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ANN DUENSING

JOSEPH SAUNDERS

THE COLOR FACTORY ALLISON BECKER

Glen works at the Color Factory. The Color Factory makes colors. Colors for fruits and colors for fabrics. Colors for wet fallen leaves and summer camps. Red for bank statements and purple to dot grass by the highway. Yellow that penetrates the thickest lampshades and deepest snows. And black, unforgiving black, for underwater cities and civil wars. Glen works on the rainbow floor. He makes rainbows for San Francisco, rainbows for oil puddles. Rainbows for Bible Belt basements and boxes of Lucky Charms. One morning Glen made a mistake. The rainbow colors leaked from their rainbow mold and mixed together. They should have made brown, but it was the opposite of brown. Glen took a jar of the opposite of brown home to show his wife. “What should I do with it?” he asked her. She shrugged and scrubbed a pan, cautiously interested. Glen’s wife worked at the Emotion Factory. She took home all sorts of test trials. Anger mixed with ecstasy. Smug disgust. Hopeful boredom. “Glen, I’m interested, but cautious,” she said, still working on the pan, “Everything that needs a color already has one.” Glen went to a pawnshop and traded his jar of the opposite of brown for a non-stick frying pan. “It’s really non-stick, the guy said nothing sticks!” he told his wife. She was hysterically pessimistic that morning. “What if I put a piece of tape on it, huh?” she huffed. Glen went back to the pawnshop to see the man who sold him the pan. He found him wearing a t-shirt. The t-shirt was the opposite of brown. The t-shirt was vibrating light. Outside, cars piled up at the intersection, the stoplights lost their meaning. A man threw a television out of his window. Bees were pollinating telephone poles. Glen ran home to hold his wife. He could see emotions flash on her face: red, green, blue. He heated the non-stick pan and cracked two eggs in it. The eggs didn’t stick to the pan. They didn’t stick to the pan at all.

VICTORIA HAYNES

COSTUME ON VICTORIA HAYNES

The doll, a-lack, cannot move as the hand,
of real moving curves (the cheeks, the hands)
makes a quick average—as lines
are smooth enough to see. Her mouth?
it presses basically. The dumbest stamp of shapedom,
it moves to speak through stitches, mummed.

And thus you mash the cotton poppet out of use,
unfuzzed, dropt, unmuscled thing, a dressed refuse—
a dress I say I dressed in, often, for one second,
(a favorite paroxysm). A borrowed shape
to fit a self in. If I wanted a mouth, here was one,
costume on voice, cotton-hummed.

CLARE CARROLL

MEREDITH DUMAS

CAVALRY JACQUELINE ALLEN

I branded
the keys with marker,
maybe even scraped them,
bleached the bench with
drops of chlorine
when you made me
practice daily
in the summer,
spilled nail-polish
on the wood
and let it dry there,
in the closet,
where you stored it.
A piano in my bedroom,
and one in the garage,
and in the den,
and in the closet
and in your office,
like horses on the battlefield
between us—casualties.
We had a stable
till you sold them
one by one.

RACHEL SIPSER

MELANIE MCMANN

EMILY PEDERSON

YOU DON’T NEED A MAP TO GET INTO BED

KERI LYONS

“Let’s sacrifice, let’s swallow
our best summers at the altar
and shit them out over
futures of mediocrity and regret.
Blazing saddles and blunts and
chasing our inner Hunter S.Thompsons
down a couple of thousands of miles of
American highway and
bad intentions”

Wailed a girl addicted to inertia,
to horizon drooling dreams,
the colors that costume the freeways,
to the prettiest corners
of the dirtiest places.

“I beg forgiveness of the road
for having only one virginity to lose
and I never know
if I’m leaving or staying or
if I’ve lost to nostalgia for exits
named after my birthplace.

Dust from a desert three thousand miles away
stains the next bed I call mine,
and it’s hard to be homesick
in every home that you know,
and the city starts to seem
smaller each time,
and I forget if the sameness of everywhere
can save me anymore, or
consume me with a jealous rage
at a building’s ability to stand still.”

JAMES SHALOM

JOSEPH SAUNDERS

MATTHEW MORROCCO

THE ONLY PEOPLE FOR ME ARE THE NEON ONES, BABE

JACQUELINE ALLEN

That's not what you were supposed to say.
You should have said, My girl's iridescent.
Instead, The one with violets in her lap mostly goes astray.

Call your girl Aegle, or Flaming May.
There's no name day for Babe, at present.
That's not quite what you were supposed to say.

Teach the helpless Ultraviolets the way you call sunrays sunrays.
Cast their warmth in sickly yellow. Make it incandescent.
It won't be costly and you can watch them as they go astray.

Damn their violet volition—they sun-seek without your ok!
Call them nymphs, then. Cast them in a sickly blue. You like your girls fluorescent.
I'll have Lux now, Lumen second. Sure, that's fine to say.

What do you know of sunrays? You'd mistake the glow of an OPEN sign for the light of day.
You cast your girl in flat blues and yellows, think it pleasant.
But the ones with violets in their laps, from your day-glo whalebones, stray.

Weakest eyes rest easy on the dimmest greys.
I'll show you fear in a flash of iridescence.
This isn't what I'm supposed to say.
As one with violets in her lap, I can only go astray.

REVISITING MOIRA BARRETT

Occasionally, I miss

First cigarettes and filched liquor.
(The substance of)

A friendship that lasted
A fourteen-year-old minute.

It's your fault,
I jumped a long abandoned ship.

Without jagged nails digging into rotting wood
I'd have slid off your side and
Into unlit water
Years ago
And joined buried treasure.

Occasionally I miss

Mornings in strange houses after fibbed sleepovers.
(The substance of)

A fourteen-year-old friendship that lasted
A minute.

So talented at the art of fun
And yet, you could
barely spell.
Sometimes
that made me feel better

I understood your flawed character,
What with your traumatic
Cookie cutter upbringing.

Occasionally I miss

Leather backseats and flighty innocence.
(The substance of)

Our predictably brief
Early teenage friendship.

VICTORIA HAYNES

ANNA DUENSING

DON’T GET LOST WITHOUT ME

ALLISON BECKER

You take a bite of your enormous burrito and I think I’d like to go to your dermatologist, see your charts and memorize every mole. You say you love me like the word albeit, which I promised to use in a poem. I like the way you speak to the UPS man, to the waitress, to food before you eat it. We sit in tiny patio chairs, pigeons perform a lousy chorus before us. I can’t see your moles change, but you tell me its happening. I’m sure it’s a thrilling performance. It’s afternoons like this when the yellow leaves shiver and I say, “lets walk through the park,” and you say, “but we can see it from here,” that I hope you don’t disappear. Don’t leave me for a desk drawer or the seat of a car. You are my reading glasses. You are the other glove. How easily I lose what my luggage can’t fit.

GABRIELA TULLY CLAYMORE

HINEINI A.E. ZIMMER

What a mistake it was, and the kind of the Jewish tradition: an almost (almost) inconsequential misstep. Friday evening, a year before the temple was gutted and redone, the spaces between the aisles of Kol Ami were almost (almost) too narrow—at least too narrow for heavy davening, for using one's body as a tool for the atonement of a mass of people. The pews were too wide, made of glossed wood of what looked like beech but was probably oak. The cushions were ribbed with the fabric of the Chinese fabric store on Fletcher, where the woman who cut the thriftier pieces of cloth screamed at her customers so loud that it must have rubbed right into the thread. It frayed easily, the temple's turquoise fabric, like it was on edge. The pilling of it—like a sweater—had a cat-scratch quality, but with more nervousness to it. The frayed fabric was more nervous looking than a cat.

The Cantor Eli Mesenbach was observing the cloth from high on the bimah, Friday evening, Erev services. In two weeks, he would have to maneuver between those pews, the tatter-all, for high holidays, Yom Kippur. To walk the aisles and sing the Hineni, the cantor's prayer.

Four months ago, he had moved to this new temple in North Carolina from Eilat. He was still new, hadn't known people, forged real bonds in the community. No one knows people like people know people, and the cantor was not people, at least not yet in Asheville. His beautiful wife blamed it on his laziness. He didn't attend many of the community events, at least not yet. They were early and unless he was praying, it was rare and difficult for him to wake before 11:30.

"You rack my brain with your sleepiness," she'd say, lying on top of his warm body, over her mother's gifted blanket.

"You're still young and the day has given us a head's up on its plans, and you slap it in the face, snoring away. You owe it to your new congregation!"

Lina was industrial—a Jew born in Giza, her family moved to Eilat before she was walking to start a flower nursery in the sandiest region in Israel. Lina and her family were like that. Why squeeze water from a stone when you can try to squeeze honey? Entertain the ridiculous only so long, so your preoccupations don't get caught up in the dreaming. And then real beauty happens—in every market till Be'er Sheva too.

When the U.S. invaded Iraq, Lina was done with flowers and encouraged her family to move. It was a sensitive issue, but she'd had enough of the "commotion" of Israel, it's centrality to the faint bombs and combustions. She was not like other Israelis in that her home was less stationary, less holy. Home was wherever felt safest. And while the common listless feeling of danger they'd both had since the late 1980s had numbed to concern, concern was still the cousin of danger—September 11th helped her remember that. She wasn't sure the U.S. was better, but it was bigger. Shadows were allowed to creep over homes, hiding them. And, she argued, if far from cities, home was not a target. Israel was just one giant shining city, all sparkle on top of a pencil point. They were sitting ducks there, so Eli found a cantor position in North Carolina. It was more than enough obscurity for them, and they said goodbye to their bright, easily spotted temple and flew into Charlotte, and drove to Asheville under trees.

"Ay, Lina! The days aren't always big planners like you, sometimes they are like me—slow to start!" Eli yawned.

"They could be like me, if they tried."

Hineni: "Here I stand." The traditional Yom Kippur prayer of the Hazzan for the congregation, offered as an appeal to God, to enable us all to share in the meaning of the occasion. In two weeks, he would offer his body up as a vessel, holding the wrongdoing of an entire congregation on his back, atoning for them and himself. He would have to become people by then.

But Lord, tonight! Friday night! What had it been, a hundred years? Two hundred? Halfway through and it only felt like the first leg. The cantor attributed the lagging schedule to the rabbi's two scotches before Erev services, his trick for turning the house into a Baptist church, alive with the glory of a God far different than theirs. But, Eli thought, it was what kept people coming back, especially the reformed.

On the bimah, she, Sylvia Greenblatt, and he, Eli Mesenbach, were sitting patiently on the left of the Ark, the Rabbi Joel Wasser talking it up on the right. The two seated had been, for a long time, almost perfectly still. But before the two of them sat to listen to the words of their spiritual leader, the cantor's dark-haired, light-skinned companion had led the first half of services incredibly well.

Sylvia had sang like she meant more than every word, and what's more was that she looked ready to take it as her own, to vouch for it on all fours if she was met, somehow, with the swords of the apocalypse. If someone asked her to take blame for it, even accountability, she would. Her voice bit the air and was pure, increasing intensity, inconsistently pitched as she sang the oldest poems written for God.

She wore a deep crimson, and when she prayed, she bent low in the knees like she knew the redness of wine. She had turned around to face the Ark and the congregation was with her. Spirit washed over all of

them on a breeze, over and under every tallit and kippah, whispering to the very bare places of body where there was no wind ever, at all. Men and women were attentive to her. Shel Berkowitz, the one who appointed his wife as head of the community newsletter, seemed particularly taken with the young lady. He swayed like it was his first dance, and at that dance, the Kedem was flowing, was swishing out of the punch bowl.

Va'anachnu korim, u'mishtachavim, u'modim, lifnei melech, malchei ham'lachim, hakadosh baruch Hu! Together we bow, lifting our heads for the one King, He who is Blessed, Baruch Hu!

Baruch, who? Tonight, it was like they believed in Him because He made someone like her so devout.

"You may be seated," the rabbi called out after the first half, and the Friday night congregation sat instantly. They kept their heads alert and mushed the navy of their dark-colored pants against the teal fabric behind them, which hardly budged with new weight. The cantor was happily exhausted of spirit, milked of feeling. It felt good—he was taken with "Carolinian" prayer for the first time since his arrival.

"Tonight, as we are weeks away from a great holiday, and less than a week into a struggle in the Middle East for justice, I am recalling Joshua, and Moses, and Israel's fight with the Amalekites." The rabbi intoned, his hands always moving, always finding places to rest on the dark podium wood.

The cantor looked to Sylvia. He gave her a look to show her he was incredibly bored. She looked back at him, almost in agreement, before turning her head to face away. She had a small, amused face and cow's lashes. The cantor leaned over his armchair discreetly.

"You've done a marvelous job tonight."

"Thank you, Cantor!" she whispered.

"I wonder why I don't recognize you. It's true, I'm new, but I have a feeling most of us have not seen you in a while—the congregation, I mean. I, at least, have not seen you before. It's a shame, with such a voice!"

She thought this statement over for a minute. "Oh, I guess my parents and I haven't been around in shul so often. I've been really busy with school, I guess. I wish you had seen me before."

The cantor looked around him before continuing to whisper. He kept a plain, happy face as the rabbi worked himself into a charming fervor, a froth.

"Tonight, as we grieve with a constancy that has not budged for three years and begin a new struggle toward justice in places like Iraq and Afghanistan, I remember the story of our Jews in exodus, in the land of Marah. As the Israelites wandered toward their homeland, you may remember that as the Amelekites attacked the Jews in Marah, Moses urged Joshua to lead the people to fight as Moses stood on a hillside, lifting his arms. For as the Lord told him, as long as Moses held up his arms during this fight, the Israelites would continue to defeat the Amalekites,"

"Wow, school. I remember it. It was a great time. Really, relish it. We had a little bit of partying in Tel Aviv, when I went to rabbinical school there. Nothing excessive, of course. But don't tell anyone, huh? I think I still remember how to enjoy myself too, and at my age," said the cantor.

But that was Tel Aviv—brimming with life, but only for a couple blocks. For a couple shekels he and his chaverim would shove off for the night on a discothèque boat. The dinghy had a dance floor and throbbed around their little scar of soil, pumping song. They scooted around the saltier shores of the Mediterranean for a few hours, then home, their eyes pooling in big drunken Hula-Hoops of feeling. They had the eyes of magicians, of Magellans. Of Wunderkind explorers.

"But you seem like a smart girl—you keep your head above water, don't you?"

Her face was now completely in profile to him, one ear cocked to the rabbi's voice, growing more impassioned all the time.

"I like to think so." Her eyes flickered to his side. "I try not to get too deep into trouble, if that's what you mean."

The cantor brought his hands to his lap. Who had made her? Baruch Ha'Shem!

"You've really grown up.You've done well tonight."

"Thank you, sir."

"Grown into a really beautiful lady."

"Thank you, sir."

" —and as Moses grew tired and began to lower his arms in exhaustion, Aaron and Hur came near to him and held his arms aloft until the bitter end. And the Amalekites were defeated."

"Well, I mean it, you're truly a sight. So—you're quite welcome," said the cantor.

"Congregation, I ask you not to forget. When attacks are made on our countries, our country, maybe this nation will look to the American Jews for renewed strength, like Moses did Aaron and Hur. The American Jews—the ones who have built their lives from tragedy before, and are full of the power to rebuild again. And so forth and so on, as we approach our high holidays this September, I urge you to remember not only to grieve and atone on one day but everyday, to never forget, and to realize the sensitivities of your presence in not only strangers' lives

but the lives of your families. We are all responsible for our justices and injustices, and it is up to us to defend this responsibility. It is our first duty as Jews."

Suddenly, with an interest she'd not shown him the whole night, Sylvia turned to Eli. "But, Cantor, sometimes I get into trouble."

"What's that?" The cantor said, turning to meet her. Her gaze looked deep into his face, immovable, for some eternal seconds. She shifted her weight to cross her legs and slipped her hands around her prayer book.

"Sometimes, Cantor, I can get into really a lot of trouble."

Blessed is He who has marred nothing on this Earth, the one whose name cannot be spoken, all blessed, remember him always, Baruch Ha'Shem! Praise the Lord! He is our Rock, in Whom there is no flaw.

Having not eaten since morning, the cantor quickly felt the intensity of acid in his stomach. Turning away from her, he tried quietly to clear his throat.

"Thank you. Before our services come to a close, I'd like to give a big thanks to Cantor Eli Mesenbach, who has recently come into our lives as a body of guidance during this strange and violent time. I'd also like to thank Sylvia Greenblatt for helping lead us in this Friday night's Erev services. I've been asked to remind you that Sylvia will be starring in the eighth grade production of Fiddler on the Roof as Tzeitel at Washington Carver Middle School this coming Saturday. If you're interested, tickets go on sale tonight, we have some tickets for purchase at the front doors as you exit. Sylvia, we wish you one more Mazel tov as we ask you to end our evening services with the Shabbat blessings."

Sylvia smiled back at the crowd and looked to the first row in front of her. To the people that were ostensibly her parents, she smiled. They looked young, no older than the cantor, and as they beamed back at her she leapt onto her feet and took her place at the bimah once again.

The cantor looked on, drenched in shock and guilt. Which way could anyone ever believe his mistake? He could see now the graceless indentations of an in-between child: her few scabs, round shoulders, the skimpy, unbalanced inhale of breath before each new line in the Aleinu. Unmeasured breath from the female lead, a rushed and quick-cavorting, young Tzeitel. Now on stage, practicing her belt for the school play!

And then he realized the congregation supporting her. They listened and responded to Sylvia like she was a little girl breathing other people's prayers and not her own, a tiny public amplifier and a vessel still full of baby fat. These Carolinians who had confused him! Who had mashed up faiths to tailor them to their nascent nation-pain. Oh, God! The Exceptional! God the unwavering! He had seen the exchange; had it even been His test?

Sylvia ended her prayers. She led the congregation through Adon Olam. Adon Olam: the only world is the world God has made. When she ended, it was the cantor's voice that shot out the first "Amen" of the crowd, and the people echoed it. It was one of the louder affirmations of his life.

After the service's celebratory end, rabbi, cantor and girl descended the bimah. Sylvia slipped away without looking back, engulfed in warm hands and sweeping gestures. As her figure fell into the care of others, a beige sea against the teal pews, the rabbi grabbed Eli Mesenbach by the elbow.

What had he seen? The cantor was not sure where or why his cabled hands were leading him away from people, down the hall, to the far annals of the temple where his office sat. They walked in silence until the rabbi shut the door behind him.

"Forgive me for bringing you all the way here, Cantor, but I had to speak to you."

"Rabbi, is there a problem?"

"Oh, nothing. Just one of the worst dilemmas I've been faced with in recent days. But really, no tragedies, no."

"That's good then, Rabbi. Good."

"I've just been upset since this morning—Amy was a mess this morning, and I knew something was off-kilter. Frazzled. I sat down to breakfast this morning and said nothing. I just sensed this upset, so I didn't open my hole and ask what's wrong. They say a good man likes to speak, but a better man weighs out his options first. Poker, Eli, have you played it? I'm an admitted gambling man. It's a sin, but of course it teaches you, mum's the word. After some silence Amy finally said it was about our Shayna. I said, 'What is it? Is she sick?' I start thinking about the doctors I know, doctors here at the temple. Lieberman's son is young, just got his degree, but good. But she says, 'No, she's not sick. Nobody here is sick with anything. It's about Shayna's stay at Emily Reeder's house, the Pentecostal.' Amy's quiet for a minute and I start grinding my gears—what happened? Why keep this from me? I don't understand. And then she bursts into tears: 'Shayna ate an omelette! A sausage mushroom omelette!' Emily's mother told Amy it was an accident, that she forgot to not give our daughter milk and meat—let alone pig—together."

He touched the cantor's dark suit with his left hand and the cantor's body visibly protested. He did not want to be a part of this club where men coalesced into community positions. Clean roles in life like that shouldn't be muddied like this, he thought. What were they together, Cantor and Rabbi? Leaders who should be revered—painted in oils—but instead were cloudy with watercolor conflict.

"Well, Rabbi, she mustn't have known—"

"She knew, Eli. She absolutely knew what she was eating—they told her what was for breakfast. She was curious."

"Certainly none more curious than you and I ever were."

The rabbi took a half step away from the cantor as he said this. He eyed him over, looping his oversized cream tallis closer to his body, folding it at an angle to the shoulders. The gauzy fabric swung into the lamplight of his office as he folded. Its arc was slow and the rabbi's gesturing reminded the cantor of baking, of pulling at dough. As the prayer shawl moved, it swung particles of dust from the air—bits of grey and inexplicable feathers were taken into the prayer shawl's strands.

"She was more curious than I was, than I am. At least when it comes to the explicit guidelines."

Then the rabbi grew doubtful—for a moment a conciliatory look spread across him before turning serious. He straightened his posture, letting his shoulder blades stretch and touch.

"Let me be clear: we're not so upset. Amy and I told her to go to her room, no sleepovers, for a few days, maximum. She's curious for the world, Eli. I know that, we all are. But before our tragedy, it was so much easier to discover the world and paste our findings into our hearts. But it hurts me—as I'm up here preaching and singing, my kids are asleep in the audience. When will they be—when will Shayna be—curious for God? I guess I'm upset because I have a feeling this is one incident of many with her. Our old ideas don't hold up next to their phones and what—computer games. But I—we have seen in these few years a glimpse of the end of the world! Don't you feel that? I feel the need to sell these stories to her, to my children—they need to believe in them more than anyone. We need them to articulate the grace of God, to annihilate those bastards who tried to destroy us with the truth. I don't know, Cantor! I want to shake the passion in them, like salt."

What were these big feelings, nu? These explosions. I have all the passion here, right here! the cantor thought. People wanted to put their passions in the bombs, though. Maybe because it was exciting they could have the passion there at all. It is comforting, he thought, to act like these horrors are unnatural, that they're rare and can be accounted for. All that had to be accounted for—Hineni! All the talk of bombs in the U.S. had left him a bit disoriented—he wasn't expecting it. In Israel, bombs were around. Unaccountable, they were only prepared for. The signs had been big on billboards since the 1980s: If you see something unattended, call the authorities. Bombs back home were simple—big packages, cardboard. Old woven suitcases, locked. Here, bombs seemed smaller—they could hide in shoes and next to skin. They were strapped under shirts; they were closer to people's hearts.

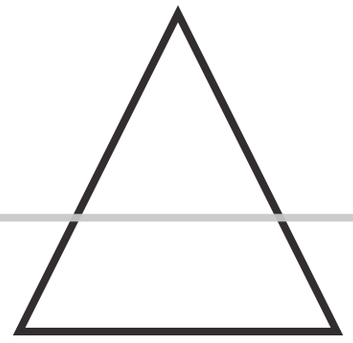
As the cantor stood wordless, the rabbi continued. "And I saw that girl Sylvia tonight, singing like Gabriel taught her how. She's truly been touched. It just doesn't happen anymore, when the Spiritual can transform a little girl like that."

What is Hineni, in its mutation and edit? Confounded love song, from the stock, one flag raised. It is the cry that our revolution has gone another year misunderstood, and misunderstanding. The Cantor found his moment with the people around him. For the first time he felt the spirit wasn't breathing in him, and that it wasn't chosen for everyone. Disco had died in '78, and he could not account for these people, nyloned and navy-ed. Hineni. He stood with an olive face that felt the long sojourn of mourning for who and what he cannot feel for—a big mass of people, his body and soul, and for Sylvia, and his grave, organic mistake in seeing flesh in her.

"These things—they exist when we don't see them, and they exist when we do. Who sees us? With what eyes?"

"Mesenbach?"

"I don't know, Rabbi. I just hope that when we're blown up, we reach heaven, not somewhere else. I hope it's more domestic than we ever imagined. Like a mall. Let it be totally boring! What am I saying? Let heaven be our mothers nagging us to buy new shoes. Let it be filled with escalators and fountain drinks, full of our old neighbors who have learned now to be careful with us. And I hope there are huge caravans of people being dropped off outside, sleepy as ducklings. Because I am sick of these bombs and these ecstasies."



GEORGIA HAMPTON

OPTIONS CHELSEA NEWSON

Irena lay in the grass in the yard behind her father's house, where everything was overgrown. Her blue eyes were lazily focused on the dark pine needles that spread like lace between the sky and her body, and her pink mouth was opened to catch the calendula petals she dropped one by one onto her tongue. She liked to imagine the petals falling noiselessly into her mouth, small fiery pieces of orange and cream that burned bitter against her teeth and floated slowly down her esophagus as though down a river, into the acid lake of her stomach. Irena liked to eat petals. She liked it partly for the metaphor: consuming beauty, incorporating it into her own bones and skin and cells. The trouble, though, was that the metaphor was only just that. The beauty was never actually manifested in her body; it never became a part of her the way she had once ached that it would. The petals had little that the human body could actually use or integrate—not a single stroke of energy in all their delicate veins. Calorie-free. And that was the second, and truer, reason that she liked eating them.

A gust of late September air brought the smell of the earth into her freckled nostrils, ushering her out of her reverie and back into autumn. The ground smelled moist and cold, as it always did this time of year when the life beneath it was just trembling into stillness. She was reminded of her grandmother and wondered how she felt today, left alone beneath the musty earth she had loved so much to tend. Irena picked another petal off the calendula's bare and darkened face and thought of the days she had spent back there with her grandmother, when the yard was still a garden and the grass and the bush had not yet been permitted to run rampant. Her grandmother had raised her in that garden, amongst the asters and the bachelor's buttons. Throughout most of Irena's childhood, the house had been empty save the two of them. They had hated the feeling and the sound of that emptiness, so they would spend every sunlit hour back there, seeding and weeding and making wishes on the petals of all the dying flowers. Propped now upon her 22-year-old, needle-like elbows, Irena recalled that she had been happy back then, in the bright light of morning and afternoon. But she remembered, too, and with a shifting feeling in the basket of her ribs, how night would steal up into the cul-de-sac and push the little girl back into the empty house and down between the sheets of her little bed. She remembered how evening would fall and cloak her flowers in midnight, and how she would feel a deep and sudden and inexplicable sadness as

she pulled the covers tight around her body. She would eventually learn that this sadness was called “loneliness,” which she called “lonelilyness” until she entered grade school and was properly corrected.

“Irena.” Her father’s voice was suddenly there with her among the weeds. “What are you doing out here? Everyone’s inside. Anyway, it’s a bit chilly, don’t you think?”

She gave him a short sigh and a shrug, “It’s alright. I’m just thinking.”

“About grandma?”

“Yeah. Remember how beautiful she kept this place?”

“Yes, of course I do.” He paused, his eyes slightly narrowed as he appraised her. “Come on, Irena, come inside and have something to eat. You’re looking too thin again.”

“No thanks, not hungry.”

“Irena.”

“Oh please, Dad, I’m fine. I’ll have something later.” She pulled her sweater tighter across her back and shoulders, stretching the fabric over vertebrae that trailed her neck like a reptile.

“Well, just come in. Mr. Donnelly’s been asking for you, wants to ask about your plans after school.”

Irena muttered exasperation to the sky as her father turned away. As she pushed herself slowly to her feet, she wondered whether the bindweed had choked out her grandmother’s sweet peas once and for all.

The living room was dark from the curtains and the hour and the whole room seemed red. Irena slowly passed the buffet table, a paper plate held limply in her long fingers. The spread was strewn with pieces of melon dripping the juices of a summer just passed and tiny shrimp that leaned pink and naked against a dish of cocktail sauce. She placed a piece of cantaloupe on her plate and felt nauseous. Her hand fluttered to her stomach and as she looked away from herself her eyes fell on the cake at the end of the table. It sat untouched, unassailable by wishful eaters for all the symbolism whipped between the sugar and flour. This was her grandmother’s cake, the one she had been making since before Irena’s father was born. It was olive oil and red grape and, as far as Irena remembered, it was intensely decadent. She wondered who had made this one, which featured nasturtium petals arranged in rings around each halved grape, turning the berries into flowers themselves.

“There she is!” Another voice, unwelcome still, drew her attention away from the cake with a jerk.

“Hello, Mr. Donnelly.”

“It’s good to see you, Irena! Been a while—busy up at school, I take it?” He smiled at her coolly, his too-thin moustache curling like a rain-

wet worm around his full lips. His gut hung flaccid over a tired brown belt and Irena noticed a new puffiness in his yellowed cheeks. He looked older and fatter each time she saw him and it was hard to believe that he had once been the smooth-speaking neighbor with a pretty family and quiet fingers.

“Yeah, not much time to come home these days.” Her eyes avoided his.

“Well, listen, I’m really sorry for your loss. I know how close you two were. She was a special lady, for sure.” He reached a hand out to cup her elbow with his palm, his shallow brown eyes dewy with an old look Irena tried to ignore. She casually shook him off by moving to toss her uneaten cantaloupe in a small, empty garbage pail beneath the buffet table.

“Thanks, Mr. Donnelly. I appreciate that.”

“So,” he began again. “What are your plans after graduation? That’s coming up awfully soon. Any chance you’ll move back home?”

“I doubt it,” she answered quickly. “I’m not sure where I’ll go, though. I like painting,” she said, though she knew very well that she didn’t know what she liked. “I’m thinking of maybe applying to an art program.”

“Hmm. What are you studying now, again?”

“Photography.”

“Oh, right. You always had a knack for pretty things, huh?” He grinned and Irena tried to mimic him but her politesse failed her and her face flushed as her hands drifted back to her stomach.

“Aw, I’m just kiddin’, kid. Listen,” he said, reaching toward her shoulder, his thumb filling the space between her clavicle and shoulder, “you look great. Don’t be a stranger. Okay?”

“Sure,” she said weakly, avoiding his muddy gaze. As he walked away, she realized she felt a little cold. There was a time when she would have reveled in a compliment like his, a time when she had been proud of herself and her bones that shone like lamp posts just beneath her skin, a time when she felt like she had earned every look of praise or desire or envy. There had been a time, she thought, with a hollow unease, when she had felt good about this.

Irena moved from the buffet table to a nearby corner that housed a small potted lime tree. She bent down to perch on the rim of its container and watched as her younger sister Frannie was admired by guests at the soda table for her curls and her pink cheeks and how much she had grown since the last time. Watching Frannie’s young and shapeless body blush with the excitement of attention, Irena thought of the day she had first realized those terrible changes wrought by time and nature upon her own body—those little evolutions so fiercely denied by the girls

at school, the magazines, her mother.

She had been in this same house, fourteen years old and toweling off in the back bathroom after a shower. She could smell her grandmother's cake turning golden in the kitchen. Her mind and her hands were on her body. Her health class had focused on obesity that day—an American epidemic, her teacher had said. Bodies aren't meant to carry so much weight, her teacher had said. Bodies are meant to fit within these weight indices; they aren't meant to hang or sag. Hanging and sagging can cause heart problems, blood problems, insulin problems, even depression. Why depression, Andrew Loggins asked. Because, Mary Jeffreys answered as she flipped her curls over her thin bare shoulders, who wants to be friends with a hanging, sagging blob? Everyone laughed. Even Irena, who suddenly felt fearful even as she giggled, and the teacher said now, now, and began to talk about the different kinds of diabetes. In the back bathroom, fourteen-year-old Irena stared at herself in the foggy mirror, grappling with a newfound despair. It was suddenly clear to her that her hips and chest had bloomed her body into something she didn't want to be. They were pushing her into a lonely place. She considered her options and made a decision. There could be no more cake; she had outgrown it in every way.

That night was the first night she faked it. She ate every petal off her slice of cake to make it all seem as usual. She slipped them one-by-one between her lips and, with her grandmother's back turned to her, she fed the rest piece-by-piece into the dog's snapping mouth. Her grandmother smiled upon receiving the empty, crumble-pocked plate and Irena smiled too, feeling somehow victorious. She realized, as she slipped between her sheets that night, that things didn't feel as usual anymore. She felt like she had something.

Irena stood in the kitchen, tossing leftover shrimp and little sausages to the dog as she cleaned up. The house was quiet again with all the guests gone and Irena was thinking about ghosts and where they went when the sun came up. A noise in the doorway caught her attention. It was Frannie, struggling with a bag of trash almost as large as she was.

"Hey, Frannie. Want some cake?"

"No, thanks." She left the bag by the door and crossed the kitchen to sit at the table. She was twelve years old and the spitting image of their father, with eyes too big and blue for her small white face.

"It's going to go to waste."

"Let's give it to Rexy, then."

"Why don't you want any? It's grandma's favorite—you like it."

"I dunno, I just don't." Frannie hesitated and said softly, "Anyway, I'm on a diet."

A wave, a shock, a bitter wind swept through Irena's body and she suddenly felt small and thin and wasted, weak with a disappointment she hadn't yet known. "Why are you on a diet?"

"You know, I'm not a kid anymore. I can't just eat whatever I want."

"Fran, you can always eat whatever you want. Don't let anyone tell you any different, okay?"

"But you don't."

"Don't what?"

"Eat whatever. You hardly eat at all and you're so thin and pretty—like a lily, Mom says. And she's right."

Irena grew quiet and the quiet got heavy and filled the kitchen like a stink. She looked briefly to her hands, soapy in the sink and she considered her options. She thought of many things in the space of seconds—her grandmother and herself and her schooling, the flowers of her childhood and her maybe-future daughters. She thought of ghosts.

"Alright," she said finally, flicking the water off her wrists and reaching for a dish towel. "Let's each have a piece."

"Really?"

"Sure."

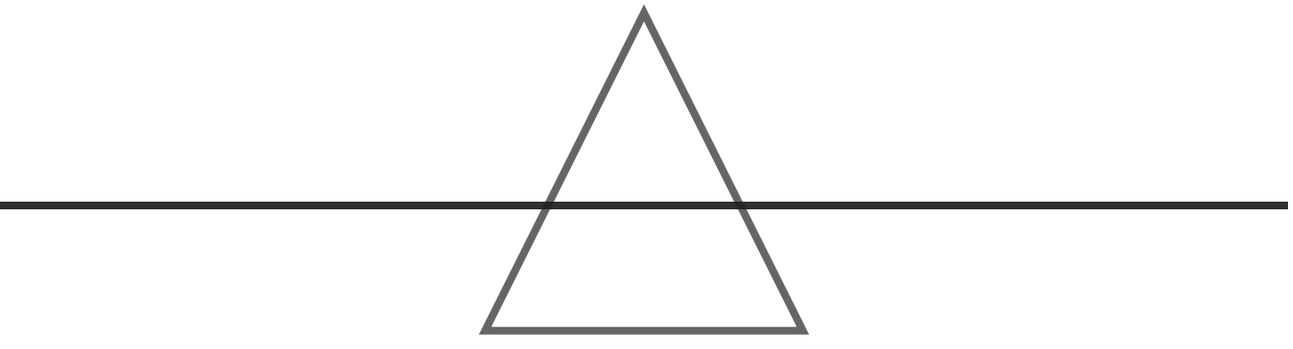
She cut them each a slice—hers narrow and petal-pocked, Frannie's somewhat more ample. Frannie grinned as they took their places at the table. She looked up suddenly, her eyes bright with a glee Irena didn't quite understand. "Oh, I'm going to get my cider. It's upstairs. I'll be right back." She jumped up from her chair and the sound of small footsteps trailed her through the house.

Irena looked to Rexy, whose chocolate eyes stared imploringly at the table. She looked to her cake, which glistened fatty and delicious on her plate. She looked again to Rexy and then to the window above the sink, as though trying to see the garden through the thickness of the night. She placed her fork down and put a hand to her stomach. As Frannie's steps pattered through the ceiling, she considered her options.

A long and empty moment passed and then Irena took a good, deep breath and took her fork into her hand. She plunged it deep into the brown-butter heart of her slice and then brought it close to her mouth, closing her eyes so she wouldn't see the light glimmer off the juices of the grapes. She exhaled sharply and brought the bite into her mouth. She tasted everything—the weight of the oil and the soft sweet twirl of sugar, the firework-burst of tartness from the grapes and the silky sweep of refined wheat flour and then, at the very end, the brush of a nasturtium petal, worthless there in the company of so many loud ingredients. She felt her grandmother in flashes. She remembered how her apron smelled of almonds, how her footsteps in the kitchen used to sound

down the halls of the house, and how pretty her chapped, wrinkled knuckles had looked next to the fragile stems of daisies she had picked. Irena felt warm and familiar to herself and then she heard Frannie move above her and messy kitchen and the empty garden and her own thin arms became real again.

She could hear Frannie leaving her room, walking down the upstairs hallway and headed towards the staircase. Irena's ribcage seemed to tighten to clasp her heart as she was seized with the panic of a possible doom. Before she fully realized a decision had been made, she stood up from the table and seized her plate and dropped the rest of her sliver of cake back onto the yellow ceramic serving plate. She picked up the serving plate and almost stumbled over Rexy as she turned toward the kitchen sink and the window that gaped open above it. Irena threw the plate out the window and into the garden with the single swift motion of a discus player, watching with a parted, crumb-pocked mouth as the cake fell sloppily across what was left of her grandmother's daffodils. She placed her empty hands on the cold, wet metal of the sink basin, steadying herself to catch her breath or slow her heart or think of what to tell Frannie.



SUNDAY MORNING ROSETTA YOUNG

On my damp neck, my mother's fingers
are cool. Her nails are pearls with lather
that kills the lice underneath. And holding

turquoise combs to pick out the dead, she combs
out bodies and eggs, or else they'll hatch again.
It will take all night, Sunday moving

into Monday. The truth being I've known all week,
tracking with thumb and forefinger sucking paths,
bulges at the root. Their shape like a gumshoe's print

backwards. She bends my head over the sink,
and I stare down its sore
metal throat. Their eggs are moon-white grains

that could be mistaken for anything.
A black diamond on each full-grown's back,
legs like hair on fruit. They wriggle

in the wet bottom of the tub. This porcelain
was made a century ago, the tile floor laid down
in the '50s. We have not lived

here for long—hot and cold knobs
put in by a missionary's wife when he was at sea.
Steam heaters hiss the language of the louse.

I lay my wet poisoned head against the curve
of my mother's stomach and cry in a flush of relief
that she is not other mothers. There are some who send

Vaseline heads on the bus come mornings. They do not
know the love like the lull of a Sunday night:
plastic teeth on my skull, a lather of lice.

HOLDING ON KATIE SIMON

People who have known me my whole life pause for a fraction of a second to do the mental math: Is he actually twice her age, or does it just seem that way?

At first sight—definitely not love, all I can remember is noticing the beard. Boys my age couldn't grow a beard like that—deep and full, fixed. He didn't realize I was watching him from the breakfast table as he turned to talk to the young sweet Korean backpacker who later called me a "special girl," the one who divulged in me her story of being "sexiled" from a trans-Siberian train compartment. She confided in me, though I was the youngest by years at the hostel we found ourselves clustered together in for a few days or weeks or would-be months in Samarkand, Uzbekistan.

Later that night, we all gathered for dinner and I placed myself across the table from him. Beards that draw you in like that ought to be paid due attention. Next to him sat Nadia, dark-haired and soft-faced, and from her I discovered his name—Felix, like the bear books my mother illustrated while she was pregnant with me. Nadia made conversation in halting English; Felix just halted. They were floating in their 20's, studying Uzbek with the other Germans there, God knows why. Felix rumbled something about joining their table after dinner. He stood up, tall, sturdy and sure, leaned against the railing that separated meals from the courtyard, and lit a cigarette.

"That guy wouldn't leave you alone, earlier," he smirked. He had been watching, although perhaps everybody had been watching the strange pairing. A Russian grandfather-type had insisted on showing me all of his photographs and maps from his journey south from Moscow. I had tried to shake him and turn my attention to the Germans, but to no avail. Felix and his beard and his long sturdy limbs had been watching. I smiled. I stumbled out something polite about not wanting to be rude to the elder Russian. I didn't hold Felix's attention for long but while I still did, a warmth bloomed in me, somewhere inside my lungs. Up until then, I had never fully breathed.

He disappeared. Matthias, another student from Felix's country, produced a bottle of Uzbek feuerwasser, fire-water, vodka. François, a nomadic Frenchman, re-animated his discussion with this German and his vodka and I similarly turned to them with interest. It was the first day I had stopped taking my antibiotics for a hacking cough I had picked up a few weeks earlier. I was eligible.

We took five shots each from the piolas, the local version of teacups, which I mistakenly assumed kept the volume if not the shape of the typical Western shot glass. We discussed, among many other topics that I deflected back to the guys, American politics, and when it came time to make a toast, the only thing that came to mind was "Sarah Palin." Thus I earned my first nickname in the world of Bahodir B&B. A few minutes later, François and I were speedwalking on a liquor hunt across the only green space for miles, a touristic park beside the main attraction, the Registan, in the town. This was my first drunken outing into the realm of public Uzbekistan. I felt safer with François than I felt alone, even when sober, even during the day. He would protect me, maybe not at his own cost and maybe not if it wasn't convenient, but alongside me sauntered a temporary shield. The way François walked when drunk resembled one of those cartoon walks—hunched shoulders, bent knees, swiveling hips. I attempted to stay in a straight line and not make eye contact with anybody in a uniform, though of course even the park cleaners in this part of the world wore uniforms.

Back at the hostel, empty-handed, François and I collapsed back onto the platform where I had been knighted Palin. I focused on finding one of the softer pillows with the lowest density of compacted dust. I was reeling, realizing that the piolas or perhaps the feuer of the feuerwasser did not equate with my experience of shot glasses and vodka. The courtyard walls bent and unintelligible murmurs enveloped me. Then there was Felix, looking brighter than he had earlier, more focused—on me, no less—entertained by my youthful inebriation, asking me questions and keeping me upright. His head ducked as if he were lifting my chin with his eyes.

The way my eyes moved when I thought, when I sorted through my mind for appropriate responses, must have fascinated him. He asked me questions simply for the prospect of watching my eyes unravel a young girl's answers. He knew I was eighteen; outliers are recognized in hostel communities. For the same reason he knew I was American, though this was less relevant. Young girls are vulnerable everywhere, just how booze and drugs and gentleness don't change from place to place. His male instincts to protect, to claim, to care for what required caring, kicked in with only a subtle recognition on his part, and a system between us developed at his both oblivious and guiding hand. I was like a puppy to him, a sister, but something presented itself as more urgent than taking care of me, friend-to-friend.

"Drink some water," he told me. I chugged.

I came back from Bukhara instead of going onwards, sealing something between us but tying me into a series of consequences that we would feel the effects of more than anybody else. But for the duration of the afternoon that I returned, little mattered—not the complications about the future, the inevitable mutual departure from the country we claimed as our own or the routine that kept the relationship functional. I made him smile until everybody else had gone to sleep, until it was just me, holding onto his arm, just holding on.

SILLY RABBIT ANDY SEBALA

Rabbit brushed his buckteeth and thought about death. His brown eyes gazed vacantly into his own reflection as dots of sudsy spit sprayed across the bathroom mirror. Earlier in life, Rabbit underwent several years of embarrassing orthodontia, an ordeal that made him feel depressed and unattractive still. Rabbit swallowed the toothpaste because that was something he had never done before, and then he flexed in the mirror for about twenty minutes or until he could no longer keep his eyes open. Rabbit lay in bed and idly assessed his own existence for about fifteen minutes, and then he dreamt about frolicking in a field of daffodils. Rabbit was allergic to daffodils.

The next day, Rabbit sat on a park bench for several hours and wrote jokes. He knew that successful comedy relied on the effect of opposite expectations, so he wrote a joke about a flying car. Rabbit said he wanted to be a famous. He set his notebook down and watched a family of ducks swimming in the pond. Ducks were funny the way they waddled and quacked. Rabbit wrote that it would be funny if they howled like wolves, because that would be incongruous with how ducks normally act. The family splashed in the water. Some of the ducklings shared a soggy crust of bread that someone had thrown. One of them made a quack about the upkeep of Rabbit's whiskers, but the mother duck hushed him and hurried him to the other side of the pond. Rabbit nervously stuffed a dandelion into his mouth and went back to the notebook. He furiously scribbled jokes for several minutes. When the paper started to run out, Rabbit hovered his pen and gestured words across the pages of the notebook. Rabbit thought this must have made him look busy and interesting. He continued writing phantom jokes until the sky turned a violet color and the family of ducks left the park. "I wish I was a duck," Rabbit said to himself.

On his walk home, Rabbit felt nostalgic about nothing in particular. He thought about elementary school and the orthodontia. He thought about a teacher who once told him that he could do anything if he put his mind to it. Rabbit could no longer remember the teacher's name, but the sentiment kind of touched him at the time. He thought about Mama and Papa. Rabbit realized at a young age that families represent a false standard of normalcy. A child never thinks his family is unusual until he grows up and discovers the wide world beyond the burrow. Knowing this, Rabbit spent years trying to disprove his family's ordinariness. He never felt successful.

He thought about his time at university. Rabbit was even more nostalgic back then—those were good times. He remembered his freshman roommate, a grizzly bear that took up too much room and made too much noise. The bear slept and snored all winter. Rabbit tried to study, but he could never hear his thoughts over all the snoring. The bear groaned and wheezed like he was always on his last breath. At night, Rabbit fantasized about throwing things at him. Once he threw a pen cap at the bear, but this was not very satisfying for Rabbit and the snoring continued still. Rabbit thought about scratching the bear's eyelids with something sharp or gnawing at his ankles until there was nothing left but little knobs of bone. Rabbit concluded that college was an important time in his life and he wished he still read as many books as he did back then.

When he arrived home, Rabbit worked on his comedy material. He wrote some observational jokes about ducks. Did you ever notice that their feet are webbed? What's the deal with flying south? He brushed his teeth and flexed. Rabbit dreamt that the future was a hole of water that spun around and sucked up everyone he knew.

Rabbit met Lucy a few weeks ago at the store where he buys his notebooks. After several brief exchanges, he worked up the courage to ask her out. She was a squirrel and she told him that he was funny. Rabbit spent an extra thirty minutes in the shower that morning. He groomed his whiskers and brushed his buckteeth twice. He called Lucy to confirm the date once more and she seemed a little annoyed on the phone, but she also said that she was excited. Rabbit took this as a good sign and thought about it again, and then confirmed that it was a good sign. He sat around the house for five hours until it was time to meet Lucy.

At the restaurant, they talked about how it is not usually this warm in November and how there are so many coffee shops in the neighborhood now. "So, what do you do?" Lucy asked him.

"I want to perform," said Rabbit.

"You mean acting? I always wanted to be an actress."

"Yeah, like acting. I don't really act. I mean, I have never acted before. It sounds nice though." Rabbit's foot began to tremble slightly beneath the table. "I think I want to be a comedian."

"Wow, that's incredible! You know, I thought you were funny when I met you. I told my friends you were a funny guy," said Lucy.

"I remember you said that."

"I always wanted to date somebody famous."

"Me too."

"Will you tell me a joke?" she asked.

Rabbit thought for a moment and then explained to Lucy that what

constitutes, or, you know, comprises true comedy is not necessarily a joke that can be told in passing like, you know, with the traditional set up and punch line, but instead, it is more of a mindset or rather a rapport between the performer and the audience—and timing. Comedy is all about timing. He said this and then he told her the one about the pope and the blonde supermodel with the large breasts.

"So, where have you performed? I would love to come see your act," said Lucy.

"I'm kind of just getting started," he replied.

The date continued and Rabbit made many hyperbolic comments about things he was not passionate or decided about. Someone once told him he had a strong personality and he liked the sound of that. After dinner, Rabbit and Lucy took a walk through the park. Rabbit made sure that there were no ducks around before the couple passed the pond.

"Do you really think I'm funny?" Rabbit asked Lucy.

"I think you can do anything if you put your mind to it."

Later that week, Rabbit received a phone call from his cousin, Sam. Rabbit was an only child, but he rather liked the idea of having a brother. He felt that a sibling would be suitable and interesting for him, so he spent a lot of time with Sam when he was younger. They grew up together and got their tails caught in fences and went to the same university.

"How are you doing, Rabbit? Sorry it's been so long," said Sam.

"I'm doing great. I think I'm at the start of something big," Rabbit replied.

"Oh yeah? Tell me about it."

"Well, I met a great girl. She's not breathtaking, but she's a squirrel. Have you ever dated a squirrel before?"

"No. You know how my mother feels about that sort of thing."

"Yeah, I don't think anyone in the family has ever dated a squirrel."

"So, what is she like?" asked Sam.

"She works in retail, but she's interesting. She thinks I'm funny."

"Well, that sounds fantastic. I've got exciting news too."

"What is it?" Rabbit asked.

"We're having another litter. Margaret told me this morning. Two boys and two girls."

"Wow, more kids," said Rabbit. "What's the use?"

"What is that supposed to mean? The more the merrier."

"Sure, sure. But it's so expected."

"What? Don't you want to settle down one day?"

"I don't see the point. It's a convention that I'm not inclined to follow."

"It's not a convention, Rabbit. It's our nature." There was a long pause. "So, how's work going?"

"I quit. I can't put my dreams on hold any longer."

"You quit? Do you know what I had to do to get you that job?" Sam let out a slow, quiet sigh. "So, what exactly are those dreams?" he asked calmly.

"I'm a comedian now."

"Yeah, funny joke."

"I'm not joking. Lucy told me I was funny."

"Lucy? The squirrel?"

"Yes, Lucy the squirrel."

"I don't get it, Rabbit. What are you afraid of?"

"What do you mean? I'm not afraid of anything."

"You quit your job. You quit college. You can never sit still. And now…" Sam's voice was loud now. "And now you want to be a comedian? Because you made a squirrel laugh?"

"She said I can do anything if I put my mind to it," said Rabbit.

"I believe that too. I think you can do anything you want to do, but just because you can, doesn't mean that you should." There was another long pause. "Oh, never mind," said Sam.

Rabbit hung up the phone. He didn't expect Sam to understand. Sam has a family and works at an office. Who ever made a name for himself that way? Sam's voice was always a high-pitch squeal when he got upset. Rabbit thought the sound would make for a middlebrow, but satisfying joke in his comedy routine.

Rabbit stopped brushing his teeth, which were now grey and weathered like dirty pebbles. He called Lucy for the hell of it. She didn't pick up. Comedy wasn't fun anymore. Maybe he would start painting again. Writing sounded good too. There was a quiet level of prestige to being a writer. He grabbed his notebook and headed for the park.

He wrote in the park for a few hours with a pen that didn't have any ink. It was spring, but there was still a fragile layer of ice around the edge of the pond. Rabbit liked the cold, even though it hurt his ears. There was something about a little bit of pain that made Rabbit feel more alive. He always felt sad that he had never broken a bone. He fantasized about jumping into the icy water.

Rabbit thought about college again. He thought about the snoring bear and quitting school. He assessed this decision and justified it

somehow, but he could not remember the reason—something about the bureaucracy of it all.

He assessed his relationship with Lucy. They went on three dates before Rabbit broke it off. Lucy cried at the news and Rabbit told her not to. Lucy was a squirrel and she worked in retail. What did she expect? Rabbit never understood what anyone expected. Maybe that's why he failed as a comedian.

He thought about the orthodontia. He thought about a great idea for a novel. He thought about Sam and what gave him the nerve and what made him so happy. He thought about one last joke. "Why is it that when you are single, all you ever see are couples? Why do people always want what they can't have?" Rabbit couldn't figure out if this was funny or not.

Just then, the family of ducks landed at the edge of the pond. The babies had grown. Their feathers had once been soft and fluffy, but now they looked sturdy and sleek. The ducks were returning from the South. They must have traveled many hard miles, but they were home at last. The ducks splashed and ate and nuzzled. Rabbit groomed his whiskers nervously.

Suddenly, Rabbit threw down his notebook. He lunged at the ducks. They screeched and scattered about the pond. Rabbit snapped at their funny, webbed feet with his cracked buckteeth. The ducks called out to each other in fear and solidarity. Rabbit shouted at the poor animals. His voice was fierce and inchoate. He felt powerful and unique.

He gripped at one of the duck's legs and gnawed at the gristly thing with his buckteeth. He focused on the taste in his mouth and thought about how no rabbit had ever experienced such a taste before. He dragged the little duck across the gravel and it cried out for its family. The other ducks had flown away regretfully. Rabbit never felt so accomplished.

He pinned the duck to the ground and snarled at it. He tugged at the duck's wings, which flapped and struggled for freedom. His teeth sank into its body and thick blood dripped from the slick feathers of the ravaged animal. The duck let out a horrible cry of anguish, which sounded like the howl of a wolf. Such an action should have been funny, as this behavior is incongruous for a duck. Rabbit wasn't laughing and the sound still haunts him to this day.

ALTERATIONS MICHELLE N. ALEXANDER

The marking above change signals a diminuendo,
a soft draining of resolve. But, last night I unfixed the annotation
with my ungloved hands, and left it beating
a pulpy mass.

Elsewhere, another bruised note clamors.
This one, trapped in the radiator
rises nightly (gnawing like a tightly wound stomach)
as a warning from the previous tenant:
captivity reverberates.

The recurrence of noise
floods the living.

A LONG TIME MAN ANNA DUENSING

And all of the shameful and all of the whores
And even the soldier who pierced the heart of the Lord
Is down there by the train
Down there by the train
Down there where the train goes slow
—Tom Waits

Like a world of its own, the little fold down in the highway where the hills open up like a gate, where the road rolls down like a sleepy invitation, that is where Otto chose to be. He chose it with his eyes closed, seeing the bend of the drive, its careful slope like a woman's back, seeing the shops and the homes tucked away between the dogwoods and the brush. He saw himself there with his old life—comfortable, hard-soled shoes, burgundy resin—and he chose. He chose like a wildman settling down, skimming over and over the thin section of classifieds through the dim motel light. It was 5:30 a.m. and Otto was shuffling around the damp space, smelling the sterile fruit chemicals in the air, folding and refolding his shirts and his towels, taking breaks from the cramped and boxed-up newsprint. Then he saw it. Large room, raw space for rent above Rapunzel's Coffee, bathroom and sink. He saw it and he knew he had money enough for a studio again, had money and a name that the older musicians would still remember. He saw it and he called and nobody answered. He waited for two hours, in which time he finished his cigarettes and walked to buy more, changed his shirt, combed his hair. He called again and a woman with a honey voice answered.

"Rapunzel's, this is Roberta. Hello?"

"Hello ma'am," he said after a beat, surprised by the lightness of her voice. "I'm calling about the room for rent. I—I would like to rent it. My name is Otto Casey."

He paced the room. He held his breath. My name is Otto Casey. Otto Casey. Hello. ma'am, my name is Otto Casey. Is this what was right to say? Hello, ma'am, my name is—

"Well, alright," she said, the din of talking and music and clatter rising and falling behind her. "We'll want to sit down with you, Barbara and me. Barbara's my sister. We own the building and run the shop. When would be a good time for you to come by? We're just about always here."

Otto lit a cigarette and thought, pressing down at the sharp creases of the made bed, pulling at its worn, blue quilt. Ash fell down onto the pillowcase. He swept it aside with both hands, pressing the phone shoulder to cheek.

"I can…I can make it," he pinched down on the cigarette with his teeth and breathed deep. "When do you want me to come by?"

"How's today?"

Otto surveyed the motel room. The sun cut through the blinds, making wild streaks as it rose. "Today is alright."

He packed his things into three brown grocery bags and took to the road where he hitched a ride to the county line, to that dip in the highway, the one he knew and could trace in his mind. He used to drive past it all the time going south, smelling the sweet air and the clay and the warm road. Moving through the curves now, wide oak branches reaching out above him, he examined his face's faint reflection in the windshield, smoothed down his hair. The man driving offered up a comb and made idle chat about the drought and how he was fixing his radio. As the car came down the drop in the highway, Otto peered forward and spotted Rapunzel's in the tucked-away row of brick and old wood buildings. His eyes stung traveling up to the shining copper-green of the roof, up above to two small windows. My windows. As he stepped across the parking lot, waving thank you to the man who drove him, he felt an emptiness in his heart like he didn't know what to do. He felt abysmally alone and thirsty and so much wanted to turn to someone, saying, Well, isn't this beautiful? Look at this place. Won't you come look?

The ladies at the coffee shop liked him straightaway, remembered his name and face from the papers, fed him coffee and warm buttered bread. They told him how badly they wanted musicians, how much it was a blessing he wanted to build a recording studio. Otto sat with his back to the wall and felt things were going well. They led him up the stairs and cooed over his ideas and ironed shirt, promised him soup all the time, biscuits at the end of the night, apple butter and strawberry jam on Saturdays. He made a pallet on the floor at first and would rise before the sun, sweeping and smoking or trying not to smoke and reading more classifieds. Roberta's husband sold him an old Chevy pickup and helped him with the heavy lifting. On the weekends, he brought a buddy or two to help out. Otto always kept his eyes on them while he unpacked, arranged and measured, watching while they drank beers and came and went.

Otto's years away had left him seeming to others somehow furtive but absolutely calm. Though he walked with a proud step, he spoke to most people in a way just barely audible. Roberta's husband and his friends, earnest generosity spent, quietly removed their offer of fraternity

from the table and passed their time elsewhere. After that, Otto worked slowly and alone, making the space all his, his body stretching and breathing against the slanted roof and fogged windows. Otto worked for a year making the place just right, bare and simple and clean and his. The next year he spent coming into the room and himself and relearning his strengths and loves again. He quit smoking twice, quit again. Soon it was June and the work was coming in and the weekends were fine until one Sunday late in the month.

Otto had been there all morning, sweating his skull off in the room, heat rising up from the baking below and the street and sky beyond it. The studio was his home, no doubt, he slept there most every night on the dusty blue couch near the window but with his back to the wall, feet out and heels propped over the arm. Nighttime and habits aside, he liked his hours out. He liked to sleep outside and very much liked to spend his mornings drinking coffee with the ladies in the shop, watch their smiles from the counter as he ate the burnt or ugly pastries they would not sell. He liked to spend his afternoons with music, his evenings with the bands, for they would always want to stay, drinking and talking, feeling swell and calm. When it got late Otto would grin, bleary-eyed and tipsy, and suggest they record some more at no extra charge, on the house, just for kicks. The smoothest recordings came from these sessions and it was in those final sweet hours that Otto would turn calm enough again to fall asleep, fall back to the couch with the click of the last guy out the door.

This was his schedule and this was what he would do every day for the rest of his days if he could. He most certainly did not like to sit around doing nothing save making spit and sweat. On this particular morning, Otto understood that if he simply went downstairs and enjoyed himself until the band arrived he would lose his chance to make them feel awful for pleading to record on a Sunday morning and then showing up late, wasting his time. He would lose his chance to teach them something like, Boys, you know what respect is? You know what it feels like to wait? Steadfast and sly, in his three hours waiting, cussing and melting, he'd managed to force the jam on the room's largest window up just enough to fit his head and neck out. His spectacles slid down his nose and his throat shone in the sunlight, thin and blue and frail. His body was a thin man's with a heavy coat on, weighted and delayed, burdened by folds and layers of imagined bulk on aged, lean shoulders. He shifted his knees on the carpet and lowered his face, gazing out over the cracked patio of the coffee shop below, out across the parking lot to the highway. The road was Sunday-quiet and waggled in the heat. Otto normally worked with bigger musicians, pals in the old guard, always a little late coming from Nashville or Lynchburg or Raleigh. These guys today were kids and coming from two counties over.

Otto watched a Ford Ranger brake fast and turn into the lot. Nope, it ain't them, just some dumb cooze. Otto spat and observed a young redhead park across two spots and climb out of the truck. He thought about sleeping and turned on the radio. He thought about trying for some sit-ups, about arranging his records, cutting his hair. For some strange reason today his limbs ached, his mind was restless and keen. The kids said they would come to record at nine, before the humidity set in. Yeh, before the humidity. Otto shoved up against the window with his shoulders, white paint chips falling down and sticking to his neck. He pulled his torso up and brought his arms outside. The redhead was pacing, still in the parking lot. Her wrists and ankles were very thin, Otto noticed. It made her look like a dancer. She lit a cigarette and looked up at him, blowing smoke. She studied his long face, his hair against the windowpane, reflecting grey. Rocking up onto her toes, she raised one hand to block the sun. In the glare, it looked like she was waving. Otto tapped a rhythm back on the brilliant copper roof. Da doo run run run da do run run. Her fingers were so slight, her palm a pale nothing against her brow.

She stared at him for a long while, the cigarette hanging from the corner of her mouth. Otto wanted to reach out and grab it, snatch it away from her face and bring it up to his lips, which ached now for a smoke. He felt irritated and old and altogether hateful toward the girl, who turned back to her car and paused with her hand on the door. Otto squinted into the daylight, blinking twice before pulling his body back through the window and sprawling down onto the dirt-worn carpet. Dumb cooze. He only wanted to smoke when the smell was in the air, when the heat was so bad everything just hung in it and his chest felt wet and gummy on the inside. He only wanted to smoke when he thought about prison.

He thought about the way smoke lingers in a small place, the way it used to keep him company and bury itself in the food he ate. He read a while back that they banned smoking in jail, about a year after he got out. Can't even imagine that hell. Otto lay there and thought of the irritable CO's chewing hard on Nicorette, twitching inmate fingers playing with hems and scabs, anything to do but punch a body—all those fiends coming down from nicotine. Early on, some of the guys had shown him how to light up when you run out of matches. With thick, agile fingers, they'd pop a battery out of their Walkmans and scrape back the covering, peeling to expose the ground. Someone always had pulled a few wire strands from the lint filter in the dryer or somewhere and saved them, then would hastily offer one up, pushing one end against the positive and the other against the scraped ground. Use your fuckin' fingernails, man, they warned, or you WILL get burned like a motherfucker. These guys would focus like scientists, real technical, until the wire

glowed red and they'd be puffing away. Otto loved their craft and focus, their long-grown index and thumbnails. He pictured them now biting on those nails, chewing them down raw.

Otto hadn't ever needed, truly needed, a cigarette until he was locked up. When his eyes had gone bad but before they got him glasses, he used to smoke and watch the end burn out of focus in front of him. He'd cherish it like it was sunlight and say hello, sometimes even hum to the shapes that would appear. He got to the point where he'd trade about anything for smokes, trade most of the best things, because he liked to think it was making his life sentence a little shorter. Otto's first cellmate, Dylan, a young kid like twenty-five or so, was an asthmatic but didn't mind. He had actually handed Otto his first pack.

Dylan had killed his fiancée but nonetheless had an alright pleasantness about him, a sound energy that startled Otto but made him nervous and made him sharp. Dylan always had nice memories of life outside and of being a kid living with his mom in Shreveport. He told these stories like sitcoms, pausing in the right places for Otto to laugh or ask questions. Otto liked Dylan so much for this, but also because he believed him when he said he didn't do it.

"Man, you don't got it in you," Dylan told him all the time, chuckling and wheezing. "Rape? Shit no."

Otto also liked him because when he came in scared out of his mind and angry, Dylan could tell and just smiled. "You scared out of yo mind," he had declared with that's that finality, his face close to Otto's and his eyes bright and playful. "Angry too and don't be neither. This ain't as bad as you think. You just think this is gonna be bad. Stand up for yourself but otherwise just watch. Better shit than TV, I swear. Keep your word and don't be a badass because you ain't one."

"No," Otto had agreed, taking Dylan's hand in cordial thanks.

Otto, feeling his back sweat against the dirty floor, clasped his hands across his chest and remembered more of Dylan. He then smelled smoke and thought he might be dreaming until he heard a timid knock on the door. Rolling onto his belly, shaking memories away, he raised his eyes to the sound. The redhead from the parking lot was standing there, peering down at him through the murky glass. Otto brought his body slowly to his feet and moved to let her in. She jumped when he stood and seemed surprised by his face, her mouth open just a bit. As Otto flung the door wide, her face smoothed out into a smile. Otto was pleased to stand a head taller than her. The girl's hand shot to her hair and tangled itself in busy fussing.

"Tell me you're with the guys coming in," Otto said, hand scratching the back of his neck. "What are y'all calling yourselves? Cherry Ramblers or somein' like that?" Muttering, he brought his hand down and

studied the paint flecks and lint that stuck to his palm.

"I'm Lauren," she said.

She waved her arms in a ta-da way as if the name meant something to him. Otto registered nothing and studied the girl's expectant face.

"I've come to—no," she paused, "I'm not in any band. I was just down there," she paused again, hands pawing at her thin cotton skirt. "I saw that you were here and wasn't sure what to—is it okay to come by now? Now, is it a good time to talk?" She was twisting the ring around her thumb now, leaving a red trace.

Otto looked down past her legs and noticed her cigarette butt, still smoking slightly at the edge of the landing. There was lipstick on the filter. He looked back up to her face, trying to sort out what she wanted. Her eyes were wide and blue like a baby's and brought to life something heavy and sorrowful in his gut. When Otto first got out, at the bus station, at the motel, then later at grocery stores, record stores, eventually concert halls and bars, he was sure everyone knew where he had been, sure they had an extra pair of eyes on him because of it. He felt like the decade inside clung to his shoulders, flashing and whining for all to see. At Rapunzel's, they all knew about everything from start to finish, from the news and much later from what he told them, and that's why he stuck around. This girl wasn't from downstairs. Who was this girl?

"Now's a good a time as ever," he told her. "I've got all the time in the world, darlin'. More time than I know what to do with."

"But what band were you saying about?"

"Miss Lauren, those boys ain't gonna show up and if they do it can be their goddamned turn to wait. Hell, I'll make 'em have you on tambourine if I feel like it. You play?" The girl took this question seriously and shrugged. Otto was startled by his ease with her. He didn't care much for women save the handful who came to check on him from the coffee shop now and again, but there was something about this one. He wanted somewhere inside him to speak with her, to ask of her, to sort something out. He also felt that he hated her, hated a part of her that he could not reach.

She chewed at her lips, leaving the lipstick an inconsistent, chapped-pink hue.

"No," she said. "When I heard you were recording music here, I thought that was such a good thing. To be doing something like that. I wish I could play something. I used to sing in choir though."

Otto thought of the girl in church-robe red. No, she ain't from church. Ain't from downstairs either. He watched her survey the small room, the sloped ceiling, the bare walls and equipment stacked in rows, beads of sweat collecting on her upper lip. He felt irritable and flustered by an ab-

stract, unchecked violence that was slowly coming up from underneath his skin. He felt it like one feels for impending obstacles in a dark room.

"I like it in here. It's peaceful," she said.

"They call me The Monk downstairs. Me in my cell here."

Otto's face wouldn't allow for a smile, as his cheeks were now hot and stiff. Lauren turned quickly to the window and was fumbling in her bag for something, stammering.

"Would you mind if I had a cigarette?"

"Only if I have one too, that's my rule."

She reached in her pack with thin fingers and pulled out the only one facing end-up, packed tobacco rough and earthy against the other smooth ends.

"My lucky," she said. "You can have it."

Otto lit the cigarette and felt much better. He removed his spectacles and cleaned them with a stale handkerchief pulled from his pocket. He cleared his throat, thinking the girl maybe wanted a job or something. He wondered if what she made him feel was maybe just energy, like a rage but worth something. She made him think of when he was younger. He exhaled a thin stream of smoke and was about to ask her if she'd ever been in a studio before when she inhaled deeply and started to speak.

"Mr. Casey," she said. "Mr. Casey. I'm the daughter of Angela Wharton. I wanted to come by to tell you that she's dead. She killed herself last month."

As soon as the girl had called him Casey it all came back like a smack in the jaw.

"Well, she didn't kill herself exactly. She was wasted and fell and hit her head too hard."

Otto's mind whirled like heat-sickness, but looking at her face, back at those eyes, in those eyes he saw the woman she came from. He saw Lauren fourteen years younger playing on the next door front lawn, saw her waiting for the school bus every morning as he passed her on his way to work. He saw her propped up on her mother's hip, asking what's wrong what's wrong to her mother's crying face as they watched from the porch the officers leading him away. The girl hadn't been at the trial. She hadn't seen her mother on the stand saying, "Yeah, it was him. He done it."

The room's heat was unbearable. He wondered when she learned what it all meant. Girl was like eight or so then. Was she thirteen, fourteen, when she learned what happened to her mother? When she learned Mysterious Neighbor Mister Casey raped her mother? He wondered how Angela must have told her, how she must have chewed on his name.

"I just really wanted to see you," Lauren said. "I know my mother ruined your life but I think really you ruined hers."

She was over by the window now, blowing smoke thick out into the afternoon. She didn't say anything for a time and Otto studied the floor, quiet as well. Car wheels spun on the gravel outside. Otto felt a pain in his hand. The cigarette had burned down to the end between his fingers. He put the butt into an empty bottle and studied the forming blister. He couldn't think straight. One night Dylan had told him exactly how he had killed his girl. He was loaded out of his mind and strangled her while they were screwing.

"So, I didn't tell them this, obviously," Dylan had said, leaning close, "but I was singing as I did it. Da doo run run run da do run run. I don't remember wanting to do it or her face or afterward or nothing. I just remember the power in my hands and that motherfuckin' song!" He punched the air as he said this, laughing at the private joke.

Otto shook Dylan from his mind and accepted another cigarette from Lauren. His hand grazed hers and he felt sick.

"They let you out," she told him slowly. "Those lawyers from New York came down here and worked for you and let you out."

Her whole body was shaking and her shadow was long on the floor.

"When mom heard you were exonerated she thought the world turned upside down. She had been certain, you know. I want you to know that much. She wasn't just—she wasn't some slut pointing her finger like mad. It wasn't just because you lived next door. Fuck. I don't know."

She looked just like a little girl.

"I don't know. I don't know. I don't know why she thought it was you. She was certain."

Otto looked to her knees, wondered about their whiteness, their ugliness. His jaw twitched. "That's what testifying is, Lauren. Certainty."

She swallowed deep.

"They helped you with that DNA and those fancy suits but I couldn't help us, help her."

"I didn't do nothin'," he said after a time to the wall. "That was all it was."

She was scratching the loose paint away from the windowsill. Otto didn't know why she was here. Otto hated her face and felt sorry for everything that was a part of her, down to the thin air in her puny lungs. She looked straight away exactly like her mother.

Otto spent ten years thinking about Angela Wharton, then two years thinking of anything but. Before the morning the cops brought him in for questions, Angela was just the single gal with the cute kid next door,

maybe two kids, he could never keep track. She had boyfriends who would wink at him if he passed by as they were leaving in the morning, boyfriends who sometimes called him over to talk about "the business," always wanting to chat all man-to-man. He would sometimes catch Angela watching these brief conversations through her lace curtains. Otto endured these men with thin patience and thought of only these men when he thought of Angela Wharton. He thought of these men when the cops took him in. He thought of these men during the trial, and then he forgot these men and thought only of Angela Wharton and why and how and how could this how could this happen?

Otto felt angrier now, like a mean gin fit, like a poison, like slamming into something in the dark and wanting in that small moment to kill and to crumple into a heap on the floor. Dylan's throaty melody pierced the space in clanging haze: Da doo run run run da do run run. He had twisted his rage out and away from his body and now it was back, filling his small, private spaces, rolling back, freight-training back to the prison library, the day he got his face beat to pulp and Dylan fixing his glasses for him all the time and Dylan talking about Louisiana-this and his fiancé-that.

Dylan was his friend until one morning when Otto found him dead in bed with rags and washcloths shoved deep down into his throat. Lauren's skirt was that same terry-blue color, her flushed cheeks the same pink as the strained skin was around his eyes. All the work undone, all what a ten years inside had hushed rock-a-bye to sleep, all settled down inside him into something simple, something like elation when the lawyers came and let him out with clean white paper documents and do-right confidence. He was angrier now and wanted to burn the hair right off her head, wanted to bite her like an animal would. He wanted to make her leave and he could, he could ask her to, make her do it.

Lauren waited for him to say something and when he didn't, with tears in her eyes, told him, "Mama never talked to me about it sober, just cried."

She was inching closer to him, hands twisting her skirt again.

"She wouldn't leave the house. People thought she went crazy thinking he was still out there, whoever really did it, but really it was you coming back. You living your life one town over. She took the clipping when you got out and woke me up that night, slurring 'Wake up, Lauren. Wake up and see what your ma done.' She'd hiss, waving the paper in my face. I still remember seeing the words in the dark. INNOCENT MAN FREED AFTER TEN YEARS. She got in bed beside me and stunk of vodka and wailed in her sleep."

Lauren closed her eyes and sucked in her breath.

"She ruined your life and mine and hers."

Lauren gestured with a waving fist. The abrupt movement caused a pang between Otto's eyes and his breath to quicken.

"I couldn't stop thinking about you. I actually kept the clip when this place opened. This nice place. My mom found it once and that's when she kicked me out."

Lauren calmed and stood absolutely still now, her chest a slow rise and fall.

"I don't know why I'm here, Mr. Casey. I don't know why but I feel like we're both on the other side of her and I felt so alone."

Otto tightened his jaw. He took a step toward her, suddenly feeling the heat all over his body rising up from his head.

"Alone?" he asked, the word losing momentum as it left the curve of his throat.

It settled between them, echoing and stopping thick and doughy near the ground.

He had never known less what do to in all his life. He said it again.

"Alone? You feel alone?"

His heart was bursting through the skin of his chest. His heart was crushed up in his guts and burning with wild, dizzying numbness like when you're hit in the nose or throat or groin. His hands were pressed up against her shoulders now, his thumbs against the notches of her collarbone, fingertips against the softness of her neck. He pressed down like that, breathing heavy, trying hard not to vomit up his insides. His gut heaved and the force came through his hands and into Lauren, pushing her pack in one quick jolt. She let out a small cry and stumbled back. He was quiet for a long time. She thinks I'm going to kill her. Her eyes were bulging broad in dark sockets in a small head, her hair red and dangling. She believes that I will kill her. Why doesn't she run? What does she want me to do? They stared at each other and Otto heaved again. The first time he felt this sick there was nothing he could do, he was pulled away and sobbing and Angela Wharton was staring at him from the back of the courtroom. The second time he was pulled away but was quiet and Dylan was dead. Dylan and Angela Wharton were staring at him now and all Otto could hear was a great mighty chorus of da doo run run run da do run run.

Lauren seemed like a creature in the road, a quick small motion freezing in swelling headlights. She was shorter than him and crying hard now and smaller and awful and not welcome. He closed in the distance he had just made between them.

"I need you to leave. I need you to please leave me alone."

Otto got his face up real close to hers. He could feel her breath hit his chest, hear a sob rising in her throat. The words came out of Otto like

rough music, words rolling off his tongue like tobacco spit.

"There's nothing right, there's no you, there's no before all that. There's only what I got back and all I got back was my life, damnit, let me have it."

Otto could taste the tears rushing down her cheeks, could feel them on his own face, in his mouth. "You were a kid then, so stay that way. Just 'cause you're grown now and just 'cause your ma fucked you up doesn't mean nothin' with me. Now please," Otto was choking then, something dry and sour in his mouth, something heavy and small. "Please just get the fuck out of my goddamn — my goddamned house."

He was stooped and twisted but felt like he stood before her a giant man, felt like he was ripping through his thick skins. Lauren was running. She was running, coins and ribbons and papers falling from her bag. Her keys were jingling as she went and the sound hit Otto's body and shook him. He was so scared of how he felt.

She was gone with a slam of the door and Otto heaved and puked onto the floor. When he could breathe again he collapsed down, curled on his side, rocking. Lying there, he felt like a great bird with wings and impressive claws and a large, flawless, noble head. He felt like he had gone a very long distance to the moon and back, or traveled very quickly without knowing it, like waking up drunk on the floor having toppled out of bed. When he tasted his own tears on his tongue, he realized he was laughing too and sobbing wide, calling out his own name, Who and what I am, mouth open to the sky — Otto Casey, Otto Motherfucking Casey! Down below, Lauren's truck swerved onto the highway and was gone. Faintly in the air he heard the telephone ring. Faintly in the air he heard some dumb voice cancel, his missing morning appointment with a flat tire one county over, ages ago.

Before prison he was living in a big house with seven rooms, living alone with women here and there all the time, living alone because he liked it, he could make them leave when he wanted. "Don't you get lonely, living in all those rooms?" the women would inevitably ask. Their hands would always be toying girlishly with their panties or the hem of his shirt as they asked and he always said no. He would wander from room to room, play his music loud, sing da doo run run run da do run run. Sing and dance and smoke grass and generally have a swell time in all that space. Going to prison he heard like clockwork — the nail that sticks out get hammered man, keep cool. Dylan had said, "Keep cool," and Otto took those words to prayer and wore them like a skin and now he paced his little room above Rapunzel's, deep and warm and clutching so many old, stubborn habits from the inside.

After everything, he needed just one room, didn't need exactly, but just had to, ought to, stick to one room precisely because it made him lonesome. He didn't touch anybody, women especially, and that made him lonesome too. He didn't tell anyone about Dylan and about the other guys that came and went. He just kept himself to one small space and everyone knew he was there, everyone could say, "There's Otto. Otto Casey was there." One small place made him sharp, one small place made him keep to himself. He could think in one small place, watch his back in one small place, do his work, sleep safe, spread himself out on the floor and sleep until noon if he felt like it, if he ever could. Otto felt his body like a great bird in his small space and spread out his wings. The day stood for him like a flash and his Sunday morning came down into dusk. He thought of Lauren's hair like the color of the sun outside. The best is what I got, he thought. The best is this.

Otto lay there until he noticed the hum of crickets outside, early evening noise and light into darkness. Like pulling his body from water he raised himself off of the carpet. The vomit nearby had soaked in and darkened, looking like a blister on the floor. Otto covered the area in newspapers and walked to the door. As he opened it and stepped outside his foot caught something with a gentle clink and crack. A small white plate lay in three angular shards under his shoe, biscuit crusts and crumbs scattered on the stairs. Otto sighed for the ladies downstairs, for this simple gesture. Just beyond the shattered dish was Lauren's cigarette butt, looking to him like the final front, a paltry, falling jab. He brushed the thing with his toe, a gentle kick sending it over the edge of the stairs and into the dark grass and stone below. Lauren landed among a million stubbed cigarettes and Otto couldn't make it out anymore.

He descended slowly, steadying his frame against a violent shaking in his legs. Turning the corner into the front lot, Otto saw the blue sky spread out around him, blue mountains and treetops brushing against them and blending in. Behind him the shop glowed orange, voices boisterous as the service switched from coffee to beer. In the distance a train called a high and lonesome lowing as it passed. Otto felt wicked there between the highway and the shop, felt framed and ashamed by his full-body anger from before, though more so by the joyful high he felt, by the sweetness of his rage and power. The train called again, two gaping roars. He was innocent, in his heart and on paper, by the book, by law, but he didn't feel it. With the last fits of anger ringing down near his knees, he felt innocent at some level but wicked underneath. He felt like Dylan singing and strangling his girl and only remembering the music of it. Good and human and willing and vicious. These feelings swarmed his mind and Otto stepped out of Rapunzel's storefront light toward the highway, an inviting deep navy and finally cool. He stepped toward the thin, empty highway, opening and rising on both sides around him, feeling the dark earth below.

GEORGIA HAMPTON

FREE SAMPLES ROSETTA YOUNG

It began with the free samples. Every mother has her tricks, Carol would think, placing a pepperoni on her tongue and smiling at him over the counter. “A pound and a half of Boar’s Head, a pound of Kentucky Legend.” A few times they commented on the weather, as people do. She never thought he was handsome, although she knew other women who did. On Thursdays, Carol would shop with Cindy Sherwin and after they had nestled their cold cuts into the baby seats of their shopping carts, Cindy would always say, “He has such a way with the slicer,” and laugh in a low manner, leaning against Carol as if they were schoolgirls. She did not receive Cindy’s shoulder or tone warmly and instead passed onto other subjects: cantaloupes, March vacation, SATs. She did not want to talk about the butcher. He did not interest her, with his paper hat covering his black hair. She thought, maybe, he had a nice face. The kind that would hold your eyes for a moment in a crowd. But not handsome—his cheeks were too full, his ears too large. One could tell his body was solid, but the butcher’s apron gave him a sloppy woman’s figure. She appreciated, perhaps, the way he’d lay the samples out so neatly on wax paper and she’d chew thinking, Every mother, every mother, every mother.

One afternoon, Carol was in a rush. It was the middle of the week, a Wednesday, and she had to pick Hannah up at ballet. The rain was coming down in sheets and had already filled her flat leather shoes on the way inside. He saw her, coming around the corner with her bags, away from the registers and just in-sight of his counter. It was a quiet afternoon—it was raining. He was suddenly at her side. “Ma’am,” he said, “Please, let me help,” and he scooped the two bags from her cart with one arm, brandishing an umbrella with the other. She was too overwhelmed to protest. Out across the parking lot her shoes filled once more with water. “I’m sorry,” she said, fumbling for her keys, as they stood beside her car. The rain hit the umbrella. They were close enough that she could smell a spicy aftershave. She unlocked the car and he put the bags in the back seat, while she repeated,

“Thank you so much.”

“My pleasure, Ma’am.”

“Please, call me Carol,” she said, extending her hand. She was the kind of person who said “Thank you” to service people and meant it. She was grateful. The hem of her skirt was wet. He held the umbrella over her until she had closed the door of her car and then he walked

away. She sat in the driver's seat and checked her face in the mirror.

She didn't see him again for another few weeks. The spring rain abated while Carol and her family vacationed in the Bahamas. The kids were out of school, her husband, David, had taken time off work, and when Carol came back it was dry and bright and chilly. Monday morning, stepping out of her car in the East Side Market parking lot, she felt tan and strong. That morning, as she'd zipped the side of her calf-length skirt and looked in the mirror, she knew she was having one of those lucky mornings. A morning in which she knew she was the pretty, compelling protagonist of her own life, that her movements, whatever they be, were full of grace. That morning, she knew that for whatever reason the parts have come together into a flattering whole. These days grow less and less frequent with age, for all Carol knew this one could have been her last, and she applied swipes of make-up and put on a pair of delicate sandals inappropriate for the weather. And so, it was in this mood she walked into East Side Market, pushing a cart through the automatic doors.

East Side Market was not some mega Stop and Shop, but rather a fully stocked supermarket for the neighborhood. They had everything a regular market would have: a florist, a bakery, an ATM, rows and rows of cereals, jams, dried pastas, Carvel cakes, an organic aisle, a cheese island. There was, of course, a butcher. There were few "deals." It wasn't that kind of place—it was there to serve the neighborhood, to be convenient, and every once in a while, some newcomer would remark, "How expensive that place is. It's really a crime, isn't it?" This would be met by a few strained smiles and then one person, a woman usually, would say, "Oh, but it's so convenient! And there's always the Stop and Shop, if you want to go out of your way."

So, Carol was walking into a local place. The kind of place where she could run into anyone she knew and it felt lovely to feel lovely in such a setting. She wondered if she might bump into Mr. Schwartz, one of the only stay-at-home fathers, who wore this appellation so well and always flirted with her, gentle. Strolling past the florist and the rack of magazines, she surveyed the whole east wing of the store: the produce, with its piles of green, and the island of strong-smelling cheese, and the butcher, with his paper hat, behind his counter.

"Hello, Carol," he said, when she approached, and she was momentarily taken aback. It was very possible that she'd completely forgotten the day in the rain—when, out of gratefulness, she'd instructed him to call her by name.

"Hi," she said, and smiled.

"What will it be today?"

"Oh, let me see. Quite a lot, I think, actually," she said, and smiled at

him again, a little forgive me smile that she knew endeared her to men (there were some, she knew, who lived to forgive women like Carol for their minute transgressions). She imagined the way she looked standing across from him with the flush of spring cold just now abating from her face. "We just got back from vacation, you see, and so, of course, there's no food in the house." The butcher waited with his hands spread, in plastic gloves, on the metal in front of him. "Let's see—hmm, okay, well, alright, how about a half pound of the usual pepperoni? And then some Boar's Head ham and turkey, half pound, each, as well?"

"Coming right up," he said, and she noticed, maybe for the first time, the curlicue of an accent on that 'c'. He retreated behind the flaps of black plastic, into a back room, which, she thought right then, was a world she'd never see. Returning with a flank of meat, a humongous rectangle of turkey flesh, with its side fraying from its former relations with the slicer, he began to put together her order. She watched him put the turkey through, and then the pepperoni, and right after he'd begun on the ham, she called over the counter, "Oh—sorry, um, could I also get a pint of pasta salad, once you're done?" He turned over his shoulder to face her—perhaps he couldn't quite hear her over the progress of the machine—and then, screamed, the slicer stopped, and Carol saw fresh blood spreading over the side of meat.

"Oh my god!" She screamed over the counter, "Are you okay? Jesus!"

"Shit!" He said, grabbing a towel and holding it over his hand. "Goddamnit it! Fuck!—Sorry, ma'am—Carol."

"Jesus Christ! Shit, your hand's bleeding everywhere," she said, her two hands now pressed on the glass as she tried to lean over the counter and look. "Oh my god, this is my fault. I'm so sorry." Carol realized, as she said this, that she had no idea how to get around the counter. A woman by the cantaloupes wandered over—somehow, no one else seemed to be around or to have noticed.

"No, no, no," the butcher repeated, and Carol didn't know if he was addressing her or his hand. The towel was slowly reddening.

"He should go to the hospital," the woman said to Carol, as if Carol were responsible for him. She was a young woman with glossy curls, a ripe mouth. The two women watched the butcher pull off the towel, examine his hand, cover it once more, and then repeat again, "Goddamnit!" and something in another language.

"Okay, okay, okay," Carol said, and then, over the counter, "Can I take you to the hospital? Let me take you to the hospital."

"I need to talk to Mr. Thompson," he said, wincing.

"Okay," she said, "Who is Mr. Thompson? Which one is he?"

"Apply pressure to the wound," the cantaloupe woman said the

butcher.

"He's in the office," he said. The towel was almost completely red now.

"Come on," Carol said, "This is ridiculous. You're bleeding everywhere. Ms.—?"

"Ms. Rothguard," the cantaloupe woman said, "I kept my maiden name."

"Okay," she said. "Do you think you could go over to the office and tell Mr. Thompson what has happened? And that I drove his butcher to the hospital? And, and—that it was me, Carol Mathis, my fault, I distracted him?" Carol shot a look at the butcher, who seemed poised to protest, but she held up her hand. "And we were sure Mr. Thompson wouldn't want his employee bleeding everywhere, so we left."

"I think I can do that," Ms. Rothguard said.

"Thank you," Carol said. The butcher then emerged from behind a little metal door Carol previously had not noticed. It was camouflaged alongside the counter. He seemed to have decided, examining his wound again, that he did not have any other option than to accept Carol's help. She abandoned her cart.

They walked quickly out the automatic doors and she opened the door of the SUV for the butcher, who she realized, with a little pain, was still wearing his apron. She hoped he would not get any blood on her leather interior. Her hands on the wheel, having just backed out of her parking space, she turned to him,

"Are you alright?"

"Yes, thank you," he said and smiled weakly.

"No problem," she said, "I am so sorry…I was being…a busy body."

"No, no," he said, "You just really wanted your pasta salad."

Carol was surprised and then realized he was joking. She realized, looking into his face, that he must have be at least 10 years her junior.

They went through the ER proceedings with speed, because it was a Monday at 10 a.m. and no one else was in the waiting room. She waited as they examined his hand. A nurse came out and informed her that the butcher had cut the fleshy side of his hand and he would need 15 stitches, but he should be fine. "Your husband will be out shortly," she said, and Carol didn't bother to correct her. Carol had learned from filling out forms for the butcher—his writing hand had been injured—that his name was George and he was of Caucasian and Cape Verdean descent, and he lived in South Providence, unmarried with no children.

George was instructed by his doctor not to get the stitches wet and to come back in 10 days to have them removed. They gave him exactly two Valium for the pain. He informed Carol of this as they walked once more that day through sliding, automatic doors. From the moment he had sliced his hand open almost three hours had passed. It was just after noon and the sun was high and bright, the parking lot a wash of painful light. Once outdoors, he pulled out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter, as if by instinct, and then looked at Carol, startled, his mouth slightly agape.

"Oh—sorry. I—"

"No! No. Go ahead," she laughed, "It's what you deserve, for Christ's sake, after what you've been through this morning. Have a cigarette. It's—I'll wait—please."

"You want one?"

"Uh, ah, well, actually—yes. Why not?" She said, and saw him smirk. "Watch what you offer. I may have the whole pack, if it keeps going this way. Little did you know I harbor an immense weakness for cigarettes. Seriously." She paused to breathe-in—he lit the end of hers and then his own. "My husband hates cigarettes. He's a doctor—not at this hospital, another one. Granted, they're not great for you, cigarettes. No one's denying that. And I don't smoke! But I did a bit when I was younger. But—this is really bad—but I guess you would understand—I keep an emergency pack taped to my bed frame. Isn't that nuts? Every once in a while I'll sneak out back, when I'm feeling stressed."

This wasn't completely true—she had done this in the past, when the kids were at their smallest and she had sometimes felt like locking herself in the bathroom to escape from them. But then they got older and she forgot about the Camels taped to the box spring, and then one day David was making the bed and he found them. He had confronted her (and really, who else could it have been?) and she confessed that she used to smoke a bit when she was stressed, but that she had stopped since then. He seemed to forgive her—the sell-by date helped her case, as it was two years old—as long as she wasn't smoking anymore.

But this marital story of temptation and redemption was boring and even Carol, who had spent a whole week worrying about how she had disappointed David, could see that. And this version of events made George laugh. "No," he said, "I understand. Sometimes you just need what you need." He had remarkably light eyes and his teeth were very white. His hair was black with a soft curl and it looked better out from under the paper hat.

"You don't look Cape Verdean, you know—at all, it's strange," she said, and then covered her mouth with her hand. "Oh—I know you're not supposed to just say things to people like that—about their, uh, heritage, and stuff, but—"

He interrupted. "It's okay. I've gotten it my whole life. My father was

white, so I am very light-skinned, and I grew up in a Cape Verdean community."

"So, you've always lived in Rhode Island?"

"In the area. I went to school in Massachusetts and then over time sort of drifted over here."

"I'm sorry—I'm prying, but, so, you're not married?" She took a drag of her cigarette.

"No," he said.

"Never saw the point? Don't want the whole ball and chain?" This was her attempt at a joke, and in her mind she was imitating her husband, who always said things like that to his one or two friends who had remained single. She knew she was being familiar with him, but she found herself not really being able to help it, because she liked him and the expressions his face made.

"No. It's actually quite a sad story," he said, lightly, exhaling upwards.

"Oh, gosh, I didn't mean to—"

"No, no," he said, "It's just a fact."

Carol dropped her cigarette and smushed it with her foot.

"The woman is in Cape Verde. I used to go there every summer when I was a kid. My mother would stay in Worcester and she would send me to my aunt's. She was the next-door neighbor's kid. It's really different, there. They only turn on the water between certain hours, but no one ever knows when that will be. Everyone yells all over the neighborhood in Creole, 'The water's on! The water's on!' And people fill up buckets. Anyway, she ended up marrying someone else. We still talk, though, from time to time."

"Oh, wow," Carol said, but she did not want to continue the conversation. This was a bit much, actually. Talking to the butcher about his love affair. Her toes were cold in her sandals. "We should probably go. You should probably go home. Rest. I'll drop you back off at your car. At the Market."

"Can I have one more?" he said, shaking the box and smiling a bit.

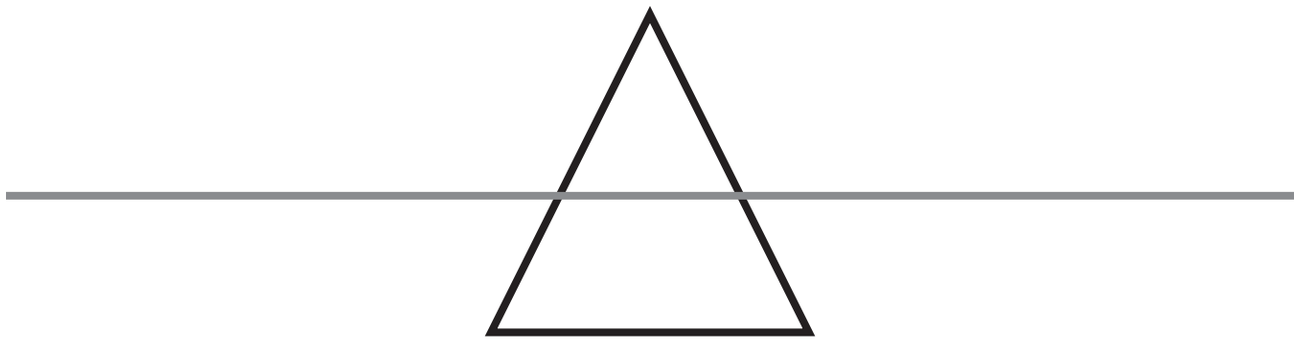
"Uh, actually, I have to pick Hannah, my daughter, up from ballet."

But this too was a lie.

After he drove away, Carol knew she should go back into the Market and finish her shopping. She sat for five minutes with the heat blasting—the weather had turned again—and thought about going inside. However, she could not face the landscape of that morning and instead she drove the ten minutes to the Stop and Shop. She pushed her cart down the crowded aisles, with their greater proliferation of merchandise and people, and tried to find her way. Sallow-faced mothers spoke into cell phones and pushed carts of bright boxes and wilting produce. Their children, too young for school, hung out of their metal seats and cried. Employees in red shirts roamed the store aimlessly, armed with price guns. She waited in line at the deli and asked the butcher for a half-pound of turkey, a half-pound of ham and a half-pound of pepperoni. She would have ordered pasta salad, but she did not trust Stop and Shop to make it right. What if the mayonnaise was bad?

"$68.38," the cashier said. She snapped her gum in Carol's face. Carol pulled four twenties from her wallet and thought, Jesus. It was at least twenty dollars more at the Market. At least.

She pulled into her driveway half an hour later and carried the full grocery bags into the house by herself. She placed their contents on the counter and then put everything in its place—refrigerator, drawers, cupboards, under the sink. The house was cold. These old houses never retained heat well and all winter they had walked around the first floor, muttering, rubbing their elbows, saying, "It is cold." The saving grace of these old manses were their brick fireplaces, and Carol went about lighting one now. She ripped each of the Stop and Shop bags down the middle, lit them, and placed them in the grate with the logs. She lay down on the coach. She loved her living room—it was the room closest to the porch, with one window that looked out onto the neighborhood and then a pair of French doors that separated it from the second living room. What sorrow, she thought, had been on George's face when he spoke of that woman back in Cape Verde. Carol tried to think of what that really meant, all the way across the ocean, before she fell asleep.



BROOD WERONIKA JANCZUK

I remember the times we rolled about together
all as thoughts not yet had
and played pretend our first breath
and step
and tooth
and built womb forts to pass the time

I remember not yet knowing you
and then only hints of you
while you were fighting your nine months battle for air
And then came the day I first knew you
And I will never not know you again

I remember giving you a small plastic bead
and telling you to not put it in you nose
and you put it in your nose
and pepper did not get it out

I remember the years of a different language
And under the same roof
I did not see you
And you did not see me

I remember the first day you spoke to me
And I remember
much later, I'm afraid,
I remember the first day I listened

CARVINGS CHELSEA NEWSON

Adam was thinking about Lake. He was thinking about the very last time he had seen her smile: over dinner one evening in May, as the three of them sat at the table eating roast chicken with pilaf-from-a-box and Aaron did impressions of Johnny Rocket. It was October now and the air in New Jersey was slowly taking on the hard edge of autumn. The leaves on the gingko trees that lined the driveway to the church were beginning their simmer into a shade of yellow that echoed in Adam's eyes as he opened his book of hymns. He followed along with the hymnal now, holding it low enough in front of him so Aaron's seven-year-old eyes could follow along as well. He could hear Aaron's high voice sounding out the words, dutiful, as his own lips moved soundlessly around the syllables. He didn't have the focus to actually speak them; his mind was on Lake and the things she now lacked.

The music stopped and the congregation of one thousand and three souls took their seats on one thousand and three identical maroon-cushioned chairs. They replaced their hymnals with gold-embossed Bibles and turned their eyes to the dual mega-screens that flanked their pastor on the sweeping before them, and that now featured a running script about the benefits of tithing. The room felt heavy and warm with the breath of so many strange lungs and as Adam sat down next to his son he thought of Lake's lungs, and the way they had wheezed on the day she had wrecked Adam's world.

It was June then, new June with the lilac trees just bursting into flowers. Adam had passed rows and rows of those lilacs on the parkway as he drove to pick her up. As he pulled into the driveway of the clinic and saw her standing beneath its awning, her delicate nose carving a place out of the long blonde hair that was mussed in her face and her thin shoulders hunched against a cold that wasn't there, he couldn't believe how much she looked like her mother. It made him shiver into Lake's imagined coldness. He pulled up beside her and rolled down the passenger window.

"Get in."

She slammed the door closed behind her and hunched her shoulders even higher as though to hide her face from him. The car stalled as he stared at her until he could no longer bear the sight of the small silver dolphin that smiled from her left ear—the first earring she had ever worn, chosen by her mother when Lake was five years old. Sandra had always loved sea life. He faced forward and put the car into gear.

"Where's Lucas?"

Lake turned to face her own window, her shoulder blades angled towards her father. She was silent for longer than Adam thought she should have been, and as she reached out to turn on the heat, he asked again, "Well?"

"I don't know. He was there. He left, I guess."

"You guess." He turned again to look at her but the dolphin again prompted his retreat.

"And I guess you wouldn't have called me at all, if he hadn't left, huh? I guess you would have hidden this, like you've been hiding the rest of what you do, huh?"

Her silence grew heavier as the car warmed up.

"Well?"

"What do you mean, the rest of what I do?" she suddenly spat, shifting violently in her seat to glare at him with all her mother's venom in her fog-gray eyes. Eyes like Monterey, he'd always thought, with a shivery young heart to follow.

"The partying, the drinking, everything you've been up to with Lucas. Don't think I don't hear you leave at night, Lake. Don't think I don't smell the beer on your breath when you get home. I'm not stupid—but I guess I should have assumed that you are."

"Dad, I'm not stupid, I'm seventeen. I'm going to act like a seventeen year old. It's not a sin to act your age, for Chris'sakes."

"Let's not even get started on sin, young lady. Let's talk about responsibility. You can't just run around, committing yourself to actions that you aren't willing to take responsibility for, Lake. How many times have I told you?"

"I do take responsibility, Dad. I handled this by my self."

"And you handled it wrong!" He saw her foggy eyes widen with precisely the hurt he had meant to inflict and then narrow again with all her teenage outrage.

"Who are you to say what's right for me?"

"I'm your father. But this isn't about you, Lake. This isn't just about you. This is about a life, it's about the sanctity of a life!"

"What about the sanctity of my life, Dad? What about the sanctity of the rest of my life?" She was almost hysterical now; her cheeks were beginning to darken with a deep fury as the soft skin around her eyes acquired the cherry tones of tears. Her chest began to heave slightly and he knew she was on the verge of another attack. Soon her lungs would be whistling. Adam calmed himself in response, composing his jaw as he gripped and re-gripped the steering wheel.

"You're going to have to deal with this for the rest of your life, that's what. You're going to have to live with this weight, Lake. This is your responsibility and you'll be the one to handle it. Just like you wanted."

He pulled the car into their driveway and slammed his door closed as he exited, leaving Lake in the passenger seat to wheeze into the shame he hoped she would feel.

On the way home from church, Aaron commented on the gingko leaves.

"Look at them, Dad—they're like little pieces of yellow fire. Do you think the have trees like that in Hell? Near the fire lakes they talk about in Revelations?"

Adam was quiet as he considered the question, and then said slowly, as though against his will, "No, buddy. I think the trees in Hell probably have blue leaves, because blue fire is the hottest fire, and Hell is as hot as it gets. Or is it white that's hottest?"

He was still pondering the issue as he set the table for their supper. He tried to imagine which looked more natural—a blue-leaved oak beside a lake of flames, or a white-leaved maple sprinkling its ashes upon the heads of sinner-swimmers. He gave it up and decided he'd never know, and called his children down to eat.

The meal began as usual. Aaron launched a monologue of giggles regarding his favorite cartoon of the morning, and spoke of wanting to hunt for earthworms in the backyard once the rain stopped. Adam nodded and occasionally smiled at his son and offered counsel on the best places to dig—the soft, wet soil beside the stepping stones on the back path, or the musty ground beneath the berry bushes. He threw the occasional question in Lake's direction—questions about school, or college applications, or whether her friends were going to the football game that weekend. She rarely rose to the challenge of conversation, and when she did it was in the form of monosyllabic answers. Aaron was in the kitchen searching for chocolate syrup and Adam was still awaiting Lake's answer to the last question when his eyes fell on her left wrist as she reached to help herself to the creamed corn.

"Lake, what's on your arm?"

She withdrew her hand from the table as though she'd been shocked by the serving dish. She pulled her sweater sleeve into her palm as her eyes grew smoky with fear.

"It's nothing. Jana's cat scratched me yesterday," she said as she tried to regain her air of disaffectedness by re-buttering her bread.

"Let me see it—it looks bad."

"No, Dad, it's fine. Leave it alone." Her fear gave way to defensiveness, but Adam couldn't let it be. The seeming frailty of Lake's small

wrist in motion, hidden beneath Merino wool, made him feel sick. When she next reached for her water glass to wash down all the bread and butter she'd eaten for show, he grabbed her arm and turned it over to reveal a latticework of cuts that stretched from her the swan's neck of her wrist to the crook of her elbow.

"Lake! Lake, what are these? What did you do to yourself?"

"It's nothing, Dad, I'm fine. Please, just leave me alone." As she spoke, her eyes began to well up with a vulnerability Adam hadn't seen since Sandra left.

"Lake, you could have these for the rest of your life." And just like that, the vulnerability shifted to anger and Adam felt he was on familiar ground.

"So what? So people will see them and they'll know what kind of person I am. I don't care, Dad, I don't care about these things. It's my body, I can do what I want and people can think what they want." She was almost shouting now.

"Lake, baby…" his tone was beginning to soften.

"Leave it alone." She pushed her chair away from the table and threw her napkin on the corn before storming upstairs to her room, leaving Adam to stare at an empty table that shone with silverware and half-empty plats of food.

Adam sat up alone after dinner several days later. It was past ten, and he knew by the silence upstairs that Aaron was sleeping soundly and Lake was in her room. He sat beside a blue starfish-shaped lamp and idly nursed a mug of cider in his right hand as he wondered why he hadn't sensed this thing with Lake before he had seen it it. She had never been bright-eyed, exactly, but she had definitely and clearly changed in the past months. She had stopped coming to church altogether—though that was easily explained. She had started wearing long shirts, almost exclusively—but that, too, could be justified by the season. She hardly spoke to her family at all anymore. That was something. But the surest sign that something was off, he thought, was that he hadn't seen her look Aaron in the eyes since June. He hadn't seen her touch the little boy she'd once called her baby, hadn't seen her even look his way, since the yard had lilacs in it. He wondered about Sandra, and how she would have dealt with this, or whether she had caused this, or what her absent role might be.

He grew tired of questions that seemed endless and cruel. He set his cider on a coaster and turned off the lamp, and stepped quietly up the stairs and into Lake's room. She was sleeping. He sat down on the very edge of her small blue bed, as gently as he could, and he watched her breathe without any thought or effort. She was sleeping on her side, with her head resting on the palm of her right hand, and he could see the sketches of old cuts in the light from the streetlamps outside. Thoughts of his shortcomings and his daughter's perfect skin turned his chest concave and he felt like parts of him were collapsing inward. He moved to sit on the ground beside her bed and put his hand close enough beside her to just touch her elbow without disturbing her into wakefulness. He closed his eyes and thought of Lake ten years ago, when the fog in her eyes was lovely and they spent their Autumns in the Northeastern pick-your-own orchards she had once loved so dearly.

He woke up the next morning to find the whole room white. Lake was still sleeping and his left leg ached numb from lack of blood-flow. He was confused by the brightness of the light outside until he stood up and realized he had slept through the first snowfall of the season. Aaron would be terribly disappointed to have missed it, but Adam didn't mind; the street outside was beautiful now, with the road deserted and the gold and crimson mums peeking frozen from their flowerboxes.

Lake stirred beneath her covers and then opened her eyes, squinting suspiciously at her father.

"Dad, what are you doing?"

"Hi, Lakey—look outside. It snowed last night."

"What? It's not even Halloween yet."

"I know. You know, I was just thinking—wouldn't it be nice to go up to Maine for the weekend? Stay with grandma and grandpa, pick out some pumpkins to carve?"

Lake stared at him, blank-faced, before mumbling, "I don't want to carve anything."

He balked, uncomfortable with the innuendo.

"But I'll go," she continued slowly. "Aaron loves the rocks up there."

They left the next day after the roads had thawed. Lake and Aaron sat in the back, each glued to their windows for the duration of the trip—Aaron's eyes round with exploratory glee, Lake's simply staring. They arrived at Adam's parents' house just as his mother was pulling a casserole out of the oven. The little town—perched on Maine's most southern coast and eternally misty from the salt spray and fog that hugged the sharp, beaten rocks and the gray-haired people—seemed to be sleeping already, before the sun was even fully set. Tomorrow it would be crawling with weekend leaf-peepers, but tonight it was quiet. The squat lighthouse that stood like a well-fed sentry just beyond his parent's fence line was aglow, beckoning to wayward lobstermen and lovers on retreat from the great Northeastern cities. Adam felt the cavernous parts

of his chest contract as he crossed the threshold of his childhood home and saw his daughter fold into the arms of her grandmother.

The next morning, Adam and Aaron left Lake in company of her grandparents and set off for a local pick-your-own pumpkin patch. Aaron grinned the whole way, bouncing in his seat and dripping the mayonnaise from his lobster roll all across his pant legs as he debated what he would carve into his pumpkin.

"I think I'll carve a wolf. Or a wolf eating a black cat. Or Jack Skeleton! What about you, Dad?"

"I dunno, buddy. We'll see."

As they pulled into the pumpkin farm, Adam could smell cider doughnuts turning golden in the farmhouse oven and thought again of New Jersey orchards with baby Lake. He bought a hot doughnut for himself and for Aaron before heading to the pumpkin patch. As they approached, he couldn't help but think of how the land before him resembled a battlefield, with the scattered orange globes looking like the heads of fallen soldiers against the cracked October earth. Aaron wasted no time, and soon held a perfectly spherical pumpkin in his cinnamon-covered hands.

"This is it! It's perfect, Dad. Which one's yours?"

Adam held up his own choice, low enough so Aaron could appraise it.

"Aw, Dad—that one's so bumpy and gross. It'll be impossible to carve." Aaron wrinkled his nose at the lopsided gourd as his thin arms strained to cradle his own.

"Yeah well, that's ok, bud. I like this one, and anyway it's for Lake, and you know how she is. Pumpkin guts gross her out. We probably won't even carve this one."

"So what will you do with it?"

"I don't know. Maybe paint a nice fall scene on it. Something with trees."

"Trees with blue leaves? That would be kinda scary!"

"No, these will be apple trees. Their leaves stay green forever."

"Suit yourselves." Aaron shrugged, turning to leave. Adam watched him walk ahead towards the farmhouse, marveling at his smallness and the way his knees bent to support the weight of his pumpkin. He tried to imagine him in ten years, three feet taller with bigger things than pumpkins on his mind, but he stopped himself. Better to let him act his age, for now.

"They always want me to meet at the Starbucks," Elijah said, sitting at his kitchen table. "And I feel like an asshole if I make them come to the office — because, okay, let's face it, the office is out of the way. If only Goodman would just give me one in the goddamn English department—"

"Well, Sweets," Judy responded, as she snapped Catherine, their daughter, into her overalls, "you'll have one soon, right? When are you speaking to Goodman?"

"Look, the point is, my office is out of the way and so I tell them, I compromise, and sway, okay, fine, we can meet at Blue State. It's quieter, less obtrusive. I just hate hanging around student places."

Judy was on her knees, eye-level with Catherine, concentrating on her ponytail.

"Owwww," Catherine toned. "Owww."

"Almost done," Judy said.

Elijah knew his distaste for Thayer Street, the strip of student stores and restaurants, was not news.

"What do you have first this morning?" she asked. "I can never keep your schedule straight. All the days seem to…." She was clearing the table now. Catherine stomped out to the hallway and then clambered up the stairs, throwing herself on each step like an animal.

"It's a Friday. Meetings. Worse than classes."

Judy glanced at the oven clock. "How many could you have?"

He resented the snipe about the time. He woke up every day at eight — couldn't he sleep in a little on Friday? Was that so much to ask?

"You know," she said, "Thayer Street is not just for students. You're the one who grew up here. It's for everyone. We don't need to drive to Federal fucking Hill — and deal with the goddamn parking — every time we all want to go get pizza as a family."

"I am just trying to express my feelings, okay? Just trying to say how I feel? This is about my work."

His wife turned on the sink.

"I hate it," he told her. "You don't how it feels when they look at me. I feel hunted. They give me these bulldozer looks through the restaurant windows. And if not the students, then my father's colleagues…."

"Maybe wear a hat and sunglasses. That way you can seem them, but they can't see you. No eye contact."

"Could you take this seriously? I am asking you to take my feelings seriously."

Elijah knew she was biting her lip. She would talk tough, but her voice would be wavering. He could fix his face into such an expression that Judy would take the girls for pizza alone. While he cupped his forehead, as if his frontal lobe ached without mercy, she would run out for eggs and milk.

"I'm sorry," she said, and turned to face him, wiping her wet hands against her jeans. "I'm just in a bad mood this morning."

Elijah walked over to his wife and drew his hands around her waist, under her shirt.

"It's okay, sweetheart," he said, and she pushed her nose into his cheek. Elijah was a wonderful performer of gratitude — he knew his wife loved the man who was thankful. Judy drew away and pushed her blond hair back from her face.

She reached once more into the sink and sighed. "The life of a professor's wife, I guess."

On the porch, he was relieved to be out of the house, even with the unpleasant day ahead. Grabbing his coat, Elijah had noticed that his younger daughter, Sophia, had one hand in her cereal. He had ignored this, called out a farewell, and lit out the door as fast as possible. Outside the door, lying in quiet, the street had been too serene to resist. He would never tire of the wedding cake colonials — all done up in their pastel frosting — and the trees that lined the sidewalk. Even in the grim weather, the air with a metallic cold to it, he thought his street was picturesque.

Now, alone, perambulating through his neighborhood, Elijah could admit to himself that he had just lied to his wife, or at least had evaded a major question. Today, he was meeting Goodman, the head of the English department, and he would find out if he would be receiving tenure. He knew his chances were not stellar—realistically, about a fifty-fifty. His tenure hearing had not gone very well, but it could not have really gone any better. He had deferred the hearing for the maximum three years and the matter was simple. His publishing record was weak; he had been hired on his potential and had failed to mature. His student evaluations, however, were mediocre-to-good. Most importantly, he had gone to the university and his father had taught there throughout his childhood. The oldest professors remembered him as a boy.

Elijah, however, did not want to think about this. Realistically, he should have been immobilized by anxiety. His future as a professional, breadwinner, faculty member, and, as far as he could see, as a man hung in the balance. This was all true, but he had no desire to engage with these facts. He did not know how to engage with them — when it came to his own life, he was a skater on a frozen lake. He could not see below the ice, even if he tried. He had no wish to visualize himself without tenure, forced to pursue some other career or send applications to the local secondary schools. Instead, he wanted to sit in his office with the door closed, grading term papers, listening to The Grateful Dead, and drinking a Pepsi from the vending machine. The dream of the next two hours — long and golden together in his mind — was all he wanted in this world. Passing a house that was having its roof redone, he waved to a workman, high up against the gray sky, and the workman waved back.

Within five minutes, Elijah was at the door of McCracken. If it had not been a matter of pride, Elijah would not have minded the location of his office. As it was close to his home and out of the way, he didn't have to interact with most of his colleagues. He slunk down to the basement, edged his lone single dollar into the machine, and slunk back up. He had just turned the key in his office door, when he heard, from behind:

"You're such a fucking queer, Simon."

Elijah jumped. "Jesus!" he said.

"With these Pepsis all the time, it has to stop."

Milton Grundy, his fellow assistant professor of English, beamed beside him, resting his hand on Elijah's shoulder. Grundy spoke like a frat boy, but wrote like E.B. White. Smooth, eloquent prose poured from Grundy and into top periodicals. Elijah would have hated him, except that he too had been banished to the basement of McCracken. Elijah suspected that the English faculty would keep Grundy underground until he lost his hair or his youthful, trilling energy. Although he reserved his jocular abrasiveness for Elijah alone, Grundy was still too fervent and keen for the listlessness of department life. Grundy was seven years his junior and, for no reason Elijah could see, seemed to respect him. All of this, and the fact that Grundy was a medievalist and not up for tenure for another three years, made him a friend, not a competitor. They often referred to each other as Crack Head, a reference to their mutual banishment to a strange building with a strange name.

"Grundy," he faux-scowled, "one of these days, a student will hear you talking like that, or, rather, he'll catch you on video, and then you'll be all over YouTube and you'll be fired."

"Speaking of," Grundy said, following Elijah into his office, "I heard you have your meeting with Goodman today?"

"What? From who?"

Grundy raised his eyebrows. "Uh, do I work in this department? Am I your colleague? Do I live? Do I breathe?"

"Shut up, Grundy."

"I don't know — I think Irene told me."

Elijah shook his head and his stomach heaved. Shit. Of course, he was deluding himself if he though everyone in the department was oblivious to his current situation. Grundy looked concerned, though. His baby face asked a different question.

"That tie looks ridiculous on you, Grundy."

"No," he said, swerving to check himself in the little mirror Elijah had hung discreetly over a file cabinet. "No, it does not."

"Stop shopping at Filene's Basement."

Grundy colored. "Fuck you," he said, and smiled.

Elijah liked Grundy because he was vain and did not know how to hide it, and yet he knew to be embarrassed by his vanity, because he owned only a thin neck, like the ridged bend in a straw, and a pale, splotchy face. He looked like a choirgirl in office clothes.

"I have to go, teaching my seminar, etcetera, etcetera," Grundy said. Elijah laughed at this imitation of Goodman.

"Bye, Grundy."

"I leave you, my liege, my fellow Crack Head."

The door to Elijah's office closed.

How easy life must be when you are Grundy! Elijah had spent enough time around Grundy to know it all came easily to him — classes, faculty meetings, research, writing, Goodman – even with his etceteras. Elijah glanced at the clock hanging next to the mirror. He so wished for it to show hours and hours before he had to enter Goodman's office. He yearned to see a gangly collection of gaps and hands that gave him some sort of eternal freedom from his obligations, but found no charity on the wall of his miniscule office. One hour in Pepsi-gilded solitude was all he was granted.

Grading was one duty that came easily to Elijah. In looking over an exam, he gave a grade based more on feeling than content. How close, he'd ask himself, did they come to getting to the heart of the thing? In fact, as a teacher, he was pretty decent. Dealing with the dolts of a classroom was his specialty. He continued to call on them throughout the semester and enjoyed drawing them out of their shells, even if this only yielded more leaden insight. It was his job, after all, he thought. And while the stronger students complained, he knew they liked the relief from having to carry the discussion. The good students often offered formidable commentary on the texts, but no one was without their dull, unimpressive moments, and they liked to have someone to look down on. In the end, everyone won, even if he did end up writing one recommendation too many for B-plus students. He basked a bit in this positive feeling and swept his pen over sheets of Blue Book paper, letting "Casey Jones" fill his office.

Looking up from the pages before him, Elijah almost did not realize it was 2:30. He ran across campus, through the college green, the heart of it, to the Humanities Building. The quad was the part of the university that Elijah had loved longest. He'd fallen for this place, this campus, during Easter egg hunts and Halloweens of thirty years ago, when the university still had a Quaker sparseness, now completely faded. Here, he'd been a child, holding onto his father's leg, eating chocolate from his mother's hand. And he remembered, of course, being a student, when staggering home across the quad had felt like a victory march. Looking back, in many ways it had been, for he'd led a parade of women through the lush green. Even Judy. When he'd met his wife and she'd come to him in Providence, for the first time, he'd walked with her arm in arm through campus. Of course, though neither of them ever had said it, he'd been giving her a tour of a future.

Elijah slipped up the granite steps into the Humanities Building. The ground was wet. It really might snow. The administrative assistant, who always sat in the middle of the office, greeted him with a large smile and said, "Just go right in, Professor Simon." Did it bode well?

Goodman's office, the largest in the English department, smelled of peppermint and exotic cuisine. It always did.

"Elijah!" A voice exclaimed before he was even at the door's threshold. Elijah jumped. Goodman! He always startled him, even when he knew he would be sitting there. He was never ready to deal with the present reality of Goodman, who seemed to have just now navigated his bulk around his ornate desk, reeking of falafel.

"Middle Eastern today, Bob?" Elijah said, and Goodman raised his eyebrows in surprise before laughing.

"You've caught me. I was dining at the new Turkish restaurant with Irene for lunch."

"Very cosmopolitan," Elijah said, and he tried to keep his tone light. He tried not to think of what Goodman and the Dean of Students would have to discuss over lunch. Goodman was heavyset and, although his appellation was misleading, half-Indian. His mother had emigrated from New Delhi in the late 1950s after meeting Goodman's father. It had apparently been a shock to the Goodman family, who were mostly white, Protestant people of modest means. Elijah knew this intimate information, because every year Goodman told a version of this story at the University's Banquet for Difference, the culmination of Diversity Week. Administrators had spearheaded this "jubilant celebration of difference" (a Goodman-ism) about ten years ago in an attempt to draw more diverse applicants to the university. Goodman was, unofficially, a bit of

a spokesmen for this effort, with his Ph.D. in colonial literatures from Yale and his love for his multi-cultural heritage. He was robust, rotund and perpetually cheerful. Sometimes, to Elijah, it felt that Goodman's whole trajectory — including his parents' unlikely union and his mother's immigration to America — had happened for the sole purpose to thwart and irritate him, Elijah. To create fissures in his life where there would not otherwise have been any. One of these fissures — and not a minor one — was that now dinner at his parents' house inevitably included his father beginning a story, "I was talking to Fitzsimmons at the faculty club and I've never known much about how you do it in the English department," and ending with, "…but it seems that Goodman over there has you beat." And that, Elijah would think every time, clearing his throat and announcing it was about time he, Judy and the girls get home, no one was denying.

"So," Goodman said, shifting a stack of papers and pulling out a slightly crumpled one from the bottom of his average-messy desk, "obviously, we know what we're here to discuss."

"Yes," Elijah said. "I hope—" Already he was stuck. "I hope the review went well."

"We're all old hands at this now, etcetera, etcetera."

"Yes," Elijah said, remembering painfully that Goodman was only four years his senior. "So, uh, what's — the — uh, verdict?" And he hated Goodman for making him ask.

"Well, okay, Elijah, let's talk. You've been here, a part of the school, for a long time. And that, was, uh, undoubtedly part of our consideration when we reviewed your application. You've been a valued member of this community — and, oh, Elijah, I don't want to make a long thing of this. I don't want to coddle you. I know you don't need it." Elijah saw all that was in front of him very clearly — Goodman, his sweating upper lip, the enormous desk, the large, many-paned window that framed him. "The short of it is, Elijah, the committee did not vote to give you tenure."

Elijah felt the office reorient itself in reaction to this information. He begged himself to keep composure. He had not actually expected, he realized now, for them not to grant him tenure. Goodman knew the insufficient volume of his recent publication. Elijah had not published anything in three years, the last article being a poorly received effort in a good-to-mediocre minor periodical.

"What?" he said, "Wait—I'm sorry…"

"You probably want to know why. And, well, it's very simple. While your teaching record was solid, you have not done enough research in recent years, to, uh, justify your permanent hire. The university is trying to stay competitive with a lot of other schools — and, well, the school is changing, essentially. It has been changing. During a different time,

maybe, yes, this would not have been so much of a problem. But now — we're trying to keep up with the Joneses, etcetera, etcetera."

"Okay," he said, trying to stay calm, but he could feel heat rising to his face, and Goodman's silence, which had a prepared, canned feel, created a subtle acoustic register into which his voice could not sound anything but tinny and pathetic.

"You can stay on as an adjunct, if you'd like. It's a courtesy we usually don't extend. But given the circumstances, we feel it makes sense."

"I'll have to discuss," Elijah swallowed, "I'll have to discuss it with my wife." He could not think of Judy. At this moment, he could not visualize her face.

"Please, discuss away. And no rush on any decisions. Close out the semester and then we can talk, make other arrangements."

Elijah nodded.

"All right then," said Goodman, smiling robustly, but Elijah could plainly see a that's right, let him down easy expression break across his features. "And, I'm sorry, Elijah. I hoped — things would have gone differently. It was a really hard decision to make."

Elijah nodded. "Yes. I understand. Alright. Thanks for — uh, you know, the consideration, Bob. See you—"

"Later this week. Department meeting!"

"Yes. Later this week. Department meeting. Sure. Bye, Bob," he said, and then, "Do you want me to shut this?" He asked this, holding the door, and then hated himself. He sounded like a student.

"Oh, no. Leave it open," Goodman said, smiling.

Elijah walked out of the Humanities Building, in a post-Goodman daze of self-hate, his shadow making a jagged cutout of a man on the sidewalk. It had begun to snow, but only lightly, and the wet fell in his eyes. The world — this world he knew so well — seemed off-kilter, cracked. He opened the glass door to the coffee shop. She would not be here for ten minutes. Probably fifteen, as students were habitually tardy; regardless of type or class or race or musical taste, they were five minutes late. He wondered why exactly Goodman had done this, because he sensed, as he got closer to it, Goodman's work. Had Elijah come to so little in his field that it had become inevitable? Or was it something else? Something he suspected in his character? He took a seat in front of the picture window. A large, coffee cup insignia and the letters EULB ETATS EEFFOC obscured the street.

For Elijah was aware that he'd given Rebecca Litzman — the very she he waited for at this moment — an A-minus on her final paper to facilitate this very encounter. Over his ten years at the University, there had been so many coffee dates and office tête-à-têtes of this nature that

his pathology was unmistakable, even to himself. His string of bright, loud-mouthed females formed an unmistakable chronology. His tactic was the same, always: he gave a slightly low grade when he knew they would schedule an appointment. He chose carefully. Obviously, the hazy, heavy-lidded coeds in motorcycle boots and dark, tight jeans, whose attendance was spotty and participation non-existent, would not care if he dropped their grade a whole — not to mention a third — of a letter. Nor would the skeptical, yet eager girls, who, throwing up their hands, offered non-sequiturs and allusions to outrageous love lives, work for his purposes. They were too proud, too happy, to write off a lower grade as his dislike, his discomfort with their provocative perspective. And the preppy types, their sweaters showing embroidered polo players or martini-glasses in miniature, were too refined and shy to quarrel over grades. They still blushed when asked to read certain passages of Sons and Lovers and gave the impression at the beginning of class — to the boys and even the girls to whom they chatted — that in their lives they were waiting for something else. It was never clear what exactly it was, the thing for which they waited, but only that this large, unnamed opportunity would relieve them of the dreadfulness of the present. Pretending not to listen as he gazed over the day's lesson plan (notes he'd made carefully the night before), Elijah saw the blurred silhouette of matrimony in their allusions, in their lilting voices, which, seeing the thing from far off, mistook its shape.

No. Ironically, Elijah was restricted in adulthood to a section of the female population that he'd stringently avoided in youth. Shrill, prudent, pretty but chastising, she wore clothes so bland that they did not even allude to a body, although it was, if one took the time to look, not a bad one. She was the type of girl he remembered from his college years as a figure in his classes and the stories of his more unfortunate friends. Chuckling, lighting a cigarette in a faintly derisive manner, he had been baffled by his friends' tolerance of a girl who would, date after date, talk only of her studies or travels with her family the previous summer, who, at most, would tell bland stories of her friends in her sorority or hometown and then wouldn't let you go further then kissing (while boozed football players and their faster companions screeched on the quad) outside her dormitory. All of the types formerly described had been treasures to him in years past, but as an older man his license to these other young women had diminished and he had to content himself with these lesser lights.

This young woman would respond instantly—an email, a note under his door, and the wonder of it was that she never knew the charade in which they were involved. Once or twice a semester, he would get coffee or meet in his open-doored office with this soft-eyed young woman, nod at her struggle with the material or his particularly thorny midterm,

watch the steam from her mocha Frappuccino or black coffee or venti Americano curl around her head. After 25 to 45 minutes, he would raise the grade a third. Sometimes she would talk of romances with young men Elijah could not believe existed. Then, he would head back home to Judy and, after years, the girls, to think back on her heart-shaped face, or jagged, badly-cut bangs, or well-formed hands around a paper cup, the chipped nails winking and showing the particular wear that comes from being 19 or 21 or 22.

Rebecca Litzman came through the glass doors of the coffee shop, looked around uncertainly, saw Professor Simon, and waved. In seeing her, a flush ran through him, a weightlessness, that reminded him how much restraint these meetings took, how it was difficult for him to not revert back to an older time, sitting here in a local coffee shop that used to be a shoe store that used to be a ritzy restaurant that used to be, first in his memory, a coffee shop. It was difficult not to take this girl by the hand and speak sweetly to her, to massage her palm or squeeze her thigh under the table, the way he had with countless girlfriends in high school and college. He didn't have the heart for an indecent proposal, but he did have the plum heart of a man who loved delight, especially on a young face, even if it was not a particularly pretty one. He wanted, on a base and embarrassing level (maybe even in some ways a despicable one) to make this girl happy and be, distinctly and solely, the cause of it. While this had to do with sex, true, that was not the part of himself he struggled to control, but rather the part of himself that wanted to see a flush of relief break over her face when he grabbed her hand. It was the monster of nostalgia he had to fight off and the unnerving conviction that if only he could reach for her hand, she would transform, miraculously, into one of those girls he had known long ago and he could finally, once more, seek her counsel and approval and supple physique. These girls — women, really—it was bad of him to think of them as girls — who had all, from both high school and college, left the state and city, slowly, one by one, trickled out of his life, to be replaced by similar ages and faces and bodies, who called him, strangely, Professor.

"Hello!" Rebecca was upon him, sitting down across from him already, unwinding the scarf from around her neck and unbuttoning the navy blue pea coat that was damp with snow. Her cheeks were shining with cold. The outside world was freezing, the fall semester almost over. A Christmas tune played faintly over the café speakers. He was 35 and a professor at the University.

"Hello, Rebecca," he said, in the richest tone of voice he could muster, the deepest and most professorial, a voice he rarely used outside the classroom.

"Thanks so much for taking the time to meet with me," she said, chatty and unafraid, it seemed, outside of a little nervousness. "I hate to

pester you about a grade. I guess I just don't quite understand. You said my paper…."

"I quite understand," he interrupted, "your grades are important to you."

"Yes," she said, brightening even more, somehow, her eyes widening, "And I really want to go to grad school, you see, and it's so competitive these days, my grades just really need to be as high as possible…." She stopped, almost panting for breath a little, backtracking. "And I really loved your class, you're so good at leading discussions, and I thought you were really even-handed with everyone, even those who weren't as…" She paused again. "Serious." She finished uncertainly and he didn't say anything at first, although he obviously appreciated the comment.

"Rebecca, you were one of the best in this semester's class. You came to every meeting and it appeared you even did the reading." He smiled for the first time, a little joke, and Rebecca broke into a grin that threatened to break her face. "And when I looked over my numbers, it appeared you were in the gray area between an A-minus and an A." Rebecca became serious now, the smile dropped in wattage, hanging on his every word. "You're a junior now, correct?"

"Yes."

"And what grad programs are you interested in?"

"Oh, uh, Cornell, Michigan, you know, anywhere that will take me really, I'd like to move to a city, but I'd be fine with any old college town. I'd love to do it here, but you know, most schools are reluctant to take their own."

"You'd be surprised. Even now it's possible to get lucky, if you do well. Do you have an area of concentration?"

And she was off — James Joyce, Henry James, a literary and cultural theory course taught by Goodman. He did not care. He nodded and concentrated on her face in a way that made her eyes rove around the brightly lit, white-and-steel coffee shop. There were other students here, and locals, and children hanging onto their mothers, and a teenage couple in the corner booth (Elijah could not look at them without his heart singing out in bleats of pain). It was almost crowded and it was almost four o'clock. She mentioned a boyfriend and her eyelids fluttered. She looked into her cup of coffee, above the café's door, at the space above his head. A few times really, so few — he'd taken drives with a few of them, down to the bay, where the land sloped into the water. Once, he'd stopped the car. Later in the day than now, the deep of winter. Everything had been dark. They had met in his office at the end of the day and he'd offered her a ride home. She had unbuttoned her shirt and he had slipped his hand between her black bra and her breast and they'd kissed in the quiet. She'd had warm, brown hair, a slightly lopsided face and a full name he could not remember. It had been six, seven years ago.

She had been one he hadn't even needed to lure in with these measures. She had come on her own. A week later, he'd made guilty, disappointing love to her in the back seat of the station wagon. Then the semester had ended and he gave her the perfect grade she'd deserved, regardless. Elijah had only seen her once after, almost a year later, tromping through the snow on campus very early in the morning, and he had watched her while he parked the jerking station wagon. He thought of her often, but mostly when he was farthest away from that moment — at the beach with his family, with the girls in their loud unitard bathing suits and the sun painful overhead, or Thanksgiving at his parents', passing the gravy boat to his father.

"…So, I don't know if I'd even want to be in Boston. I used to think I would because Jake lives up there — he graduated last year — but since we, like, broke up, I don't really care where I go. It's kind of freeing, in a way? To not be restricted to somebody else's schedule?"

"Hmm," Elijah toned, edging his voice into an even deeper register. "Mmm, well, it seems like you've thought about all of this a lot, which is very good. It is very good to think about these things ahead of time. And just the right time to be thinking of them too."

"Oh, yeah," Rebecca said, smiling again, now that her monologue of worry had been accepted. "It's not the kind of thing — well, it's not the sort of thing I would like to leave up to chance. And —" There was a break here, a sideways look, a slight lowering. "—I know a lot of kids don't, and I just want to thank you, Professor, for not urging me to rethink it, or take a year off or something like that. Most other professors have — they want to change my plan, in some way, and you seem to, you know, like you're not trying to force your experience of things onto me, like you know everything isn't the same for everyone."

Elijah was a little taken aback by this forthrightness, but he gave her a firm grimace and replied, "I often find it futile to give such advice to my students. I don't presume to know how it is these days. Since I received my own degree, the game has changed quite a bit." She looked at him expectedly. "But, any rate, given the circumstance, Rebecca, I find it feasible that I could augment your grade on this paper, given the quality work you've put in so far and your grasp of the material in class."

The huge smile was back and she was now nodding vigorously. "Thank you, Professor, thank you. I really appreciate it."

He became aware in a heavy, sodden way that their meeting was over now. Why had he ended it so quickly? Rebecca was already now winding the long scarf around her neck and rising to leave. She was asking

him the type of question one asks to fill time at the end of an interview.

"What classes are you teaching next semester, Professor?" They moved toward the glass door and Rebecca was forced to move awkwardly to the side by a cluster of male athletes entering the shop. The door opened quickly and revealed boot-packed snow.

"Not sure yet — maybe some smaller classes, a bit of a change for me."

"You like teaching the small classes?"

Elijah smiled down at her. His dissatisfaction, his tragedy, had totally slipped over her head. She believed the best of him. They were now standing outside the picture window, facing toward one another in the dark. He wondered if the athletes were looking at them — he'd recognized one from a lecture class he'd taught last spring. He wondered what this other student would think. Probably, he thought, simultaneously feeling how short Rebecca was in front of him, nothing. It was snowing harder now and the ploughs would come out soon. Each year it seemed some of the students got stuck here until a day or two before Christmas. Rebecca, if he could remember, was from L.A.

"Sure, sure. It's a nice way to keep familiar with the material."

She stood there in front of him, smiling up through the falling snow uncertainly. He clenched his teeth as his mind attempted to hold back the picture book of snowstorm memories he had stored in this place, on this one long street. There was elementary school, when he and Hani Zaki had run home at lunchtime with their mothers' permission. They had slid and slipped up this way, as he had sophomore year of high school with Jillian Wing, who had always worn a turquoise jacket. They had been making their way back to his quiet, empty house and he had been so excited, holding her cold little hand and kissing her lips at each corner. Or, in college, only a few years later, he'd walked back alone from the dorm of a girlfriend, knowing, deep in the solemn pit of his stomach, that he was going to have to end things. Or, even, last year, when he'd turned thirty-five in gnarled January, Judy had run out to buy candles at the last moment, probably passing this very spot. They'd celebrated with their daughters, who had insisted he wear a paper crown. Judy had taken many pictures of him in his pose at the end of the table, with the girls squealing around him, presenting gifts they helped him unwrap. His wife had laughed behind the camera. Its flash dazzled the wrapped and unwrapped presents, the slow-burning, tapered candles, and the four half-eaten plates of cake. The next morning they'd walked in silence to get coffee before the girls woke up. It seemed too much that it had all happened here, at home. It seemed to him now, looking at the freezing face of this alien young woman, this student of his, that the pictures told a story, although he couldn't tell what it was.

"Would you like a ride home?" Elijah asked. "It wouldn't be any trouble."

UNTITLED KATIE SIMON

the boy around the corner
of the world the one
that holds me from
myself, the boy
who watched his father
die, who called me
in the middle of my night,
who left me out of
kindness, who keeps me lonely:
his name means congratulations
in six languages; his hands
mean everything in mine.

THE RED COAT WERONIKA JANCZUK

Part One.

Ah. Safia.

She returns.

Falling slush hardens to ice as this girl-turned-woman steps from the car and leans against the roof, her arms crossed beneath her chin, feet rooted deep in the snow. Soil bleeds through the whiteness; it webs around her.

Her gaze roves up the hill. I remember how green those eyes were, like dewy leaves, when years ago Safia clung to my branches with slender calves and bony fingers. Then she was French braids and fingertips stained orange with pulp. The tang lingered in my grooves until I couldn't-wouldn't-stand-it anymore.

Then she disappeared; she bid me no goodbye.

Now she wears grooves of her own on that skeletal face and I can't-won't-stand for the smoke lifting up from the cigarette between her lips. But my branches . . . They say, Don't leave me just yet, please. Please stay.

She may go. She ought to. She ought to take that sleek, savage machine back east. She analyzed data there, the wind says. She feared what the reports—clinical, certain, exquisite—might have told of horrors to come. Perhaps outer space warfare, the galaxy bursting with sparks of fire, and rather than shedding rain and stardust the skies would release human blood and the remnants of ships.

If only she could put an ax to my trunk. She would come across my pith and the lines grown there would sing with the dense copper smell of blood and the gurgle in men's throats as they bid farewell to breath. The land memorializes warfare, but humans never learn, never prepare.

She fidgets with the key, slips it into her pocket, and takes long strides up the hill. Snow clings to her jeans, to her calves and her knees. Her gaze is heat on my bark and flames explode along my fissures—deep like a river—when her fingers brush against them. She tucks her cheek into the nearest crevice.

I fold into myself, trunk bowing, wishing for this girl to swing her foot into the hollow above her knee and climb until she can no longer. My heartwood stampedes with this desire.

But she steps back, thinking of the daughter who broke her neck climbing in a backyard that spoke of safety. Weariness settles even deeper into her marrow. Her fingers lose grip on the youngest of my branches and she tips her head to look up at my entirety. Tears cling to her lashes. Tears and shadows, a certain inescapable darkness.

Part Two.

Mariela cannot sleep. The rain tap dances along the tin window casings until the tap tap tap drives her not to sleep, but to insanity as the sounds echo 8-2 8-2 8 within her.

Numbers won't save her. She wants to forget the digits that served as fodder for the corporate work in her previous life, the enterprise resource planning that never satisfied her soul. The digits dried her up but refused to leave her.

Her palms fisted, she presses them against her forehead, pushing away memories of stories spun from these very digits. The nights in the twelve-story library that blocked them all—tthe best friend who picked up her guitar and disappeared into the L.A. smog, the man she'd intended to marry, calling out his last see ya around—both such clichés.

She stumbles to the arthritic wooden panels of her bedroom, slides her feet into slippers and swings one hand against the sole indentation of a body in the mattress. Her wedding band wedges deeper between her fingers.

Goddamn you, Charlie, she thinks. She ignores the portrait of them on the bedside table as she swings away. Let me be.

But it is not Charlie that bothers her.

It is everything he left.

The silence.

Shh.

Desperation clings to her blood and the urge to crawl from her skin moves through her vessels and arteries. What power it would be to run run run until she was a mass of pure sensation so so cold and emotion constant-anger-explosive-like-a-fuse—what power.

Part Three.

The girl-turned-woman is standing behind window glass on the top floor, the second window from the right. That room used to be her mother's. Even now Safia remembers their full-costumed polka dances around the bed and dresser after her father left. He liked to throw around his words—crazy, schizo—and finally their meanings dawned on him. Packed two bags and left, he did. The women opened the windows. The music filtered out with the breeze and Safia imagined that the cottonwood (that is, me) heard and danced along.

I know what she sees now from her vantage point and it is not the sun peeking its way through the clouds, glinting off whatever snow she didn't brand with her footsteps. She is not focused on me either—not just me. There is a story to be told here, a narrative rooted to the ground, tied to my pith and heartwood and years alive.

Part Four.

The door to her baby girl's room swings open with a creak 96423 and Mariela settles on the edge of the bed.

Ghosts brush their fingers along the skin revealed beneath her shirt that rode up her stomach—1.0007— during the night, itching like wheat against an earlobe, but colder.

Her girl sleeps with an adult-like wrist laid across a teddy bear's neck. The leather watch Mariela gave as a birthday present is black against porcelain skin.

Mariela runs her fingers through her girl's hair and then over the hard cover of the fairy tale collection left at the edge of the pillow. It smells of must and imagined possibilities, and Mariela remembers waking in the night to the rhythm of her own mother's voice as she read aloud.

1, 2, 3.

She opens the book, runs a finger over the S embedded inside, tries to focus on the words, and breaks inward when she cannot; the molecules holding her together, giving way to air pressure and disappointment—the numbers that refuse to leave her head.

And the rain tap tap tap taps.

And Mariela cannot sit anymore.

Closing the door behind her, she jams her fingers into the knob as she holds it behind her back. She breathes quick and harsh. 9. 9. 9.

Leave me be.

The orchestral disjointedness in her head increases in volume. It throws her off, leaving her to run down the stairs with both hands wedged against the walls in an attempt to keep her body upright.

She paces in the living room, across the Oriental rug that Charlie found at the carpet store down on Main and 7th the year they bought the house. Pausing at the potted Azara next to the foyer closet, her fingertips brush against the velvet while her nostrils inhale the pungency.

Thoughts itch at the inside of her mind. If she were a dog and her mind the fur, she would scratch until everything just stopped.

Mariela paces again, to and fro.

The house sits more silent than a tomb while her baby sleeps.

Escape.

4.

A nosy neighbor might see her as she runs down the back hallway from the living room, to the closet, at the backdoor with hair flailing behind her—loose, untamed and boring.

She pulls on a jacket, deep red, thick and poofy.

Opens the door, walks through it, slams it shut.

Part Five.

Safia disappears from the window.

I imagine the pause at the one photograph forgotten by the bedside, now encased in dust; the wringing of palms during the slow descent to the main landing and the leftover remnants of winter floral, their scent escaping from beneath the door.

Between it all there is a pull, deep inside.

Part Six.

The vastness of the field out back is never empty to those who walk it. Humans cycle through the seasons as if they were four distinct phases, as if greens could melt into orange overnight and as if the most vivid detail were the apex of an experience. Their memories are like mine—each day shifts the shades of color and I notice each one, the same way that mothers can catch changes in their children's bodies.

I remember Mariela does too.

And her memories, like mine, span the field. They grow from the ground, branches expanding outward like fingers grasping for empty air.

She grimaces there on the deck. Her skin stretches, crinkles and pulls at her hair. For a moment she freezes, her body a statuette of marble left to the ravages of winter. The storms that come through would pick away her skin until she was nothing more than a had-been.

Her eyes flutter closed. There is so much that might cross her mind now. But surely—

"Mariela!"

Charlie shivers on the deck.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

She's pacing the snow in bare feet, blistered now, soon to be shades of blue.

"Mariela!"

He turns toward the door, then back around and rushes out into the snow in his socks that dampen within a step, beginning to freeze up.

"Come inside."

"Not right now."

“Marie—”

“The walls won’t stay quiet. Fifteen by fifteen by eleven feet, two thousand, four hundred seventy-five feet cubed.”

She looks up from her footsteps at Charlie—the chiseled cheekbones and the indent in his nose below the glasses.

“And the kitchen? Twelve—”

“Come inside.”

“I can’t.”

“You’re going to get sick.”

“No.”

“Fuck it.”

He leans down and tucks his arms around her shoulders and feet, picks her up and carries her across the threshold until they disappear. She is screaming.

It is summer and the sky shimmers with stars and a moon that glows with white life. Mariela sits with feet tucked beneath her on the deck bench, a cup of steamed-out Earl Grey below. I cannot read her, despite the lives I’ve observed. A face set still with emptiness, really—a face absent of Mariela.

Charlie again, Charlie and his fisted hands and energy that explodes outward.

“She fell asleep on the kitchen floor— again!”

Mariela blinks from her daze to find her husband in the doorway, his jacket hanging from his fingers, the way a towel may hang discarded, left to dry and left to be remembered.

“What?”

“Your daughter—on the floor—again.”

Mariela is up and moving, ready to save the day.

For the first time, Charlie stops her.

“What is wrong with you?”

“What?”

“It’s two o’clock in the morning. What have you been doing?”

“Thinking.”

“About what? What could possibly be more important than your child?”

“I was caught up.”

“In what?”

“My thoughts. I was thinking about one thing, very linearly”—she won’t tell him about the numbers because he will laugh at them in that forced

way of his, ha haha hahaha ha—“and everything else kind of fell away.”

“Right.”

“I’m sorry. I’ll go put her to bed.”

“Already did.”

The tightness in Mariela’s shoulders loosens.

But Charlie?

“This isn’t working.”

“What?”

“You… me. This is . . . I don’t know what. A psychotic breakdown. You need a doctor.”

The numbers, they are circular, never-ending.

Part Seven.

Safia closes her mind against the husband who wanted her to sleep, even when the muse came in the early hours, the husband who turned his back to her when she wrote or read by the light of the stove in their apartment. She closes her mind against the freelancing contract she canceled—no more analysis of words and reports and an unbroken sea of possibility.

It is time.

Part Eight.

Mariela never visits the cottonwood at the hillcrest.

Seated on the rocking chair deeply embedded in the snow banks on the deck, her gaze traces the tree—those outstretched limbs encased in frozen water—and her mind clicks forward the way it does often these days, sifting through thoughts in search of a new status quo and that peace that will carry her until dawn.

A.D. 3

A.D. 2

As she considers, the freezing rain picks up again.

An engine starts down the street.

The wind curves within the hollows in the snow and whistles an invitation.

She loses herself.

It is not something that I understand. This just being is a human thing—emotion and essence and spirit without body.

Mariela’s hand clenches the chair subconsciously. She doesn’t feel the cold, even as it sinks into her skin and stiffens her muscles and stops the blood flow. Charlie called her ‘his ice queen’ long before his words grew less funny and more acute.

But the pain dissolves into the cut of winter. It numbs her.

Her head falls back. Snowflakes melt into the dead blush of her cheeks. Dunes grow at her ankles and spread over the plane as the woman rocks, planning.

A few hours later, Mariela disappears for a moment. She returns before the five-year-old is up, keening her request for milk.

For the first time in years, she drags her feet through the snow toward me—bare toes growing blue even as she lifts them in her next step forward.

So naïve am I. I do not recognize her intentions until she stands beneath my leafless branches, hunching into one arm, muttering "Hail Mary." And then nothing that I do—no creaking of my limbs, no looseness in my form—can stop the unfolding.

Part Nine.

Inside the closet, the girl-turned-woman finds a red coat and it reminds her of Mother's flowers. Something else, too, buried deep within her mind in a lagoon of memories. Something she saw, once, when she was barely old enough to understand.

Part Ten.

In her red coat, Mariela climbs me midway.

I expect her legs to shake as they tuck around my bark but they are tight and strong, courage-filled. She leans onto a thick limb and swings a rope over it. The endless supply comes from deep within the coat pockets—it keeps coming.

She and Charlie met in the navy.

I call upon wind and storms to shake her off, but none come. She doesn't fall into hope and a future. She falls into the opposite—bare feet clasp along the bark's thickness, the caverns and mountains that jut into her skin and the ridges absorbed by the coldness before she has the chance to feel.

She falls. Just steps off the limb and lets go.

It's done before I know it.

Her body crumples inward.

Crack goes her neck.

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3—goes her mind.

And while the wind grieves and I wish for leaves to shed as tears, the world offers her its infinite silence.

Part Eleven.

The girl-turned-woman scares me.

Safia leans against the doorframe, the red coat open on her chest. She memorizes me from the thickness of the trunk to the definite absence of leaves and color other than the brown of bark, which melts into the sky because it fits—you have to look for me to care about me.

And she is looking.

And I know that she remembers.

Just like Mariela before her, the girl-turned-woman takes to the snowy hill—royalty—her shoulders thrown back and fingers splayed away from her hands for balance. She returns to the trunk and looks at it, looks at me with that sullen gaze from eyes black and pithy.

She is humming.

It is a melody of childhood and sunsets on the river and of board games played on cabin floors while mothers bake cookies and brew iced tea. She sinks into the snow, taking off her coat and pulling from the pocket an orange. Her other hand grasps a dried snowdrop, its whiteness bitter.

My heartwood clenches inside me.

Charlie gave her an orange the day they found her, hidden beneath her bed with rivulets of salt staining her cheeks. He had it in his jacket. She fell in love with oranges then. They remind her of Mariela.

She peels the orange skin. It unravels easily in her fingers, encases the snowdrop between her legs. Then she bites into the pieces, savoring the sour taste against her lips as flakes plummet toward her bare shoulders. She drops the leftovers to the white-like juice stains on a wedding dress.

The girl-turned-woman lies with her arms and legs crossed through the numbness until her last breath frosts the air.

Part Twelve.

Let me tell you something: they found her remains eight weeks later.