Put it on," ordered one of the men. Humpty could not see any of their faces, but he could see their eyes, and they were dark. Faced by so many and with nowhere to run, Humpty did as he was told and put on the blindfold. They took Humpty to a secret place with cages and stains on the floor. They led him into a room where a box—black, silent—sat on three legs. He saw these things because his blindfold had slipped just enough for him to see under it with one eye. Then suddenly a red eye appeared on the box and the men lined up behind him. One of them made a speech and although Humpty did not understand what the man said, he wanted him to keep talking. But he finished and then there was a lot of shouting. Humpty sat on the ground and watched the red eye watching him. It watched as they lopped off poor Humpty's head and yolk poured out of him and onto the ground, only the yolk wasn't yellow, it was red, like the eye of the thing that watched, not blinking as—

Laura strides into the bedroom: pink basque, stockings, heels. She's in a flap, it seems, like some irate flamingo. I smile; I can't help it, things are backwards these days. She drags me out of the room, rounds on me in the hall.

"What was that?" she hisses, struggling to keep her voice down. "What the fuck were you telling our son?"

I'm still smiling; no, I'm grinning. Ear to ear. I can't stop. It masks the fear. I smile a lot and people think I'm crazy. I never used to smile and people, strangers, would come up to me and say, Quit frowning, it might never happen. They thought I was crazy then, too. Oh, and it did happen. It snuck right up and sat its fat fucking ass on me while I wasn't looking. Wasn't looking.

"What's so damn funny?" she asks.

I have no good answer to give her, and that scares me. And so I keep on smiling, like this is some big joke. And it is, in a way. Some big cosmic joke.

Muffled questions try to reach us through the door.

And then we're in our bedroom and the door is closed but we're not watching mpegs, nor is it what I expected to find in here, and part of me feels relieved that she's mad and not amorous.

"Asshole! Sick asshole! You had no right. No right to do that. He's your son for chrissakes and you're filling his head with nightmares."

My smile is gone.

Laura is shaking in her pink basque.

"Those nightmares?" I say. "They're happening now. Six and a half thousand miles from this city. And they could happen anywhere—here, in our country."—Our bedroom.—"He needs to hear the truth, Laura. Besides, I softened it up a little."

"He's five years old, Richard. Five. He isn't ready to hear that shit."

That tone again. I won't let this happen.

There are licks of sweat appearing all over her, on her forehead, her cheeks, the tips of her nose and chin, the tops of her slender arms…in the cleft between the small rounds of her pushed-up breasts….

"None of us are ready to hear it," I say, starting to undress.

"What are you doing?"

"I need to take a shower."

"Now?" she says. "But you already had one when you came home. Counting the two earlier today that makes four."

"So what?" I shrug. "Can't I be clean?"

Laura walks away to tend to Darren.

The water feels like a hundred cold baby-fingers drumming my skin. I soap, cocoon myself in lather. Then, with the showerhead in my hand for a close rinse, I blast the suds and watch them drain away. I'm clean. Decontaminated. The first step from the shower stall will be another fresh start. It's what keeps me coming back again and again and again. But there's always something I miss: that spot behind my balls where the soap tends to collect. And I know I can't step outside the stall until the suds are gone and I am clean. But rinsing down there…the baby-fingers…it feels strange, makes a choppy sea of my stomach. And sometimes…wait, this time, yes, it's happening…I get a hard-on. And so I start over again—soap, lather, rinse—until I'm clean and you're gone, even if only for an hour or so.

Laura walks into the bathroom just as I step out onto the tiled floor. She spots it nodding to sleep again and says in a flat, humorless voice, "Now's really not the time to have your fun—"

"I didn't…."

She gives me a look. Right.

Then I break the wall mirror with her face.

- - -

At the hospital, Laura doesn't tell, not even in the face of weighted looks from heavy nurses. They don't like broken mirrors. They can make them very unlucky. I sit in the waiting room with Darren. The doctor who examines Laura tells me she'll need plastics, and even then she'll be left with scars. I glance at Darren sitting on a plastic chair two along from mine. He's ghostly pale and hollow-eyed. When the doctor leaves, I buy Darren a candy bar and try to start up a conversation. He's unresponsive, taking mouse-bites from a corner to show me his mouth is busy. I slip him the cab fare back to our apartment, though something tells me it is their apartment now, and ask a nurse to sit with him while I slip outside to make a call on my cell. Only I did not take my cell with me.

As I drift through the city's dark and empty streets, suspecting they were made just for me, the wind sighs—disappointed, it seems. Encircled by that single voice with a thousand echoes, it speaks to me, promising your imminent return. You and I, alone again. My stomach knots. And then my feet are a blur beneath me as I run to beat the devil, you, the you I created, or rather destroyed; me, the one who saw a ball that was never a ball and broke a mirror with his wife. But where to go to escape myself? Where to go? At the mall, the mirrors will only shrink away from me. Mistress won't lock the door long enough.

Home is out. I could run myself into the ground, but there has to be an easier way. Steal a car…throw rocks at apartment windows…beat on a homeless drunk. Or maybe I should find a hotel room somewhere and lose a couple of days to the mini-bar.

A boy of about fourteen rounds the corner ahead, strutting in my direction as I race in his. Maybe he's the answer, I think, slowing to a fast walk. I'm equally drawn and repulsed by the notion of running straight into this kid and maybe pushing him around a little until he calls the cops. But there's no violence left in me. Besides, what would the cops do? Toss me in a cell for the night. Order me to pay the kid some compensation, and then I'd be back to square one. I suppose I could flash him. Hope he calls the cops then. They like that as much as nurses like wife-beaters. Yeah, that's what to do. Show the kid my cock. That ought to earn me a few gut-punches in a holding cell

tonight. What if I rub it against him? Just a little, but enough. What would they do to me then? How far could I take this?

But the boy passes without incident, except to tighten his eyes at me as I step aside at the last moment to avoid collision.

Watching him walk away, I let go of the zipper on my jeans.

For now.

When there's a safe distance between us, I follow him.

For some time, we move through the lamp-lit streets, him, me, boy, shadow, as the wind carries intimations of you and my fast breath fogs my vision.

When the boy turns into a park, where there are very few lamps and every second one is shot out by air-gun pellets or well-aimed rocks, he joins a group of friends, maybe a dozen or more. I duck behind a bush near the entrance, a soccer field's length from their Saturday-night play: boarding, sinking beers, pulling on a joint and then passing it around the circle. Teens are pack animals, of course.

Then maybe this is better.

Next thing, I'm easing down the zipper….

Seesawing my jeans down my legs to my ankles….

Moving out into the open, though it's shadowed here, waddling for the orange spill of the nearest working lamp. And when I reach it, it'll be two fingers in my mouth and blow….

But somebody cries out, though not in pain. He is directing everyone's hazy attention toward something he has spotted. It's not me, the half-naked man shuffling through the shadows toward the light; I see only an assembly of backs turned toward me as they insist, it seems, on ignoring my presence. No, there is a newcomer on the scene. A young boy, much younger than any in the group, eleven at most, strolling through this park at night on a zigzagging path that keeps him as close to the light as possible—though not for his personal safety, but so he can see the words in the book he's holding four inches from his nose.

I have three seconds, longer than a blink but still just three seconds, before the group of boys begins to move toward him as one dark and deadly shoal, and in those three seconds I think to myself, I've never seen anything so foolish and so beautiful—except I have. That morning, when I saw you pick up a ball that wasn't a ball and shake it, trying to hear what was inside.

You're back, I see.

As I stand there, legs weakening fast, breathing in short, tremulous gasps, I see several of the boys' faces backlit by the glow of their

clamshell phones. Aimed and ready. Drifting, but with clear intent, they form a wide circle as they move in closer to the boy, able to cover every face-punch, every rib-kick, every stomp to the head from every angle. As for the boy, he walks on obliviously as words talk and sentences sing and he…he listens.

Then I'm pulling my jeans back up to my waist….

And I'm closing the zipper. Gritted teeth.

I won't blink this time, kid.

I won't.

The Trial Christopher S. Cosco

Hunting Season

Rusty Barnes

Late November and no snow.
The Krag has a clip in it, leans
against the barbed wire sunk deep
inside the wood.

Randall sits on the ridge drinking
coffee and wishing, the hapless fuck.
No whitetail should come within miles
but he finds a dumb one.

He raises the Krag and dumps coffee
down his Carharted thigh, which
he ignores, and lets the trigger go
as he breathes softly.

Randall wants to become
the bullet, the perfect spiral
losing itself as it sails toward flesh
punches and tears

into the heart muscle, but he watches
the deer bound once and fall before
the report has sounded. Randall jumps
up and raises his hands

in triumphal salute, takes a step forward
and like torn air the canvas pants give
way before the wire; that sharp star
and his flesh become one.

Beyond the pale, the deer bleeds dry.

Growth Caleb Morgan

Max Velocity

Leslie Claire Walker

Fan knew she was fucked when she opened her mouth and nothing came out. Noth. Ing. She put her palm against her belly to search for a kick or a heartbeat through her tee-shirt and the low waistband of her khaki boy shorts, her vision gone soft-focus, not seeing the people in the check out line staring at her.

She was breeding.

How? (In the back seat of Denny Ford's Camaro, that's how.)

Why? (No birth control. It was the law.)

Why her?

Mrs. Huckabee paused her scan of the macaroni and cheese, the conveyer belt running full-tilt, knocking the cans of tomato sauce and tuna against each other at the end. Clink. Whir.

She leaned forward, her freckled peach cleavage pushing against her navy polyester tunic uniform. Her even blond bangs swept into her eyes. "You all right, dear?"

Those baby blues shone at Fan. It took a heartbeat to realize Mrs. Huckabee looked—what?—grateful?

Fan forced her lips into a sick smile. She left the food and the Mrs. Huckabee and the faceless folks in the line. Was that Denny three back—was it? He still had on his football jersey, grass and dirt dug into the left shoulder, and he was a senior and now he would never go out with her again—once had been enough, hadn't it?—and didn't this happen to his last girlfriend too?

Her sneakers squeaked on the beige linoleum. She stepped out into the fading sunshine, the asphalt of the parking lot damp and steaming from the July rain. The steady chill of the air conditioner crept after her through the open door, swept the backs of her knees. She wanted to throw up.

They said:

> The woman becomes two beings in one body, and the child takes her voice, marking her. The woman becomes part of the earth, and the earth accepts her sacrifice. The child becomes part of the Web. And the Web becomes vaster and vaster—an underground network of children.

People stared. She felt it on her shoulder blades like a force.

They all knew.

She thrust her hands into her pockets and set out down the store's front walk like she had purpose. Places to go. Didn't want to look weak.

Couldn't go home. Couldn't go back to school.

She cleared the store windows; glass became brick. A relief not to feel all those eyes on her.

Gone in a flash of red and blue reflected in the evaporating puddles as the cops pulled up next to her. Real casual-like. No siren.

Hub half got out the driver's side, one foot braced on the frame. "I'm sorry, Fan."

She'd have kept walking or launched into an all-tilt run, but Hub used to be on the track team in high school and her idea of exercise these days was walking to the corner store for rolling papers. Also, there'd be a back-up car. Always was.

She'd never even make it down the block.

He frowned like he felt genuinely apologetic and rested his forearms on the roof of the cruiser, his eyebrows doing that inverted-V thing that always made him look somewhere between confused and worried.

She didn't much feel like giving him any credit. How many times had she seen him do this?

Yesterday—or ten minutes ago—she'd have given him a piece of her mind. Now, because she couldn't speak, she glared at him.

"You gonna get in the car, Fan?"

She folded her arms across her chest.

He sighed. "So it's gonna be that way?"

She shifted her weight. Got her center as low as it could go.

"Fan, please."

She couldn't answer him.

"Fuck." He came around the car, boot heels clocking a funny rhythm on account of sticking to the asphalt. A sweat stain slicked the front of his shirt.

His partner got out of the cruiser. She didn't know him. She didn't look at him. She kept her gaze on Hub, who'd grown up down the street. She'd been friends with him since she was five years old.

All the times they played flag football in the front yard and Marco Polo at the swimming pool and all the times he teased her about reading girlie books under the shade of the ash tree in her front yard and the first time she saw him kiss Ashley McGee on his front porch when he thought no one was looking and he always smelled like his daddy's Old Spice and....

He tried to get around back of her.

She backpedaled flat against the wall.

Hub inched his fingers in between her and the brick.

Fan threw an elbow into the soft meat of his armpit.

"Goddamn!" He fisted his hand in her hair. Lifted her off the ground.

She tried to scream.

"Get her legs, Jerry."

She kicked and punched and got a needle in her arm for her trouble. The world washed away in angry tears.

- - -

Registration. Such a simple word.

Fingerprint.

DNA print.

Digital picture.

Wire your jaw shut (so you couldn't bite).

Wait all night. (There are prescribed times for the planting. Charts and graphs and Laws.)

Sign here. Sign for the last time. Before the muscle memory of how to write leaves you. (Eventually the meanings of words will slip away like a shadow around the corner. A kind of death.... An unkind death.)

Fan wondered what her mother would think; she could imagine Hub's car pulled up a few inches too far away from the curb, the grass in the yard too long and the flowerbeds overgrown with that pointy-leaf ground ivy and the smell of the dirt so soon after a rain. How her mom would open the door and the puzzled expression on her face would morph into horror.

Hub wrapped his fingers around her arm above the elbow. "C'mon, Fan." He led her away from the lab, down the darkened corridor toward the back door of the station. It was a long way.

Their footfalls on the concrete floor filled the empty space.

No one came to stare; too much superstition. Like seeing a bride before the wedding.

She shook off Hub's grip.

"You don't gotta be that way."

Sure I do.

He cleared his throat. "They say it's an honor, what's happenin' to you."

They say. The mysterious They.

"They say you should be proud."

Yeah. That's why you have to take every one of us by force except the couple a year dim enough to actually be proud.

"I'm gonna miss you, though, Fan."

She stopped walking and stared at him.

He held her gaze for a heartbeat, studied his shoes for another. When he raised his eyes again, he didn't look at her face, just scanned the rest of her until he lighted on the gold pinkie ring her grandma gave her when she turned fourteen. The one she nearly lost down the sewer grate after she threw long on fourth and twenty from Max's front yard. Flicked off her finger in the snap of fall cold.

Hub had got it back for her, just barely.

"Can I have that?" he asked. And then took it, scraping her knuckle.

"Thanks, Fan." He grabbed her arm again. Pushed the silver button by the door.

The siren blared over the speaker system and Hub made sure to face the security camera in the corner. He took her chin between his thick fingers and made her show herself too.

The automatic door clanged open. Sunlight flooded the end of the hall, bounced off the concrete. Blinded her.

Hub marched her out into the morning by her hair. She squinted at all the dirt and the sparse, dew-soaked grass. At the mounds. None of them looked fresh.

"You think you're seeing spots now? Give me any trouble, Fan. Any." He reached for the shovels leaning against the side of the building and pressed one into her hands. He took the other.

Half a mile to the end of the patch. She balked. He punched her in the cheek with the handle of his shovel. Drove her to her knees.

What the hell'd he do that for?

She could hardly look at him, she hurt so bad; what she saw turned her cold. His gaze, a shifting mix of guilt and...hate?

"No concessions, Fan. It can't work that way. You understand."

It took a minute for what he said to sink in. He did hate her now. Because they were friends. Because he didn't want to be her friend anymore. Not if he had to do this to her.

She had no idea if her face was broken; the thought captured her like a siren song. She'd rather die than do this, but there was no way that would happen. Hub would be careful.

There were rules.

He could break every bone in her body short of causing her enough shock to miscarry. And he would. If it would make him forget he ever knew her.

When she could get up again, she followed him the rest of the way. They stopped fair close to the fence line. They were going to have to move that gleaming chain line out some more, and—talk about your urban sprawl—how long before they pushed up against the boundaries of St. John's Town?

The other side of the fence, grass grew man-high. Black-eyed Susans nodded in the breeze. Live oaks stretched tall, limbs swept wide and low, graceful arms. A thousand yards before the St. John's fence line. With its own collection of mounds.

She caught a flash of blue. Heard a jay call three times.

"Dig," Hub said.

She shouldn't have to.

If she didn't, he'd force her. She lifted her fingers to the sharp ache in the side of her head.

It took a good hour to get the hole just right.

When they finished, Hub pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped the sweat off his forehead and the back of his neck. He hesitated a moment, then cleaned Fan up some too. Like she was some child who needed the dirt scrubbed off her face.

"You want me to knock you out before I put you in?"

She shook her head.

"You sure?"

She nodded.

"Brave, huh?"

She spat on his shoes.

"Guess so." Hub smacked her mouth. He cocked his head toward the hole. "Get in."

She sucked in a breath and took in all the old mounds and the colors and the smell of the fresh-turned earth and the trees out beyond the fence.

"Now, Fan."

She sat in the dirt and slid as slow as she could, wedging against the sides. The hole was an inch taller than she was. She made it halfway before the earth she was bracing against gave way. She fell the rest of the way.

The first rain of dirt came down over her head.

"You hold still in there now," Hub said. "It'll go quicker."

Her eyes filled.

She refused to cry. 'Least not until the earth filled in around her chest. She might cry then. She could make it that long, couldn't she?

Hub acted like he didn't see. He moved around back of her, maybe so he didn't have to.

"You know this is for your own good. And you oughta be proud. You're gonna keep us all safe. You're a hero, Fan."

She wished she knew what would happen next.

No one knew what came after the planting. Except the Mysterious They.

Them and their underground network of children.

A big deal. Because no one was having them the normal way anymore—not healthy babies, or preemies, or even stillbirths. Not here or anywhere else, for the last seven years.

They said it was because of pesticides. Or because the California Legislature had finally legalized gay marriage. God's wrath? Her ass. It could've been anything, like on those late-night infomercials: this bullshit brought to you by EVOLUTION. And if you act now, you get this spiffy set of kitchen knives for only nine ninety-five!

The important thing was continuation of the species.

None of the new children lived above ground—that she knew of. No one she knew had ever seen one. Maybe some scientist somewhere had.

Of course none of the mothers survived. Their bodies died and they became food for their babies.

The soil filled in and settled around her shoulders. Her neck.

She looked up at the summer-blue sky and the wisps of cloud that'd congeal later on when the temperature rose high enough, and there'd be thunderstorms and the rain would drive into the dirt and turn it slick. She'd be buried in mud.

The shovel missed her forehead by a couple inches.

The next load splattered her face. It got into her eyes. She blinked furiously.

Pretty soon she couldn't even do that.

And then she couldn't see anything but black or smell anything but earth or hear anything except the rhythm of the digging and filling. Then the sun and shadow at the crown of her head cooled for good.

Hub covered a couple more inches. To be sure.

She couldn't move. Not even a wiggle.

She waited for her breath to labor. To start sucking in dirt.

Clang clang thump thump. Thump. Thump. Thump. Thump. Hub gathering the tools and leaving her?

She waited.

She didn't want to die.

- - -

Some time later, she must've stopped breathing.

In the silence—no, that wasn't the right word for the absence of human noise—she could hear the most extraordinary things: slither of worms, droning of cicadas, shifting of the soil.

The thunderstorm swept in (in the middle of the afternoon?). Rain slipped through the dirt. Ran in icy rivulets through her hair, down her neck, between her breasts. Her tears mingled with it.

She sang songs in her head, with the memory of her voice and the ghosts of guitar and bass, drums and keyboards, like she used to do when she was afraid of her mother. She'd go sit out in the backyard on the green and white lawn chair and smoke cigarettes and watch the patterns the smoke made against the night and sing.

Dusk fell like a dream. Twilight. Between. Some time after that, she dreamed that Denny Ford and Chuck Hanson and Lloyd Hagel dug her up—at least as far as her head.

Sometimes people did that once or twice, with their loved ones. Or sometimes it was for kicks.

"That her?" Lloyd said. He didn't know her real well. She

knew everything about him she ever wanted to know, like how he'd run track until he broke his ankle falling down a flight of stairs in the rain and he was out of school for two weeks. He could still run like a hurricane wind. She didn't get why he'd never gone back to sprinting.

He didn't have a lot of friends. And he sounded more awake than he usually did in homeroom. He smelled good, too.

Chuck turned his head and spat. "Yuh-huh."

She'd had a crush on Chuck when they were five. He'd colored her a valentine on wax paper. She still had it pasted in her scrapbook.

Denny didn't say anything.

She wanted to look up at him, but they hadn't hollowed out enough behind her neck for her to tilt her head.

"I wonder when she'll start to stink." Chuck knelt at her flank.

Lloyd shrugged—she couldn't see it but she could hear it in his voice. "Another day or so, maybe?"

"Heat and all," Chuck said.

Denny still didn't say anything. She could feel his words reaching max velocity, though. Like they could explode out of him any minute now.

They buried her again before that happened.

No breakthrough. No mercy in retreating steps. No fucking mercy.

- - -

Lloyd came back after midnight. Thank God.

He dug her up, this time as far as her waist. It took a while; all the time she smelled nothing but earth and his spicy cologne. Stubble shadowed his cheeks. He sucked on the insides of them the couple of times he rested.

He wore an open maroon button-down with the sleeves rolled up. When he stopped digging, he shrugged it off and balled it up and tucked it in the back pocket of his jeans—they hung on his hips, threatening to fall down. He was awful wiry.

Lloyd speared the shovel into the ground with a grunt and hunkered down to where she could look him in the eye. He wiped the sweat from his brow with his dirty forearm. "I know you can hear me, Fan."

Yeah. So?

"Can't leave you here."

Really?

"My mom's in here," he said. "And my sister. All my women."

The way he said that, she'd have laughed if she could. All my women. Jesus.

Did you dig them up, too, Lloyd?

He knocked a clot of dirt out of her hair. "Nope."

Huh?

"Couldn't get to them in time."

For what?

He swallowed and didn't answer her.

As fucking if. As if he could hear her thinking. As if they could have a regular conversation. What bullshit.

"Ain't," he said.

How?

"That's not important, Fan." He got on his hands and knees and crawled in close. "I gotta finish this now, and I need you to help me. You game?"

How come you can hear me? What happened to your mom and your sister, Lloyd? (What the fuck was happening to her?)

"Yes or no, Fan?"

Yes, oh, yes.

"All right, then. You don't pay any attention to me or what I'm doing, understand? You mind your feet."

My feet?

"See 'em in your 'magination, Fan."

She didn't get it, but she'd do it.

"What're you wearing?" Lloyd asked. He picked up the shovel again and hacked at the earth around her. "Sneakers?"

Cross-trainers.

"Your feet still in 'em?"

Yes.

Sweat ran down his back. Down his neck and chest and belly, into the waistband of his jeans. Through the trail of black hair descending from his navel. She wondered—

"Cut that out, Fan. That's what got you in this mess in the first place, ain't it?"

Not my fault for being human.

"No," he said. "Guess not." He dug some more.

What's with my feet?

"After a while, they're gonna sprout roots. Once you get rooted, it'd be too late to take you out."

She wanted to move her toes. To have some physical way to check. She couldn't move or talk or breathe.

Am I dead, Lloyd?

"Mostly."

What's that mean?

He wouldn't answer any of her questions (especially about what happened to his sister and his mother). He dug down to past her knees.

He wrapped his arms around her waist. To pull her out. She knew that was why. But it felt like he was copping a feel, too. His touch, slick of his sweat, grit of the earth stuck to his skin—she could feel every molecule, every millimeter of surface contact like electric shock.

Hypersensitive.

Her nipples tingled.

"You'd'a been a fine woman, Fan," Lloyd said. And pulled.

She popped out of the ground. Like a turnip. The force of it felled them both.

Lloyd rolled to take the brunt of her weight. Not far to fall, but still they smacked the ground with enough juice to knock the air out of him.

And halogen lights flashed on all around them, at the edges of the field.

Lloyd scrambled to his feet.

Hub marched out of the back door of the jail with a shotgun slung in the crook of his arm.

Lloyd hauled her up over his shoulder.

"Lloyd Raymond Hagel, you put her down. She's not your property. You're stealing a breeding woman."

Lloyd didn't bother replying. He whispered in her ear. "We gotta run for it."

Fine by her.

Lloyd feinted left, ran right instead.

Hub fired.

The boom of the bullet would've made her cringe if she

could've. It passed close enough that she heard the whine of it slicing through the air.

Fan couldn't see a damn thing. She bounced like a sack of garden soil, slamming over and over into Lloyd's back. His shoulder grated against her hip. She couldn't see Hub.

She couldn't see. Something wrong with her eyes.

Please don't hit me. Please, God.

"No danger of that," Lloyd panted. He ran through the field. Wove around the mounds. Got low; tossed her to the ground and rolled her under an oleander that had grown up there and—into a hole in the ground just wide enough to fit a woman her size—or a man skinny as Lloyd.

She fell ten, twenty feet. Taking loose dirt with her. The chute felt smooth except for a couple of roots. She fell until the earth curved, stopping her momentum. Her sneaker dug in—not by accident. Not to keep her from going further, either.

Mind your feet.

Lloyd slid into her, popping her between the shoulder blades and dislodging her shoe. "That was close."

Her foot?

"Hub. Catching us out there in the open."

What makes you think he's not comin' after us down here?

"Besides that he'd need a backhoe to get in here?"

Don't think he wouldn't get one.

Lloyd chuckled. "Yeah. He's been watching a little more close lately. Like he knows what's goin' on. He don' know."

He grabbed her by the offending shoe. He stood up as much as he could—half-way?—and duck-walked backward, dragging her. More roots brushed the top of his head.

How come she could see that? Underground, in the dark?

It wasn't dark—lichen grew on the walls and the ceiling. It glowed. Phosphorescent, she thought her biology teacher called it.

"You remember shit from Bio?" Lloyd asked. "When were you ever in class?"

Every day.

"Okay," he said. "When were you ever in class not stoned?"

He had a point.

He picked up a rhythm. Gained speed. Making it so her shorts rode up in the crack of her ass and her shirt pulled up over her belly and her arms V'ed over her head.

Her belly moved. All by itself. Like there was something inside it. Something...squirming in there.

Lloyd.

"Hub won't see the hole. It's camouflaged."

Lloyd! My stomach!

"Try not to worry, Fan. It's normal."

For who?

"All y'all."

The tunnel widened some and got taller, so Lloyd could stretch out to his full height. "Just a little farther."

'Til what?

"Just you wait." Lloyd pulled her around a corner and downslope. The tunnel walls spread out and up—a cave?

The glowy lichen grew on the stone: all of it, except, as far as she could feel—and she could feel it—where she and Lloyd passed through. Water dripped.

Where are we?

"Under the jail," he said.

From the far side of the cave, a man's voice. "You got all of her, Lloyd?" Denny asked. She knew it was Denny.

She could still hear him whispering to her in the car—the way his breath against her ear, against the curve of her neck, had sent shivers through her. His weight on top of her, pinning her down. In a good way. And—

All of her? Like Lloyd might've come back with parts?

"Yeah." Lloyd let go of her leg. He bent down and scooped her up in his arms. "Don't you worry about that none, Fan."

He set her down on a long slice of raised rock, then stepped away. She couldn't see him anymore. Panic flowered in her stomach.

He wouldn't leave her?

"I'm right here, Fan," he said.

More than a relief. She didn't trust anyone else. Especially not Denny—who hovered over her now. He traced a finger along her hairline. Brushed away strands that were plastered to her cheeks. "It's good to see you, Fan."

Of all the things he could've said, that had to be the most ridiculous.

"No shit," Lloyd said.

Denny looked at him.

Lloyd arched a brow. "You oughta at least apologize for gettin' her this way."

"Oh." Denny smiled ruefully. "Takes two."

You're not the one lying on this rock, mostly dead. Motherfucker.

Lloyd laughed, not unkindly. Could Denny hear her the way Lloyd could? He seemed to think Lloyd was cracking up at what he'd said.

"We're going to get you back to your old self, much as possible," Denny said. "You understand, Fan?" He glanced over at Lloyd. Waiting for the translation. Confirmation.

Lloyd nodded.

"Good." Denny took her chin in his hand. "We got to free up your jaw."

Did that mean she'd be able to talk again?

"Dunno," Lloyd said.

If she could've passed out while they de-wired her jaw, she would've.

The hypersensitivity that she'd felt all along her skin—she felt it everywhere now. Mostly she felt her insides being rearranged. Like someone stuck a hand in there, applied a little elbow grease, and made some new order to replace the old. It was all too much. Too much to feel.

Denny finished up. Wiped his hands on his jeans. "We're going to put you with the others now, Fan."

Women like her?

"With the kids." Lloyd hooked her arms with his. Scooped her off the slab.

Denny got her legs. "We only ever rescued you, Fan. Before the gestation was up."

Before the baby (she remembered babies and there was no way what squirmed inside her could be a baby and she didn't believe she'd give birth to anything real) dug its way out of her? Ate her and left what remained of her carcass behind to go back to earth? Dust to dust?

Lloyd grunted. Adjusted his grip on her. "They don' dig out on their own, Fan. That's just rumors."

She didn't want to ask how he knew.

"We got you. That's lucky," he said. "Luckier than the others."

She wished she could close her eyes. Blot it all out. Instead she got a great view of the ceiling—more lichen—and the paths water had worn in the green. Her head lolled to the side. She saw where the water pooled on the floor in the cavities of the rock, like dark eyes.

They ducked her into another room. The lichen either didn't glow or grow so fierce in here. Fan could hardly see a thing, even after they righted her and pushed her up against a wall—into a plywood stand nailed together from scraps. It reminded her too much of the hole she'd been buried in. So close. No space.

"We need you to watch the kids," Denny said.

Lloyd set his hands on his hips. "You know. Babysit."

He had to be kidding.

"Nope," Lloyd said. "There's two of 'em need lookin' after."

"And ours makes three." Denny flattened his palm against her belly.

Why were they holding children here? Those kids were supposed to be in the ground. Propagating the race.

Lloyd, what happened to your mother? Your sister?

It occurred to Fan for the first time that he and Denny might've planned this whole thing, starting with seduction over a medium popcorn at the movies. Leading straight to the back seat. But how? How could they know what would happen?

Lloyd shook his head. "You can't plan it, Fan. It just happens. 'Course, you can increase your odds. You fuck as many as you can and hope for the best."

If he was trying to say this wasn't personal—

"Wouldn't dream of it, Fan," Lloyd said.

And how many more girls were there?

"They're my kids, damn it. I'm going to raise 'em," Denny said.

Fan took it back. That was way more ridiculous than Denny being happy to see her.

"This is the only one that's yours," Lloyd said.

"The other two shoulda been. Marla's and Stacy's."

Marla: sunny brown hair with hazel eyes, olive skin, collection of Ramones tee-shirts. She'd been in ninth grade. A year behind Fan. She'd had a little brother named Charles and she drank a lot of coffee. Always sat out under that hackberry in the smoking section. Always in the grass, never on the bench.

When had he gone out with her?

Lloyd laid a hand on Denny's shoulder. Like this was an old argument. "We gotta go, man. Natives gettin' restless."

Where? She couldn't see, damn it. How the hell was she supposed to watch them?

Unless she couldn't....

Lloyd?

The men turned their backs on her.

Lloyd.

He sighed heavy. The force of it shrugged his shoulders. "All I got's cold comfort," he whispered.

Better than none.

"Not in this case. Be back." He kept on walking.

Stacy. Fan hardly remembered her. Red hair? Green eyes? No. Little pucker mouth? Ghost of a face. She'd hung out with the Ag people. She'd been Denny's last girlfriend.

Hadn't she been Lloyd's something, too?

Sister.

Scraping on stone. Scurrying. Blew Stacy right out of her brain.

Every nerve ending in her skin fired. Until she thought maybe she'd explode. The sounds—those might be the kids. Monsters—how could they be anything else? But the more she listened there in the dark—unable to move her head, unable to see—the more the sounds seemed to be coming from either side of her. From above.

On the walls. The ceiling.

Eyes. She saw eyes, reflecting what light there was. All white, no pupils. The child's head, its body—everything seemed normal shape. Its skin was green. No, yellow-green.

Fan's first wild thought: Little green men. Aliens.

The child stroked her belly. The squirming inside calmed.

Oh shit.

Please God don't let this be happening—but it was happening and—please God what the hell could she do about it; she was

(mostly) dead and dead meant past the point of no return—she had to get out of here—

Where was the other? Lloyd said two.

No way out.

The words reverberated in her head. Only in her head.

Lloyd?

No answer there.

Goddamn sonofabitch Lloyd Hagel. She'd kill him. Or, better yet, bury his ass in the dirt and watch him suffocate. Watch him die. Watch him—

The child rested its palm on her stomach. Its green face didn't look exactly solid. A close resemblance to that ground ivy her mom kept in the front yard. No way out, it said.

It had to be him. Her. It.

She noticed finally that it had no mouth. Which made sense. What on earth would a network of underground rugrats need with mouths?

It wouldn't hurt her. Would it?

It pulled up her shirt. Way out of line.

Tucked it under her breasts. Exposed her middle. The contact between the flat of its hand (scratchy) and her skin (smooth, supposed to be smooth) felt all wrong.

Oh, there's going to be hurt, all right.

The child raised its hand up onto fingertips. Flexed its joints.

Scooped out a chunk of her and let it fall—splat—to the floor of the cave.

She would've screamed if she could've. She would've passed out from the pain.

And she would've looked down to see what the green child was doing to her. Over and over—the kid did it again and again until it lifted something small and curled out of her. She hardly noticed. Felt it at the edge of her awareness. Beyond the hedge of evisceration.

Her baby?

She wanted to see it. Her monster.

The child held it up. Not much in the way of features. Not much of a face. She couldn't make out any limbs. It didn't look like Denny. Or her. Until it reached for her with tiny fingers. With

thorns. And then she saw the human in it. Or something kind of like human.

The thing was hers. From her body. She'd made it. She could do thorns. Couldn't she?

The child pulled it away. And gave Fan to understand that the thing dug out of her didn't want to bond. It wanted to eat her.

Need you, the child said. Need your way out.

She caught a shadow in the corner of her eye. Another child. It laid its hands on her sneakers and for a breath she thought it would dig something out of there. Take off her feet.

But it rose up and went to work on her plywood cage. Not pulling her out, not pulling it apart. Lowering her enough for her feet to touch ground.

Oh.

She sensed the work of gravity. Her own weight.

Her feet rooted. Through the rubber soles of her shoes. Into the rock. Thick, ropy roots—they had to be. They didn't feel dainty or small.

They moved the stone. Broke it. Cracked it. And sought down. For what?

Water. The child in front of her cradled her baby.

Fan's roots snaked through the cave floor. Widening. Deepening. Of their own accord. Nothing to do with her own free will. Not one thing had, this whole time. Except her wanting Denny in the dark, in the steamy summer night in the back of that car. Human want.

Would the holes her roots made get big enough so the kids could pass through?

None of them answered her. But they skittered around her feet. And the questing of her roots got easier. Whatever they hit, it must've been paydirt.

The children squatted too low for her to see, even out of the corner of her eye. After a few minutes, all their sounds began to fade. Like the reverb of a falling penny striking the side of a well.

Right about the time Denny and Lloyd moseyed back into the chamber. She thought "mosey" on account of how one set of footfalls seemed pretty relaxed. The other, though—

"What the fuck?" Denny took hold of her arm and shook her. As if.

Lloyd didn't look at Denny; he eyeballed Fan. "They're all gone?"

Just come close enough, you bastard.

"And you'll what?" Lloyd asked, matter-of-factly. "They gone?"

Of course.

Denny's gaze boomeranged. Lloyd to Fan. Fan to Lloyd. "Want to tell me what's what?"

"Sure wasn't some altruistic charity thing," Lloyd said. "You know, lettin' the kids escape."

Denny stared at him.

Lloyd held his gaze. "You can't raise those things, man."

"They're mine."

"You oughta ask them what the hell they want," Lloyd said. "They might not answer you, 'course, since they're not people."

"You were helping me."

Lloyd shook his head. "I was helpin' the only people here that's left."

Denny fisted his hands.

"What're you gonna do about it, man?" Lloyd stepped between Denny and Fan. "You gonna destroy her?"

Denny thinned his lips.

"You gonna go tell Hub or one o' them other cops? Or you gonna go find yourself someone else to impregnate?"

"It's not right, what they did. Taking them away from me."

"Your women or your children?" Lloyd spat. "First one meant somethin' to you, din't she?"

Denny crossed his arms over his midsection.

As much an answer as words would've been. Fan thought she got it, finally. And not a hair of it was about her. She was just some player in their little drama.

Get the fuck over yourselves.

Lloyd glanced over his shoulder at her. "Hold up, now, Fan."

She made one crappy choice and this is what she got. Eternity mostly dead in a cave with her guts all over the floor?

"Don' have to be that way," Lloyd said.

What way did it have to be?

Lloyd turned away from her. "Whatcha gonna do, Denny?"

Denny mulled his thoughts a minute. "To you? Nothing. Figure we're even."

If Denny had got Stacy as pregnant as he'd got Fan—if what Fan thought was going on here was what was really happening—there wasn't anything on God's green earth that'd put him and Lloyd even.

Denny made to go around Lloyd. Toward Fan.

Lloyd stepped to him. Nose to nose.

"You don't mean to just leave her here?" Denny asked.

"Nope. You don' got a say in it though. She's not yours anymore."

Denny snorted. Turned on his heel and marched out of there. Soon as he was out of sight, she turned the whole of her attention on Lloyd.

She didn't know what he meant to do. Only that it couldn't be good.

"You're right," he said. "Nothin' good at this point. But you still got choices."

What choices? She couldn't even blink. Or wiggle her pinky. Much less walk. Much less will herself all the way dead. If that was even possible with everything that'd gone down here. She wished fervently that none of this had ever happened.

"Don' wish away the life you had, Fan. No other way it coulda fell out."

Did he mean fate? Destiny? Her jury was still out on either one or both of those.

"Here's the deal." Lloyd held up a hand and counted off, bending his fingers. "I can bury you again. That'd mean you'd rot. Or some new woman gets buried next to you and her kid eats her. And you."

Wait.

You dug me up. Saved me from that fate to begin with. You wouldn't rescue the next one, too?

He studied his feet. "You could just think of me like your guardian angel."

Not good enough.

The thought surprised her. First because she'd thought she was more worried about herself than about the next girl in line. And second because she still had so much to lose.

Waiting to rot or be eaten. Conscious the whole time. That was no choice.

"Can't do anythin' else from here," he said. "You put it out there yourself—Hub'll get his backhoe eventually."

So where are you going?

"Can't say."

Who was she going to tell?

He looked her in the eye. "You think I'm the only one can hear all y'all out there in that field?"

She had thought that. It never occurred to her any way else. And why not?

"You think folks want to admit they can hear what happens out there, Fan?"

They probably didn't even want to admit it to themselves.

He framed her cheeks with his hands. Gentle. Like he didn't want to hurt her by touching her. (And oh God, would it hurt?) "They'd have to do somethin', wouldn't they, Fan?"

How could you be human and not?

Lloyd offered up a wry grin. "That's the question, ain't it?" He took away his hands. "I could bury you back again—or I could just let you grow here and see what happens."

You don't know?

"None of y'all's ever stayed whole long enough to grow."

Another crappy choice—but better than the alternative. Except—

Can you kill me?

He shrugged. "How do you kill a mind?"

She let that sink in. Fear after fear rose in her. Shot off fireworks in her chest. Into her throat.

What about the children? They coming back? (To eat her?)

"Don't think so, Fan. They're out, and they got a big ol' world out there."

And....

What about you?

He studied her face. "I'm gonna have to disappear for a while, Fan."

What's a while?

"'Til Hub gets off my back."

That could be a long time.

- - -

And it was.

The cave never darkened, even with autumn. Even with winter.

Slither of small animals. Rats. Snakes. Drip of icy water, rivulets running down her scalp, her back, her legs, to stone and earth.

No other women. No more children.

Her arms hurt, hanging at her sides. After a while, she lifted them up until they felt comfortable again. She must've grown, like Lloyd said she would, because she could feel the ceiling of the cave getting closer. Shadowing the tips of her fingers. And her sides ached. Like stretching way further than your muscles wanted to go.

Spring chill melted into summer. The ache became so delicate, it was exquisite—like lace. Like a single snowflake or the edges of a budding leaf.

She grew her ass off. Picked up speed.

Lloyd came back, true to his word. He brought her a bouquet of daisies and ferns—stolen from somebody's garden, no doubt. And he brought her some compost that he spread around her roots, getting the rich stuff stuck under his nails and between the grooves of his knuckles and in the roughness of her skin—her bark.

She asked him about what was going on with Denny and Chuck and Hub and all them, but he just sat down beside her with his legs folded under him and read to her a while. The rhythm of his voice fed her as much as the fertilizer.

The following spring, the tips of her branches rooted in the ceiling.

And the spring after that, they broke through.

The Illiterate Sky

David Lenson

"How come you know that?" McMahon goes.

"I've been up there a lot."

The candidate sits back and looks. The place is a cross between a barracks and a boardroom. Somebody here is impersonating a government agency. There's that smell of licenses, or food stamps. Something. A familiar smell.

"I mean," the officer pulls on his earlobe, "some of us have been here for years and never gotten up that far."

The water cooler gives up a large, loud bubble.

"I mean, how come we've never run into you up there, if you know it like that?"

"I keep to myself."

"You mean you saw us and avoided us?"

"Sure."

McMahon figures the guy to be on the lam, but called him anyway because nothing turned up on the police wire. He needs a guy who knows the hill. Since the thing with the cougar, he's short a man. He comes to his feet, the brown uniform unfolding around him. He reaches his hand out to the candidate. They shake.

"When can you start?"

"Right now," he says, thinking that he started years ago, maybe more than years.

- - -

Up only a few hundred yards, feeling strangely undressed and already thinking about night, he's surprised at how deep the memories have drifted, about halfway up his calves. Not only his memories, of course. It's a text, like movie subtitles blowing along a foot off the ground. He can cock his head back and look up through the conifers. He can ignore the memories. But once he starts, he has trouble getting out.

He waved the map off, back at headquarters, saying he already had one. But he doesn't. He knows where their cabin is. He keeps climbing till the sun looks like weak tea. There is a sag after the frosts of last week, the grape and wild cucumber down to a fraction

of their weight and menace, the blackberries looking greener and more hurtful than ever.

He pulls a key off his new chain, pops the padlock, and opens the door.

- - -

The place is pretty clean. Someone's just been here in the last few days. The fire must have burned up some of the text. He shuts the door quickly behind him, opens a gas lamp, sits on the cot for a second. His eyes catch something in the corner. Lovers, sometime in the late nineties. Married to other people; hiked way up while a drunken search went on from bar to bar down below. A fight. They left within a day or two.

He stops reading. He takes the text and rolls it up for kindling, humps wood in from the lean-to, takes a match to it.

- - -

Next day he keeps climbing. The trail is always the same if he keeps his eyes level. He knows that every cabin will be smaller, all the way to the top. Each night an older cot, a dirtier, smaller woodstove; each night more text bunched up in the room. The smell always worse, the evidence of animals always more obvious. Sometimes nausea overcomes him as he opens the door. But so far he has gone no higher than he has before, though every day he travels along.

Once he was free as a wolf, but now McMahon comes to him in dreams, calling him a disgrace to the uniform. One morning, when the fall sun at such an elevation shines the way a knife cuts, he passes the place where his predecessor was eaten by a catamount, leaving his lifeblood to soak into the ground and a thousand subtitles.

- - -

With the peak in sight, he pauses and looks down and around. He is now so high up that there is hardly any text blowing around. Hardly anything has happened here worth recording, unless for the beast that kills or is killed. The last approach is almost clean—curses falling like confetti. At the summit, there is a book sitting on a lectern, open to the acknowledgments. He stares above it, into the illiterate sky.

The Banker Calls for Three Martinis and a Pipe

Cami Park

They swarm like orphans,
dancing and bespectacled;
fat cups of tea bleed
into our scorpion hands.

They prowl like semis,
whispering smoke and asphalt,
peeling our truest skins
with hard songs.

Put their ears to melt on the rocks
to stems of wasted thought;
let them fall standing among us,
collapsing like algebra into the dusk
of our hidebound hearts.

The whalebone is our testament
to sacrifices encumbered
by generations of lives lingering
like corn rows for detasseling.

Twenty strokes deflowered
by the sight of my eyes.
Twenty more to ritual
lest we stand down.

Sisyphus of the Staircase

Cami Park

I almost had it last time; I
was getting so close, rolling
that infernal rock up that infernal hill.

But now there's a twist, instead of a hill
it's a staircase, and instead of a boulder, it's
a Slinky™, but so what, for fun
it's a wonderful toy, right? Except
I have to make it go up, like the boulder,
and this way is not so much fun and

I think about God and how I want him to
sweep me up these stairs like Rhett swept up Scarlett
before committing unspeakable acts in unspeakable orifices
and shit I almost had it and I slide down the banister
to start again, praying it gives way

but it never does.

Steps to Darkened Ends Ali Al Saeed

In the Dark

Sean Melican

Dear Shane,

It is our bliss to enlighten you that we have decided to tolerate your desire to visit our orb. Not only is your facility with language unparalleled, but in evaluating a converted edition of your *A Friendly Jaunt Through Obscure Mythologies,* we ascertained a psychological fault and verified the probability you would eventually transgress our sacrosanct positions without our privilege is assured. We would reassure you that transgression would result in absolute fatality.

We impose one condition: you will sanction to castration of the ocular condition. On the day, we have assembled a physician conversant with human physiology atop an unnatural satellite. We assure you that the condition would be entirely impermanent and absolutely reversible. The reasoning: ourselves have never been exposed to transliteration of physical form through the human-visible electromagnetic spectrum. Our physical form would not be fatally harmed but yours would be. If you should so desire to not acquiesce to our minimalism, then due to the unacceptable probability of your transgression your life would be forfeiture.

We request one condition: impermanence does not resolve true belief. Your voyage through us would be more vital if you were to create permanence of devolving your physical deformity. We understand that a sterilized needle or knife would be sufficient.

Sincerely,

Shades

- - -

Ben,

They've accepted! But with one ludicrous demand. Check out the letter stuck to this one.

Should I? I ask like my answer could be no. I never told anyone as it would've meant prison, but not long ago & I'll keep the details obscure to protect the guilty, I sacrificed my considerable

savings to procure transport; but sadly, the captain of the ship I hired was—shockingly—arrested for smuggling illicit pharmaceuticals. I avoided a lengthy sentence myself, & I'll bet my ass & royalties my critics, especially that big cocksucker at the *Times,* would've had no end of fun with *that* when I explained that I, of course, was looking to do a perfectly innocent book of a pirate's life.

This message is for your eyes only. Remember those old games?

Shane

- - -

Oh Great and Wondrous Editor Olivia,

They've accepted, with one curious request. I've appended their letter.

I've contacted the best eye surgeon available. Bill appended. He assures me that such an operation would be simple; a butcher could sever the optic nerve, but only a surgeon could repair the damage. But what do know we know of their surgeons? For all we know, they might cure disease by bleeding. Perhaps I will be permanently blinded.

How best to approach the Shades? What would my readers want? *Everything,* of course; but their letter implies an active religion. The mythology book was on the lists for how many months? And now actual religious practices? How novel! Pun intended.

Ashamed of his own lowbrow humor,

Shane

- - -

Dear Shane,

You should absolutely follow through on the religious angle. But, like you said, we want *everything:* kinship, social structure, science, art, architecture, anything else you or I can think of. Sex, especially. Alien sex sells. After this, we'll both retire. Go out on top, right?

But with the *everything,* we're invoking the physiology clause in our contract: you'll wear an organic radio-microwave-infrared recorder, a sort of embedded third eye. (How Muslim! Or was it Catholic?) Our assumption is that they will have only a basic tem-

plate of human physiology, so we'll have it appear to be a dormant vestigial mutation, like tonsils or toenails; it can be activated by an enzyme labeled as an essential medication. Of course, you won't be able to 'see' anything. I know, I know! We've sold the novelty of an actual author writing an actual book—paper, ink, and all (don't forget the cost, particularly the hefty shipping costs)—not a dime-a-dozen sense-around artist, but this is a once-in-a-lifetime shot.

To protect your integrity, and ours, you will receive none of the credit—but you will all of the royalties.

Olivia

- - -

Dear Ben,

I can't tell you how terrified I was! The translation was accurate in at least one instance: the 'assembled physician' really was an assembled physician! So I've never seen the Shades. I'm blind. The robot seemed competent, but it was only an arm and a laser. Can it stitch? No going back.

Dancing in the dark,

Shane

P.S. You know how great a dancer I am, too.

- - -

Olivia, sunshine of my life and how I need you!

Shadow is a tidally-locked moon. Having learned a little of their language, I've developed a hypothesis that a species without the dual experience of day and night wouldn't have the sort of language dichotomy we have. You know, war and peace, black and white, good and bad, girl and boy.

Before being blinded—I admit after my last letter to you I debated their advice, but I'm a coward—I found some fascinating research on blind albino lizards and fish in isolated ecological niches. But what is curious is that no one has ever seen a Shadow. Are they albino? Or reptilian, amphibian, humanoid, something we've never as a species seen? I'm afraid that referencing these niches will lead to

incidental racism. But without it, there's no context.

Now that I'm here, I know even less. They are generous. They recognize, they said, my fumbling-bumbling-humbling steps. That's one word. I'm like a child to them—if they have children—but I've never sensed—and that's the right word, I think, something I should emphasize in the book—any amusement.

I should describe them to you. Their hands, or the analogue at least, are warm and dry. They've got thirteen digits divided between their two hands. There seems to be handedness too, some having the extra on the right and others on the left. I've noticed as I've been touched lightly on the back or arm for guidance that there are fine hairs and nodules or calluses on their fingers. Or finger-analogues. It's becoming easier to anthropomorphize. I've no doubt evolution has equipped them to finely discriminate tactility as we do color. As an example, at one point, one of my hosts put an oblong fruit-analogue in each of my hands. (Their food is edible, if somewhat bland.) He told me the one in my left was poisonous and the one in my right was ripe. Then he swapped the poisonous one with an unripe fruit-analogue. They felt the same to me. I asked him to put them on a table to allow me to feel each one as long as I desired. After what I think was an hour, I felt confident that I could distinguish a pebbly texture that I was sure was ripe, a smoothness I thought was unripe, and a prickliness that must surely be poison. I was wrong on all three counts. After an entire night of coffee—which I've brought with me, since I can't abandon *every* comfort—and frustration, the pebbled texture replaced the prickle replaced the smooth, and still I was wrong. It was, and this might be good for the book, like three-card monte.

To luck,

Shane

- - -

Dear Ben,

This place is so damn frustrating! The language is the worst. Inflection means more than syntax. Sentences are constructed in any random order; it's which syllable the emphasis is on that matters. Remember how our teachers said it wrong in school? The em*pha*sis on the syll*a*ble. Only now it's right.

I've been here for a week, I think. Things I'd kill for, in order:

sun
a flashlight
beer
pussy
pizza
football
basketball
baseball
chips and dip
more beer
more pussy

They take me all around the place. I have a stick so I don't fall down or into a manhole or off the edge of the world. The incessant tapping would drive anyone nuts. & my shoulder burns all night long. There's nothing here, either. Lots & lots & lots of fucking stone. Tap, tap, tap! Shades. That's about it. We eat, and they must shit like I do, but do they fuck? Do they work? Have any kind of art at all?

Go into the bathroom. Chuck out everything that isn't bolted down. Turn off the lights. Have fun.

Shane

- - -

Liv,

What a fascinating language! If the emphasis on a noun is on the first syllable, for instance, the statement is declarative. On the second, interrogative; the third, imperative. I haven't figured the fourth out yet. I think it's a negation, so emphasis on the second and fourth syllables of a noun would be *Is [noun] not...?* Emphasis on verbs, of course, indicates tense. Verbs, I should add, are all at least eight syllables long. And irregular verbs? Don't ask.

I'm living with a tripartite family. I can't figure out relationships yet. Mother, father, child? Two mothers and a father or vice versa, or two daughters of a single, perhaps asexual, mother? There are times when their fingers remind me of jellies. And jellies have larval and medusa stages, so maybe I've never experienced—I was going to write 'seen'—children.

Remember those damned emphases? With proper nouns, emphasis indicates relationship or seniority or social status or...or something. Christ.

So. Rant over. For now.

My room is spacious, or at least I think so. I can walk about eight paces from any corner to the next—but there are thirteen corners. One for each...something. It's not just their fingers. Elements or elementals, natural phenomena, compass points (oh, the mapmakers will find that hell for the book, huh?), emotions, gods, stations of the Cross, sexual positions in their version of the Kama Sutra? I don't know.

They heat their spaces with warm rocks. No furnaces. No stoves or ovens either. The food is chemically cooked, like sushi. Flavor: once you get past the wriggling, the tentacles, suckers, spines, tiny teeth, and tinier bones—or maybe cartilage—it's sweet and spicy. Sometimes I think we're eating seafood because of the high sodium content, and other times freshwater fish. Or whatever. But again, when I ask, the emphasis changes. And sometimes it seems like a regular noun, so are they asking me what it is or insisting that I eat it? And sometimes it has the indicators of a proper noun, so am I eating an ancestor or a descendant? It goes without saying that, in the privacy of my thirteen walls, I sometimes vomit up what I've had.

The toilets, by the way, are concave basins with raised rims, powered entirely by gravity and a surprisingly sweet-smelling lubricant. On second thought, perhaps it's not surprising; perhaps it functions as an air freshener, maybe even a disinfectant. I haven't noticed any evidence of a maid service.

Stinkfree and

Shane

- - -

Liv and let Liv,

The language is too fluid. Last night, we spoke at length about the last book. They were curious about human religions. They weren't curious about the incarnations of gods, but about the milieus. How

can we draw a line between heaven and earth, and earth and hell, or the equivalents?

We were wrong about them not having a written language. They removed my shirt and trousers and, with a surprisingly pleasurable sensation—again, is the thirteenth digit a sexual organ?—traced what felt to be a Venn diagram on my abdomen. The syntax was unclear, but it seemed that not only are their versions of life and afterlife as fluid as anything else: one moment one might be on earth—well, Shadow—and the next, without spatial, temporal, or intellectual movement, one could be in Zion or Abaddon.

I think they are silicate creatures. Is there any covert test we could perform?

Shane

- - -

Dear Ben,

You want kink? Last night, they undressed me. Not for sex, but because they write with fingertips on skin. Circles, in this case. Well, there I was, & fore I could say boo, they'd stripped me. Well, I could've said boo, but this was new & that's the point, right? I stayed as close to the warm rock as I could. They couldn't see me, but I still didn't want to be small & wrinkly. What I didn't know was that they'd think it was a finger. & when I did, I didn't want them to think it was deformed, you know?

Drawing with their fingers—shivers up my spine just thinking about it, & the certainty of erotic dreams—they discovered my cock. This delighted them to no end. They'd made remarks that I was symmetrical—I think that's the right word, more or less, though it also has the connotation of *plant,* as in trees and flowers—& though they counted two less than I should have had, I wasn't symmetrical, or plant-like. They handed me something I'd never felt before, a type of rock, I think, dense and rough. They indicated that they were this rock & I too was the rock. Rock-hard, too, let me tell ya. They found that delightful too. But not as much as me.

Shane of the shit-eating grin

- - -

Olivia, my repressed nymphomaniac,

Sex sells, but how am I supposed to figure out the mechanics if I'm blind? Cop a feel? They did to me, but—remember the fruit?—I have absolutely no means of asking about or distinguishing sexual or asexual reproduction. I can't even tell the difference between my hosts.

Shane

- - -

Dear Ben,

I told you I never saw evidence of a maid service or anything, right? But I know they come into my room. A few days ago—they don't even have a word for *day*—after the orgy, I came into my room and tripped over a statue that wasn't there before. It fell over with a wicked noise, so I hurried to lift it & found that it was impossibly heavy. It wasn't very big, maybe the height of my knees. Still, I couldn't possibly hope to move it, but then, as if gravity had suddenly shifted, it was light & I could lift it easily.

I found ten more of them in my room. One in my bed. My dreams that night were, um, intense. I had to wash the sheets, know what I'm saying?

Here's hoping I ain't stuck on you,

Shane

- - -

Dear Olivia,

I think I'm in trouble. Something's wrong. I should've told you before, they've discovered my penis, which made them happy. Before, they didn't like that I had an even number of fingers. But now, while it's in an odd location, they've accepted me as a person, not a child? pet? plant? insect?

Which led to a discussion of sex, you'll be happy to know. I had to let them learn as much as they wanted, which made me tremendously uncomfortable. But after, we talked about sex. I didn't

want to say that it wasn't a finger, because then maybe my status would go back to knick-knack. I tried to explain that it was in an odd location because it had a specialized function; but they don't have a word for specialized, for single, for unique.

The translation I gave them was something like this, I think: 'My odd finger vomits genetic material into another's emptiness.' Do I need to remind you sex organs and gender seem meaningless? Then I said, 'What was empty bears fruit.'

Shane

- - -

Sweet Olivia,

They've taken me to their gods. We should've had this for the last book! I had to swear a thousand solemn oaths that I would not reveal what I discovered.

Fat chance, right?

I've gotten quite used to this stick: tappity-tap-tap-tap. Is that too much? Will it read well?

Have I written about the bricks that line all the roads? They sound solid against my cane and when I kneel, as if I'm making obeisance to the stone, they're rough like my beard. I'm afraid to shave. I don't need a mirror—who's going to judge whether my hairline is regular?—but I have this irrational fear that I'll sever my jugular. Or is it carotid? When I first learned to shave—have I told you?—my father insisted I learn to use a manual razor. It was one of those things he said men should be able to do. Anyway, I cut my upper lip. It didn't really hurt, but it seemed to bleed forever. I must've used a roll of toilet paper. But that was nothing compared to the bleeding I've done today.

The path—they assure me it is not a road per se, not a coarse, unfeeling, changeless, leading-to-nowhere road, which is a rough translation, but a *path,* all the symbolism implied—was made of the same stone as the gods, though I didn't notice on the journey there. And what a long walk too. Somewhere, something burned with a thick odor. I swear I couldn't get enough oxygen.

I thought their cooking methods were indicative of Prometheus' absence, but now that I know they have the ability to ignite fires, does that mean that they've never discovered food can be cooked by fire?

Is fire purely symbolic? If so, of what? No doubt they have a dozen or more words for various sensations associated with fire—blue or white flames are substantially hotter than red coals—but as this is the first time I've experienced this, I've no linguistic matrix.

The stone and gods. I'll try to explain. Find a steel ball or marble, or better a steel or marble brick, and find the equivalent volume of lead, or better yet, gold. Lift the steel in one hand and think *This is heavy this is solid this is real.* Put it down. Pick it up. Repeat until your muscles burn and your shoulders ache. Think how heavy it felt. How real. How can anything be any more solid than this. And then lift the lead or gold. Do you see? Ha ha.

Their gods are made of stone. But it's a kind of stone that makes the cobbles or bricks feel positively ethereal. When I struck them quite gently with my cane—I was told it was not sacrilegious, I think—I felt as if I'd swung a baseball bat against a tree trunk. And rough! I'm typing this with my left hand only, as the mere laying on of a palm to the graven image has flayed the meaty part of my hand to ribbons. They've rubbed a salve on and bandaged the skin with a substance that feels like snot and binds to the blood and bone and whatever remains of the skin. I can no longer peel ribbons of flesh and the bleeding has ceased, but my hand feels as if it will permanently retain that pins-and-needles feeling.

Ecstatically yours,

Shane

- - -

Ben,

I can't tell Liv this yet. She wouldn't believe me. She'd be convinced I'd inhaled or swallowed some drug or gone completely mad.

We seemed to walk up & down entire mountains, seemed to ford chest-deep, fast-flowing rivers, crossed entire deserts of burning sands & through an arctic cold that lasted what I would've sworn encompassed the entire moon. Whatever they were burning was some strong stuff. We don't know anything about them except that they seem as a species to be aggressively agoraphobic. Maybe they're not. Maybe we've seen them all the time and don't know it.

Maybe they've got some sort of instantaneous transport system. In the myth book, there was that hoity-toity physics guy who thought alien visitation, miracles, that sort of thing could be explained with a variation on an ansible. All that math to show it was easier to move a littler package from one space to the next than a bigger one. The readers loved the bit where I came back with a bowling ball and a ping-pong ball and asked if I could have a job now.

What is curious, and deeply disturbing, is that as I've wandered the length of my room, which seemed generously sized after a 'liner bunk but now feels small as a prison—and sometimes I dream of stone scraping on stone and believe, for a moment, that the walls have inched inward as I've slept—is that the stone, which was rough but no more so than granite, is now—at times and in very small patches that disappear when I seek them again—as serrated as the stone gods.

Maybe I am mad.

With cackling laughter,

Shane

- - -

Liv,

I think there's a problem. I didn't think about it until later. It's night and I'm awake and can't sleep. I miss the sun. But the sun's like fire, right?

It dawned on me that the fire was a test. It was so close to the paths and it didn't make any sense that it should be there. But I could easily avoid it without a hand or my stick. Do you understand what I'm saying? They don't have a word for day, but they have a word for fire and it's very, very bad.

Scared Shitless Shane

- - -

Dear Ben,

I think I've misinterpreted something. Remember I said that emphasis on the fourth syllable implies a negative? I don't think so. Or maybe sometimes. Anyway, I think it actually means sacred or

holy or something like that. So emphasis on the second and fourth syllables would translate as *Is [noun] sacred?* But since the same emphasis means sacred and not, there's no way to ask if something isn't sacred. So what does that mean? Anyway, that would explain their interest in the mythology book.

Shane—Who the hell else would it be?

- - -

Dear Shane,

I believe we should call this off. You've got enough material for a book. And what the hell. Even if it was thin as Martian air, people would snap it up like that just because no one else has ever so much as stepped foot on Shadow.

Olivia

- - -

Damned Olivia,

No! I absolutely insist I stay the duration. Did I tell you something was amiss? No, I don't believe I did. There are only twelve stone gods. Why? Where is the thirteenth? I believe there is a linguistic trick. The religious nomenclature is fluid; we might discuss one god and then, with no break at all, another name will surface. That's an entirely appropriate verb, by the way: without sight, words seem to float, sometimes coalescing and other times scattering into fragments, like a diagrammed sentence suddenly exploded into nouns, verbs, adjectives, all without syntax or context. And then later, the first god—if it was a first, and not another avatar or incarnation of the same god—will breach and send the first or second or twelfth name spiraling into the murky depths of sentences and paragraphs from several minutes past.

Tonight I follow the fires. Where is the thirteenth god? I will find him. Her. It.

Traveling man,

Shane

- - -

Beloved Olivia,

We grieve the Sacrifice. We envisaged his transgressions. He forfeited his existence in the mode of the symmetrical.

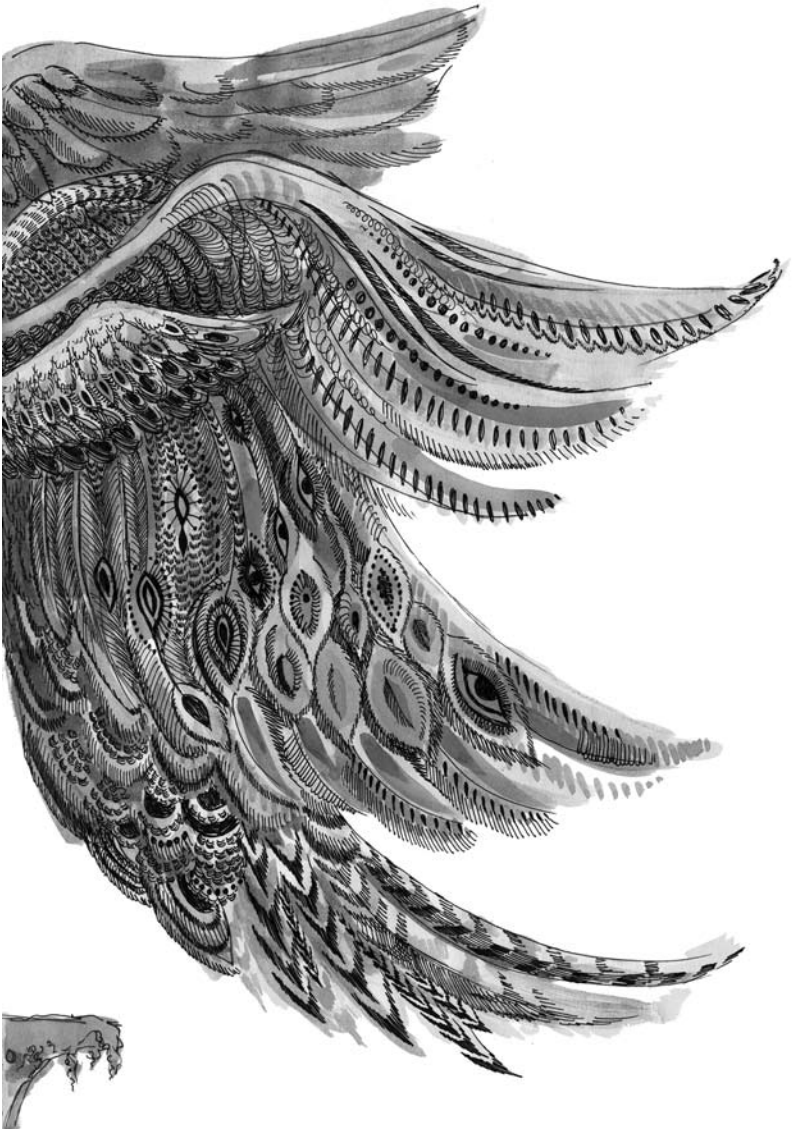
We earnestly anticipate his electromagnetic recording appliance is exclusively attributable to his deficiencies and not to any others of your species.

His relics are attached to this epistle.

Sincerely,

Shades

The Prophet: two figures



Ilona Taube

Fear Not Heaven's Fire

Jaine Fenn

Despite my good intentions, I have sinned, Lord. I have spoken to a man.

It was this morning, soon after Prime. I had run out of wool, and the other sisters were in the fields, taking advantage of the early spring to sow corn and beans. They would not have known if I had just let the distaff drop and sat idle in the sun, but I try to be good, truly I do. So I went to fetch more wool. I felt my way along the stones of the church, out of the cloister and crossed the outer court to the granary. The sounds around me told me the wind was shifting: the trees were restless and I could no longer hear the sheep down the hill.

As I edged back down the granary steps, I heard something. I thought it must be a stray goat or sheep, broken through the fence into the outer court, so I stopped at the bottom of the steps and waited for it to give itself away. After the initial rustle, there was silence, and I walked on. Then I heard a small sound of pain, quickly stifled. It came from under the granary. I turned and went back to stand by the steps. I could feel the chill on my legs where the wind blew through the open space under the granary floor.

'Is someone there?'

No answer. Perhaps only an animal then. But I was not so sure.

Remembering how one with sight would react, I twisted the unspun wool into a tight knot within my skirts, then bent down to put my head below the level of the raised floor. The breeze blew the smell of damp earth and rotting corn into my face. Someone shifted in response to my movement, and now that I had my ear at their level, I could locate them by sound. They were in the corner, against the hurdling that protects the space below our food store from the worst of the rough weather that blows in from the north and west.

'I will not hurt you.' I did not think as I spoke how little a threat a blind nun might be.

'Please, I need water.' The voice was weak, but male. Somehow I had not thought it would be a man. Yet this man had the sweetest voice I had ever heard. Even parched and in pain, it was a voice better suited to singing than talking. The sound of it made me dizzy, and I reached up with my free hand to steady myself against the steps.

'It....' I tried to remember myself, to stay calm. 'It is our duty to help all God's creatures.' He made a sound then, something like a snort, but I carried on. 'Please come out; I will try to find the almoner. She will give you food and water.'

'No. I can't come out...into the light.' He sounded afraid.

'You are hurt?'

'Yes. No. I am...resting. Hiding.'

From the law? We have offered sanctuary to fugitives before, though the Thane's men are apt to disregard the sanctity of hallowed ground when it suits them. 'You will be safe here. Let us tend your ills—'

'I am not badly hurt. But...can you bring something to drink?'

'Of course. But will you not come out?'

'I cannot.'

I straightened and turned. I knew I should go and tell the others about our guest. But they were in the fields; they would be back soon enough, and I could tell them then. So I went to the refectory, filled a pitcher with watered beer, and carried it back to the granary.

When I returned, I leant down and balanced the pitcher against one of the stone columns that support the granary floor. I could hear nothing of our visitor, though I was sure he was still there.

'How did you lose your sight?'

The loudness of his voice startled me; he had moved to the front of his shelter.

I started and sat back on my heels. 'A foolish accident.' I was not used to hearing compassion from the lips of men. It disconcerted me.

'Ah.' He saw the lie; his voice said so. But he did not pursue the matter. I heard him reach out, heard the scrape of pottery against stone as he took the jug. For a moment I felt a strange warmth and smelt something other than damp and rot, something like honey or blossoms.

'Will you come to the almoner now?' I asked over the sounds of him slaking his thirst.

He made a sound of appreciation, somewhere between a sigh and a smacking of the lips, and when he spoke his voice was stronger. 'No. It would not be...appropriate.'

'But men are forbidden here, other than those being given healing or charity. If you are in need of either, we can provide them. But I cannot leave you here alone in the dark.'

'I am cursed.' For the first time, his voice faltered. 'I.... If you could see me, you would run from me.'

I thought of the rare times when strangers had come to us, and how I had heard in their voices, and felt in their movements, disgust at the ugly ruin of my face. He had given no such sign. 'I understand. But....' I let my voice trail away; I was not sure what I should do.

'I don't want to cause you trouble. If you could bring food and ale for a day or so, until I am stronger, then I will move on.' He sounded desolate, as though he had nowhere to go, no aim nor goal nor hope.

I wanted to comfort him, yet I stayed where I was. I know my vows well enough. 'Yes. It would be un-Christian to do otherwise.'

I heard him move back into the depths under the floor. 'And I'm sure you are a good Christian.'

Was that mockery in his voice? Sometimes I imagine too much. 'We are a House of God here.'

'And what is your name, little sister of God?'

'Elfleda.' As I spoke, the chapel bell rang, summoning me to Terce.

I heard him turn away. 'Go to your prayers, Elfleda.'

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I have not told them yet. You heard the words I formed as I sat in Terce. You know my heart, Lord. I could not concentrate on my devotions, but I have formed my confession. I will tell my sisters later, when the time is right. They are busy now.

After the others returned to the fields, I took bread to him. It was my food; I am permitted a greater share of the priory's meagre wealth, on account of my infirmity, but I rarely take it. Food is a base thing, a sign of weakness. If I were truly pure, I would not need it at all; I could live on the word of God and the light of the sun. But of course I am not truly pure.

He asked me to stay while he ate, and though I should not have, I sat on the earth under the granary with him. He kept his distance, and I felt no threat from him. I could smell his sweet scent over the dark smells of the earth. He asked about life in the cloister, and about my devotion to God. He seemed to find such devotion strange, and I asked him whether he were not a Christian. He certainly had a strange accent, and if he were—God forbid—a Northman, he might also be a pagan.

'I lost my faith.' His reply shocked me, but allowed for no further discussion.

He showed no desire to talk about himself, nor how he came to be here. When I asked his name, he said I could call him John if I wished, as though he did not much care what I called him. I admit, Lord, that I found a certain pleasure in speaking to him, in holding his interest. I do not know what category of Sin that may fall into, but as You-Who-See-All must know,

I defended my faith and my calling, and made no improper remarks nor gestures. But when I told him of the priory's holdings, of our small parcel of land, he said, 'So fertile ground is precious, no?'

'Of course. We praise the miracle of life and food coming from the soil.'

'What of this soil, then?' I heard him thump the ground, and felt the fine vibrations of his touch on the earth.

'I do not understand.'

'This soil, through no fault of its own, is hidden. The sun never reaches it. It never brings forth fruit. Is that not a terrible waste?'

Again that tone of mockery. This time I knew what he mocked. Anger rose up in me.

'Do you think we are fools for denying our flesh?'

'I did not say that.'

'But it is what you meant. If you have lapsed in your faith, that is not my fault. My faith is strong.'

'Your faith in a virgin, and a God you cannot touch? What of your faith in people, Elfleda?' I heard him shift.

'People are fallible. They sin.'

'And did you ever forgive those who sinned against you?'

I recoiled slightly, not only from his words but from his hand, which he had raised to my face. I felt his heat, as though I had walked into an unexpected shaft of sunlight. 'I remember them in my prayers.'

'That is not what I asked.'

'You cannot know....' The nearness of his touch burnt me, took away words and reason.

'Then tell me. They were men, yes? More than one?'

'Yes. I do not wish to speak of it.' Now, feeling his warmth go through me, I most certainly did not want to speak of it.

'I'm sorry, Elfleda. I did not mean to cause you pain. You should go.'

'Yes.' As I sat back, I felt the boards of the granary floor above me brush my head through my veil. How I had loved such places as a child. At that moment, I remembered something I had not recalled for many years. Once, when I was perhaps five or six, I had lain on the earth alone in my den in the woods, and, wriggling out of my clothes, had spread mud on myself like an animal. Deciding not to put mud in one particular place, I had, instead, explored it with my fingers, feeling my own warm moisture and a thrilling pleasure, a whole new world of simple joy.

I felt my face grow hot, and turned to leave. 'I will return this evening.'

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I have been dozing in the sun at the south side of the cloister, out of sight of the others. When I have spun enough to earn my keep, I sometimes allow myself this luxury.

But while I slept, my body betrayed me. Of course we sometimes wake in the night full of foul desires. It is a temptation all flesh must bear. But to have them visit me here, in the light! He makes a fool of me. I must tell the prioress about our visitor. I will tell her tonight. I must. And tomorrow, when we confess our sins, I will ask formal forgiveness, Lord, for letting my base nature take its course, for not holding back the hand that snaked by itself into my clothes, and felt my secret places, for not stopping its foul beating until I gasped out loud. And for seeing light as I did it, seeing the light that I know comes from the man beneath the granary.

I will confess, do penance, and be absolved.

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I went back in the evening. I did wonder, as I walked to the granary as though drawn by an invisible cord, whether he had bewitched me. I decided to confront him with my fears before the heat of his presence stole my will.

I put down the pitcher and plate, then asked quickly, before my nerve failed me, 'Are you a demon?'

He laughed, and his laughter was like falling water. I heard no offence in it. How could I have had such wicked thoughts of one who had such an innocent laugh?

'Not at all! And I will not trouble you for much longer, if you do not want me to.'

'Perhaps that would be best.' I sat down and shuffled into the shade with him. I was very aware of my women's parts, the small stickiness there. Perhaps he could smell the sin I had committed alone in the sunlight. Perhaps I wanted him to.

'Is it a good life, here?' He conversed as though we were friends at a social gathering, not a woman sworn to chastity and a strange man hiding under a building.

'It is easy enough, compared to the lives of those who must make their way in the outside world. And I have my faith.'

'Which I envy you.' Such talk made me uncomfortable. I shifted backward a little, to be out of his heat. 'I'm sorry, little sister. I am just curious and unused to your ways.'

'I should get back....'

'I would like to repay you your kindness, Elfleda.'

'Charity is a virtue. I try to be virtuous.'

'Still, I would like to help you.'

'I have everything I need.'

'You know that is not true. Firstly, you do not have your sight. That was taken from you, wasn't it?'

'Yes.' I prayed he would not ask me how. I would have to tell him if he asked.

His voice dropped to a whisper, yet it was loud in my ears. 'And you are not...complete. I cannot see how it is right to abstain from pleasures God gave us the capacity to feel. That is my error. To question the virtue of denial.'

I thought I must have misheard him. 'What do you mean?'

'Is denial of pleasure such a good thing? Must you be sorry for doing what feels natural to you, and harms no one?'

O Lord, I forget that others have sight! Had he crept out and watched while I abused myself? Had he seen my evil hand at its work?

Of course not. He would have had to leave his sanctuary and risk being seen by the others.

'Some pleasures are God's gifts. Others are the Evil One's temptations. I know the difference well enough.' I felt shame at the superior tone in my voice.

His voice had that mocking note again. 'Of course you do.' Then he sighed. 'Are you afraid of me, Elfleda?'

An odd thing to ask, though I was glad of the change of subject. 'No, I am not.' And it was true. He held no fear for me, only fascination. Sinful fascination.

'Would you let me help you, then?'

'I am not sure what you are asking of me.'

'Let me give you what you lack.' He had come closer again. I should move away, I knew, but I could not. His hand startled me, but he just rested his fingertips lightly on my forehead, nothing more. I felt his warmth, and smelt flowers and musk. 'Men betrayed you. I am...a man. I would like to undo some of the harm done. Think of it as a last act of kindness from one entering damnation.'

His words made no sense, but all I cared about was his presence. I stretched my neck toward him like a cat, leaning into his touch. My stomach fluttered and I felt the arm supporting me start to give way.

'No....' I murmured, and shook my head.

'The choice is yours, child.' His touch withdrew. 'This time, the choice is yours.' I heard him move back into his dark sanctuary.

I fled.

I knew then that I could not tell the prioress, could not tell another living person about the visitor, for my face would betray me and they would see the longing I would try without success to hide.

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Night is the time of temptations, the bridegroom's hour. Once I had a real bridegroom. I had been promised to a man of flesh and blood. I had seen how he looked at me, how my passing stopped his words. The Thane's son, looking at a girl of low status. I was sure Alfric loved me, and that the difference in station would not matter. I was such a fool. I took his gifts, flirted with him, held the image of him behind my eyes when I pleasured myself. I would have given him joy, and sons, and even obeyed him, mostly. But no, he could not wait. Rather than let me give freely, he had to take for himself.

They came at night, four of them, Alfric and three of his friends. They made no noise, and they stopped my mouth. But they did not cover my eyes. I had always seen well in the dark, and I knew them. As they held me down, I saw their profiles, and I knew them. One of his friends must have seen the look on my face as he leant back after sating himself; he whispered, 'She can see us!' Alfric gave a low laugh and murmured, 'Then we'll be the last thing the bitch sees,' and reached back for something. Such pain, such white searing pain, as the lime burnt into me! Shame and pain, that was all there was for a while.

The raiders from the north are such monsters, said the villagers. To come among us in the night and deflower a virgin child, then blind her. Of course, no one would believe my version of the night's events. Not even my mother believed me, and in the end she sent me here to the priory for my own safety.

So what should have been pleasure was instead pain. If I remember that night at all, I recall fear and betrayal. I try not to recall the worst of it: that if they had not thrown the lime in my face, I would not have told anyone what they had done. I would have let them have me, because to fight would have made them harm me more, and to comply would have made them think they had power over me. But really I would have had power over them. Despite their inexpert fumbling and grunting, they had not really hurt me. They were rough, certainly, but I already knew how to take pleasure where I found it, and the thrill of making them into undignified fools before my womanhood was a wicked joy. If only they had not seen me watching them, seen the recognition in my eyes. I knew them for what they were, animals at the mercy of their lust. They saw that, and they could not stand to be looked at in that way.

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I open my eyes. I feel the lids part and see the pre-dawn sky through the dormer window.

I am dreaming. I have my sight again, therefore this must be a dream.

I sit up, my head swimming, then stand, seeing the faint grey outlines of the world around me. Yes, a dream. If it is a dream, then I cannot help my actions. We are blameless in our dreams.

I pull my cloak on and walk between the beds of my sleeping sisters. The wooden floor feels real enough beneath my bare feet. After two steps I am afraid; I can see them, so they will see me. I close my eyes. Now I am in a familiar place. But as I reach the door and the chill of the pre-dawn air seeps into me, it all becomes too real, and I must open my eyes again and return to the dream.

From here, I can see two buildings. Ahead, the granary. To the left, along the cloister, the chapel. Their dark shapes loom like choices. Well, I still have my faith. Even in dreams, I am the bride of Christ, though he is a cold and distant lover. For that thought alone I might be damned, if I were not dreaming.

Mud oozes beneath my toes. I trail my hand along the outside cloister wall as I pass. It would be easier if I closed my eyes; I know where I am without my sight. But that would shatter the dream. The chapel door is heavy; it creaks. I walk up to the altar, barely lit by the vigil flame. I cross myself and kneel to wait for the grace of God, but it is not my heart nor soul that is filled with the love of Christ. It is a lower part, a baser part. The longer I kneel, the stronger the warmth becomes and the less I can concentrate. I pray with my eyes open, fearful of losing the dream. Then I realise I am not alone. Movement at the corner of my eye. I ignore it for a while, but the burning will not abate, so I stand and turn.

There is a pale figure in the aisle behind me. He wears rags, though once his robes were white as Heaven's grace. I see paleness behind him and I know the truth.

Now is the final choice. I can dismiss him and wake myself up. I can lock my womanhood away forever. If I close my eyes, I will not see him and he must go.

But it is no choice, really. I know myself truly now, in this dream. I go to him.

Everything is silent, as though I have traded my blindness for deafness. The air is cold, but his touch is the fire of the sun, flaring through every part of me. His arms enfold me and his wings refurl themselves to hide us. How can this be wrong?

For a while, he lets me bask in his touch. But I want more of him. I must complete his fall. No longer God's virgin, now I am God's harlot. I take his hand and pull it to my sex. He smiles and closes his eyes. I am giving pleasure to an angel!

We sink to the floor, kneeling at first, his hand still on me. Such fire, probing me! Waking what has slept for too long. I lean back, knowing I cannot fall. He lowers me to the flagstones. As he leans down to kiss me, the feathers of one wing dip and brush my arm. This I have renounced? This I have given up in giving myself to God? I have been a fool, when God's own messenger can come to me now, like this!

We are told that angels are beyond the flesh, neither male nor female, but through his tattered robe I see that this creature is certainly a man.

I remember the boys' rough hands and their ungainly little pricks. They were nothing; this is how it is meant to be. I lift my shift and guide him into me. At once I am filled with light, his light. Now, at last, I close my eyes, to contain the light within me. I would cry out, but for fear of waking myself.

There is a time of light, of desperate joy, and my only thought is how like beasts we are, and how this is a good thing, as God made the animals too. And it appears that even angels are animals. No grunt and fuss from this celestial creature, though. He is intense, and, it seems, a little surprised to discover that pleasure is so simple to achieve.

I would not stop until I have had my fill of him, but finally he pulls free of me, and I feel the stone floor and the chill night air again. 'Do not go yet,' I say, the first words I have spoken in my dream.

He takes no notice, just stands up and murmurs, 'My fall is complete.' Then he turns and leaves without a backward glance. He moves painfully, slowly, like a wounded beast. He will not get far. I fall back and rest a while, but the stone floor is cold and rough, so I get up. My thighs are damp with the unction of an angel. I turn back to the altar, where the vigil flame and the cross look down on me. I feel a sense of elation, and release, and no shame at all.

I wait, eyes on the cross, for God's wrath, but it does not come. So, then, this is Your will. My gaze leaves the cross, drawn to the vigil light, and I know what I must do.

He gave me what I needed. Now I must give him what he needs.

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I awoke to fuss and shouting. One of the other sisters told me to be still. There had been a fire, she said, but the church was safe. We took the first office of the day as though nothing had happened. The smell of burning filled my nose.

We had confession. The priest talked to the prioress in whispers; we strained to hear as we knelt and waited our turns. I had little to confess, other than a brief night temptation. What could not happen did not happen.

But as I stood and left, I saw brightness in the centre of my vision, and when I walked into the sunlight, the space behind my eyes pulsed red where the shadow of the cloister fell across my face. I pulled my veil closer and kept my gaze down.

As I sat and spun, the darkness and light resolved themselves, and after a while I could see the outline of the spindle. I ran out of wool just after Sext and walked to the granary to get more, half-expecting it still to be standing. It was not, of course.

Standing before the ruins of the building, I squinted at the broken, charred timbers. My sight is almost perfect now. His promise was not idle; he has indeed restored me to what I was. He has given me my vision back and, for a while, he made me a whole woman again. Though it was at the cost of the last of his grace, poor fallen creature. He was not happy here, in the purgatory of our world. He was neither pure enough for Heaven nor base enough for Hell.

Seeing brightness in the ruins, I bent down to pick up a feather. It was blackened and scorched along one side, but where the fire had not touched it, it was perfect white.

My sisters have already moved the body and will bury it tomorrow, in hallowed ground. They know nothing of their poor dead visitor, which is as it should be. Just an unlucky trespasser, they will say. They would not be strong enough to comprehend the truth, because they, unlike me, have not known what it is to be complete. And they, unlike me, have not been permitted to sit in judgement on an angel.

I released the feather; the wind caught it for a moment before dropping it back into the mud.

I did right, Lord, did I not?

Experiment: Love

Brian Conn

Experiment: Foil

Obtain a car and driver, some aluminum foil, and a roll of adhesive tape. The car should be one you wouldn't mind falling asleep in; the driver should be someone you love.

Tape up some foil inside the car. Cover the ceiling and the area around the windows. Foil crinkles easily; make it as smooth as you can.

Wait for night. Go for a drive. Doze off in back, then wake up, uncomfortable, wanting to go back to sleep. Look out the front window: you are on an unfamiliar highway. There are no other cars. Your driver knows where she is going; that's one reason you love her. Take your seatbelt off and lie down across the back seat; make a pillow of your coat. Fall asleep again.

Wake up. Feel the vibration of the engine and feel the road beneath you. Wonder where you are. See your driver in profile and trust you are somewhere good.

Watch the foil. You are passing under sodium streetlamps. The light is orange; watch it on the foil. Expect the next lamp, then the next and the next. As the car turns, watch the light turn across the foil. Cultivate the illusion that the foil is not reflecting but transmitting light, that it is not a strip of foil but a window into a silver place where orange lights flit by too quick to question. Wonder what this place is that you see through the silver window.

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If I'm going to fall in love with a woman, it is important that we start out strangers. If I have some image in my mind before we meet, it will be false, and this false image will always come between us and prevent me from knowing her.

The first time I saw Catherine, we were at the aquarium. We were both looking at the cuttlefish. She turned to me and said, "Would you eat a cuttlefish?"

I thought about it. I said, "If it were prepared by someone I cared for, then I would eat it."

"What if you were in a foreign country?"

"Yes." I nodded. "I would also eat it if I were in a foreign country."

She looked satisfied. She said, "I ate a cuttlefish in Italy."

The movement of the cuttlefish is smooth and undulating. It does not twitch and dart, as more conventional fish sometimes do. We looked at the octopus, which is related to the cuttlefish and moves in a similar way. Then she went home.

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The second time I saw Catherine, I was walking down a hot street in the middle of summer. She was standing at the edge of somebody's lawn, close to the sprinkler, so that her legs and hands got wet. It was early afternoon, right after lunch. She recognized me and smiled. She said, "Running through sprinklers is childish."

"You never get wet enough," I said. "It's too hot to do anything this afternoon."

She said, "Do you want to take a walk?"

I was surprised that she seemed to think we ought to be able to take a walk together. I didn't even know her name then.

I said, "Where will we go?"

"We can walk to the ocean."

"I don't know how to get to the ocean from here."

"Neither do I," she said. "But it's east of us. If we keep walking east we're bound to get there. Do you have anything else to do?"

I didn't have anything else to do, so we started walking towards the ocean. Soon the neighborhood became strange. I said, "I've never been here before."

"Me neither," she said. "At least I don't think I have. I forget things. In another day or two I may have forgotten you."

It was a long walk to the ocean, and we were both tired by the time we got there. We walked to the end of a pier and sat down.

Before, I had always thought of the ocean as a vast expanse in two dimensions, as a plane. I would look at the ocean by looking at the horizon and thinking of the distance. But this time I looked down at the ocean. Long, round swells rolled in, one after the other. I imagined my body fitting into each swell, and I began to think of the volume of the ocean and the mass of the waves. Catherine put her head on my shoulder.

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We fell in love and it was still summer. We went to the art museum, which was air-conditioned. The art museum enclosed a great deal of space, but only a moderate number of artworks. On a crisp white wall as big as the side of a barn, there would be three small portraits. The empty expanses made the museum seem a larger place than the world outside with its posters and billboards.

Catherine said, "My brother is a carpenter. Once, when he was remodeling a museum, he showed me how the light from the paintings actually soaks into the walls. If you look closely at an empty wall, sometimes you can tell what kind of painting used to hang opposite.

"For instance," she went on, "there was probably a Klee opposite this wall, maybe a group of them. Look at the angle the light makes on the walls—the walls remember the Klee light deep down in their cells. If you look, you'll see what I mean."

I looked at the stretch of wall, and, sure enough, I soon felt as though I were looking at a Klee. I thought Klee must have been the one who had painted the wall that eggshell white.

We played a game of trying to read what kind of paintings had hung opposite various walls in the museum. When we were ready to go, I said, "Let's leave something here together. Something small that the cleaning people won't find and throw away, but that the walls will see and remember."

"Something small," she said. "Here's what we'll do: I have some lip balm that's kind of shiny. We can leave a kiss somewhere out of the way, down low where people won't look. Even if it only stays there a month, or a week, or even a day, it will change the light a tiny bit, and maybe the walls around it will remember."

We found a narrow strip of wall, between a corner and an archway, where the light was dim and there were no paintings. Catherine put on some lip balm, knelt down, and kissed the wall, and then I kissed her until my lips were covered in lip balm and put a kiss on the wall over hers. When we stepped back, we could barely see a silvery gleam on the wall.

"It's not much," I said, "but I think it will be enough."

As we left, she smiled at me and reached for my hand. "Now even if we break up," she said, "the walls of the museum will remember us together."

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Often, when love wanes, I begin to think that I will never fall in love again, or that there is no such thing as love. Because it is hard to look forward to a life alone, I am frightened to admit that I am no longer in love. When winter came, I told myself that Catherine and I only had to keep moving forward.

A friend told me about some hot springs that he and his wife went to every year. Catherine and I made reservations at a lodge near the hot springs and rented a car. We arrived late at night, after most of the other guests had gone to sleep. After we checked in, we saw a pool table in the lounge.

"Do you like to play pool?" I said.

"Only late at night, while everybody else is asleep."

Neither of us was very good at pool, but it was pleasant to play by ourselves. It was pleasant to enjoy a public place in secret, as though there were no one else in the world. After we finished a game, Catherine said, "Do you hear a baby crying?"

"It's coming from that way," I said. We walked down a humid, tiled hallway and reached a room where the waters of the hot springs were pumped into an indoor tub. A woman sat on the edge of the tub, dangling her feet, and a man held a baby in the water. The baby was crying.

The man smiled sheepishly. "It's his first time in the water," he said. "It's only tepid."

"We've been coming here for twenty years," the woman said. "We love the hot springs. We find that the sooner we put our kids in the water, the sooner they start loving the hot springs too. We want them to love it as much as they can, so we get them started right away."

Catherine and I said nice to meet you. We went back to play another game of pool, but it was no longer pleasant, because we knew that other people were awake. We kept listening to the baby. My back and feet hurt. It grew very late and neither of us could make a shot.

"If you had a baby," said Catherine, "would you introduce it to the hot springs right away?"

"If I had a baby," I said, "I would drown it."

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Experiment: Birds

Obtain access to a large auditorium. It should have tall windows stretching from floor to ceiling, and long drapes in front of the windows. Find out when there are lectures there. Choose a lecture on a topic unfamiliar to you, one that takes place in the early evening. Write down the date and time, but do not tell anyone that you are going.

Make sure you have nothing else to do that evening. Walk alone to the auditorium, waiting patiently at every street corner until the light turns green.

When you arrive, take a seat at the back. There is still plenty of time. Use it to savor the yellow light and the bright empty volume of the lecture hall. Let the conversations of the people around you mix into babble in your ears. Pretend you are the kind of person who comes to this kind of lecture and makes this kind of conversation. Imagine the house you might live in and imagine where you might go during the day. Imagine your silverware. Imagine who you might love; look around and think who it might be.

When the lecture begins, forget love. Listen to the speaker as long as you can, then allow yourself to become sleepy. The lights are dim; there are slides. Feel the air become warmer.

Turn to look at the vertical strip of evening sky that the drapes have left uncovered at the side of the room. Notice how the sky changes from bright pale blue at the bottom of the strip to twilight blue at the top.

Watch a flock of birds fly across the narrow strip of window. They pass, each in an instant, black motes flickering in and out against the blue.

Cultivate the illusion that the window is not transmitting but reflecting light, that it is a screen on which the flickering image of birds is projected. Wonder about the source of this image.

- - -

When I am with a woman I no longer love, the thing I notice is the light. Many years later I may no longer remember her face, but I will remember the glare of the streetlamp outside her window, or the first high clouds of autumn arriving in the afternoon. Yet the women I have loved have never thought to be jealous of the sky.

The last time I saw Catherine, we were at my apartment. It

was February, a rainy afternoon; I made her tomato soup. She had a bus ticket.

"I wonder if I will remember this," she said, "the last bowl of tomato soup we eat together. I forget things, you know."

"You may not remember," I said, "but your cells will. Your cells remember everything that happens to them. You may forget that I ever existed, but the next time you eat tomato soup your cells will remember me. All of a sudden it will feel like a rainy afternoon in February and you'll miss me. You won't remember my name or the name of this city, you won't remember how I look or what we did together; you'll only remember there's someone you miss. That much is in your cells."

When it was time for her to go, she put her coat on and stepped outside. Before I closed the door, she turned around. "I have an idea," she said. "We'll both keep moving to different cities—we'll keep moving and moving. We'll get new clothes and new haircuts, maybe glasses and tattoos. We'll keep moving and changing until we've forgotten each other completely and would never recognize each other anyway. But sooner or later we'll accidentally move to the same city and happen to pass each other on the street, and then our cells will remember. It will be as though we were seeing each other for the first time, but we won't walk by, because our cells will remember that we can fall in love."

She walked away and I closed the door. I wondered if it might happen that way—if we might meet again on strange streets, as strangers, nothing left between us but the faith that we could fall in love. I wondered if it might. I sat down to watch the dusk, but the dusk seemed unfamiliar.

Anything

Matt Bell

Sitting on the toilet, I gently kick her once, twice, three times in the ribs. She doesn't move. I don't know what I'll do if she wakes up, but if she stays unconscious, well, then I've got an idea.

I'm in the bathroom of someone else's studio apartment. Outside the door there's a party going on. I'm here because my friend Raquel is here. I don't know where she is now. I don't know the host or anyone else, not even the girl passed out on the floor. I've only met her once, earlier this evening. She was drinking champagne straight from the bottle in long gulps, all night long, so when I saw her go into the bathroom, I didn't think much of it. I didn't feel anything either, except for irritation. Because of what she'd done to me. Eventually I noticed that she hadn't come back out, so I wandered in to check on her, only to find her passed out on the floor.

And now? Well, it's like I said. Now I've got an idea what to do with her.

- - -

The party is being thrown by a friend of a friend of a friend. The host is an artist of some local fame, his huge canvases dominating the room and separating the party into segments. The first time I saw the girl, she was standing under a twenty-foot-long oil painting that looked like the floor of a parking garage, all grays broken with dirty puddles of black and streaks of yellow. I had no idea what it was supposed to be.

This girl, she caught my attention, first because her red gown clashed with the painting, then because she looks a lot like Raquel. I even thought the girl was Raquel at first—she had the same blond hair piled on top of her head, long, the same skinny limbs, the same small, cone-shaped breasts.

When I walked over and said hello, I could see the girl checking my qualifications to talk to her, my résumé in full view and up to date: a dark blue suit from a good tailor, an open-necked shirt underneath in a cool but complementary off-white. I have a good haircut, straight teeth. She took my hand, her small fingers draping over my larger ones.

"Good evening," I said, releasing her hand and smiling.

"I don't think I know you. Is this your first time here?"

I nodded. "Is it that obvious?" I looked around. Everyone was talking like old friends. Raquel, the only reason I'd come, was nowhere to be seen, but she was probably just on the other side of one of the host's canvases. It's frustrating how she brings me to these parties and then just disappears.

"It's usually a pretty exclusive group," the girl said, knocking back another gulp from her champagne bottle. "But since you're here, you might as well introduce yourself."

"Oh, sorry. I'm Greg." I offered my hand again, then put it back down, feeling awkward.

"I'm Nadia," she said, tossing her head slightly, causing one long blond curl to tumble down the side of her face. "Who are you here with?"

Nadia was intimidating in a way that was hard to define exactly but probably had to do with the way she held herself. She gave off the impression that no one was good enough for her, that those perfectly-sculpted hips were forbidden territory, that breaching the hollows within would require a monumental siege of time and money. Neither of which I wanted to spend, especially not where Raquel could see me.

How would I describe what I am? Safely. "I'm a friend of Raquel's," I said, searching for her again, watching Nadia nod in recognition. Raquel's done a couple of big shows recently and she's starting to make a name for herself in the city. She paints erotic still lifes. As in dead people fucking. The only time I ever asked Raquel what the paintings were all about, she told me that sex is beautiful and so is death, and that when beautiful sexy things die, well, that's the most perfect thing of all. I don't know about all that, though her paintings sell well enough that I suppose she must be on to something.

Raquel...she says she's obsessed with death yet she's never known anyone who's died. She thinks that lack of knowledge hurts her work, but she also just finds the fact of it tragic. Maybe it is. I wouldn't know. Raquel's a pretty odd girl, but always up for pretty much anything.

Actually, now, here in the bathroom, I'm counting on that. This just might be the chance I've needed.

- - -

When I was talking to Nadia, Raquel was still nowhere to be seen. "She appears to have left me on my own."

"Is that a problem?" Nadia tilted her head, smiling, her eyes sparkling until they were obscured by the upward tilt of her bottle.

"Doesn't seem to be." Seeing her drink reminded me of the martini in my hand. I raised it to my lips, drinking so deeply that my olive banged lightly against my teeth.

"So what do you do, Greg?"

"I'm a broker. Wall Street."

Nadia laughed, but not in a funny way. "And what are you doing here again?"

"Raquel's a friend of mine. We used to date." And still would, if only—

"I'm surprised she brought you here. You're so out of place." The smile on Nadia's face turned bored, dismissive. "I mean, what could you possibly have to talk to anyone here about? Stocks and bonds? How great the NASDAQ looked today?"

She said, "How dull."

She said, "I've got to go. Enjoy the party."

Nadia stumbled as she brushed past, leaving me to stand there watching her, hating her with every swing of her hips, wanting to throw my glass at the exquisite little space between her exposed shoulder blades.

I restrained myself, finishing my martini. From across the room, I watched her get drunker, watched her flirt with art boys ten years younger than me dressed in ratty clothes and bad haircuts. Stinking of pot. I watched her touching their arms, kissing them on their cheeks. They were worthy and I was not.

I watched until I was sure I'd seen it all before, and then I went to the bar for another drink. And another.

- - -

Nadia's lower half is sprawled awkwardly on the ground, her dress pulled up to expose how well-formed her legs really are. The fabric over her chest is pulled tight, her breasts straining to get free. I don't touch her.

I'm tapping my cell phone in my hand. Thinking, thinking, and finally smiling.

I kick her again, but this last time carries no charm, at least not for her. She remains motionless, passed out. Oblivious. Perfect.

I bend over and pick her up. Once her feet are more or less on the ground, she moans as her head rocks back too fast.

If she wakes up, I'll drop her on the floor and walk out.

She doesn't. I bury her face in my shoulder and head for the bathroom door, dragging her out into the apartment. A few people look at us, none of them Raquel, who's still out of sight. No time to look for her now. I'll call her later. She'll be interested in this, I'm sure.

- - -

No one tries to stop me as I take Nadia from the party. Why would they? So far, I haven't done anything wrong, not really. The apartment is on the fifteenth floor, so I push Nadia into the elevator and prop her up against the wall. The whole way down, her body slumps against mine, limp and flaccid, in stark contrast to my own.

Drooping in my arms, Nadia is closer to me than Raquel was on the way up. In fact, we're more intimate this way than Raquel and I have been in years.

By the time I get her outside and into a taxi, I'm excited, sure, but also angry. I'm so sick of women who think they're goddesses, just because they have perky tits or a flat stomach or a penchant for painting.

No more.

- - -

I get Nadia upstairs to my apartment and prop her up on the couch. She's stirring a bit, but still pretty much passed out. There are noises coming from her exquisite little lips, but nothing that qualifies as words or sentences.

I take off my suit jacket and head into the bathroom. Opening the medicine cabinet, I consider my options. Potential winners. Margins of loss. Decisions, decisions.

One bottle of Vicodin. Fifteen pills, oblong, white, 500 mgs. Side effects may include light-headedness, dizziness, sedation, constipation, nausea, and vomiting. Prescribed for a racquetball injury last summer.

One bottle of Zoloft. Twenty-six pills, oblong, baby blue, 50 mgs. Combining with alcohol may cause depressed respiration and blood pressure. Prescribed for depression, feelings of low self-worth.

I don't take the Zoloft anymore. It took the edge off my emotions. It dulled me.

- - -

I go back into the living room. Nadia's head is tilted back. Her legs are positioned knees together, ankles apart. She's snoring, just a little.

I head to the kitchen, where I take a candy dish out of a cabinet and set it on the counter. The pills clink against the glass as I empty each bottle in, the blue and white tablets mixing together.

I make myself another martini. I'm out of olives, so I slice a lemon and twist one wedge into it, savoring the procedure. I return to the living room with my drink in one hand and the candy dish in the other. I sit down on the low coffee table, facing Nadia.

Even passed out and drunk, she's still pretty hot, long elegant fingers spread wide on either side of her hips, her neck extended backward to her head, pushing her tits up. She has a silver choker on. I like that.

I slap her. She moans. I slap her again. She tries to talk, fails miserably, her eyelids fluttering. I grab a handful of pills out of the candy dish and shove them in her mouth.

I say, "Swallow."

She doesn't. I hold her jaw shut with one hand, pinch her nose with the other.

"Swallow."

Finally she does, her throat convulsing for air, gulping down the pills. I have to repeat this several more times before she's swallowed them all.

She's passed out again when I let go of her, her head slumping down toward her chest. I stand up, looking down at her. Pull my cell phone from my pocket.

I dial. The phone rings.

- - -

Like I said, I know Raquel because we used to date, a long time ago, when I first moved to New York. We were both freshmen in college, both newcomers to the city. She was beautiful and smart and made me deliriously happy. Unfortunately, she was also an art student trying to be taken seriously. We lasted six months before she moved in with some guy with a beret and space for canvases. Raquel said he was good for her art, leaving unsaid the fact that I wasn't.

That would have been all right, except that by then I was absolutely in love with her. We've managed to stay friends throughout the years, and I've never been sure if that's a curse or a blessing. I still

can't tell, because every time I see her, I want her to be mine again.

Tonight, for the first time, I see a way to make that happen, if only she'll answer her phone.

- - -

Finally, she does.

"Where the hell are you?" she says, obviously irritated with me.

I say, "Where am I? Where were you the whole party? I never saw you at all, and you brought me."

"Jesus, Greg, I figured you could handle yourself. I ended up in the bedroom with Angelo."

"Who the hell is Angelo?" I mean, obviously, he's an artist, with a name like that. I don't think I've met him, though.

"He's the guy who's throwing the party." Oh. "Where are you?"

"My living room. You should come over."

"Why? The party's just really getting going here. I mean, it's only midnight."

"Really, Raquel, you should get over to my place. You might find it interesting. I mean, as far as your art goes."

"No offense, Greg, but what the hell does your apartment have to do with my art?"

I say, "Dead people, right? That's what you paint."

"Yes...." She's hesitant. Confused. Of course she is.

"Well, that's quite the common interest we share. I'm killing someone. Like right now."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"You'll see."

"I don't know what's going on, Greg, but I'll be right over, okay? Don't do anything stupid." The phone clicks and I put it down on the coffee table.

Stupid? Of course not. This is the smartest thing I've ever done.

- - -

An hour later, me and Raquel are sitting on two of my kitchen chairs, except we're in the bathroom. Nadia is naked now, propped up in my bathtub, facing us. Her breasts are moving up and down, very, very slowly. She's having trouble breathing.

Raquel's shaking her head. "I can't believe you're really doing this," she says, sipping from the martini I made for her. "Wow."

I check my watch and say, "How long do you think it'll take her

to die?" I'm looking around for my cigarettes. They're in my pants pocket. Good. I light one for Raquel, then one for me.

"What did you do to her again?"

"Two or three bottles of champagne. Seventy-five hundred milligrams of Vicodin. Thirteen hundred milligrams of Zoloft. Stripped her naked. Put her in the bathtub."

"Wild. I've never seen anyone die before."

I say, "I thought you'd like this."

"Yeah. But why her?"

I say, "She deserves it."

I say, "I did this for you. I wanted us to share something special, something for just you and me." Raquel doesn't say anything right away. We sit and smoke quietly, watching Nadia. I tap ash into the bathtub, some of it falling on her naked thighs.

"I've seen her at Angelo's before. Snubbed you at the party, I take it?" Raquel smiles, leans over. She takes a long look, then reaches up to fix an errant strand of her own hair, like Nadia's a mirror, like she sees herself in the other girl's face. "She's pretty."

"Yeah, well, not for long." My voice is calm, controlled. I know what I'm doing.

Raquel stands up, starts to leave the room. I tremble at her touch when she runs her hand through my hair and says, "Mind if I get my camera?"

- - -

Raquel takes a picture of Nadia every ten minutes. She tells me that she hopes there are minute differences between the photographs so she can paint a series of portraits of Nadia dying. Her next exhibit—she tells me she'll call it something special, name it after some private joke we shared long ago. I'm pretty sure she's kidding, but it still makes me smile.

- - -

When Nadia finally dies, it's completely anti-climactic. Around three in the morning, she just stops breathing. Me and Raquel, we've propped her up on the edge of the bathtub, sitting on either side of her. We're leaned over, close, listening to her final, shallow gasps. Our fingers are wrapped around her wrists when her pulse stops. Her body is still warm, clammy from its struggles to keep breathing.

For a moment, we both look up at the ceiling as we place her gently in the bottom of the tub. I think somehow we were expecting

to see Nadia's soul leave her body and rise up through the ceiling. We don't see anything, but I know I would have liked to.

I leave Nadia in the bathtub and walk Raquel to the door. She kisses me goodnight, on the lips for the first time in years, then she says, "Thank you. No one has ever done anything like this for me before."

I tell her, "Now that we've shared this, we can share anything."

She kisses me again, tells me she'll call me later in the day. Her fingers brush down my arms as she walks out, giving me goose bumps and sending a pleasant chill down my spine.

I smile the whole time I'm in the kitchen washing the martini glasses and the candy dish and putting them away. I smile while I fold Nadia's dress on the bathroom floor. I place her shoes on top of it, her panties underneath, and put the empty pill bottles next to the sink.

I even smile as I lie in bed, waiting until morning, when I can call the cops and report Nadia's suicide.

I'll tell them, I brought her home from a party because she was too drunk to drive.

I'll say, Yes, she wanted to fuck me, Officer.

I'll say, Sorry, I don't mean to talk that way about the dead, but Christ, the poor girl was practically gagging for it.

No, we didn't have sex. I told her no. We went to sleep instead.

When I woke up this morning, she was dead in the bathtub. I can't believe she took all those pills. It's tragic, really.

You know how these artists are. They're scared, sad people, with feelings of low self-worth. It's terrible what can happen when someone like that is rejected. Just terrible.

I'll say, If only she could have found true love, Officer. Then maybe this wouldn't have happened. And yes, Officer, I really do believe in true love, and I believe you have to be willing to do anything to make it happen in your life.

Anything.

Torso twenty-one

Christopher S. Cosco

Women of the Doll

Nisi Shawl

Josette admired the countertop's sheen while she waited for the desk clerk. Black marble, veined with green. Like endless Niles etching dark and fertile deltas, she said silently to the stone. Like malachite feathers resting on a field of night.

The surface was interrupted by a white rectangle sliding towards her: the charge slip for her room. She signed dutifully. It would get paid; it always did.

The clerk had hair like black rayon. Her smooth brown face was meticulously made up, copied exactly from some magazine. "Twelve-thirteen," she said. "Elevators are across the lobby to the left." Then she noticed. "Oooh, how cute! Does she have a name?"

Automatically, Josette tried to tuck her doll further down into her handbag. She wouldn't go.

"Viola," Josette told the clerk. She settled for pulling a bright blue scarf over Viola's long woolen braids. The painted eyes stared enigmatically from a cloth face caught midway between sorrow and contentment. "I love her very much."

"I'll just bet you do. Can I hold her?"

Josette didn't want to be rude. She ignored the question. "What time does the gift shop close?"

"Six p.m."

Plenty of time to get rid of her luggage first. She wheeled her bag around and started towards the elevators, crossing alternating strips of that same wonderful marble and a whispery, willow-colored carpet. "Enjoy your stay," chirped the clerk.

Mirrors lined the walls of the elevator. Once that would have been a problem, but Josette had reached the point where she could make an effort and see what pretty much anyone else would have seen: a woman with a soft, round face, short, curly hair, a slim, graceful neck. Breasts rather large, hips, waist, and legs like a long walk through the dunes. Blue cotton separates under a dove-grey woolen coat—knits, so they wouldn't wrinkle. Golden skin, like a lamp-lit window on a foggy autumn evening.

There was nothing wrong with how she looked.

Room 1213 faced east. Josette opened the drapes and gazed out over parking lots and shopping malls. Off in the distance, to her

left, she saw a large unplowed area. A golf course? A cemetery? The snow took on a bluish tinge as she watched. Dusk fell early here. Winter in Detroit.

There was a lamp on the table beside her. She pressed down on the button at its base and fluorescence flickered, then filled the room. A bed, with no way to get under it—less work for the maids, she supposed. An armchair, a desk, a dresser, a wardrobe, a TV, and a night stand. Nothing special, nothing she hadn't seen a thousand times before.

She sat on the bed and felt it give under her, a little more easily than she liked. Her large handbag, which doubled as a carry-on, held a few things to unpack: a diary, a jewel case, handmade toiletries. Bunny was scrunched up at the bottom. She pulled him out and sat him next to Viola on the pillow. He toppled over and fell so his head was hidden by her doll's wide skirts.

"Feeling shy, Mr. Bun?" she asked, reaching to prop him up again. She knew better than to expect an answer, with or without the proper preparations. Bunny was a rabbit. Rabbits couldn't talk. Anyway, he wasn't really hers; he belonged to Viola.

The clock radio caught her eye. Three red fives glowed on the display. Oh no, she thought, and rushed out, leaving her doll behind. Probably Viola wouldn't care. She might not even notice. Certainly she'd be safe alone for just a short time.

Josette made it to the gift shop with a minute to spare, but it was already closed. Frustrated, she stamped her foot, and was rewarded with a stinging pain in her ankle and a lingering look of amusement from a passing white man. She ignored both and quick-stepped back to the elevators.

There was a wait. The lobby was suddenly filled with people, mostly men, mostly white, mostly wearing name tags. A convention of some sort. She let a couple of cars go up without her, but when the crowd still showed no sign of thinning, Josette resigned herself to riding up in their company. The amused passerby joined her load just as the door began to close.

The elevator stopped at nearly every floor. The men all stared at her, surreptitiously, except for the late-comer, who smiled and was quite open about it.

There was nothing wrong with how she looked. She stared right back.

He was tall. And thin, not all slabby like over-bred beef. A runner's body, nervous and sensitive. He wore black sweats, actually

sweaty sweats, she noticed. His unusually long brown hair hung in curls over one shoulder, held loosely in place by a rubber band.

His smile broadened. He thought he was getting somewhere. They were on the tenth floor. All the other passengers were getting out. "Join me for supper?" he asked.

"I'm sorry, I have so much work," she murmured politely as she edged through the closing doors. Tomorrow, Sunday, would be the best time to find her place here. Before that she'd have to go through the papers, eliminate and prioritize the ads, consult a map.... Not much time for that if she got involved with a client. She located the stairwell and walked up two flights to her floor. He was attractive, though.

Everything was just the way she'd left it.

She opened up her toolkit on the bed and added recently-scavenged supplies: rum from the airplane, salt-packets from various restaurants. From her handbag she took the small jar of urine she had collected this morning. She was ready.

Salt first. Between the bathroom and the bedroom, there were surprisingly many corners. Josette put a square of toilet paper in every one and dumped a packet of salt into the center of each square.

Next, she swept down the walls above the squares with her rum-sprinkled whisk broom. Little bits of dirt and straw and flakes of dislodged wallpaper fell into the salt. She picked up all the debris and flushed it down the toilet.

She turned on the tap at the wash-basin, splashing her fingers through the water till it ran as hot as it was going to get. Which wasn't very. But she was used to that. She let the sink fill while she added her other ingredients: brown sugar, which melted into the warm water like sand into glass, golden piss, and a swirling white cloud of perfume.

She soaked a hand towel in the mixture, wrung it out to dampness.

"Now I will cut the green myrtle tree
To build a bower for my love and me...."

Her voice was high and clear, and sweet as the scent of her wash-water. Getting down on her hands and knees, she began to sponge the room's royal blue carpet, continuing:

"Rose in June, rose in June,
I will enjoy my rose in June...."

- - -

She built her altar in the center of the room. It didn't take long. She used the round table from in front of the window, covering it with her shawl. Between the printed wreaths of lilies, roses, and forget-me-nots, she laid out the stones: a moss agate from Mexico, a white egg-shape covered with barnacles from Whidbey Island. Polished, flat, black, red, rough, round, brown, the stones and their stories circled the cushion where Viola sat, a new white votive candle at her feet. A bowl of water before it trembled with light as Josette struck a match. The candle spat and crackled, flaring up, dying down, then steadying as the wick pulled up the melting wax.

"Is it safe?" Viola's voice was dry and whispery, cloth rubbing against cloth.

"Yes, honey, I promise. It's as safe as I can make it," Josette answered her.

Viola had no neck, and her stitches were tight, but she managed to turn her head enough to survey most of the room. "Hi, Bunny." She waved to her toy where he waited on the bed.

The pearls dangling on the doll's flat chest gleamed as she twisted her stocking-stuffed body, still looking for something that wasn't there. "What about the flowers?"

"I, uhh, I couldn't get any yet, Viola honey. I'm sorry...."

"But you said we were gonna have flowers this time." The painted face showed bewilderment and betrayal. "Can't you just go out and pick some?"

Josette sighed. "No, darling. See, it's winter, and we're way up north, and—" She broke off. It was so hard, Viola was so *little*.... If she'd gone to the gift shop first instead of dawdling in the room, she wouldn't have had to try and explain all this.

She checked the clock radio. It was eight-thirty, not terribly late. "You wait here, honey, and I'll go get some flowers for us." Somewhere. Somehow.

- - -

Josette tried the bar first. From the moment she walked in, though, she knew it was not that kind of place. Grey plastic upholstery, murky purple neon. Artificial twilight trying to pass for atmosphere.

She glanced around at the table-tops. They were decorated with some sort of oversized Crazy Straws or something. No flowers.

She turned to leave. Someone was blocking her way. The man

from the gift shop, from the elevator. He was smiling again. "Join me now?" he asked.

"I was just leaving." She stepped around him and out into the hall.

"Right. Me too. Check out the restaurant together?"

She surrendered. "Sure." It was probably about time for another client, anyway, and he looked likely to come up with a valuable offering.

"I think it's quickest if we take the escalator," he said. "My name's Danny Woods, by the way."

"Josette," she told him, without waiting to be asked. She made sure he stood above her on the escalator, and kept a couple of steps between them. Standard operating procedure. He was wearing black again, slacks, with a dark, piney-looking green plaid shirt. As he turned to smile down from the top, she noticed with surprise how broad his shoulders were.

The restaurant's entrance, swathed in pink and gold lace, looked promising. But when the hostess conducted them to their table, Josette saw that the flowers were false. Scrap silk and wire sewn with sequins. She made a show of examining the menu. Dramatically swooping script filled the pink cardboard pages.

Her eyes met Danny Woods'. "See anything interesting?" he asked her.

"Yes," she admitted. "But nothing that I really want."

He grimaced, but his gaze stayed steady. He folded up the menu and laid it on the table. "You know, this"—he tapped the pink cardboard—"is just a list of suggestions. You're not bound by it, not by any means. If you know what you want, you should just say—"

A young woman in a pink uniform and shimmery gold stockings came up. "Good evening, and welcome to Chez Chatte." Her voice squeaked and see-sawed, like a five-year-old in high-heels. "I'm Dee-Dee, and I'll be your server this evening. Have you made your selections?"

"I'll have your Caesar salad and a bowl of the minestrone soup," said Danny Woods.

"And for the lady?"

"Flowers," said Josette calmly.

"Flowers?" repeated Dee-Dee. "To eat? I'm not sure I.... Where do you see that on the menu?"

"I don't," said Josette. "But I would very much appreciate it if you could bring me some."

Dee-Dee backed away from the table. "I'll have to ask," she explained apologetically, then fled to the kitchen.

Danny Woods smiled a quick smile. "What's that make you, a floratarian?"

"No. I'm just not hungry, is all. Jet lag. I'll order out later."

"Where you from?"

"All over. And you?" she added quickly. It was a little harder than usual, but she managed to get the client talking about himself, his aims, pursuits, goals, methods of achieving them. Danny Woods was a building design engineer, which as far as she could tell was an architect, except that architects were to be despised. He was here for the conference on appropriate technology. He had a presentation to make, a red Camaro, at least three credit cards, and a secure position with a Boulder-based consulting firm.

He seemed genuinely interested in finding out what she did for a living. She told him fund-raising. Freelance.

His soup came. He ate it quietly and she slowed the pace of her questions to let him. He offered her bread, buttered it for her, touched the inside of her wrist somehow as he handed it over. Warmly, deliberately. He wanted her.

She decided he would do.

Dee-Dee brought her flowers with his salad: three red roses in a crystal bud vase, presented with professional aplomb on a white dinner plate. Viola liked lilies better, but these would certainly serve to fulfill Josette's promise. "Thank you," she said. "They're lovely."

Dee-Dee beamed. "From the breakfast trays for tomorrow," she explained. "Are you sure there's nothing else I can get you?"

Josette shook her head, but Danny Woods was nodding yes. "Actually," he said, "I think you ought to just wrap this salad up to go and bring me the check." He turned to Josette. "That all right?"

"If you pay for it? Sure, thanks."

The rest of the second floor was deserted. As they passed the empty function rooms, Josette caught glimpses of the shallow arcs of gleaming chair-backs scalloping the darkness, of ghostly white tablecloths beneath hollow urns.

He pressed the up button and they waited silently. He touched her wrist again just as the elevator chimed.

Inside, there was no one except for their reflections. She didn't look.

He was reaching for the controls. Josette put her hand over his, pulled it away from *16* and made it push *12* instead. "You can

see me to my door," she told him. Probably that would be all right. But Viola wouldn't want him to come in.

"Yes," he said. He raised her hand to his mouth and lightly grazed her fingertips with the edges of his teeth. Then he continued down the side of her index, gently scraping against her skin, his warm breath a whispering echo of the caress. At the juncture between two fingers, he touched her with his tongue.

Josette was very still. Seconds passed and she remembered how to inhale. She got in a couple of hurried breaths, and then he kissed her. His lips were soft, barely brushing her passive mouth, then inquiring into the corners, sweet and strong and sudden and sure, sure that she would accept his offerings and take him, take him away from himself. And she could, she could do that....

His hands stroked the wings of her shoulder blades as if they were covered with angel feathers, and she shuddered against him and let go of the vase. It thumped down onto the elevator's carpeted floor and tumbled away, making soft bumping sounds. The bell chimed and the doors rolled open. Josette stepped back from Danny Woods. There was no resistance.

According to the indicator, they were on the eleventh. A short man in a beige suit got on. "Banquet level," he said, facing the front.

"But we're going up," said Danny Woods. Josette knelt to rescue the flowers. The short man watched her. She could tell, even with her back turned. The doors slid shut and they started back up without a word from him.

The vase was unharmed. The roses were still so tight, almost buds, that they were none the worse except for a little lint. If she got them in some more water soon, they would be fine. She stood. The beige-suit man looked away.

The bell chimed for the twelfth. Josette got off, with Danny Woods following. "Oh," said the suit to the closing doors, "this is an up car, isn't it?"

They walked in silence through two turns and a long, straight stretch. At the door to 1213, Josette turned and spoke. Firmly, she hoped. "I'd better not invite you in."

"No?" The self-assured smile got backgrounded.

"No," agreed Josette. She wanted, for the first time, to tell a client the truth. "I have—" She hesitated and he finished for her.

"—a lot of work to do. I understand. Me too."

Josette nodded. It was easier than trying to explain.

"You still gonna be here tomorrow? Tomorrow night?" asked Danny Woods.

"Sure. We could get together then."

"There's a banquet—"

"Oh, no," said Josette. "I have other plans. But afterwards would be nice; say, nine o'clock?"

"Okay, I'll say nine o'clock." The grin was in the foreground again. "Where?"

"Your room."

He gave her the number. He was going to kiss her again, but she already had her key out, and she was inside closing the door before he could do more than decide to try.

The white votive burned steadily, putting forth an even globe of light. Viola leaned forward as Josette walked towards the altar with the roses. "Oooh," the doll said. "How gorgeous! Are they soft? Let me touch them." She reached out one stocking-stuffed hand, but Josette reached past it and rubbed the red roses against Viola's cheek. "Mmmm," she said. "Those are nice. Thank you, Aunt Josette."

Josette refilled the vase with warm water. She recut the stems, too, with the knife from her toolkit.

When the flowers were in place on the altar, it was time to think about food. Almost ten-thirty. She called room service and ordered "basketti " for Viola and a salad for Bunny and herself. As an afterthought, she asked them to include a copy of Sunday's paper if any had come in yet.

She finished unpacking. Viola was in a talkative mood. She had made up a story about the house they were going to live in, and the garden they were going to grow, and all the toys and books she would have once they finally settled down.

"I have to work tomorrow night," Josette announced. Viola was suddenly silent. The votive candle crackled, the flame spurting high, then dwindling to dimness. "I *have* to, Viola. It's been weeks since we turned in a new account number, and the last two didn't have anything worth putting in a flask. Besides, I think he's really nice."

"Ok-a-a-ay," the doll said slowly. "But you're not going to do it here, are you?"

"No." Josette winced to think of the one time she had tried that. It might be better for her own security, but it had scared her doll stiff.

"You like him?" asked Viola after a minute.

"Uh-hum. He's cute. His name is Danny Woods."

"What does he do?"

"Makes houses. Not builds them, but he makes the plans."

"He could make one for us, then. With secret passages!" Viola bounced a little with excitement at the thought. It was going to be all right.

The food came while she was standing in her flannel nightgown washing out her bras in the sink. The waiter was a slim man with a moustache. He looked Hispanic, so she didn't bother trying to hide her set-up. Odds were he'd figure it for some sort of Santeria, as long as Viola stayed still. Nothing that might necessitate calling a manager. Anyway, there wasn't going to be any trouble here, not of any sort. She'd spent the evening making sure of that.

She looked at the paper while they ate. The salad was good, romaine and spinach and buttercrunch, with a honey-Dijon dressing. She had to remind Viola several times not to slurp her noodles.

"But it's fun," the doll protested. Her dry voice was querulous.

"But it's *messy* fun," Josette told her. "You'll get stained."

The want ads contained a number of good-looking prospects. Josette circled them to check out tomorrow. She glanced at the clock radio. Make that later today, she thought. It would be wonderful to be able to adjust to one time zone.

"All right, squids. Bedtime." She sponged spaghetti sauce from Viola's mouth and dressed her in her flannel nightie, a diminutive twin of Josette's own. She tucked the doll into her half of the bed, with Bunny at her side.

"Leave the candle on, please, Aunt Josette?" asked Viola.

"It's the last one. I'll have to fix another tomorrow night, when I get back."

"Oh. Okay. Well, then, good night."

"Good night, baby." She kissed her doll on her soft forehead and Bunny on his fuzzy nose and then put out the light. After a while, she slept.

- - -

Josette woke several times during the night. At last, at nine a.m., she decided it was late enough to get up.

On her way to the exercise room she found the maid, a woman barely taller than her service cart. Spanish, Josette decided. "No servicio por 1213," she told her. "Por favor."

There were separate facilities for men and women, which was a relief. Mirrors again, of course, but she knew what she looked like. What other women saw. What men saw, too, even the ones who stared. They didn't do that because of her appearance. It was something they smelled, or sensed some other way. Something they wanted and sometimes got.

She took her time with her asanas and showered briefly. She wasn't even a tiny bit worried about Viola and Bunny alone up in the room. It was clean and safe. Even if her instructions to the maid hadn't stuck, her guardians would certainly be able to prevent any intrusion. She even stopped at the Chez Chatte on her way back up. They had a continental breakfast buffet. She helped herself to a plateful of boiled eggs and muffins and carried it up to the room.

It took a while to get everyone ready. Viola didn't have any winter clothes, and Josette's wool coat was a little thin, so they had to dress in layers. Of course, Bunny didn't have anything to wear. Josette decided to leave him there. "Rabbits aren't that interested in houses anyway," she explained to her silent doll.

Josette called a cab and they went down to wait in the lobby. The black and green marble floor had been newly buffed and shimmered resplendently. Josette lost herself exploring the branches of stone rivers, of jade-filled chasms, of sap-filled veins in forests of onyx.

A blaring horn brought her back. It was the taxi. The driver, for a wonder, was a woman. A bit butch, in denim and nose-rings. White and plump as a pony beneath her denim cap. "Hi, I'm Holly," she said, introducing herself. There was a plastic partition between the front seat and the back, but it was open. "And you two are...."

"Josette. Viola." She waited nervously for Holly to ask to hold her doll. But the cabby made no comment. Josette strapped her doll into the seat next to her.

"Ready?" At Josette's nod, Holly put the cab in gear. "Where can I take you folks today?"

Josette handed her marked-up classified section through the partition. "We thought we'd take a look at some of these places. I've got a map, but maybe you know the best way to go to hit them all."

"Sure, Josette. This here's my turf."

Holly drove fast, braking smoothly when necessary, accelerating and turning as if dancing with herself. The deconstructed landscape of light poles and parking lots soon gave way to an actual neighborhood. Frame houses, mostly painted white, tried unsuccessfully to hide behind young, spindly trees.

"Used to be all elms," Holly explained. "Some places they try to keep 'em up, inject 'em with fungicide every spring. Down on campus they do that, feed the stuff in through these plastic hoses. Goddam trees look like giant junkies noddin' out."

There were three addresses in close proximity. Josette told Holly just to drive on by.

She got out of the cab at the next stop, a fieldstone bungalow with no yard to speak of, just so they could catch a breath of air. But most of what she'd circled in the paper they rolled right past: the wrought-aluminum porch rails, the train-crossing frontage, the sandstone split-level shoved up against a fried fish stand.

Late in the afternoon they came to an area of red brick houses. Josette's heart warmed itself in their glow. But there were no trees, not even immature ones, here. And one place was next to a convenience store, the other right across the street from a body shop with a chain-link fence and a big, gaunt dog. The dog barked nonstop as Holly used the driveway to turn the cab around. The angry sound followed them down the block.

They crossed a boulevard and suddenly everything was quiet and rich. Maples laced their twiggy fingers overhead. The lawns were longer, the streets and sidewalks completely clear of snow.

Holly pulled up before a beautiful house: two stories, brick, with a one-story white frame addition and an attached garage. "Are you sure this is it?" asked Josette.

"Well, yeah, and there's the sign says they're havin' an open house today, even."

"Wait here, then, please, while I check it out."

"No problem."

Josette tucked Viola inside her coat just to be sure she'd stay warm, then stepped out of the cab and walked up the winding brick pathway to the house.

Beside the door she found a round black button, a crescent of light showing where it had not been painted over. She pushed it. Faintly, from within, came the sound of a silvery gong, two-toned. Then silence. She tried it again. More of the same.

She opened the storm door to knock, then realized how useless that would be. The bell was working; she'd heard it. As she shut the storm, though, the door itself swung slightly open. "Hello?" she called. No one answered. Hesitantly, she pulled the storm open again, and the door was sucked back into place. She touched the

white-painted wood gently and it opened with a soft swish, brushing over light-colored carpet. "Hello?" she called again into the dark, still house. No answer.

She stepped inside and heard the storm's latch click shut. Instantly, its glass clouded with condensation. She stood in a small foyer. A wooden table shared the space with her and an oval frame hung on the pale grey wall above it. Inside the frame was grey too. A mirror. She would have to pass it to see the rest of the house.

Easy enough. It was a lot smaller than the ones in the weight room or the elevator. But the dimness.... Dark mirrors especially sometimes showed her other things.

She closed her eyes. Maybe she could get by like that. But that would be cheating. She wasn't a cheater, and she didn't have anything to be afraid of anymore.

She left the door and faced the mirror, which had become slightly fogged due to the cold air. Through a faint mist she saw herself, looking no different than anyone else. Because what had been done to her didn't show. No one could see whether it had hurt or whether it had felt good. Or both. No one could see who he was, the one who had done those things. She knew that now, she really did. She didn't have to see that when she saw herself, either, if she tried.

If she tried, what she saw in the reflected dimness was what had come after that, the memories that she had made, the life she'd learned to live since, as an adult. With the help of the Women of the Doll.

She had heard about them in a magazine. She'd written the magazine, but no one there had known anything. The author was just a pseudonym, a canceled P.O. Box. But that was all right. Everything was all right, would always be all right, as long as she just stayed still. And she would always stay still.

How had they found her, eventually? Not through any move she'd made. In a bookstore, in the coffee bar, the woman waiting on her had said, "You look like you could use a little extra help." At first the help had been talk. Then music, dancing, pretty things to wear. Then baths, and baths, and bells, ringing and ringing, and more baths. In salt, in milk, in chalk, in honey.

In the oval mirror, Josette saw a steaming tubful of gardenias, surrounded by women, arms reaching, hands dipping up fistfuls of soft, wet flowers. She saw herself, standing in the center of their circle,

clothed in nothing but the heavy, heady scent, the heat, the sweat, the songs they sang as they scrubbed and scrubbed and scrubbed her skin with flowers, with white, with innocence. She saw a mirror in the mirror, the one they had held so often to her face, asking her to tell them what did she see, what did she see.

Hers was the Whore's Story, and they'd shown her what to do with it, how she could sell her body and still keep her soul alive. Her soul was in Viola now. And Viola was safe; she knew how to make her doll safe and keep her from being touched.

Josette looked in the mirror and saw what she decided she would see. There was a wall behind her. She could feel it when she leaned back. She knew that it was grey. She followed the grey paint into the next room, which was carpeted in a dusty green, like lichen. Sudden sunlight fell in thick strips between venetian blinds. "Look, Viola," Josette said, pulling back her sweater coat so her doll could see. "Look, a piano!"

It was a baby grand, dark, maybe mahogany. Josette took Viola out and scooted her over the top to show her how smooth it was. The doll left no trail—a well-dusted place.

Steps rose to the right, two carpeted flights with white railings and dark, silky banisters. But Josette turned left, through an archway, into the living room. Or maybe it was supposed to be a library; along one wall, empty shelves stretched floor to ceiling. There was a fireplace, too. Flint, though. Viola preferred fieldstone.

There were prints on the walls representing something wan and ghostly. Josette couldn't quite make them out in the room's dimness. She searched for a switch to turn on the chandelier, then gave up and walked out through a different door, into another empty room with bright windows. There were four buttons on the far wall: two ebony circles beneath two protruding cylinders of pearl. She pushed the pearl stubs into the wall and the two ebony buttons shot out. And brilliance swam overhead, a whole party's worth of sparkling lights. She could see the prints quite clearly now from where she stood, lighted by the library's smaller chandelier. They were intricately frilled orchids with wide, speckled mouths.

Cream carpet, cream silk curtains, cream ceiling, arched and florentine with cherubs. This room was saved from its single-mindedness, though, by the leather covering its walls to the height of Josette's chin. Darker cherubs flourished around her here, amid tobacco-colored curlicues and sober squares.

"What do you say, Viola?" Josette asked her doll. "Me, I'm just not sure...."

She had turned left into the library, right into this place, which she decided must be the dining room. A door with a push plate led off to the right again. The kitchen?

Yes. Yellow like a daffodil. A cookstove, white-porcelained steel topped in gleaming stainless. A sleek, slumberous freezer and a stodgy upright refrigerator, both once white, currently ecru. But the counters appeared to be composed of compressed eggs, lightly scrambled. In butter. And the walls glowed cheerfully, electric saffron. And the glass-fronted cupboards, and the drawers below, and the linoleum below that. The color of morning, the color of the sun. Josette smiled. "I think...." she told Viola, "I think maybe—"

A keychain jingled loudly. From where the linoleum descended in narrow steps came other metallic noises: the springing slide of an aluminum door-closer, the heavy, brassy tumble of an opening latch. A woman's voice started out muffled and grew suddenly clearer over the sound of an opening door. "—ay in the van, sweetie, I'll just be a second, all I have to do is turn off these lights I left burning—" Footsteps scuffed quickly up the stairs. Then a woman stood at the top, auburn head bent as she dug in her purse. She hadn't seen them yet.

"Don't be scared," said Josette. "Hi."

The woman froze, then peered up through her fine red hair. "Uhh," she said, "okay, I'm not scared. Especially since I've got a gun in here, and it's loaded, and my boyfriend's right outside in the van. So I'm not scared, thanks. So let me ask you what the hell you're doing in here?"

"A gun?" Josette hugged Viola tighter. "I...I was just looking. The door was open, and I'm interested in buying—"

The woman flung her head back and smacked her forehead with one hand. "Baby-jesus-son-of-mary!! *That's* what I forgot. I thought it was just the lights. I left the goddam *door* unlocked." Josette backed away as the woman walked briskly through to the dining room. "Excuse me, but I—" Her voice became too faint to hear as she moved towards the front of the house. Josette followed slowly. "—dinner with his folks, and we're already late. Get that switch for me, will you?" she said, coming back into the dining room.

Josette nodded and turned off the chandeliers. A snowy twilight replaced the glare, gently washing away all contrast. Josette

decided she liked it better this way. Though maybe candles would be best. "How much do you think they'll settle for?" she asked, trying to sound casual.

"Didn't you just hear me saying? It's sold. Closed yesterday morning. But the ad was in, so I left the signs up and had the open house anyhow. Good way to meet people."

Josette felt her flimsy hopes crumpling like foil. "They closed? On a Saturday?" Her voice sounded high and tight. "Don't you still have to get the mortgage approved and the title searched and... and stuff?"

"No mortgage. Cash." The woman rummaged through her bag again. "Here's my card. Julie Saunders." She handed it over. "Sure, there's a chance things will fall through, but I wouldn't waste my time holding your breath. Maybe I can help you find something else, though. Give me a call." She noticed Viola and eyed her suspiciously. "You got kids?"

"No."

"Good. Makes it easier. Well...." She paused meaningfully.

"Okay. Thanks." Josette turned and walked through the cheerful yellow kitchen, down the four steps to the side-door landing, and out. This was not going to be their house. Her eyes hurt, and walking down the concrete drive made tears spill over and fall out, warming her face. She had a pack of Kleenex in her bag. Back in the cab, she dug it out and scrubbed away at her cheeks, still weeping. "It's sold already. Let's go."

"Hey," said Holly. "Hey, listen. It wasn't the right one." The cab was in motion. The house was already behind them, out of sight. "I mean it. I mean, if it hadda been the right one, you guys woulda got it, right? But it wasn't. Really. Honestly now, was that place, like, *perfect* for you?" She waited long enough for Josette to realize she ought to answer.

"No."

"'Course it wasn't. 'Cause there's someplace better, better for *you*, somewhere down the road."

"You don't...you can't even begin—" Josette cut herself off before she said something inconsiderate. Holly was just trying to help her with that tacky taxicab philosophy.

"Oh, yes, I can." Holly pulled up at a stoplight and turned around to face her, dim and multi-colored in the sodium and traffic glare. "See, my ex is just about done with her doll. Housemaid's

Tale, that's what *she's* got. We're still friends, and she's been telling me stuff.... I'm gonna miss her when she goes...."

Another initiate. Only the fifth she'd met since leaving the temple—well, heard of, anyway. "Oh, Holly, oh, that's wonderful. I'm sorry—"

"No, it's cool. But see—" The light changed and she swung around to drive. "See, you gotta *know* it. You're gonna find your place, Josette, and it's gonna be kickass, just absolutely swollen.... How long you been on the road?"

"Four years."

Holly absorbed that in silence for a short while. "Right. So you're closin' in on it now, see?"

Josette tried to see. Then she gave up and just looked out the window.

- - -

The candle guttered, burning low. Spurts of sooty smoke rose and disappeared. Josette's skirts swished silkily against her bare legs as she spun before the altar. "Ooh, pretty," Viola said. "Do it again."

"Not now, there's no time. We've got to get you tucked in before I go."

"Please?" The doll's sad painted eyes were hard to resist. Josette twirled once more and her skirts swirled out: crimson, amber, viridian, waves of ocean blue. "All right, Miss Muffet," she said as she stopped, "off your tuffet." She swooped Viola up in her arms and waltzed her to the bed. Gold tissue floated from her head, caught and wrapped and tied around her arms and breasts in careful knots.

The doll was unusually silent as she helped her into her nightgown and tucked her in with the already somnolent Mr. Bun. Josette thought at first it was because of the candle, which was just about out.

But as she bent to kiss Viola's cheek, she saw a fold, a worried wrinkle in the spot between where her eyebrows ought to be. "What's wrong?" she asked.

Viola's soft red lips twisted. "Auntie Josette," she said, her dry voice filled with dread, "you're not going to let him *hurt* you, are you?"

"No, darling. I'll never let anyone hurt me. Never, ever again."

"That's good." The doll settled back on her pillow and the flame went out.

Josette glanced at the radio. Eight minutes till. She liked to be reasonably prompt when dealing with clients. It made it easier to keep things on a professional footing. She picked up her toolkit, slipped her sandals on, and headed out the door to work.

Danny Woods' room was on the sixteenth floor, three stories up. She took the stairs to avoid crowds. And so that she could stand on a landing and sing:

"Was down in the valley,
The valley so deep,
To pick some plain roses
To keep my love sweet...."

The echo was surprisingly mellow, for all that concrete. Not to mention the metal railings.

"Let it be early, late, or soon,
I will enjoy my rose in June...."

She opened the fire door and there he was, waiting, a silhouette that loomed against the dim hall light. His hair was loose and fanned out in long curls past his waist. Josette smiled coolly and walked forward. It was like moving into the shadow of a fir tree on a moonlit country road. Keep going, she told herself. That's how you reach the light.

"I heard singing and I thought it must be you." He turned so they were standing side by side and started down the hall. She could see his face, the grin.

"Am I late?" The door to his room was propped open; they went in.

"No, I got back early. Didn't want you to have to stand around." He nudged a green-cushioned stool out of the way and his door slammed shut. "Want the heater on? Window open?"

"I'm fine, thanks." The room was a double. A brown hard-shell suitcase and a camera occupied the far bed. Josette sat down on the end of the near one and set her toolkit near her feet. The spread and the carpet almost matched. Rose and burgundy.

This was always the hardest part. Sometimes the client knew exactly what he wanted. Sometimes he even knew he would be paying for it, though usually not how much.

At least Danny Woods had heard of the Women of the Doll. Josette brought them up right away, while he poured her out a glass of pineapple juice from the vending machine. She sipped the sweet, tinny stuff politely and listened to him as he tried to explain.

"They're a secret organization—" he started out saying.

"No. Not secret. Hidden."

He sat on the footstool and cocked an eyebrow at her. "There's a difference?"

"A secret is something you can't tell. By definition. If you can tell it, it's not a secret. Never was."

"Whereas hidden just means hard to find. I can appreciate that. Okay, so they're hard to find, and they help women in some sort of trouble, different kinds, I guess. And the women they help... do things for other people. For a...um, consideration."

"Donation," Josette corrected him.

"And we're talking about this right now because you're...."

"It's tax-deductible," she told him. "501(c)(3). Religious and charitable."

"But, Josette...." He reached for her, then stopped himself.

"Danny. In return I promise I'll give you *everything*. Whatever you want." Except her suffering. She would not be made to suffer, ever again.

"'Everything'—in return for what?"

She opened up the kit, got out the terminal. "I run your card through this and you sign a blank authorization form. Just like they do here at the hotel."

"But Josette, that's...that's stupid, I can't do that!"

"Sure you can. Think how proud your accountant will be." She patted the bed beside her. "If you don't think it was worth it, when the bill comes, tell the bank it was a computer error. Give them a different figure. We won't contest it."

"Never happened before, hunh?"

She shook her head. Her veil rustled. The sound seemed to draw him. He reached into his pocket and brought out a worn leather wallet.

"I must be crazy," he said, handing her his Visa. His hazel eyes pleaded with her to tell him he wasn't. He had an awful lot of fight in him, to be thinking even semi-rationally after this long in her proximity. Josette wondered where it came from. She took his card with a casual scrape of one short nail against his palm, and still he stared at her, unbelieving. "Am I really doing this?" he asked.

"You won't regret it," Josette promised.

While waiting for the account to clear, she asked him what he wanted. Often the direct approach worked best. He seemed reassured

by her question and answered it with one of his own. "Simple version or the complicated one?"

"Either. Both." She set out her work-candle and lit it. Then the incense.

"Okay." He crossed his ankles and clasped his hands loosely between his knees. "The simple version is I want you, as much of yourself as you're willing to share with me at this time, in this place." Viola, she thought in sudden panic. He wanted to get at her doll. But he didn't, couldn't know. He went on. "If this is how it has to be for now, that's fine. It's a limited setting, but a definite improvement over the escalator at O'Hare, or the limo stand outside that place in Berkeley, the hotel with the Edward Hopper hallways. Or that florist's in Madison, or—"

"You've run into me before?" Had he built up some sort of resistance over time?

"Right." He held his hunger back, clasped it in with arms crossed below his knees. "The complicated version...I can't...can I touch you? Or do I have to use only words?" He held out one hand, keeping it fairly steady in the air.

"All right." She wasn't going to figure him out any other way.

He stood up and ran his palms lightly over the gold veil. "I want to...I want—" He tugged the veil back and bent to kiss her hair. His breath circled gently in, gently out, whispering among the tips, warming the roots. Hot on her crown, then spiraling down to her forehead, feathering the fringe. The slightest touches of his tongue drew points of light along her brow and outward, vanishing. Then his lips were firm, pressed full on the center.

"Ahh," she said. A sound like a snowdrop blooming early.

"That, that," he murmured. "Yes. Josette...." He sank down beside her on the bed and used his chin to brush aside the fabric where it drifted around her neck. A river of delight ran down to the hollow above her collarbone and collected there. He lowered his head and lapped it like a deer. She sighed and melted against him, soft as heated honeycomb. "And this, Josette...." he whispered in her ear. He swept his tongue out and around in a circle behind it, searching. He found the spot and washed it patiently, faithfully, through her hisses, cries, and trembling sobs. She came, her voice arching high, trying to describe to someone, anyone, the pitch of pleasure's peak.

"That," he said, lowering her gently to the bed. "That's what I want. In a moment, I'm going to want you to give me more."

Josette stirred weakly on the rosy coverlet. He'd received some of whatever he was looking for, yes, but unless she got him to make an offering the temple labs could accept, she'd have to bring about a really spectacular healing. No other way to justify the Women of the Doll charging him more than her expenses.

Usually she was able to cure her clients of some unintentionally inflicted childhood wound. That's why they never argued over her rates. Only how could she concentrate enough on him to sort out the source of his troubles while serving up the kind of responsiveness that would keep him satisfied?

She watched him while he untied her bodice-knots with patient hands. The fingers were surprisingly strong, the knuckles scarred white in his uneven tan. Her golden tissue unwound in satiny profusion around her on the bed. Her breasts, fully exposed to her client's gaze, waited stoically for his touch. Instead, his hands slipped around her waist, resting comfortably in the curves. "Ready?" he asked. She nodded and his hands slid under all four waistbands, then spread to stretch the elastic. They cupped her buttocks as she lifted them, obedient, and let the filmy colors slide below.

Carefully, he raised her sandaled feet and freed them of the fallen skirts. "I wish you could see yourself right now," he said as he knelt before her on the floor. She didn't tell him that she didn't need to. She knew what she looked like. Mirrors. There was one on his closet door.

Her sandals were coming off. That was it; nothing left. Now he could fuck her. But Danny Woods stayed where he was. He lifted her left foot and sucked the bone of her ankle, so hard, so vulnerable, her whole life so forlorn.

Like leaves his fingers brushed up against her calves. He spoke. "Can I get you to turn over? And you'll probably want to move a little higher on the bed." Those were the last words he uttered for an hour. She had an orgasm in the back of her left knee, another, longer, in the right. Another one six inches up from that. Mounting to heaven like a lark in the morning, each height feeding and leading to further exaltation. Of which she sang.

When he stopped, the spread beneath her was sodden, dark as the carpet. "Thank you," he said. "My dear."

Soon she was able to move again. She turned on her side, facing him. He was still half-dressed. Beyond him, the candle burned steadily at half its height. In its half-shadow, she saw his shy grin, dog-teeth gleaming.

What should she do? Asking hadn't worked, and she wasn't getting anywhere this way, either. She smiled back sleepily, let her eyes flutter shut, and turned away, nestling her shoulders against his broad, bare chest. He hesitated hardly at all, then wrapped his arms around her, cradling her towards him.

Keyed up as he was, feasted on her arousal, it took her quite a while to bring him down. Bit by bit, though, he relaxed around her. She timed her own breath, shifted the intervals slowly, lullingly, set her heartbeat rocking both their bloods, stilly, stilly, stepping over seconds stretching longer, longer...till at last her client slept.

Cautiously, she opened her eyes, then shut them back up tight. The mirror on the closet door—the lights were off and her work-candle burned low. But maybe the dark reflections could help—she'd never tried before, but maybe they could show her someone else's story, the story of Danny Woods.

She slid off the bed quickly so as not to break the slumber. Slipping around to the far side, she peered over her sleeping client's shoulders, into the shadowy surface confronting her. In there he was young, very young. Only a little boy, with a look of stubborn, customary loneliness. Around him, the room's dimness swirled in shapes like angry screams. Nothing more specific showed itself, so she gave up, resuming her place on the bed.

Rough childhood, Josette thought. But there's a fair chance he knows that much himself. She wasn't going to get away with more than a couple of hundred for tonight, and no offering. Not enough for the temple to break even after her expenses. Not unless she at least got her client's pants off for him.

She let loose of the slumber. Her client stirred, but didn't waken. Resistant, was he? Perhaps she'd been too sophisticated in her approach. She focused, made adjustments upward. Her sweat sharpened, breath hardened—not with delight, but with dirt-simple demand. A calculated grind brought her the contours of good news; through sleep's light draping, Danny Woods had responded.

Suddenly his hands held her shoulders, twisting her clumsily face-down. The too-soft mattress shifted as he came to his knees, bore left and right as he stripped the denim off one leg, then the other. Then he was on her, kneading and nipping, urging her haunches higher. The sheath, she had to check the sheath, make sure she still had it in place. She freed one hand, felt the rolled rim, numb among her sensitive wrinkles, and braced herself once more, barely in time.

Without a word he thrust inside and worked away. Fierce, not fancy. Without a word, but soon not silently. Strange, muffled grunts, snuffles, snorts, and growls came from him as he rose and fell, rose and fell. The pace increased, as did the noise, and Josette risked another look in the closet mirror. Her heart jumped shut as she found and met them there, those yellow, glowing eyes. Held them, poised for flight or fight, those wild eyes of the beast. And stayed still, gazing as her blood slammed back through, opening its accustomed gates. Pulse pounding, she considered pretending not to notice the eyes, with pupils slit, not round, and the fur roughening her client's silhouette, already pretty vague within the mirror's frame. Without, his skin still seemed smooth and relatively hairless to her touch. It—he—obviously didn't expect he would be seen this way. After a short, puzzled pause, he went back to his business. He made his offering and collapsed with her in a fairly graceful heap. From there he fell into another sleep, this time his own.

She lay and rested on her back a while, feet up, knees held loosely to her chest so she wouldn't lose a drop. Throughout it all, she'd felt no threat. Once she'd checked to find him unchanged outside the mirror, the fear, like dry ice, had evaporated, leaving no residue except an odd chill and a lingering curiosity.

She glanced at the work-candle. It still had a little more to burn. Should she tell her client about encountering the beast? She wasn't exactly sure of their relationship. Was the one the other's curse? Or totem animal? Was Danny Woods possessed, or just lost in a story he had no idea how to tell? A sudden tide of liquid wax swamped the candle's wick and snuffed it out, deciding her. She had done enough for one night.

She rose, picked up her toolkit, and felt her way into the bathroom, where she carefully removed the sheath. Singing softly. It had, after all, gone fairly well.

"But roses in June are never so sweet

As kisses can be when true lovers meet...."

She took her oversized tee and orange tights from her toolkit's bottom tray and sat down on the stool to pull them on. Leaving the door ajar for the light, she came back out to the bedroom. Her skirts were still on the floor. She picked them up and smoothed them out, letting them hang over one arm.

"Josette...."

She turned. Danny Woods was awake. He had propped himself

up on both elbows. His hair swam over his bare shoulders, tangled currents running down the hollow of his back. "What?" she said.

"Nothing. Just...Josette."

She found the veil and rolled the skirts in it. Stuck the candle remains in a small brown paper bag, ready for disposal.

She paused at the door. What would it be like to stay with him, to hear his tale and tell him hers? A white man, but he hadn't committed any racist stupidities, at least not yet. The beast, though... and Viola. They might not like it, either one.

"Good-bye," he said, turning away.

"Okay," she said. She left.

The hallways were as murky as ever, night and day and night and day again. Outside some doors pairs of shoes stood, waiting to be polished, or stolen, or ignored. She called the elevator. It came quickly. They always did at this time of night, conventions or no.

Back in 1213, she drank a couple of glasses of tepid tap-water, loaded the sheath's contents into a cryoflask, and checked out Danny Woods' credit info. The card he'd given her had thirty-three hundred available. Low. Must be the one he'd been traveling on. She took a third, but left the line open, undecided. Maybe it ought to be more—danger pay. But had she really been in danger?

She didn't know. She was tired, and so she shut it down.

She took a leisurely shower. Early mornings, the water was hot as it ever got.

It had been a long, long night, but she got out the candle fixings anyway: lavender and lotus and mugwort oils. Baby powder. Clover seed. A pinch of earth from Milham Park, in the town where she'd been born. And a blue ceramic bowl to mix them in.

She thought again about the house that afternoon. The wrong one, obviously. Holly had been right. Only it was so long now since they had started looking. And Viola needed a home of her own so desperately.

Josette's eyes blurred. She blinked and shed quick, hot tears into the blue bowl.

Mix wet and dry ingredients with rapid strokes. One more thing, she thought, and lowered her head to the bowl. In, out, in again, she breathed the sweet, musty aroma. There.

She was in the middle of anointing the votive when a knock came at the door. She glanced at the clock radio. Five a.m. She hadn't ordered any breakfast. She ignored the knock and kept working. It

came again a short while later. This time a white sheet of paper followed, sliding under her door.

The water on the altar looked a little cloudy. She scrubbed the glass clean and changed it, then lit the new candle.

Her doll slept peacefully. Her small chest rose and fell steadily now, in the light of the low flame. It seemed a pity to disturb her, so Josette packed as much as she could beforehand.

She called a courier for the cryoflask, then picked up the phone again to order a cab for six-thirty. The dispatcher put her on hold, to the tune of Sammy Davis, Jr.'s "The Candy Man." While she waited, she gave in and read the note. Several times. It was short; all it said was, "I love you." No signature. The handwriting belonged on a blueprint, even and precise.

The line clicked and the dispatcher was back. "To Metro," she told him. "My flight leaves at eight-thirty. A.M." She gave him the hotel's address, then asked, "Is Holly driving this morning?"

"I don't know. I can take a message for her, if you like."

On the bed, Viola stirred and pushed sleepily at the covers. "That's all right. Thanks."

"Thank you for calling Rite-Ride."

Josette went and sat on the bed. "Hey, squids, you ready to motivate?"

Viola smiled and stretched her short, fat arms. Josette loved to watch her wake up this way, with the candle going. The doll's face shone with joy.

But when she saw the suitcases, she sobered up a bit.

"Do we *have* to go already, Aunt Josette?"

"I'm afraid so, darling. There's no place for us here." She paused in buttoning up Viola's pink cardigan. The buttons were white and yellow daisy-shapes. She twirled them around in her fingers while she spoke. "I think, maybe, yesterday was a good lesson."

"I was sad we couldn't get the house," Viola said.

"Yes, but...it wasn't right; it belonged to someone else. If we're going to start another temple, it has to really be our own. I think we're going to have to just make it. From scratch. From the ground up."

"Is that going to be a lot of work?"

"Probably." Josette pulled her blond mohair sweater over her head. It was big; it came down to her knees. "So we better get going. We've got enough saved up to buy some land that's really *beautiful*, maybe on a lake, even."

"Okay."

"What's the matter? You don't seem too enthusiastic, Viola."

"Auntie Josette, are you ever sorry you made me?"

She picked her doll up, cradled her in her woolly arms. "Oh, darling. *No.* Never. Before I had you, everything was horrible, just awful. I never got to smile or play, or anything. It was like I was dead, Viola. But now I'm alive, honey. 'Cause you're alive. And why would I be sorry about a thing like that?" She kissed Viola's long, black braids. "I love you, you silly squid!"

"And Bunny too?"

"And Bunny too. Now we better get you in the purse or we'll miss our ride to the airport." She got her doll to sit down in her handbag, with Bunny on her lap.

The stones were packed away. Only the votive and the water remained. She snuffed the candle, emptied the water into the sink, stuck the still-warm votive in a wax bag in her coat pocket. Wheeled her bags out into the hall.

One last look around. Nothing left behind, she thought, and closed the door on 1213.

Down to the lobby. She was going to miss this floor.

The same clerk checked her out as in. Her eyes were red-rimmed now, from tears or smoke or lack of sleep, Josette couldn't tell. But her perky smile was the same. "Did you enjoy your stay?" she asked, trying to disguise her curiosity. The cryoflask gleamed cryptically on the beautiful dark counter between them, waiting to be picked up.

"Oh, yes. Can you tell me, has the party in 1610 checked out yet?"

"Doesn't look like it. Want me to ring them?"

"Oh, no, it's too early. Just see that he gets this." The card was embossed, pearl on white. "Women of the Doll," it read. "Tell us what you want." No address. Just a phone number, prefix 1-900. She was sure he would be using it. Any messages would be forwarded to her.

A car horn sounded outside. "Come again!" chirped the clerk as Josette hurried to the door.

As she stooped to ease her luggage wheels over the threshold, she noticed a place where the marble floor was cracked. It looked loose. She pried up a small section and put it in her pocket. Bit by bit, she would build it, her own place. She and all the others. Piece by piece.

The Gods of Houston

Rebekah Frumkin

The vacation ended with Missy Elle's nose-dive into the canyon. Momma Laurent had been driving, and everyone knew Momma Laurent was no good since that deep scratch she'd gotten on her cornea weeks ago. She had to wear a huge black eye patch that obscured half of her face. Missy Elle said it made her look like a pirate, but Nixon thought she was too fat.

Missy Elle sat up front with Momma Laurent. They were in Utah, Missy Elle having decided that they could all benefit from mountain air because it was supposed to do something to the lungs. The cab was small, and Reagan kept on hiccupping. Nixon held his finger-gun to Reagan's forehead, but apparently the idiot was no longer afraid of death.

The road was narrow and Missy Elle was consumed with the mountain vista. As they wound up the crest, she pointed several times to dried trees or the occasional deer staring obliquely through the white globes of its eyes. Missy Elle was broad and beautiful. Having just eaten dinner, she was comfortable with sitting still and observing. She wore heavy coveralls and heavier makeup. When she pointed at something she liked, she always used the finger with the warped, peeling fingernail. This unnerved Nixon.

"Look at that. Would you look at it?" She pointed at a small brook meandering next to the road. She turned to Momma Laurent, then to the boys. "Are you two enjoying it?"

Reagan pressed his face to the window. "Looky," he sang. "Looky, looky, looky."

Nixon smiled. "He's making fun of you."

"Who is?" asked Momma Laurent.

"Reagan. He's making fun of Missy Elle."

Reagan snapped back from the window and raised both his middle fingers at Nixon; he couldn't raise the middles without the ring fingers joining in, so he looked pathetic. Nixon clapped.

"Idiot."

"Shut up!"

"Shut up, both of you," Momma Laurent said.

"Look," Missy Elle hummed.

She was pointing at a series of trees naked from controlled burning. "Pull into the turnout, Momma. I want to look at these trees and the valley."

Momma Laurent navigated off the road and stopped. Missy Elle emerged from the truck and stood on the very edge of the mountain, touching a leafless tree. There was hardly room enough for her to leave the side of the pickup because the cliff was so narrow. She was haloed by a break in the clouds, a thin knife of sun, her broad frame suddenly effulgent. She raised her arms and called something into the valley below her.

"Come back in the truck," Reagan said, his breath dewy on the windowpane.

Nixon rolled his eyes. He could feel a film of sweat forming on the insides of his thighs. Before leaving for the drive, he and Reagan had been eating vanilla ice cream in the motel room. He had left his unfinished bowl in the fridge and now ached for it.

As if to encourage Missy Elle to get back in, Reagan opened his door wide. It hung over the edge of the cliff.

"Missy Elle wants us to back up so she can get in."

Momma Laurent nodded, her bandaged eye blind to Missy Elle and the valley. "All ready?"

"Yep."

Momma Laurent began to back out of the turnout. The open door caught Missy Elle on the back. She wobbled, turned to Nixon and Reagan with a look of pathetic confusion, and lost her footing entirely. By the time Momma turned, she had fallen. Nixon got out of the cab, saw what was left of her, and vomited. Momma Laurent opened her door, rose from her seat, and walked to the edge of the mountain. She flattened her hand to her mouth and then walked to the road, where she kneeled, silent, and crawled about as though she were looking for something. Nixon made Reagan get out too.

"I'm goddamn freezing cold," Reagan said.

"It was your fault for opening the door," Nixon said paternally.

Reagan said nothing. He turned to his brother. He looked as though he were being made to walk the plank, a finger-gun in the small of his back.

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It had been Missy Elle's idea to adopt Nixon and Reagan. According to the adoption agency, when Nixon was seven and Reagan was almost five, they had been living on welfare in a community

north of El Paso and had experienced a shootout between a native and a ranger. Their birthmother had included this information in the adoption papers, as well as the fact that Reagan had had a stroke after birth and would always limp a little on the right side. Nixon's name was Timothy and Reagan's was Oscar, but the birthmother had insisted the boys be renamed. She felt the names she had chosen were boring.

In the mug shots the birthmother had taken, Timothy was licking his front teeth and grinning. He had a grotesque number of freckles. Oscar was sleeping. His skin was perfectly white, strangely untanned. Missy Elle had thought Timothy looked like a Nixon because he had a radish-like nose and the splotched, sunburned skin of a cancer victim. Reagan's name had been chosen by default, by the convenience of the current presidency.

Nixon couldn't remember the actual shootout, but he often had dreams about it. In his dreams, he and Reagan were walking through a pueblo. The sun was coming into the room in shafts, giving the illusion of stripes. He and Reagan were looking at a vase on a table. Before anything could be said about it, the vase started to rattle. The legs of the table buckled. Six gunshots sounded from the sky. A small, terra-cotta-hued Indian was walking bow-legged up to the ranger, who was holding a rifle. The Indian fired his automatic once. Every time Nixon had the dream, the Indian fired at the ranger and hit him in the heart. Even though he was bleeding from the chest, the ranger kept on living; he would start shooting and reloading with one of those old-fashioned pipe cleaners. He could never hit the Indian. When Nixon woke up, he always felt a dusting of gunpowder on his face.

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Momma Laurent brought out her slender cigarette holder and her nice shoes. She sat on the porch and waved when the van pulled up. She signed the certificates permitting her to be an official guardian. After the van pulled away, she kneeled and grabbed each boy's chin. It was meant as a gesture of affection, but Nixon felt like she was actually trying to steal his chin for herself.

"We have you two because we don't want men putting anything in us, even if it's only for kids."

Nixon half-smiled. Reagan blinked. He'd just awakened from a nap.

Missy Elle appeared behind Momma Laurent on the porch and grabbed her shoulders. Nixon was immediately taken by her two-foot-long mane of blond hair. He observed that they were both fat, but the blond one hid it with coveralls.

"I'm your new mommy," Momma Laurent grunted. "You can call me Momma Laurent."

"I'm your mommy, too." Missy Elle kneeled, causing Momma Laurent to jump to one side. "We don't have any daddies."

"No daddies?" Reagan asked.

"None."

"Not even the kind that leave?" Nixon asked.

"None," she said again.

"Damn," Nixon whispered. He'd wanted to go fishing.

Reagan couldn't fall asleep the first night, so Nixon had to sit with him in their room, against the wall, until midnight. They were meant to share a bunk bed shaped like a fire truck, but the top bunk carried the threat of falling off and dying. Nixon had recently discovered that he was afraid of death. To stop thinking about it, he told Reagan stories about seeing women naked. The only naked woman he had ever seen had been their birthmother, and he had discovered that she was beautiful. Her torso was a half-face with nipples as eyes and her stomach a mouth, the flattened triangle of her crotch the mysterious beard of some old count. He made their mother into six different people and told Reagan stories about each of them. They could hear groaning on the other side of the wall.

"Stop it!"

They heard the loud creaking of a mattress reacting to weight.

Missy Elle screeched and then giggled. Something hit the wall. Reagan shivered.

"Tell me about the one with the big breasts," he said.

"They all had big breasts," Nixon snapped. He was thinking about the Indian and the ranger.

"No, the one with breasts like coconuts. And they jiggled when she laughed at you."

Nixon pushed himself from the wall and retreated to the opposite side of the room. He folded his arms and narrowed his eyes in the darkness. "Do you remember the Indian and the ranger?"

Reagan was silent. Nixon could only see half of his face, but could tell he was pouting.

"Yes," he said eventually.

"Which one died?"

"It's the Indian."

"He doesn't die!" Nixon said, a little loudly. He cut his voice to a harsh whisper. "He killed the ranger. The bullet goes right through the ranger's heart."

"No. I remember. Momma took me out on the porch because we had to get that milk from the cactuses." Reagan flipped over on his back, escaping into shadow. "And there they were. And then you came behind me. And the Indian fired one gunshot but he couldn't work the gun and the ranger fired it and it hit the Indian in the brain."

"Was it sunny?"

"I don't know. How'm I supposed to know?"

It didn't matter if Nixon's eyes were opened or closed, he was perfectly blind in the growing dark of the bedroom, and all he could hear was Reagan's breathing. He extended one of his hands and gripped the top of Reagan's head.

"You're a good brother," he said softly.

In the next room, the bed moaned as if begging for something. Missy Elle was singing terribly, most of it in French.

Nixon took Reagan by the shoulders, bent forward, and kissed him on the lips. It was wet. Reagan was unprepared. He wiped his mouth on his pajama shirt and began breathing louder.

"When should we run away?" Nixon asked.

"Tomorrow," Reagan said. He swallowed heavily. "So now can you tell me about the woman with the big breasts?"

Nixon licked his teeth and told Reagan about the woman with the big breasts, about how when she laughed they jiggled in her bra like two fat coconuts.

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Momma Laurent searched for an exit onto the highway for thirty minutes, speeding the truck through Provo as though it were a shuttle preparing for liftoff. No one was behind them. She got onto the highway and passed their motel.

"Our stuff...." Nixon whispered.

"No time for stuff," Momma Laurent grunted. She smoked a cigarette without removing it from her mouth. "We don't need our stuff."

Reagan was making whinnying noises. Nixon checked routinely out the back window to see if cops would appear from inside of barns or out of meadows, like they did in movies. The road was

empty except for the perturbed grumble of the truck, which sounded strangely like a father late for work.

"You sons of bitches are murderers," she said. She was crying silently, but as profusely as Reagan. "I'd put you both on the electric chair if you weren't—what is it? Nine and almost seven."

She turned a hard right and the truck skidded into a valley. She proceeded over stones and roots, flicking her cigarette, murmuring.

"You like killing? How'd you two like to be cremated on the side of a mountain? Both of you. You're murderers of the third degree. Shouldn't of taken you two away from the big shootout. Shoulda let you get right in the middle of it. BAM!" She smiled. "Fucking Indian sends it right through you."

Nixon could feel a floor falling out from underneath him. He could feel walls folding. A house he had been sitting in was being taken apart.

"If you had it your way, half the world would fall off a mountain. You know what you said when you were born? I don't want Momma Laurent to be happy. I don't want her to ever be happy. That's what you said."

"I just wanted to leave!" Nixon said. "I was hungry. I just wanted you to pull out and leave!"

A jackrabbit dashed out in front of them and Momma Laurent sped over it. She didn't look back at Nixon or Reagan.

They drove straight up to a wall of rock, the nose of the pickup coming within inches of a limestone outcropping. Momma Laurent idled the engine and leaned back in her seat. There was a heaving noise and then a small hiss as she folded her tongue over her cigarette and swallowed it. One thousand feet of mountain loomed directly over them; above the cliff's edge was a tumorous moon like a hardened piece of tallow. Momma Laurent began to sob musically, her voice following an unseen set of crescendos and decrescendos. Nixon edged toward the front seat and put two fingers on the nape of her neck. He pulled at the thin, buzzed hairs preceding her curly hairline. Slowly, he raised his hand, began massaging her scalp.

"It'll be all right," he said.

"I know," Momma Laurent breathed. "Maybe I love you."

Nixon was momentarily disgusted, but he kept rubbing Momma Laurent and telling her everything would be all right because there was nothing else to do.

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In Nixon's dream, he named the Indian Honcho and the ranger McCormick. In this version, he was Honcho and McCormick was firing at him. There was one straight bullet in the air (this was the one that was supposed to take McCormick's life, but never did), followed by six sharp sister-bullets, all of them aimed at Nixon. The last one caught him, somehow penetrating his rib cage from beneath. He woke up startled.

"Arizona," Reagan said when he saw Nixon was awake. He was holding a flashlight by its string, shining it directly into Nixon's eyes.

"We're in Arizona?"

"She drove all night. I haven't been asleep."

"I was killed in my dream," Nixon said.

Reagan cocked his head. He had blue bags under his eyes. "But as long as you don't die in real life," he said.

They stopped only to go to the bathroom, eat at drive-thrus, and nap. They came into Houston at one twenty-five in the morning. Reagan had fallen hard asleep for ten hours somewhere outside of Scottsdale. Nixon rubbed his top two ribs, wincing in pain at the lead he imagined had lodged itself in his chest. He could feel a film of something on his face. He poked Reagan with the flashlight.

"Houston."

Momma Laurent did not get out of the truck, even after Nixon and Reagan found the spare key under the stone. She did not come in the house until the next morning, her knees weak, her face wild. Nixon could hear her walking around downstairs, straightening pillows, removing pictures from the mantle. She was making the noises of a stranger.

- - -

Mr. Maltan began coming over to the house daily. Mr. Maltan was a friend from the University of Texas, tall, with a coffee-stirrer mustache and gelled and parted hair. He always wore loafers and long, pressed pants, even if the pants weren't meant to be pressed. On his first visit, he wore pressed jeans.

"I'm so sorry," he said to Nixon and Reagan.

"For what?" Nixon asked.

"The death," said Mr. Maltan.

"It's not your fault," Reagan said. "It's mine."

Nixon looked down.

"Accept my condolences," Mr. Maltan tried, grabbing each by the shoulder.

Nixon pulled his arm away. "Momma Laurent's upstairs."

Momma Laurent came down the steps, a bucket in one hand, a plunger in the other.

"Nick!"

"So nice to see you." Mr. Maltan rose, the twang in his voice changing with his posture. "I'm sorry."

"Oh, well." She set the bucket and plunger down. "Flood upstairs. Plumbing's out."

Mr. Maltan nodded. "I see."

"I'm sorry about this, really."

"I came to pay my respects to Elle. Is everything going smoothly?"

"Could be better."

"You have an eye patch."

"An accident in the garden." Momma Laurent splayed her fingers, trying not to touch anything with soiled hands. "Everything is running smoothly. I worry about the boys, though. Elle was their North Star."

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Mr. Maltan stayed longer and longer into the night after each visit. He moved around the house like a ghost, positioning himself at the kitchen table at the earliest hour of the morning with the previous day's paper. If anyone was hungry or thirsty in the middle of the night, they'd meet the piebald specter of Mr. Maltan, still working on a mug of coffee to stay awake. When Nixon asked Mr. Maltan why he stayed up so late, he responded that Momma Laurent was vulnerable as a result of "the event."

Then he would not leave at all. After being shot by McCormick, Nixon would awaken at night to hear Mr. Maltan speaking to Momma Laurent pleadingly from the room where she and Missy Elle used to sleep. Momma Laurent's responses were always muffled by the comforter. Sometimes she giggled. Everything seemed a sorry attempt at something, the shell of an original impulse. Nixon did not sleep well on such nights.

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The funeral was on a weekday. Instead of taking the school bus home, Nixon and Reagan took the adults' bus to the stop near the funeral home. Reagan was dragging his bad foot, complaining that everything hurt. Everything hurt in Nixon's body, too. When

they got there, Momma Laurent had positioned herself in a white armchair with Mr. Maltan beside her.

Two hours into the service, Mr. Maltan craved nicotine. Nixon felt himself being pulled outside by the collar.

"Momma Laurent told me everything," Mr. Maltan said, producing a lighter from his jacket pocket.

"Told you everything about what?"

"Oh, God. You know."

In one of the windows of the funeral home, a neon crucifix glared soda-orange, the outline of Christ blinking on and off as dictated by the electrical current. Mr. Maltan looked briefly at the crucifix, then at Nixon.

"I think Reagan's too young to hear what I'm going to tell you. You think you can handle it?"

Nixon nodded.

"I love your Momma Laurent. But we all know it's not going to work out. We know that, of course."

Mr. Maltan interrupted himself to smile dully at Nixon.

"Now, Nixon, there's a story my wet nurse used to tell me before my mamma came home. It was about the Gods of Houston. She had big old bugger eyes like you've never seen, and the longest teeth and the fattest lips. She was a fuckin' cow, but that's aside the point. Whenever I used to sneak a rib from the fridge or hit the dog or break a glass in the bathroom sink, Wet Nurse would come in, her eyes wide"—he bared his teeth and widened his eyes for emphasis—"and say, 'You know, Nicky, that there's gods that live here. And they punish bad boys. They're called the Gods of Houston.'"

Nixon nodded. He looked at Reagan's silhouette in the window. He had fallen asleep on a comforter just inside the parlor, Momma Laurent rubbing his head.

"Nixon, look at me. So the Gods of Houston do to you whatever bad you've done to the world. So you steal a rib from the fridge, those furious gods, they steal a rib from you. You break a glass, they break one of your marbles. Wet Nurse had me scared for months, and I never did anything bad. She told me you could see the Gods at night, that they have crooked arms like trees and button-tight eyes and wild hair, looks like roots. And they have legs up to their necks and no body. I saw them every night, Nixon, and goddammit if they don't really exist."

He blew smoke in Nixon's face. "They tell you, don't they, boy? What goes around comes around."

- - -

That evening, Nixon watched Mr. Maltan undress in the guest bedroom. First he removed his tie, then his collar, then his shirt and cummerbund. The process was pious, as though he were trying not to offend someone. Almost completely naked, he stared at himself in the mirror and took a swig from a small gray flask, his neck muscles swelling when he gulped.

- - -

Reagan was lying on Nixon's bed when Nixon found him. Next to him was a pair of scissors and a pile of construction paper. He had been trying to make a book.

"What I did over the summer," Reagan said. His face was white. "The teacher is like one of the ladies you saw naked. She has huge breasts. They move when she talks. They moved a lot when she gave me the assignment."

"They bounce?"

Reagan nodded. "And she has hair kind of like the shingles on our roof. It's black-gray. She's real young, though."

Reagan sat up. Nixon could feel Reagan's pulse skipping in his foot.

"I'm going to write about Missy Elle for the book."

"Is your teacher going to like it?"

Reagan shook his head. He looked carefully at a picture he'd drawn of a box-shaped woman bleeding on the side of a mountain. "I used a lot of orange for this. We don't have red."

"Red runs down fast when you like racecars," Nixon observed.

"You only draw blue ones." Reagan inhaled slowly. "I draw all the red ones."

Momma Laurent turned out their overhead light, saying nothing. The door in the next room closed softly, and something began gushing with the suggestion of a shower. In the dark, Nixon could hear everything. Mr. Maltan had taken a box of cereal from the downstairs cabinet. One of the two microwaves hummed, the more sonorous one.

"Reagan?"

"Yep?"

"Promise me you won't let something bad get you?"

Reagan wheeze-laughed and tossed his construction paper in Nixon's face. "Don't be a dick," he said. He'd learned the word earlier that day.

"I'm not a dick."

"You're a dick." Reagan laughed again.

- - -

Mr. Maltan was not at breakfast in the morning. Momma Laurent made eggs and coffee from a powder mix. She set pictures of Missy Elle in the oven to be burned. As she preheated it, she explained that the process was almost like a cremation.

"He fell through the window last night," she said suddenly. "Fell right through the first-story window."

Nixon left his seat to look out at Mr. Maltan, who was asleep on the lawn. His robe was torn from the rosebushes and he was lying in the shape of a Y, one of his arms bent behind his head. Momma Laurent took the ashes of the pictures, opened a plastic bag, and sifted them inside.

"You want to know what happened? The bastard came right at me in the middle of the night. Just got out of the shower and came at me. I stood in front of the window and stepped to the side. Everything broken but that damn whiskey bottle of his. You boys will know what it's like when you get ladies. Shit, you'll wish you never grew facial hair."

Nixon went out on the lawn in his bare feet and kneeled next to Mr. Maltan, who blinked through a swollen eye at him. He tried to rise and fell backwards.

"You wanna hand me my shoe, boy? She threw it in the driveway."

Nixon got the loafer, but didn't hand it to Mr. Maltan. The curtains still waved through the window where he'd taken his fall.

Mr. Maltan took another swig of whiskey and gripped an open cut on his lip.

Reagan appeared in the front doorway, clutching a bathrobe around what there was of his waist.

Without thinking about it, with Reagan watching, Nixon raised Mr. Maltan's loafer and brought it down across his chin so hard the crack made Momma Laurent turn and drop her buttering knife. It

continued to echo, growing in volume and multiplying into distant cousins of the original sound. Mr. Maltan blinked tears from his eyes and touched his chin. He coughed out two molars.

"Are you trying to kill me?" he asked.

Nixon looked at the shoe and then at the sky, which was cloudless. He nodded.

Mr. Maltan smiled. He was bleeding from the mouth. Reagan bolted onto the front lawn, his bathrobe ballooning over his frame.

"Well, I guess that's that." Mr. Maltan said.

He stood up, sidestepped once and tripped over a rock lodged in the pavement of the driveway, fell, rose again, fiddled with the misaligned joint in his arm, and stumbled off. They watched him until he was past the last house on the block.

Nixon handed the shoe to Reagan, who took it, his teeth still working over a wayward piece of yolk. Nixon had thought Reagan would be smiling, but he looked oddly like his sleeping baby picture, tightening his lips as he watched Mr. Maltan go. Nixon stood up and cartwheeled and kicked off his shoes. He spat into the air and watched it land. He had no way of knowing that Reagan would one day stand on a cliff near Provo, Utah, spread his arms wide, and feed himself to the Gods of Houston.

A Doorbell

Kenneth L Clark

Nobody ask me the color of forgetting—
what paste unsticks from the sepia mind
which knows what's good and does so,
and does the same with the bad.

No one remember to check the invisible pens
of regret for ink—we prefer the Oregon winds
to record their own in & out, up & down
and over the rebar. Let the clouds come

down to remind Robert & Liz they were
lucky to be at her father's funeral
in Kennewick where she found time
for Stephen after drinks & the wake.

Because some of these stones took care
to straighten their aim into her kitchen
past the ghosts of glassware & iron pots
for a brass doorbell Steve gave them

four years before Robert built her
a house and filled the cul-de-sac
with the daily ache of beds, bricks
and flowerbeds, now a barefoot rubble

where leaves battle with dust balls
and onions that have unskinned on the floor,
a home where the walls were like her lips
on your own before night or morning.

In Defense of the Boll Weevil

Kenneth L Clark

Here in Dothan
I am Alabama, red
dirt fingernails
and muscadine.

Cotton fields & peanut
farms circle Southern
commerce of garage sales,
scratch-offs.

& the blue laws our indigo stomach suffers.

Here in the South,
America plays tin-can
castanets for the trampoline
brigade, lines up on farm
roads to wave hello.

Says to the cloud-cloth of October, Lay down
beside me, and hum.

I heard them say,
Let us leave Dothan
as we arrived, unbound
by the bracelets of bills
and bad planning; let us
return to the universe
we keep alone, inside
of us on travels

and between dreams
when we are not
who we want to be
but who we were.

Catholic Girls

Kenneth L Clark

It's painful
to remember girls
from Chapelle
who were known
to be loose
& carefree.

By any adjective
to me it meant
one thing:

at the lake-
front they'd
roller-skate by
or worse, walk
a slow stroll
that contained
the 2nd degree
of unavoidable
gravity.

What killed me
was how they wore
their uniforms
as if plaid skirts
and saddle shoes
lacked magic when
we knew they
had to

or last week
when I cleaned
our bathroom
& your hairbrush
free from loose
strands, & picked
up your panties
for the wash—

how the things
you have remind
me that to taste
nectar we first
pierce the fruit.

Please oblige
me one favor
and put on
this skirt

and giggle.

Item 27

Mike Procter

So I'm going through my list and I get to Item 27, "Off someone". And I can't really remember even putting that one down, but it's there on the list. And the list is sacred. I can't just start dropping things off because they're inconvenient, or there's no point in having the list in the first place. The list exists to push me to try new things. Step outside of my comfort zone.

I compromise and change it to "Have someone offed", because I'm pretty sure that's what I must have meant. I add some quotes around the word "offed" to show that it's not a real word, and I realize I'm stalling. But how do I start? Putting aside the fact that I don't even have a victim—recipient? target? target—I haven't the faintest idea how to go about finding a person in the "offing" business.

But then, if it was easy, it wouldn't be on the list.

I reconsider doing it myself. I don't have a gun or anything. Obviously, I could get hold of a knife, but I'm kind of shy and knifing someone seems like such an intimate act. I am always considerate when it comes to other people's personal space. I mime a couple of experimental stabbing motions and confirm that it's just not for me.

And what about the victim? I mean 'target'. I glossed over my lack of one but, really, the target provides the whole motivation for this type of undertaking.

Yet again I find myself getting bogged down in the details. No wonder I never get anything done.

I decide my original intention must have been to go through the exercise of arranging the deed so as to be prepared should the need ever arise. Makes a lot of sense, as this is clearly not as straightforward as one would hope.

I change it to "Research having someone 'offed'" and immediately feel more content about the whole thing. This is still an important, difficult goal, but an obtainable one.

I'm back to having to find someone in the profession of killing people. I don't bother looking in the yellow pages, although I do have to resist the urge a couple of times. How stupid would it be if the answer was there all along?

The problem, of course, is how to look for a referral without overtly advertising one's desire for the service. I get around this by way of a simple, but quite clever, ruse.

"Those movies," I say, possibly to a colleague at work, "they are soooo unrealistic. I mean, they make it look like everyone just happens to know someone who happens to know where you can hire a contract killer. As if." I can be quite a good actor.

As I expected, most people are eager to prove me wrong. I love taking advantage of human nature.

I eventually end up with an address from a guy I don't even know in Accounting. He says I can check it out if I don't believe him and I, continuing my act, respond, "Yeah, right. I'm really going to hire a hit man."

The address turns out to be for a bakery, which—I know from watching The Sopranos—is, in fact, a "front". I watch the place and wait until there are no other customers. I enter. The smell of fresh-baked pastry distracts me. Killing and cookies don't seem to go together somehow.

The man behind the counter has a no-nonsense air to him. That helps. "What can I get you?" he asks.

"I would like to enquire as to your prices to perform a certain... service," I say.

"Oh yeah? What kinda service?"

"I would like to have someone terminated with maximum persuasion."

He looks at me, confused. Then he smirks. I hate it when people smirk. Even assassins.

"You mean 'maximum prejudice'?" he asks.

"Uh, yes." Crap.

"'Cause I ain't never heard of no 'maximum persuasion'."

"Yes. Okay. Maximum prejudice. Excuse me."

"Hey, Jerry. Get this. This guy wants someone terminated. With 'maximum persuasion'."

Jerry really seems to find this hilarious. While the two of them enjoy a good laugh, I make up my mind not to give them my business. I'm very sensitive to poor customer service.

"Just give me a dozen whole-wheat buns," I tell him, not wanting the trip to be a total loss. I evaluate the tone of my voice and find it satisfactorily curt.

"Sure," he says. "Would you like those with or without persuasion?"

"In fact, make it half a dozen. After all," I move from curt to terse, "I don't know if they're any good."

He stops chuckling. The smile disappears. The lips disappear.

Too bad I don't have "Insult people who kill for a living" on the list.

He slaps the bag down on the counter. I pay him and hold my hand out for the change, but this too is dropped on the counter. I have to move fast to prevent a stray quarter from rolling away. I leave quickly.

I decide to put Item 27 on hold. I start to eat one of the buns and go on to 28: "Meet Eminem".

Huh.

Maybe he'll know someone.

Mad Dogs

nonfiction by Christian A. Dumais

The lesbians are on the bed doing what lesbians do with their clothes off.

"You like, Amerykanin?" asks one of the lesbians.

"Tak." I'm sitting a few feet away drinking a beer. My participation is not required or wanted; this is only meant to be an exhibition. I look outside the window and see that it's light out already. I close my eyes to remember what darkness is like and I feel sleep wanting to take over. I can't remember the last time I slept. I think it was yesterday, but yesterday feels like my fifth birthday—only I know this can't be true because I'm not wearing my Superman Underoos.

With my eyes closed, I can hear the lesbians, their kisses connecting and disconnecting, their sighs rising and falling, and their fingers clicking in a liquid vacuum. And while I appreciate these sounds, I can't help but wonder how it is I got here in this strange little apartment in Krakow with these two Polish women. I don't even know if I have money for a taxi back to the hotel—Do I still have a hotel room?—let alone the train home tonight.

Blaming myself for my current situation sounds easy enough I guess, but I'm not known for taking the easy way. And besides, in this case, the journey towards personal responsibility seems more important than the destination. Instead, I think of the cold bastards who took me out tonight, who bought most of the drinks that've replaced my precious blood with sweet, sweet alcohol, who disappeared one by one as the evening progressed in this dark city, and I decide to blame them.

But that's not fair, is it? If it weren't for them, I wouldn't be here with the lesbians, who are now using toys. No, I must absolve these fine gentlemen and instead focus my frustration on the organization they work for: the Secret Service.

Why did they take time out from protecting the second most powerful man in the world to completely screw up my life?

Were they under orders to doom me?

- - -

Just twelve hours ago, I was at the hotel bar charging ridiculously expensive beers to someone else's room when the bar began to fill

up with Americans. The mood of the bar altered dramatically, as if someone had opened a window to let the winter air in. The bartender—a man who had been smiling and laughing with me minutes before—served the Americans with a cold indifference.

The Polish have a genuine love for Americans, but they frown upon us when we congregate in large groups, where we're harder to influence under their hospitality. While they're kinder and more intelligent in ways we'll never properly understand, our confidence makes them nervous, which is why they'd rather deal with us individually, when we're quieter and less likely to cause property damage.

There were two groups of Americans in the room. The men in suits discreetly ordering drinks at the bar were Secret Service, in town with Vice President Cheney. The other group, who were noiser and less formal, were either college students on holiday or business people who had just discovered alcohol.

The latter group appeared to be going out of their way to proclaim that they weren't just Americans, but very important.

"It's a shame the beer's good but everything else sucks," said one of them.

"This place is trying too hard to be America anyway. Identity crisis much?" said another.

"Like this country has a chance," said a third.

The agents finished their drinks quietly and wandered away—all the while maintaining the dignity and politeness they had arrived with—yet these people remained, interrupting their myopia only to complain about the service and make fun of the locals, embarrassingly unaware that most Poles know enough English to understand the gist of what's being said. They even took the time to observe my aloofness and my clothes and label me a "Polish guy who believes he's rich," whatever that meant.

America has a bad enough name these days without this kind of nonsense. There's just too much unfocused anger floating around to be this crass. America is a brand name that's been tarnished: slightly recognizable, clearly not the same. If you're American, you see this better from a distance. It's like watching a beautiful sunset ruined by a series of massive clouds. It's just one of those sad little events that breaks your heart wider than you thought it ever could. It hurts us even though we know it represents change and that to resist it would lead to even more heartbreak. It hurts just the same.

I believe that's where all this new anger is coming from, this dissent: it comes from broken hearts.

These people—with their innate obliviousness, thoughtlessness, and tactlessness—represented everything I detest about my own people. Not that I'm better than them; I've probably done worse. But when you're the considerate American in a room full of crass Americans on foreign soil, their behavior inevitably gets reflected on you. And that might have been fine if I were like them, a tourist without a care in the world. But I'm not like them. I haven't had the luxury of enjoying the prosperity the currency exchange rate provides or the ability to take Poland for granted, with the detachment that appears to be unique to Americans, in a long time.

That part of my honeymoon ended a few months after I moved here.

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Three hours later, feeling slightly tipsy on an empty stomach, I met up with a group of agents in the hotel lobby. I was briefly introduced to everyone as the receptionist called us some taxis. There were five of them, their suits replaced with casual attire that was too light for the winter outside. Their handshakes were firm and their eyes met mine confidently.

Their ages ranged from the late twenties to the late thirties. Fashion-wise, they looked like they belonged together. However, physically, they didn't have that Stepford quality I'd expect from the Secret Service, that chiseled, squinty-eyed, three-genes-removed-from-Clint-Eastwood look. Some were tall, some were short, some were fit, and some weren't (though even the least fit could probably have hurt me badly without breaking a sweat). To be honest, they looked like frat boys. And though they no longer looked official without their suits on, they still exuded an aura of authoritativeness—a trait that most law-enforcement officers have a hard time shrugging off.

They were also extremely tired. Not only had they been working twelve-plus-hour days, they'd been doing the bar scene in Krakow the previous two nights with the same intensity they put into their workday.

"I feel like absolute shit," said Bruce, one of the agents. "I'm not doing the drinking thing tonight."

"That's what you said last night," said another agent.

"And the night before that," added another.

"I mean it tonight," Bruce said. "Christ, I can't believe how strong the beer is here."

"The beer's stronger than magic," I said.

Bruce stared at me blankly for a few seconds before saying, "Well, magic shouldn't taste so fucking good."

"It'll taste better tonight."

He gulped and his eyes appeared to water. "I was afraid of that."

- - -

I sat in the front of the taxi. Bruce and Alan, a tall agent with thick eyebrows, sat in the back. Two of the other agents followed in another taxi behind us. I told the driver where to go in my broken Polish. He nodded and gave me a thumbs-up. The snow was falling outside in huge pieces. It was by far the worst weather I'd seen in Poland. Considering the poor visibility and the taxi's high speed, the driver must've thought the weather was normal.

"What's it like living here?" asked Alan.

I turned around in my seat. "It's great. I live in Wrocław, about four hours away by train. This is my first time here in Krakow."

Bruce leaned forward. "What's Wrocław like?"

"It's a lot like Tampa, meaning it's too small to be a city, too big to be a town, and its identity relies on its inability to know what it truly wants to be." The taxi stopped at a red light. "How's Krakow been treating you guys?"

Alan said, "It's been great. The people're nice. Well, there was.... Oh, never mind."

Bruce laughed and tapped the back of his hand on Alan's chest. "He got punched in the throat on the first night."

Alan rolled his eyes. "Yeah, apparently I was saying some guy's name wrong—not rolling my r's like I'm supposed to or something—"

"It's a genetic thing, too, isn't it?" Bruce interrupted. "Either you can or you can't do it, right? Like sexual stamina."

"Right. It's genetic. So anyway, the guy punched me in the throat."

"How did that go?" I asked. "The poor bastard had no idea he was messing with people who're trained to kill."

"It's not like that, not at all. I was cool with it and I handled it well. I felt he simply communicated his concern in a poor manner. I was more worried about the other agents. Some of those guys're ex-football players and love an excuse to mess someone up. But, like I said, I was cool. Other than that minor incident, it's been great."

"A Polish girl called me a dog!" said Bruce.

"What happened?" I asked.

"The bathrooms here're fucked up. You're either a circle or a fucking rhombus or something, and I didn't know what I was."

"A triangle. Women're circles."

"I know that now, yeah, thanks. I didn't know what I was the first night. I didn't want to go into the wrong one. I ask the guys here which bathroom I'm supposed to use. Some of them say circle, some say triangle, because, you know, it's more interesting to fuck with me. I'm thinking, so it's going to be like that, is it? Fine. I'll wait it out."

It was Alan's turn to laugh.

Bruce continued, "There were these beautiful girls at the table next to us. Eventually one of them got up to go to the bathroom. So I stand up and lean over to watch her and see which room she goes in—which is a circle, by the way."

"Like we told you!" Alan interjected.

"Right, right, thanks. So anyway, the other girl at the table sees me doing this and thinks I'm checking out her friend's ass. That's when she tells me that I'm a dog. She was nice enough to say it in English so I'd understand. Loudly, too."

"The funny thing is," I said, "you couldn't tell her the truth. That would've sounded worse."

"Oh, no way! I told her, I told her. I said I didn't know which bathroom I was supposed to use. I felt like I was four years old. It was great. Some secret agent...."

They mentioned a few other "concerns" they had with the town, but, overall, it seemed impossible to dampen their enthusiasm. For every punch in the throat, there were four stories about a Polish person doing something incredibly generous. They seemed really amazed at how munificent Eastern Europe was as a whole, from the service to the women to the prices; they seemed hesitant to mention anything remotely negative about Poland.

They even had smiles on their faces when the taxi driver overtly ripped them off.

- - -

The Krakow city center was empty. The snow continued to fall, even harder. The lights turned the snow orange. There didn't appear to be many footprints. I couldn't tell if it was the blizzard or it being Wednesday night that was keeping the people away; probably a lot of both.

We walked around from empty bar to empty bar looking for a party. We finally stumbled upon a Gatsby-like green light glowing in the distance that turned out to be a pub with a radiant Heineken sign. It was one of those watered-down Irish pubs you can find in pretty much any major city in Europe, the kind that expatriates flock to in large numbers. It was a good-sized place, two floors, with a thunderous party happening upstairs. Once every ten minutes or so, we could hear singing:

Sto lat, sto lat, niech żyje, żyje nam!

Jeszcze raz, jeszcze raz, niech żyje nam!

Niech żyje nam!

There were plenty of women there, which seemed to make the agents extremely happy. In fact, the whole place was festive and warm in a way that can only be achieved on a dark winter night like that one. This seemed like as good a time as any to introduce the Wściekły Pies, or Mad Dog.

You take a shot of vodka with a layer of raspberry juice at the bottom, crown it with a few drops of Tabasco, and you have a Mad Dog. It goes down sweet and bites you at the end. You haven't experienced Poland until you've had a Mad Dog burn your throat and coat your stomach.

I ordered a round for everyone. Bruce was at the end of the bar attempting conversation with two women who looked like a Polish Betty and Veronica. He held his Mad Dog up to the light as if he were examining a large jewel. "What's this?" he asked.

"A Mad Dog," I said.

"What's it taste like?" He sensed my answer and added, "Magic?"

I nodded.

Bruce held his Mad Dog towards the ladies. "Does he speak true? Is this magic?"

Veronica grinned and tipped the glass towards his mouth to get him to shut up.

- - -

Now I've drunk with many people in my life, a surprising number of whom have worked in law enforcement. From state troopers to sheriff's deputies to diplomatic security agents, all of them share the same reckless abandon to drinking, leaving absolutely no room for anything even close to moderation. Once inebriated, they're as dangerous as they are funny, with pretty much no concern for the laws

they enforce when sober. In fact, they become dangerously human. Deputies burning property, state troopers defecating in convertibles, diplomatic security personnel sideswiping cars...it goes on and on.

While these agents shared many of those traits, minus the destruction, their way of drinking was in a category all its own, an almost Zen-like quality that made their antics charming even when they bordered on being appalling. A large part of this was because they seriously enjoyed themselves; there was none of the ingrained self-loathing I see regularly with the other agencies.

Perhaps it's because the Secret Service appears to have it made in the Federal scheme of things. There's travel, interesting people, limited diplomatic vouchers—the kind of Get Out of Jail Free card we can only dream of—and a certain attitude that doesn't appear to leave room for cynicism.

While the Secret Service is popularly known for the protection of their protectees—including the President, Vice President, President-elect, Vice President-elect, and their immediate family members, among others—another of their major functions is to investigate any crime that affects the nation's financial institutions, including counterfeiting, forgery, and credit-card fraud.

As of 2006, only thirty-five Secret Service agents had been killed in the line of duty since the agency was created in 1865. Compare that with the fifty killed in the Federal Bureau of Investigations since 1908 or the fifty-seven killed since the Drug Enforcement Administration was created in 1973 and you'll see that their casualty rate is at the low end of the federal totem pole. Since 2000, fifty-one federal agents have been killed in the line of duty; only two of those agents were Secret Service. More Secret Service agents die in one Hollywood movie than real ones do over the course of decades.

All of this isn't meant to suggest that the job isn't dangerous, because it clearly is. Most of us wish we had jobs half as interesting and twice as dangerous. But there's something about an agency as old and complicated—not to mention mysterious—as the Secret Service working with a low casualty rate that makes the whole gig seem that much cooler.

To top it all off, the men and women—at least the ones I've met—who do this job aren't out there to save the world, and they're certainly not jaded about not being able to change anything. They are incredibly practical and charismatic with little to no ego. Half the time, they're as amazed at what they're getting away with as

we are. It's work hard and play hard, performed with serious verve and respect.

They're reckless, sure, but mindfully so.

All my life I'd thought they were the Grant Morrison Justice League, and they turned out to be the Keith Giffen and J.M. DeMatteis version instead.

It's fantastic.

- - -

The Mad Dogs ended up being an amazing success, so much so that the shots replaced beer for most of the evening. By the time it occurred to me that we might have passed our tenth round of Mad Dogs, Bruce was three seats down chatting up Betty and Veronica—who had both had a sudden interest in him once he had "accidentally" revealed he was a secret agent ("I'll buy your drinks... let me get my wallet here. Oh, this? This is my badge. Yeah. This is my ID. It says 'Secret Service'. It means I'm awesome.")—and I was too busy listening to one of Alan's stories to care.

"Let me explain how it all works," Alan started. "When Air Force One or Two is coming in for a landing, the airport is shut down. It doesn't matter where. This is standard. You're allowed so much activity on the runway, but once the plane is within ten miles of the airport, everything stops. Nothing lands. Nothing takes off. Got it?"

"Sure," I said.

"So we're in Russia with Air Force One coming in for a landing. The plane's thirty miles out, I'm in the control tower—little old me—in charge of everything. I inform the guy in charge what the drill is. At such and such a distance, he must shut this and that down. At this distance, this and that. And the guy waves his hand at me and says, 'No problem. No problem.' Now, what does 'No problem' mean to you?"

"All good? I understand?"

"Oh, if only it did. You see, apparently, in Russian, 'No problem' means, Fuck you, American, I'm doing whatever the fuck I want." He emphasized each word by beating his finger into my shoulder. "The plane's now ten miles out. I tell the flight controller to shut down everything. I want every plane at a standstill. Nothing moves. Again, 'No problem.' Meanwhile, I'm watching planes take off and land like it's going out of fucking style. I'm pointing at the planes and the guy's smiling. 'No problem. No problem.' So I'm standing there at

the tower, looking out the window, watching Air Force One landing while two planes are taking off, one landing, a military helicopter armed with missiles and machine guns is flying around, and a whole squad of armed military guys are marching up and down the runway doing god knows what."

"Awesome."

"In reflection, sure, you could say it was awesome. But at that moment, I was watching my career end right before my eyes. I swear, I almost started to cry. And when that guy walked over to me, shook my hand, and invited me for some vodka later on, I wondered if my diplomatic immunity would've covered me if I'd shot the bastard down. I don't think I ever hated someone as much as I did that guy."

Bruce shouted, "Hey, is he telling you the control-tower story? Shit, man, I wish he'd let it go already. It's happened to all of us. Well, not me, 'cause I'm obviously taken more seriously than Al is." He turned his attention back to the ladies. "Did you hear? We were talking serious secret agent stuff."

That was right about when the horrible people from the hotel bar showed up, about eight of them, half women, half men. When they entered, it became clear that their behavior at the hotel had just been a dress rehearsal. They scattered, as if to conquer the place with their obnoxiousness.

"Cheney would love this beer," one of them said.

"Oh, Cheney'd love this wine," chimed another.

"Cheney would not only love the vodka here, but bathe in it with an albino orangutan before drinking its blood to honor the Great Cthulhu."

This one-upping seemed to slow time itself.

"Okay, okay, I get it! You're important!" Bruce said, too loudly. "Jesus, who are these terrible people?"

"They're the Air Force Two staff," replied Alan.

"Them? No shit?" I said.

"No shit."

"They just might be the most awful people I've ever seen," said Bruce.

Betty and Veronica appeared to be leaving.

"Please don't go," said Bruce. "I'm not with them."

They stood up together. Veronica kissed Bruce on the cheek politely and turned for the exit with Betty.

"But...but...I'm a secret agent. Doesn't that mean anything to you?" Bruce jumped up and down like a little child who's had his favorite toy taken away from him. For a moment there, it looked like he was going to collapse to his knees. He raised his fists at the Air Force Two people and screamed, "Foiled by my own people!" He then turned to the bar and ordered a round of Mad Dogs.

I noticed two extra Mad Dogs. "What happened to the rest of you guys?"

"They're married," Alan said. "They usually check out early."

"We're in it for the long haul," Bruce said. "None of this half-ass bullshit." He pushed the extra Mad Dogs to Alan and me. "It's time to find the next party."

"Weren't you not drinking tonight?" I asked.

"I wasn't going to, you know that. But once I saw the opportunity to pursue my lifelong Archie fantasy, I had to adapt. And now, well, I'm in mourning. Now drink, you two."

Before we'd finished the last Mad Dogs, three of the Air Force Two women walked over to us. "Are you with Cheney?" one of them asked.

"Honey, Cheney's with us," said Alan.

This remark provoked a nervous laugh.

"Secret Service, I presume?" the woman in the middle said.

"Guilty," said Bruce.

"Not guilty," I said.

"He's guilty too," Alan said quickly, nudging my shoulder.

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Despite Bruce's initial anger with the Air Force Two staff, he knew an opportunity when he saw one, which is why we ended up staying for a while longer. Bruce was clearly working the woman on the right, who had difficulty even standing, and Alan had expressed interest in the woman on the left, who was tall and thin with dark hair. This left the woman in the middle, who clearly was as repulsed by me as I was by her.

Bruce ordered more Mad Dogs. The bartender made it known that he was going to be out of raspberry juice if we kept this up.

"That's okay," said Alan, "as long as you have tequila, we'll be fine."

The thought of tequila added to the equation made my stomach burn, especially since they use orange and cinnamon in Poland rather than the usual lemon and salt I've been raised to accept. And all at

once, the dozen-plus Mad Dogs hit me like anesthesia. I excused myself and pushed my way outside to get some fresh air. Walking was like swimming in toothpaste.

It had stopped snowing, but it was colder than before. My jacket, I realized, was still inside. My breath appeared to stay with me, hovering around me like confused clouds. I wanted to flee, to go someplace where I could lose myself in a sea of blankets and find warmth and sleep. But I'd played this game enough to know that the night wasn't over, that the chances were high I'd be seeing the sun high in the sky long before I saw even the hint of a dream.

A large part of the problem was drinking with the secret agents. I felt like their equals as we drank, but I knew enough to know that tomorrow they'd return to their jobs with their expensive suits and guns, travel to countries I don't even know exist, and meet people who actually change the world instead of talking about it. And I'd still be here, an expatriate in Poland trying to make sense of the geometry of my life, drinking large quantities of what would surely be illegal where I come from, and endlessly exploring an empty bed while the moon worked the graveyard shift.

In America, I escaped Florida to New Jersey, to Pennsylvania, and back to Florida, until finally fleeing the country altogether for Poland. And no matter where I ended up, life always crept its way back, and before I knew it, I was surrounded once again by routines and people asking me for things I couldn't give.

I'm thirty years old now; shouldn't this finding-myself nonsense be long over? I'm stalling, I know it; I just wish I knew what I was really holding off in the long run.

It started to snow again. My ears were starting to burn from the cold. The door to the pub opened and Bruce was there to throw my jacket at me. "I'm sensing the hindrance of introspection and that's simply unacceptable."

"Are we leaving?" I asked.

"There's talk of a club not far from here, one that has plenty of raspberry juice. Alan's coming and the ladies of Air Force Two will be joining us. They're awful, I know, but we must make do with the tools we have. I read that in a book once. Maybe the Bible."

Alan stepped out.

"We don't do tequila with oranges," he said. "Let's move, gentlemen."

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The ladies of Air Force Two caught up with us before we reached the next place. They brought with them the men of Air Force Two, who were either annoyed by our presence or extremely tired. Perhaps they thought we were cock-blocking them; either way, it was apparent they didn't trust us. One of them seemed to make the connection that I was one of the people they'd been talking about before at the hotel and wouldn't look me in the eye when he spoke.

At the door of the next club, security eyed our group suspiciously. The walk between the pub and here had been an inch too long for people in our state. Things were turning blurry and dark. The wave we were riding was getting weaker. If we didn't have more alcohol soon, things were bound to turn deadly.

We smiled and projected the feelings of Joy and Fun. We were gods—debauched, yes, but we never claimed to be perfect gods—clearly surrounded by imposters; security could sense this, which is why the secret agents and I entered the club without any hassles while the Air Force Two people—who represented something Evil and Filthy—were harassed and forced to pay a ridiculously high cover.

By the time the Air Force Two people made it downstairs to the club, we were finishing our second round of Mad Dogs. The bartender, unlike security, saw through our charade and revealed his hatred of us by dousing the Mad Dogs with way too much Tabasco. It didn't matter though, because we were once again high and full on Mad Dogs and all was right with the world.

To push my luck and stomach even further, I bought myself a beer. Before I could even get the glass to my lips, someone accidentally pushed me, forcing me to drop the beer. The glass hit the ground between music beats, making it louder than it should've been. The bartender was immediately yelling at me to pay for the glass. I told him I'd buy another beer, sure, but I wouldn't pay for the glass.

"NO! YOU PAY!" the bartender screamed.

When I stepped back, I realized one of the club's security guys was standing behind me.

I could hear Bruce and Alan close by. Bruce said, "What's happening, Al?"

"I'm not too sure," said Alan.

Bruce, the secret agent, began to panic. "Are they going to send Christian to the gulag? Oh, Jesus! Not the guuulag!" He stretched out the u in gulag to comic proportions.

"Do they even have a gulag anymore?"

"Poor Chrissy's going to the gulag! Our baby's going to the gulag! Look at those soft, pretty hands of his! He won't have a chance in the gulag!"

All the while, I was wondering, why can't the secret agents get me out of this, as this problem is probably trivial compared to, say, shutting down an airport? Can't they commandeer the bar and give me free drinks in the name of freedom? Or at least make something explode that segues into a thrilling car chase? Man, drunk secret agents are as useless as the politicians they protect.

"YOU PAY!" the bartender repeated.

"No," I said again.

"You tell him," said Bruce. "We'll be there to break you out of the gulag!"

"I'll buy another beer. I'm not asking for a free one. But I sure as hell won't pay for the glass." I set my money down on the bar and, without even thinking, I said, "Piwo, proszę."

The "Beer, please" in Polish appeared to have a profound effect on the bartender. It had looked like he had something else to say; instead, he picked up a glass and filled it with beer. The security guy walked away.

"That's it?" said Bruce. "What about the gulag?"

I held up my new beer to Bruce and Alan. "Thanks for your help, you two," I said. "You drunk secret agents are about as useless as the politicians you protect."

"Ouch," said Alan. "Let's hear you say that the next time I foil Dr. Doom's diabolical plan...while drunk!"

"I told you we'd break you out of the gulag, didn't I? You won't find many people who'll do that for you." Bruce turned to Alan and said, "I don't know if you've noticed, but I like saying gulag. I need to figure out how to use it more often." One of the Air Force Two women tugged at his arm. He said, "Did you hear? We were talking serious secret agent stuff."

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As I wandered away from the bar, I noticed a persistent London fog of smoke that made the club seem endless and dangerous. The music was good and loud. The hot air near the dance floor made me think of a Florida beach at night; the cigarette smoke guaranteed the illusion didn't last.

There were voluptuous shadows moving suggestively in the smoke. It felt like there was another world on the other side of the room, one far away from the Mad Dogs and the uncertainty. This was the kind of place where you could fall in love or just end up with an unforgettably powerful blowjob; either way, your heart would be changed by the experience. Because these connections, no matter how frivolous or shallow, they work their way deep inside of you and stir the parts that have congealed while you were paying attention to something that wasn't important.

I entered the smoke and started to dance. I spun around to see the secret agents disappear. I sensed people close and saw two women dancing around me. It was difficult to discern their details. The women pressed themselves against me. At first, I wondered if they mistook me for someone else, but their persistence proved me wrong.

I wanted to explain to these women that I had surrounded myself with men who had sworn to protect the most powerful people on the planet with their very lives and yet couldn't save me, so now it was up to them to save me tonight. I know it's silly, but I've never been as serious as I am right now. Please? Can you do it for me? Save me?

I sadly realized I couldn't say something as simple as "Save me" in Polish.

The women sandwiched me in while they groped and fondled one another with abandon. I was just a buffer, and that was fine. The music grew louder, the smoke thicker, and we kept dancing. There were moments that felt like we were dancing on a night cloud miles up in the sky, just drifting under the stars like forgotten gods. I closed my eyes to hold onto the moment.

Their hands pressed against each other and then me. I could feel their breaths on my neck. One of them bit my earlobe. The other took my hand and put it on her back. I pulled her closer. They both laughed. I laughed too.

The music ended abruptly and the lights came alive. They revealed a beer-soaked floor and black walls; it all felt improbable. We were dancing on a cloud a moment ago, weren't we? The girls looked at me sheepishly, as if their behavior were only allowed in the darkness. They said something to me in Polish.

I explained that I spoke only a little Polish and what I did know was pretty hopeless.

"Jesteś Amerykaninem?" asked the shorter girl slowly. She wore glasses like a librarian and her black hair was cut short.

"Tak," I said.

The girls looked at one another. The taller one, who had green eyes, said, "My English not best, okay?"

"Is this club closed now?"

She nodded.

"Is there another place still open? I think I need beer."

The girls looked at each other again. It looked like there was serious telepathy happening between them. The tall girl said, "We get beer. Go at home. You come. Tak?"

"Sure thing," I said. I turned around, looking for the secret agents. I thought they'd be pleased to know the party was continuing.

The librarian girl put her hand on my shoulder, shaking her head. The tall girl said, "No friends. You just."

I briefly thought about how the secret agents had stood by while the bartender screamed at me and said, "All right, but I have to say goodbye to my friends."

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When Bruce saw me walking over, he excused himself from the Air Force Two girl he had previously selected for "a proper Bruce-ification" and approached me. He leaned in close while he talked, as if to confide a major secret. "Hey, man. Would you still respect me if I slept with the Air Force Two girl? I mean, she's not top-shelf like the Air Force One girls are, I know. But, you know...it's...I need this, you see. Please tell me you'll respect me."

"I'll respect you," I said. "Would you respect me if I went home with two lesbians?"

He looked over my shoulder and saw the lesbians making out. "Yes," he said hesitantly. "I'll hate you, obviously, but I'll still respect you."

"Fair enough."

"This is such a great life."

"Isn't it though? It must be fantastic to do what you do. I really envy you guys."

"Shit, man. Don't throw it back at me. I'm talking about you."

"Oh," I said, slightly flustered. "Well, it's not always like this. Most of my evenings are lesbian-free. Really."

"It's not about the lesbians. This life agrees with you."

"I'm not out there protecting the world's most important people."

He scoffed at this. "Dress it up all you like, at the end of the day, it's a job like anything else. The gold's where you are when you're not working. I read that in a book once too, Mister Writer."

"Was it in the Bible?"

"Listen, I'm serious about this. There's plenty of gold here. Whether you know it or not, you're rich."

I didn't know what to say to this, so I asked, "Where's Alan?"

"He's taking advantage of some of that there gold. Leave it to me to come all this way and end up with my own kind. I disgust myself." He tilted his head to the left and cracked his neck. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have to go reach into the bottom shelf and hopefully invent something dirty enough to write about in my diary."

"I'll see you back at the hotel tomorrow."

He looked at the lesbians again. "Probably," he said, and then winked. "But if I don't see you, I'll understand."

There was something about the moment that told me I wouldn't be seeing Bruce again either way. We shook hands. "Dobranoc," I said.

"Hey, I know that one. Good night to you too."

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I wake up around noon, in bed, fully dressed. The lesbians are naked together on the other side of the bed, sleeping peacefully and holding one another like their lives depend on it. I don't know if what they have is love, but it sure looks nice, whatever it is. The sunlight is coming through the window and embracing them both. The way their skin glows in the sun is next to divine, and my heart tells me I'm looking at something I'm not supposed to. The sex show earlier was open game, something as natural and open as standing and waiting for a bus; but this, well, this is what divinity looks like when you least expect it, a lucid reminder that there's something behind the curtain of our lives, and it's not meant for someone like me to witness. If the lesbians grew wings and flew away right now, I wouldn't even flinch.

The librarian—who looks years younger without her glasses—shuffles in bed and wakes up green-eyes, who catches me watching. She gives me a vague kind of smile that makes me feel guilty until it widens into a sleepy grin. "Hello," she says.

"Hello," I say. "I should go, I think."

She nods at this. And while it's true that I should be leaving, I'm faintly disappointed in her agreement. While I don't know what

I was expecting from the evening before, I can't help but feel that I overlooked something, a resolution of some kind, and if I stay here longer, I'll be able to find it. Maybe it's because I spend too much time looking for external answers, imposing omens on random occurrences...like projecting broken hearts on others when it's my heart that hurts or confusing lesbians with angels.

"I'm so tired," I say as I get up. My legs are stiff in the way they only are when I sleep in my jeans. My elbow pops when I stretch. My stomach feels like it's disconnected from the rest of my body and is shifting aimlessly in my belly like the lava in a lava lamp. My head feels like someone took a hammer and chisel to it. I'm hoping I feel worse than I look, but that's seldom been true.

I put my shoes on like it's the first time I've ever done such a thing, almost falling over in the process. When I stand back upright, green-eyes is standing there next to me. She's naked. I feel overdressed, especially when I get my jacket on. I keep hoping she'll stop me, to throw me back on the bed or offer me coffee or talk to me, anything that'll let this story play out just a little bit longer.

I almost say, "I still haven't been saved yet," but instead I say, "Thanks for giving me a place to stay."

She steps forward, stands on her toes, and gives me a hug. It's unwarranted, which makes the gesture more sincere than it should be. I hug her back in a selfish attempt to keep myself warm for just a little longer.

"This isn't my city," I say. "It's not even my country."

She laughs softly at this, as if I've made one last joke for her benefit, pushes me out the front door into the cold, and closes it.

"And I don't think I know where I'm going."

Jimmy's Luck

Tammy R. Kitchen

The only sounds were the tires rolling over the grated pavement of the interstate and Melissa's nightgown flapping out the passenger side window. It was 3:30 a.m. The midnight DJ's voice had ground into Jimmy's ears and so he had turned off the radio. Driving, then, with the rhythm of white silk in the wind and the turning of tires, Jimmy began to sink into himself.

Melissa lay naked, sprawled in the back seat, her feet pressed against the window and her hair across her face. Ten miles back, Jimmy had realized she'd stopped snoring, but he hadn't pulled over to check on her.

Melissa always snored when she slept. The sound of it drove at Jimmy, and every night he burrowed his head into the tiny space between the mattress and the wall. When he woke in the dark with his neck stiff, he scooched to the end of the bed, pulling the blankets with him. Melissa always opened her eyes and watched him walk across the room on his way out to the couch. He would stop in the doorway and look at her on the bed, coverless, goose bumps crawling down her stomach. He would look at her looking at him and she would keep snoring the whole time.

Jimmy drove on, no longer hearing the flapping sounds or the buzz of the road, only hearing the silence. Days spent at the shop listening to men yell above the grating of metal in through-feed grinders. Evenings spent with Melissa yelling about her mother, yelling at Jimmy, even yelling when they fucked. Then that Goddamned snoring. Jimmy had forgotten the sound of his own thoughts.

This was their first annual run-off-and-fuck-in-the-woods trip. Melissa had said it would be good for them to get away. Jimmy had stuffed their tent and duffle bags into the trunk with Melissa behind his shoulder, her nasal voice clawing at the back of his head. They'd climbed into the car and driven with a bottle of Beam between them and the radio blaring above the wind in the open windows. They'd driven with Melissa's high-pitched excitement between them, the right side of Jimmy's head beginning to throb.

Melissa wanted the growl of thrash-metal music. She said it made her feel young. She said it made her want to spread her legs.

This she screamed over the wind and the traffic, then she swallowed some Beam and put the bottle between her thighs. Jimmy grabbed the Beam from her and took a drink. It burned his stomach and the music burned his ears and Melissa's fingers moved up his leg.

She turned up the radio, Pantera vibrating the car, and Jimmy dug his fingernails into the steering wheel. Melissa sang, her voice bouncing off the dashboard, and during the guitar riff, she said, Come on, baby, and her fingers crawled up his stomach. Gritting his teeth, Jimmy kept driving, and by the time the lyrics started again, Melissa had his shirt pulled up and her tongue on his nipples.

There were fields along the highway. Cows and barns. Melissa was good with her tongue when she wasn't talking, so Jimmy took an exit, went down the road, and drove into a field. He turned the car off, the music still ringing in his ears, and walked away to take a piss. When he came back, Melissa was in the back seat in a white silk nightgown. I bought this for you, she said, and it was tight on her breasts as she ran her fingers down her stomach.

She pulled on Jimmy's waist, her fingers digging in as he pulled the gown over her head. She wrapped it around the headrest and held onto it for balance. This part was still good. Her face was in his neck and this part was still good except for her squealing and if she would just shut up, maybe he could breathe. If he could just make her shut up.

Jimmy reached up and put his hand over Melissa's mouth, and she didn't seem to mind. She wrapped her legs around his waist and pulled him tight against her, sweat pooling between them, and when they were done, Jimmy fell asleep with Melissa snoring in his ear.

He woke in the middle of the night with his neck stiff and his face shoved into the back of the seat. He left Melissa where she was, climbed into the front seat, and drove back to the highway. Melissa's snoring echoed through the car, digging at him, so he turned on the radio to drown her out. The DJ's voice was loud and howling and the music not much better, so after a while Jimmy turned off the radio, and that's when he realized Melissa had stopped snoring.

He knew he should check on her, but the traffic was gone and the radio was off and all he wanted to do was drive. Jimmy drove for miles, lulled by the darkness and the wind. By the lights of the towns he passed. Along the side of the highway, semis idled, their drivers asleep, and Jimmy was alone.

A honk startled him at 4:30 a.m. as a semi pulled into the lane beside him. The driver grinned and looked down at Melissa. Jimmy tightened his fingers around the steering wheel and slowed down. The other drivers would wake soon and get back on the road, and Melissa was still naked and quiet in the back seat.

Jimmy heard the sound of his own breath and the tires spinning on the road. He heard his jeans move against the seat as he shifted his legs. His thumb rubbing on the steering wheel. And nothing. He glanced in the rearview mirror and saw Melissa in the back, her feet still against the window, but with her face now turned away, pressed into the seat. Hands clenched and sweating, he pulled to the side of the highway and got out. Footsteps. Crickets. The back door clicking open as he pulled the latch. He ran his fingers over her calf and she moved, turned her head, and began snoring. Jimmy breathed out as he bent to kiss her knee.

Contributor Biographies

Rusty Barnes co-founded and oversees *Night Train* (www.nighttrainmagazine.com) and maintains webspace at www.rustybarnes.com.

Matt Bell lives in Saginaw, Michigan, with his wife Jessica. His writing has appeared in magazines such as *Hobart, Barrelhouse, Caketrain,* and *McSweeney's Internet Tendency.* He is also the reviews editor for *SmokeLong Quarterly* and can be found online at www.mdbell.com.

Originally from Montreal, Canada, **Magali Cadieux** works mainly in acrylics, occasionally applying oils, ink, and enamels as well as elements of collage and construction (metal and plaster) to her art. She employs hot tonalities and honest, sharp color to convey her interest in the subconscious self figuratively, with strong emotion. Magali draws on her travels and observations of human nature for inspiration, inviting the viewer to explore the universe with her. Her work can be found in private collections and fine art galleries across Canada, the United States, and Europe. Contact her at lalicad@hotmail.com or visit her website, www.magalicadieux.com.

Kenneth L Clark writes verse & fiction. His work has appeared in *Equinox, Tabula Rasa, The Story Garden,* and online journals that have disappeared. He resides in the southeastern United States and travels north for shoofly pie.

Brian Conn's work has appeared in *Sybil's Garage* and *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet.* He is a graduate of the 2004 Clarion West Writers Workshop and is currently a student in the MFA program at Brown University. He lives in Providence. Visit his website at www.brianconn.net.

Christopher S. Cosco is a photographer and artist currently engaged in achieving a fine arts degree in Barrie, Ontario. Strangely, his work has appeared only in magazines with three letter names: *NFG, JPG,* and *GUD.*

A native of Boston, Massachusetts, **Kenneth Darling**'s short fiction and poetry can be found in a number of literary journals, both online and at newsstands. He recently completed his first novel, *Hiders,* and is hard at work on his second. He shares a home, a life, and a website with Nadine Darling, a national treasure. Details at www.kennay.com.

Nadine Darling is broke-ass and sick with love. A three-time Pushcart Prize nominee, she lives in the greater Boston area with her husband and fellow writer Kenneth Darling, who, with respect to Aimee Mann, saved her from the ranks of the freaks who suspect that they could never love anyone. Learn more at www.kennay.com.

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Christian A. Dumais is an English lecturer at the Wrocław University of Technology in Poland. Despite having lived in Poland for four years, he has somehow invented more English words than he has learned Polish words. His most recent article is "An Examination of the Shape of a Story in Metafictional Postmodernist Literature," published by *Systems,* a Polish academic journal. He's also been published by *TooSquare, City Style,* and *The Weekly Planet.* He can be contacted at cadumais@gmail.com. He sincerely thanks you for taking the time to read his report.

Truth may be stranger than fiction, but it's far harder to track down. **Jaine Fenn** has sold fiction to *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, On Spec,* and a few other places. She has yet to sell, or buy, Truth. Further UnTruths may be found at www.jainefenn.com.

Pieces of **Rebekah Frumkin**'s oeuvre can be found in *FRiGG, Grimm Magazine, and Scrivener Creative Review.* She lives and studies in America's kitsch-ridden heartland. Any endorsements, grievances, or second replies should be sent via email to rafrumkin@yahoo.com. "The Gods of Houston" originally appeared in *Antithesis Common Literary Magazine* in Fall of 2006.

Timothy Gager is the author of *Short Street* and *Twenty-Six Pack,* collections of short fiction, and two books of poetry, *The same corner of the Bar* and *We Needed A Night Out.* He hosts the Dire Literary Series in Cambridge, Massachusetts every month and is the co-founder of Somerville News Writers Festival, where he has shared the stage with Pulitzer Prize winners Franz Wright and Robert Olen Butler.

Cameron Gray was born in Melbourne, Australia in 1984 and currently resides in Tasmania, studying Contemporary Art at the University of Tasmania. In 2002, Cameron won the Agfa Australia award for best body of pre-tertiary photography for his digital art at Launceston College. In 2003, his work was exhibited in Art Rage and published by the Queen Victoria Museum & Art Gallery, and in 2005, Cameron was accepted into the guest gallery of the Museum of Computer Art. Cameron's art has been described as dark, thought-provoking, and emotionally intense. His work is regularly displayed at ParableVisions.com and DarkArtsWorld.com.

Gini Hamilton writes both fiction and nonfiction and has published articles and essays in regional newspapers and magazines. She has recently returned to her birthplace near the Gulf Coast of Alabama after more than thirty years in New York, where she worked as a fashion editor/photo stylist. The short story in this issue is her first fiction publication.

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Caleb Morgan's work is surrealist in content, yet has many expressionistic and abstract qualities to it. The artist's influences range from H.R. Giger and Chet Zar to Salvador Dali and M.C. Escher. Morgan wields the graphite medium superbly, bringing out disturbing yet beautiful images of dreams, figures, and nightmarescapes. He uses his views on politics and organized religion to induce images that are as thought-provoking as they are visually stunning. Mr. Morgan considers himself a progressive artist, a Modern Surrealist. Visit him at his website: manticon2002.boundlessgallery.com.

Cami Park's fiction and poetry can be found in publications such as *SmokeLong Quarterly, Opium Magazine, No Tell Motel, Ghoti Magazine, edifice WRECKED, FRiGG,* and *Forklift, Ohio.*

Mike Procter lives in Calgary, Alberta with his wife Cheryl and their two laptops. People who know him wonder what he does all day. He writes about life, and stuff. Mostly stuff.

Jordan E. Rosenfeld is author of *Make a Scene* (Writer's Digest Books, November 2007) and, with Rebecca Lawton, *Write Free! Attracting the Creative Life,* (Kulupi Press, Summer 2007). She is a book reviewer for *The California Report* on NPR Affiliate KQED Radio and for the *San Francisco Chronicle.* She is a contributing editor/columnist for *Writer's Digest Magazine.* Her fiction has appeared in *The Pedestal Magazine, Void, juked, Pindeldyboz, SmokeLong Quarterly,* and more. She holds an MFA in creative writing from Bennington College. She edited the anthology *Zebulon Nights* (Word Riot Press). Visit her at: www.jordansmuse.blogspot.com and learn more about *Write Free* at: www.writefree.us.

Ali Al Saeed is a writer from Bahrain, born in 1978. He wrote (and drew) his very first story—a sci-fi comic book—at the age of ten. He's been writing professionally since 1998, and today contributes to a number of publications and magazines in the Gulf region. His debut novel *QuixotiQ* (2004) was the winner of the Bahrain Outstanding Book of the Year Award. Ali's short fiction has been featured in several magazines and anthologies. His second book *Moments,* a collection of short stories, was published in 2006. Ali is also a filmmaker and photographer. Visit www.alialsaeed.com.

Nisi Shawl's story "Cruel Sistah" was included in *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* #19. Her work has also appeared in *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction & Fantasy* and both *Dark Matter* anthologies. Recently she perpetrated "The Snooted One: The Historicity of Origin" at the *Farrago's Wainscot* website. With Cynthia Ward, she co-authored *Writing the Other: Bridging Cultural Differences for Successful Fiction* (Aqueduct Press). A board member of the Clarion West Writers Workshop, one of the Carl Brandon Society's founders, and a guest speaker at Stanford University and Smith College, Nisi likes to relax by pretending she lives in other people's houses.

Oisín Mac Suibhne is a Texan artist, introduced to the craft in November 2004 by a stained-glass artist from Cork, Ireland. Oisín draws his inspiration from various mythologies, most predominately Irish. His fluid style attempts to capture the rich imagery and deep currents of the Celtic culture while at the same time seeking to create an individual approach in a field often trapped in its own history.

Ilona Taube was born in Moscow in 1983. She attended art school for eleven years, then entered the Graphic Arts Department of the Moscow State University of Printing and graduated with a BA. Ilona works in Moscow as an illustrator for several publishing houses that produce different genres and styles: Ventana-Graf, Titul, Prosveshcheniye, Avanta+, AST, Rosman, and Terra, and the journal *Roman-gazeta.* She regularly exhibits her work and likes to create paintings that mix reality and fantasy. Her favorite styles are realism, modern art, surrealism, and fantasy. Ilona can be reached at ilona@ilona-taube.com and at www.ilona-taube.com.

Lavie Tidhar grew up on a kibbutz in Israel, has lived in South Africa and London, and has travelled widely in Africa and Asia. He currently lives on a remote island in Vanuatu, in the South Pacific. He won the 2003 Clarke-Bradbury Prize (awarded by the European Space Agency), edited *Michael Marshall Smith: The Annotated Bibliography* and *A Dick & Jane Primer for Adults,* and is the author of *An Occupation of Angels.* His stories appear in *SCI FICTION, Strange Horizons, ChiZine, Postscripts, Clarkesworld Magazine, FLURB,* and many others, and in translation in seven languages.

Leslie Claire Walker hails from the lush bayous and concrete-and-steel canyons of the Texas Gulf Coast, where she lives with dogs, cats, and harps. She is thrilled to have "Max Velocity" appear in *GUD.* Her short fiction has been published in *Fantasy Magazine, Hags, Sirens, & Other Bad Girls of Fantasy,* and *Cosmic Cocktails.* She is hard at work on a novel about a runaway and a rock star who ride the L.A. skies with the Wild Hunt. Her website is www.leslieclairewalker.com.

Lesley C. Weston loves character-driven stories, loves words more than food. Her stories have appeared or will appear in *SmokeLong Quarterly* Issue 9, *Gator Springs Gazette, FlashFiction.net, AlienSkin Magazine, UR-Paranormal, Ars Medica, and Pisgah Review,* among others.

Cover Art: An Bradán Feasa (The Salmon of Knowledge)

by Oisín Mac Suibhne

In Irish mythology, the first thing to ever come into Creation was the Hazel tree, within whose branches flowed all the knowledge of the Universe. Beneath this tree, a great well formed, and within that well, a great Salmon slept. From time to time, the Hazel tree would drop its acorns into the well below, and the Salmon would awaken and eat them, one after another, until it too knew all the Universe's secrets. As time went on and the world unfurled, men came in search of the Salmon, seeking to capture it in their nets and swallow its secrets. But the Salmon knew whose net it was promised to, and stayed below.

A couple of thousand years ago, a poet named Finnécas came to the well, thinking that he would be the one to finally hook the Salmon, for it was prophesied that a man named Finn would be the one to do so. For seven years, he sat at the edge of the well, casting his nets and baiting his lines, waiting for the moment when he would outguess his quarry and claim his reward. But the Salmon was all-knowing (something the stories ignore), and so waited for its time to come.

One day, a young boy named Demne came to Finnécas and flattered him, saying that in all of Ireland there was no man better suited to teach him the ways of the poet, and begging to be taken on as his apprentice. Finnécas agreed, and Demne became his pupil. Within days, the Salmon was hooked, and the poet gave it to Demne to cook, warning him not to eat even a bite of it. And so the Salmon and the boy were left alone. Demne put the fish over the fire, but almost immediately, its skin began to blister. The boy pressed down on the blemish with his thumb in an attempt to keep his master's meal from being ruined, but the blister popped and Demne burned his finger. Immediately, the boy thrust his thumb into his mouth to ease the pain. When Finnécas returned and Demne presented the fish to him, the poet noticed an odd light burning in the boy's eyes that he hadn't seen before, and immediately knew that the prophesy hadn't been meant for him, but the child. What the old poet hadn't known was that Demne had another name, given to him by his mother: Fionn, her fair-haired one.

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