

SHARED RECKLESSNESS

By

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For Dara

Abstract

A collection of fiction, nonfiction, and short shorts that together demonstrate my development as a writer. In these pieces, I explore themes of sexuality, religion, and death. I am interested in why people do what they do, especially actions that are considered taboo. One of my goals was to investigate socially abhorrent behaviors to find the truth and empathy hidden there. My characters embark on journeys, and take risks to ultimately forge connections to people and to life, despite the questions of loneliness and meaninglessness.

Seldom Spoken Desires

Apple juice. The color mint green. A predictable world, order, hierarchy. Breathing in then breathing out. Nuclear holocaust. Obliteration of the self. Whips and grip. Meatloaf. Scandal. Permission to take a baseball bat to a convenience store, glass cracking, potato chip bags crunching. Screw permission, laughter condensing on your black ski mask. Cruelty. The sting. Pressing, pushing deadline. Toeing the line, tipping it. Betrayal. The relief in certain disaster. The clichéd pyre of possessions, the turned back, the slow saunter away towards nothing.

Being slightly more attractive than your partner. Strangers' tongues. Whiskey in the morning. Milk and oranges at night. The flesh so obscene, the juice on your cheek. Wake with residued fingers. The highway that doesn't end. The cliff that does. Razors. Snakes wrapped around your ankle. To best all, to be the one, the star, the special snowflake. To be your own perfect other, wrapped in a white shroud, the moon upon your brow. A marble pillar to stand on, perfect eyes to gaze down with. To have the sun shine only where you stand.

To be fully known or fully loved, but not both.

Alias

I'm at the party and Goat leans over and says, "You have a beautiful name."

I say, "You should really thank my parents."

Complimenting your name is like complimenting your nose or your sister's admittance to Harvard. It is all very nice, but you had little to do with it. This guy with the blue sweatshirt and blond stubble is correct though. In my memory he was my roommate's boyfriend's good friend and called himself "Goat."¹ This particular party was a Non-Valentine's Day party at my apartment and I spent most of it boozily flirting with Goat and another more appropriately named gentleman who I can no longer recall. Matt? Mike? Chris? I find that 85% of men are named one of those. This party was capped by these two men each trying to look into my eyes meaningfully, or perhaps press me against a wall, all the while my dear (sober) friend Jen tried to thwart these attempts because these suitors were somehow not "suitable" for me. The whole thing seemed like a British farce, with characters chasing each other through doorways. One of Jen's more memorable attempts included asking me to make her oatmeal at four that morning, because as she later explained "oatmeal takes a while."

When I was in elementary school I used to daydream what my life would be like if I was named something more easily pronounceable. Danielle was the perfect name. If I was named Danielle, I would have the longest hair, the smoothest knees, and there would always be a place

¹ I really wish I had some complicated meaningful and symbolic story about why he decided to name himself after this particular barnyard animal – perhaps an affinity for a certain Grecian god? A desire to chew string? Cloven feet? Unknown. I even recently asked my old roommate if she knew and all she could say was "Nope. He's just Goat." Sorry. If you would like, you are free to make up any explanation you wish.

at the lunch table, even though, obviously, Danielle is devoid of appetites. Danielle never has to battle with unwanted hairs. Her pink clothes would repel stains and crumbs. The boys would fight about who got to carry her books. She would stand off to the side, giggle only with her mouth shut.

Now I spend hours considering the perfect adult pseudonym. A Nom de Plume. I go by “Ruby LaRue²” with strangers who need to alert me that my food is ready. I’ve recently decided to keep my first name, but change Goodman into something more melodic. Would you read a book by Danya Amar³ or Danya Lara⁴? Would you fall in love with Danya Whothellcares⁵?

Knowing how to pronounce my name has been a symbol of our closeness. Jay, the great love of my life so far called me “Dana” once when we first met, which caused me to harbor small suspicions through the entirety of our relationship. He did learn to pronounce my name correctly, to rhyme with lasagna rather than a nasal DAN-ya. This is also evident in class. In high school I took two years of math with a man who pronounced my name “Donya.” I stopped correcting him after the first year. This may be why I had to take two years. If he couldn’t be bothered to learn my name, why should I be bothered to care deeply about parabolas?

My lovers⁶ have had different ways of saying my name, a certain accent or rhythm that I would be drawn to. In college, I started to understand my name as an erotic prop, sort of like my long, dark hair that when tossed in a specific way (I hoped) conveyed a sense of nonchalant

² “Ruby LaRues” was the name of a brand pair of underwear that looked like a potato sack but was designed with a secret “pleasure panel” that when you walked, supposedly “rubbed in just the right way.” This novelty item was sent to the hip feminist magazine where I interned one summer in the hope that we would review them. Instead we giggled.

³ My maternal grandmother’s maiden name, which means “Love.” She, out of her entire family, survived the holocaust in Greece by running through the country side. She traded her engagement ring for a bag of rotted oatmeal. A doctor fell in love with her and hid her as one of his patients. Etc.

⁴ My middle name is Laura after the same Grandmother.

⁵ We can all agree this is obviously the best choice.

⁶ Love is only tangentially related.

possibility. Or maybe to them it was one of those small details that your attention snags on, and then is quickly released, like a specific constellation of freckles or a toe that is longer than the others. In the end this is speculation. I do not know if my lovers would have rather I had been Danielle.

But although Danya is unusual, it is also decidedly unsatisfactory if I want to be considered an artistic free-spirit. Willow, or even Spirit would have more appropriate to the persona I tried and failed to become. Ironically, my name actually is Danielle, only in Hebrew. Danya means “judged by God and found good.” Could anything be more staid? More stifled? I would rather “judged by God and found kind.” Or “compelling” or even “curious.” I prefer to think of it instead as when Daniel was surrounded by those hungry cats in the den. I like to think of my name meaning “can make lions purr.”

In Russian, I am a boy, which pleases me.

As I’m reading this over, I realize that I sound myopic. But then, if these are collected thoughts about my name, how could I widen the scope? I could talk about my obsession with other names. How the boyfriend I made up in sixth grade was named Jeremy, and how whenever I meet a Jeremy, I wonder if he is the one I invented. I have liked men with J names in the past, Josiah, Jacob⁷. Jay⁸, whose love I once described as “iron-strong,” and although his name is

⁷ ...and since writing this, in the past two weeks, I’ve had entanglements with men named Jon (awkward first-date conversation at a Thursday night punk show), Jesse (a man in an open marriage who I am tentatively meeting for adventures) and Jeff (an NPR announcer with a voice like burnt caramel who’s asked me out periodically for the past three years but now that I have actually agreed, his enthusiasm seems to have withered like that perennial forgotten soufflé).

⁸ What you need to know about Jay was that the third time we met I couldn’t decide on my lipstick. It was a rain-blasted evening yet I wore a dress that was more flowers than sleeves. He called me from outside my apartment and I ran down the two flights of stairs to let him in, but for some reason we stood outside together, under his umbrella, for much longer than is reasonable for two mostly-strangers. We didn’t kiss. He didn’t comment on my mascara running and I didn’t care about my hair relenting to the rain. We held each other and shivered. That is Jay.

unremarkable it does begin with the correct letter. Now that I am considering it, he has a complicated Indian middle name that I once knew. Is that what falling out of love is? Forgetting that secret, personal arrangement of letters? Is love the way certain names feel in the mouth, the contortions the tongue performs?

That night at the Anti-Valentine's party, eventually Jen gave up and went home. The man with the sensible name left as well. It was dawn and my roommates were asleep. There must have been people crashed on the couch, because Goat and I found ourselves on a sleeping mat laid out in the kitchen. It was the kind of drunken kissing that is fueled by hours of not-kissing. Our fingers fumbled with buttons. Teeth clicked. Those sweaty maneuverings bumbled along when I heard Goat moan.

“What?” I sat up.

“Oh, Fanya.” His eyes were closed. When I didn't say anything. He repeated “Fanya” in a throaty way that made me think he had spent too much time watching porn. Even in the drunken mist of the morning, with his stubble against my cheek, I started laughing. Although, let's be honest with ourselves, Fanya is no more ridiculous a name than my own. But, still. Fanya?

I extracted myself and blundered to my bed, alone. Years later I would refer to Fanya as my party personality. Fanya was the one who thrived on male attention to the point of satire. Fanya is the one that joined in the flesh pile. Fanya was the one that said “My boyfriend is just a boy, but I need a man” to my forty-year old friend before I excused myself to vomit vodka. Fanya is a parody of myself, of my loneliness coupled with my sheer exuberance for experience. Fanya would so totally do you.

I don't remember if I saw Goat the next morning. A little less than a year later, Jay and I had our first New Years with tapas at CuchiCuchi, a hip Cambridge restaurant where the waitresses wear cherry lipstick and vintage lingerie. I wore a black dress that swished. We left before midnight and wandered to the river, stopping only to kiss on the steps of MIT. We saw the fireworks, shivering, and came back to my apartment, the very scene of the party, to fold into each other in my big, adult bed. We were woken up by crashing sounds in the living room. My roommate and her boyfriend must be home. We waited, but the clunking continued. I stumbled from bed, threw on a long t-shirt and opened my door. There was a slightly familiar man sitting on a chair slumped against the wall.

“Um, hello,” I said with my hands on my hips.

He roused. “Who are you?” he accused.

“I'm Danya,” I said. “Danya Goodman. I live here.” Even to myself, I sounded unsure. He closed his eyes.

Then I returned to bed with my gentle boyfriend, whose ability to pronounce my name would not protect me when he left almost exactly two years later, and allowed Goat his dreams, maybe of Fanya, maybe of Danielle, but not of me at all.

Jungle

For Owen it started very simply with a Geranium plant sent by his daughter who, like everyone else, lived very far away in a cold state. After Owen turned 80 and Alma died, he migrated to a warm state like all sensible people. There was something sensual and extravagant about putting sunscreen lotion on every day, or even more so about forgoing it. Palm trees molting in place of seasons, Ruben sandwiches with extra Russian dressing at Café News, Cuban coffee so hot it will take the skin off your tongue, the parade of girls in turquoise and cream sundresses, the hard, tanned bodies jogging by his condo every morning, if anything was going to keep his blood pumping through his wilted veins, these would be it. Ethel told him he was a stallion, and he saw the way the ladies at the pool looked at him. He was spry. He had weathered well, as he liked to tell Dr. Joe every six months. He was a good old ship that was fine for another few sails, he chuckled to himself. So what if the timbers creaked every now then?

The geraniums were a color between red and pink that Owen had to google before he could find the word fuchsia. They sat on the counter that divided the kitchen from the living room, so that they watched him while he made his egg white omelet in the morning. They made him want his sunglasses.

“Fine,” he said to them. “No cheese today. But that is only because I’m taking Ethel out for ice-cream later.”

While he was lacing up his shoes for tennis, he added, “I’m getting a sundae. Hot fudge. The works.”

Later, Ethel strode past them on her way to the bathroom, and they nodded their heads collectively in the breeze she generated. She called back to him over the water, “Owen, its fine. Really. But those doctors have things for this. George used to. Really. Fine. Do you not have any clean towels?”

He rolled over in his bed, and looked at his wedding picture. Alma looked like pie, like a piece of apple pie. The piles of red curls, the sharp nose, the splash of freckles. Her white lace skirt, tucked around her knees like it should be. You could even see the slight flush to her cheeks. Her temper, though, was missing from the picture.

Ethel came back in bed smelling of his shampoo and something sweeter underneath. He wanted to lick her knee.

“Those flowers?”

“From Alice. For Alma’s anniversary.”

“Kinda garish, don’t you think? Besides they are wilting.” She wrinkled her nose and turned over. “I wish I still smoked.”

She stretched fully toes out, fingers, everything, and he could see what her body was when she was young, the hidden liveness there, the taut strength covered by skin that didn’t exactly fit anymore. He coveted her smoothness, right there below the surface. She sat up, began rooting in the carnage of dispelled clothes.

“Leaving? Already? I could make dinner.”

“Oh, I just couldn’t.” She pulled on her shorts, the liveness morphing back into its proper form. “Besides, I think I might be allergic to those flowers.”

When she kissed him on the forehead, he knew it was over.

“I should be mad at you,” he said.

The flowers were stoic, despite their hue. They were still.

“Ethel left because of you. Because you are unsightly. And you stink.” He leaned in and smelled them. They didn’t smell like the bouquets he was used to, but like earth. Something silky. He touched a petal. It reminded him of a salad. Alma had always said that soap was the best perfume.

“Well. I guess she might not have left just because of you. To be honest, I haven’t quite been up to performance lately. If you know what I mean.” He glanced down but the flowers seemed to understand.

“Personally, I appreciate boldness in color. It brightens up the place.” Without Alma or his daughter to help him decorate his condo looked more like the inside of a ship than he liked to admit. It was the opposite of the geraniums.

“This is foolish,” he stammered. “No wonder Ethel left. I’m a rotary club man. I served my country.”

That night, after a nightmare of dark shapes he couldn’t quite make out, he stumbled out of bed, hips cracking. After he watered the pot, and sang a little tune, his heart calmed. He fell back into a dreamless sleep.

“Here,” he said, unloading a pot of Azaleas, a spider plant, and a miniature rose bush onto the counter. “I thought you might be lonely.”

He arranged them by height, but then decided to arrange them by personality instead. He thought of calling Alice and thanking her, but he was distracted by researching plant care. He

learned that they liked Beethoven but not Tchaivskosky, which he agreed. Those soaring violins were too vulgar, obvious. Alma would have approved.

When he finally made it to the pool, the circle of brown coiffed head stopped bobbing.

“Well, Owen,” Rose giggled. “Nice of you to join us.” She scooted her lounge slightly out of the way, leaving Owen the best puddle of sun.

Ethel was across the circle, her eyes hidden by enormous sunglasses. He tried to think of something gallant.

“Ladies,” was all he could muster. He took his throne but was too distracted by the state of the scraggles of bushes by the perimeter of the pool to pay attention to Roses’ trauma at the orthopedist. They were struggling, surrounded by this lushness and starving nonetheless. He craned his neck for one of the landscapers to appear with a cool hose. Owen felt his own sweat gather, he could feel his heart in his chest, knocking insistently. A small, spade-shaped leaf cracked off a branch and filtered into the pool.

“Parched. Positively screaming for water.” He sighed.

He looked up. All the women were staring at him, but not quite like he was a stallion. Ethel’s eyes were just two mirrors reflecting his own blank face back at him.

He grinned. “Anybody want some lemonade? I’m sure I could rustle up some from Alma’s old recipe. These arms might not be good for boxing anymore but they can still squeeze lemons.”

The group relaxed and tittered, except Ethel’s mouth stayed in a straight red line.

He planned to go to tennis, but took his racket to the garden supply store instead. When he walked down the aisles, he felt the vibration of each blossom call to him. He felt them straining through the meager clay, wanting to break free. He felt their desire to thrive, for sun, for food, for water.

It would have been like saying no to a starving child. The deep green of the ferns called to some hidden greenness in him. He memorized the textures of each leaf, the woody stems, the clean, crunch. He felt the strength of the roots muscled against the hard interior of their cages. He was only slightly embarrassed that he needed to ask one of the check out boys for help getting all the purchases to his car. If his family was still his family, they would have bickered about who would hold which plant on the way home. Alice would have wanted the obvious beauties, the Anthuriums and Gingers, the vibrant plants from far away. Alma would have been content with the quiet ones, the silently poisonous Peacock Flower, native to Ethiopia, whose delicate white petals contain a neurotoxin. First it numbs your tongue, then it stops your heart, at least according to Owen's research.

The geraniums stayed in their special place in the center of the counter, everything else flowed from them.

"I shouldn't call her," he said. They flushed. "I know, I know. It is useless."

So instead, he swept away the withered. Buried them in fertile soil so that more could grow, he understood now this is the way it is supposed to happen. He replanted the seedlings into new, bright ceramics, with enough room and richness to expand the tentacles of their roots. His world was working on the small silent maneuverings of creating life. He appreciated both the

fuchsia of his geraniums, and the subtler lilacs and blushes of the mums and orchids. When he closed his eyes, a litany of greens rocked him to sleep.

At night when he was awoken by those dreams of dark shapes, moving like tigers, he broke into the pool area and watered the bushes. He sang them the song that he used to sing Alice when she fell off her bike. Something about a small spider in a rain spout. It didn't matter, but he knew singing helped. Alma wasn't a singer. She wasn't much of a hugger either. It didn't come naturally to Owen, but he had tried his best for his kids. On those months when he was stationed at sea, he dreamed about them reaching out for warmth and finding their mother instead.

Owen thought the latin names were gorgeous, incantations. Common milkweed had a name like a spell: *Asclepias*, *Sonchus oleraceus*. He learned that the garden plant called geraniums are actually the more elegant *Pelargonium*. It tasted spicysweet on his tongue. He would have been happy to tell his daughters, but they never asked. If Alice has said explicitly "Dad, have you been spending an awful lot of money at the garden store lately?" or even "are you making something beautiful where before there was nothing?" of course he would have said yes, but these subjects never came up. Besides, he wanted to take the precious minutes they had to learn about the grandchildren, and then leave the line free in case Ethel returned his calls.

There was the issue with the first lemon tree. It wanted to stretch, it suffered. It groaned at night. It longed for space, but there was so little left. Alma had told him often that he was too sensitive, that this compassion made him soft and susceptible to blows on his belly. She was always striving forward to protect him. Really, Owen decided, it was a question of priorities. Did

he really need a couch? Table? Chairs? These did nothing to enhance the rich smell of soil and forest that was his when he stepped into his apartment. They were not textured subtly, or responsive when he sang. Besides, his pension check was barely covering all the electricity for the artificial sun lamps that needed to be on for the west side of the apartment. The bed was harder to remove without injuring the herb garden he was so proud of. Who needs a fridge, when you can eat bananas from your living room?

He spilled one of the larger pots getting the fridge to the curb, it was a kumquat tree. To his delight, the tree was fine. The roots were hardy and clung to the rug. He was always a large man, even on the boats in his youth he took up more space in corridors than he should, and other tumbles happened. Cracks of pottery through the soil, leaving remains for archeologists to come. The roots of trees and grasses and ferns and flowers intertwined, like a certain type of love making.

As he took out a trashbag of some of the bigger shards, Ethel was waiting on the corner for the shuttle. She wore those small pair of black shorts. Her legs were shaped like a fawns.

She startled when she recognized him.

“Dear God,” she said.

“Ethel. A pleasure.” He swung the trash bag into the dumpster and enjoyed the feel of his muscled tensing and releasing.

“Your hands,” she said, clutching her oversized straw purse. Owen looked down and saw the calluses, the soil ingrained in the creases. I could plant seeds in those furrows, he thought. Another, forest, a miniature one full of grasses and dandelions sprung from his palms grew in his head.

“I’ve been doing some yard work. Apparently I’ve got a green a thumb. And how is that hip treating you?”

“Owen,” she said. She placed her huge sunglasses in her lap. Her eyes were rimmed in black and he could see the tiny wrinkles around them, like ancient river beds. “Are you ok? What’s happened?” Owen wanted to answer her but the grass in the lawn behind her called for fertilizer and Owen’s mind wandered between the brown patches. That felt right. Right as rain.

“Who should I call?”

Owen shook his head. “Oh, no, darling. I’m divine.”

He bowed and took her hand and in slow motion pressed his lips to it, leaving a faint smudge of soil. Then he turned his back and returned.

Sure, he was hungry. But it was a good hungry. It matched the fertile smell, the way the textures of the leaves contrasted with each other, and the three-cornered ivy that had begun to cling to the cabinets, the bonsai and tall grasses. When more pots spilled, he let them lie and the roots would mingle and he had dreams were he was a tree, with hundred of birds on his arms. A tree that had both peaches and flowers. His children would come and sit in his shade and be covered.

He needed more sunlamps, because the plants blocked out all the natural light. He couldn’t get to his closet, which was filled with mostly mulch anyway so his dapper clothes were dusted. His tan faded. Then the phone got lost, probably in the grasses. At night he thought he could hear animals stalking between the tree trunks, the call of a lost parrot that may have found

its way in. There were certainly new spiders, red itchy bumps that Owen wore like tribal tattoos.

He belonged here.

He had unfurled.

The Line Where it Blurs

Paul says “No one who looks that good should have try to so hard” to our new neighbors, Australian artists who make poverty chic, and knocks over the olives right before his head smacks the cardboard box we use as an impromptu table in our expatriate apartment in Spain. Paul and I do poverty unvarnished, unshaven. We are sitting cross-legged on the floor, sharing one joint that tastes like it was forged from pine needles. The olives roll, racing to the corner. Neighbor 1 jumps up as the olive juice starts to soak into his perfectly fitting jeans and his bubble ass bumps into the wine and Neighbor 2 says “fuck it” with the Australian clip and I watch the wine puddle splash into the olive juice puddle and everything smells sharp and sweet at the same time, like if you breathe too deeply the smell will carve out the cells meant for thinking.

Paul croaks “help” in this sweet little voice and I am reminded of his vulnerable contentment right after he comes. He clutches his chest, more like clawing on it, trying to rip his black t-shirt and his eyes are large, too large. His eyelashes which always look wet, mascaraed, are like tiny ebony daggers. I think they could cut me. He looks at me, opens his mouth and then falls to the box, his mouth still in an “O”. His eyes are on mine, into mine. Blue. I wave. Jeans shrieks. Neighbor 2 puts his arms around Paul, shakes and says, “Come on, Man. Come on.” Then yells at Jeans to call 000. “No, fuck. 112,” he corrects. Jeans stumbles across the tiny hall. I stare at Neighbor 2’s large hand measuring the muscles on Paul’s back. He has sculptor hands.

Paul’s skin is starting to look like chicken skin, sort of cold and detached and I say “No.” and I wave more extravagantly and there in his eyes he is looking at me but, bored like, there is something better to be looking at. It is a familiar look. “Paul. It’s me. Jonah.” I jump. I jump as

high as I can and flap my arms. “Paul. Paul. Paul.” Hands says, “No, Man. It’s, too late. He’s gone.” I can see there is less Paul in his eyes, just those black daggers ringed around an empty pool, but I just jump higher, squishing olives between my toes. Each time I say his name I see a flicker, there, some primordial twitch of neuron responding to neuron. My legs and shorts look like I have been in a massacre, merlot on the backs of my knees and from the way I am jumping when the emergency people come they confuse the wine for blood and stand silently watching me in this tiny room.

None of us speak Spanish, but there is a nurse with nice teeth who tries to explain that it was just dehydration. Dehydration, yes. It means after the summer he can go back to the states and continue his pro-tennis career. I will follow and write a brilliant novel in the meantime and Paul will come home sweaty after practice and I will lick the salt from his collar bone. College will wait. Just like we planned. Everything will be fine, see. Paul doesn’t smile. The neighbors are smaller and more smudged in the hospital room. I apologize for the spilled olives, for the stained perfect-fitting jeans. Hands slaps me hard on the back, “No problem.” I don’t look at his fingers, even though I want to. Jeans touches Paul’s shoulder on his way out but Paul turns his head, and I am glad. He gets the IV and the funny robe. The cartoons are all in Spanish so we make up stories for them, but he is released within a few hours. His heart going exactly like the machine I have suspected it to be. We check our money and go directly to the only English speaking doctor we can find. On the bus all the stops sound the same. I feel his body a damaged magnet next to mine. We walk past the crumbling houses with blue murals on the side, the gardens and ivy limp in the heat. The office is right next to an old synagogue. I reach for Paul’s hand. The smell of hash smoke makes in the air makes me thirsty. I reach again. The waiting

room has prints of Mickey Mouse in heavy silver frames. His mouse-face looks sinister and secret-telling. "I'm going to be sick," Paul says. We are called in a minute later. This expensive doctor says Dehydration. Heart-stopping dehydration. We don't get our things from the flat. We allow the puddles their natural progress into sticky refuge for ants. We go directly to the airport, slide into our seats and emerge in Wyoming. He is too tired to join the mile-high club. I realize someone needs to call my parents.

Paul enjoys this. It is M'am this and Sir that. His jawbone mesmerizes my parents. On Saturday morning I wake up and he is stirring the pancake batter and I get confused because I should be standing there and for a moment, I am doubled and my heart is the one with the shoddy artery, but then he smiles and I am where I should be. My mom says "Slept enough, hon?" and her coffee burns my tongue and watch them laugh and I listen to my dad rustle the paper in the other room. Paul blushes when they ask him why he hasn't found a nice girl yet, their favorite question. He talks about a high-school sweetheart and how going back to his home town brings back the sadness, with his parents gone and the house empty. He actually says it like that "the sadness." With his blue eyes, he is allowed certain extravagances.

My parents raise eyebrows at each other. "I've had my fair share of broken hearts," she says. She gives him the last puffed up pancake, pours his syrup. She puts on lipstick after breakfast.

My dad's eye-brow asks the question.

"Bronze bombshell," my mom answers. "I'm just in the mood."

I try not to begrudge her this small thing.

Later, in the living room, I ask if it is OK if Paul stays for the summer.

“His parents gone...” I begin. “Spain just..” I start again.

I watch the light reflect off her bottom lip as she nods.

We lay out faded turquoise bath towels in the back yard and pretend we are in the French Riviera. We learn to tell the time by the sun, and our towels travel from the concrete porch to the faded garden and back again. When we are very quiet a family of turkeys will join us. We don't ever mention them. They are ghost turkeys. They strut through the fence, aliens picking at the choicest leaves and grass. Each day the chicks are a little uglier, a little showier. The parents seem proud of this fact, clucking and oblivious to us. Wattles in sunlight, I think I will title my novel. This silence about the turkeys seems terrifically intimate, and then I decide to speak of them would be like making love and I turn and see that Paul is napping.

On Wednesday morning, an inhaler appears, a rectangular powder-blue talisman.

“Where did that come from?”

“When I went grocery shopping with your Mom. We decided to stop by her doctor.”

“When do you go shopping?”

“You were busy. Reading a book.”

“The inhaler helps with dehydration? How about a glass of water.”

“It helps me breathe. When I breathe, I can play.” He reaches out and traces my cheek, and I inhale. I can hear my parents' clinking spoons in the kitchen getting ready for work. His finger is on my lip, trembling.

“Your mom said you were going to be a lawyer. You never told me that.”

I open my mouth and taste his finger. I want it to be salty, or taste of his medicine, so I can take some of it inside me, too. It tastes like nothing. I scrape my teeth against his skin.

“You never asked.”

“I can see you in those suits. All buttoned up. I’d like you in stripes.”

“Being a writer just isn’t good enough anymore? Now I need buttons?”

He leans in and now I can smell the medicine on his breath, minty and harsh, like an oversharper cleaner. His fingers are in my hair and through some microscopic pull of gravity I can tell that there is less of it than there was yesterday.

“Bye, boys!” my mom calls. “Go to the pool, show off those tans!”

He kisses me too roughly and we don’t answer and the door to the garage shuts in our silence.

He doesn’t play. By July, I see his body softening, the lines I recognize in the dark are blurring together. He looks more and more like me, with give in his waist. A softness. He cradles my belly at night. He will never lose those extra five inches of height, though. He will never quite shrink to my proportions.

He watches sitcoms with my father on Thursday nights. They laugh in unison and I am unable to distinguish their voices. At night he kisses my mom on the cheek, goes to bed in the guest room, and then at midnight sneaks under the same planets comforter I have had since I was five. At night he says the things he doesn’t say during the day. He says that he saw death and he saw the light and he could have gone there, but he also heard me. He saw me, Jonah, calling him back. In the dark, we do not laugh.

I am hungry all the time. I start having dreams of lavish meals, quail stuffed with water-chestnuts and figs. Brioche-battered in eggs and honey served with pear-wine compote. I insist on doing all of the grocery shopping. The endless rows of perfect vegetables soothe something untidy inside me. Paul doesn't even ask to come along. He's on his cellphone with friends for hours speaking in the language of sport, sometimes whispers. After a week or two, no one offers to help. I hear them laugh in the den while I am in the kitchen butchering pig and slicing onions so thin you can see through them. I pretend I am on a cooking show and they are laughing at my jokes. At dinner, no one looks at me they are all too entranced by the meal. I decide I like it that way. Instead of a novel I will spend the rest of the summer writing a cook-book.

I start working as a server. I take as many shifts as I can, my mouth aches from smiling. "Watch out, you'll get wrinkles." He says, his brow furrowing. Paul talks a lot about giving tennis lessons, but instead he starts smoking more pot. His skin is a beautiful coppery glow from forehead to the soles of his feet. Now that I am at work all day he sunbathes nude. I try and fail to make a crème caramel the color of his skin. I smile recklessly. My tips increase.

Amy has been helping me with my tables. She has permanent ketchup stains on her khaki pants and a rabbit-like habit of pushing her greasy hair behind her ear when she is nervous. We are out back smoking before our shift starts and I point to a stain on her thigh.

"It looks exactly like Florida." I say.

She grins. "I think it looks like a penis."

I look more closely. "No. You can see Epcot center."

“Watch,” she says. Her whole cigarette disappears into her mouth. Smoke leaks out her nostrils. She looks dragon-like, dangerous. In a second, her wet mouth opens revealing the damp cigarette. Whole. Burning. Her lipstick is bubblegum-colored. Her skin is excessively moisturized. So damp it could grow gardens of mushrooms.

She smiles at me from across the floor, her front teeth tilted in a leering way that makes me off-center. Her eyes press me forward all night. They push me from table to table, from grease stain to grease stain. I feel them like heat, compelling me. I wonder if it is like this for Paul all the time, if the light of gaze is what tans his skin.

When I get home, I stop on the porch. I can see Paul with my parents and the glow from the TV flicker. I smoke a cigarette. I try her trick, but ash coats my tongue.

He says he doesn't have the right shoes for hiking in the mountains.

“You don't need shoes. We can stroll. Leisurely. Just come and see the goddamn mountains.” I think of kissing him under a tree, and the way his skin would taste when we are woozy with the crisp air.

“I need a refill on my inhaler.” He coughs. “I think I may be coming down with something.”

I touch his forehead. “You feel fine. Should we go to the doctor?”

“No.” He flips the channel on the TV. “We should just go next weekend.”

I go to the mountains by myself. I imagine a freak storm, an avalanche, a sudden canyon tearing beneath me. I imagine Paul at home, worried, heading a search party, offering my name into the wilderness. I imagine my parents' confusion over his passion, his unending tears. I climb

the peak. Twice. I stay after dark without equipment. I run out of water and get so thirsty that I stop sweating. Still my heart is a bass drum. I wait until I can't stand it. There are empty boxes of take-out lo-mein on the table. He doesn't look up from the TV.

"Your parents went to bed," he says.

"I died out there," I say.

"There's food on the table," he says. "Don't worry."

In August, my parents start asking out loud when we will go back to school. I have forgotten about my other life. I don't mention going back to the mountain. Paul's cellphone rings and he answers during dinner. They share small observations on my cooking. "This really was delicious, Jonah, but do you think that the duck was a touch over done?" Even Paul mentions that my white-wine cream sauce could have been lighter. Amy has been covering for me. I feel myself slipping. My smile shifting into a leer. I forget drinks, ranch dressing soaks the salad when it should be on the side. Steaks somehow become overdone when I touch the plate. Lactose intolerant people find their potatoes doused in cheese. Amy quietly steps behind me, with the correct plate. The sparkling water. The right smile. I envy her her easy kindness.

In between shifts at the restaurant, I think about registering for classes just like a normal college student who did not promise that he would tour with his tennis pro boyfriend. Paul comes to me that night.

"Brrrr. Your feet are freezing," he says, and both pulls away and pushes himself to me. The bed is too small for grand gestures. On the ceiling we can see the remnants of the glow-in-the-dark universe I made with my Dad. Dad and I were artists of the doing, not of the saying.

“Look, Orion,” I say.

“Where?”

I point, and he nods but his eyes are closed. He smells like suntan oil and smoke. This feels familiar. He smells like he is already dead, like there is an inner part unattended that has been allowed to decompose. I rehearse the things we are not saying.

“What was it like, really?”

“It was like being on this precipice, staring over the edge, balancing.”

This is what I am doing now. Deciding when to tell him, but as he holds me the grip in his fingers tells me that he must already know. The end of stasis.

“Those turkeys. They are beautiful in a totally ugly way aren’t they?” I say.

“I thought maybe I was hallucinating. Like they had followed me from the other side or something. Some sort of weird messengers. I didn’t know you saw them, too. But yeah, I guess.”

“Beautiful.” I insist.

He kisses me and breathes my breath and is my skin.

When Amy finally asks me out, as we are closing up, I do not mention my live-in secret boyfriend. I do not mention that his heart valve is slowly leaking or that my mother now wears heels, or that the deadline for registering for classes is looming. I do not mention my failed novel or the fact that all of this is farce. I say, Thursday. Dinner with my family. I will cook you things so delicious you will not be able to walk for a week.

She squints. “Your family?”

“I promise it’ll be cool. You’ll like them.”

“I don’t like seafood.”

“Got it.”

“If it swims, I’ll vom.” She glares at me, then stumbles and kisses me softly on the cheek. She smells like green peppers and baby powder. I stand perfectly still until I hear her car leave the parking lot.

My parents are falling over themselves about the idea of an actual real live female coming to dinner, no matter how often I insist she is just a friend. My mom makes the grocery list twice and insists on buying it all herself. Everything will be perfect. The bottles of wine. The roast chicken. Parsnips, lemons, parsley. I add olives to the list. Paul is silent, chewing on a sandwich. That night, he fucks me harder than I can remember. I have to bite my lip to keep from screaming and the taste of blood mingles with the pleasure, and they are indistinguishable.

Amy shows up in a clean khaki skirt and a white button down shirt. Her hair is in two braids and she looks like someone’s sick joke of a girl scout on a job interview. All I can see are her crooked front teeth and her pink mouth. When she hugs me, her breasts squish against my chest and I hold my breath. My mom is all smiles and takes Amy’s cheap bottle of wine and slips it away. Amy slides out of her clogs to reveal magenta socks with a hole in the left toe. She paddles into the kitchen where Paul is sitting, sullenly into his fourth glass of wine. She stops, sliding a little on the polished floor.

He stares at the swirling red liquid in his glass.

“I’m Amy.”

“I know.”

I punch him in his hard shoulder, my hand lingers a moment longer than it should.

The chicken is dry. The parsnips water-logged, but somehow everything is butter-rich lemony and full of garlic and thyme. Through the steam, my mom forces bright conversation. Amy tells us about late nights studying for her nursing degree, and for a moment she shimmers for me, beyond a quiet girl who I can use to push against Paul, but then she is giggling in the back of her throat again and she is just Amy. Amy who will understand the part she plays in all of this. Amy who will help me to refill the ketchup bottles tomorrow. Paul shoves bones shudderingly around on his plate.

“So,” he says, interrupting my mom’s conversation about perennials in the garden. “Amy, do you have any hot friends for me?”

Amy looks down at her plate. My father refills his wine glass.

“I’m not sure. What kind of girls are you into?”

I feel Paul’s hand on my thigh under the table. I stiffen and drop my fork. His fingers begin kneading my muscles.

“Well. I like a really pretty face, you know? Someone with good lips. Not a fashion model, but a girl next door. Sort of like Mrs. Newman here.”

“Oh, stop.” My mom blushes, and my dad continues chewing methodically. Paul’s fingers dig into my flesh and then start to move.

Amy laughs, hoarsely in her throat. “Come on. There must be more than that?”

“You’re right. I’m being shallow. I also appreciate a good figure. Someone athletic.” His hand is on me now, and I’m afraid to move. My breath is stolen, I’m marble.

“You know, I’m a professional tennis-player, so I need someone who I can knock a few balls around with.” He squeezes. “Someone who likes hiking. Maybe to go up in the mountains.

Wildlife.” The hair on the back of my neck is electric and I am sure that everyone knows exactly what is happening, what his hand is making me feel. “Know anybody like that?”

“Sure. There are girls in my class who bike ride. I like to hike.”

I glance and I see Amy spilling into Paul’s eyes, her lips parted. I shift in my seat and see that Paul is slouched in just such a way that his hand is in my lap but his foot is playing piano lightly up and down Amy’s bare calf.

I push back my chair. It screeches against the floor and Paul startles.

“Excuse me.” I whisper. No one hears, so I say it again louder.

From out in the back yard, they look like a nice family through the steamed windows. Amy’s skin glows and her smile becomes something off-beat, a syncopated note that sits with the rest of her face. Even her hair looks soft and shiny from this distance. She looks loveable, knowable. Paul leans towards her and brushes a piece of hair off her cheek and the rise of blood in her face is a bloom. Even my parents look warm and bathed in gold. Paul is beautiful as he always is. Distance does nothing to obscure it.

I lie down in the grass, pebbles pressed against my back and let the spiders and the burrowing insects discover me. The dirt smudges my clothes and the sky loosens above me and even though it is the same sky that was above us in Spain when Paul died, it is a whole new sky, too. New constellations have been born and died, new solar systems formed, red dwarves collapsed under their own gruesome power. Gravity has captured the dust and let it settle here, over us. I stick out my tongue to catch the last falling particles.

I am so still, that when the first turkey appears it is not a surprise but rather like a manifestation of my own desire. A chick, now over a foot tall and ruffled with a crown of

feathers comes and pokes at my shoe. It is a silent investigation and soon joined by its brothers and sisters and I feel their sharp pecking beaks and the sway of their adolescent wattles against my bare skin. The pricks of each feather and the spiked pain of their small feet over my belly. I want to shout and join them, pressing my face into the mud, tonguing the layers of mistakes I have buried there, but instead I close my eyes and I am grass.

The Kaddish for Spilt Wine and Other Forms of Longing

Here are a few of the things that happened:

Sam's marrow mutates and grows tentacles. Mom and Dad manage to agree to replace the backseat with a mattress, because Sam is too weak for the twelve hour drive for the transplant in Trenton. The mattress smells like books left in the rain. We argue about whether to bring the worn candles, the Kiddish cup. They relent and I place these objects around the mattress, like a fort. For just a moment, I feel the craving to be loosely drunk. The kind of drunk that rattles screws. We climb into the van, I scrape my index finger on the door.

"Here," Sam whispers. He takes my finger into his mouth. I am the one that is 19 to his 16, but he insists. As the blood passes from my hand to his tongue I pull back to myself.

I suggest we pretend we are in a spaceship, hurtling through distant galaxies. Sam shakes his head, grumbles. I poke Sam's stomach, hard. I wonder if cruelty is genetic. If Sam gets the chance to grow three more years, would he be so unrelenting? He flinches.

My finger throbs. Part of me wants it back in his mouth. Which part? Maybe my liver? Spleen? Where does want reside?

I think I am on a boat, but when I wake I realize the tire is cartoon-flat, and we are on the side of the road in Indiana. Sam and I are nestled like the continents want to be. His back shivers against my chest. Dad is outside whispering on his cellphone that we have an emergency, and no he is sorry, but NO we won't wait 60 minutes. He lisps, just slightly. Dad has unbuttoned his collar and I imagine drops of sweat caught in his mustache. I can hear Mom pacing on the other side of the car, maybe doing jumping jacks, anything she says, to get the blood moving. The

definition on her calf could cut through my father's doughy section, and sometimes I think she may have tried. They stopped whispering about "a trial separation" when Sam got sick.

We listen to our father's voice rise on the last syllable of emergency almost like singing and the slap-slap of our mother's impromptu work-out. I nestle my hands on Sam's belly.

"Goddamnit, Delia," he says. "Your hands are freezing."

"You're cold." It is true. I rarely lie, at least not lately.

"Whatever. Ice-queen. You do frigid so well."

"Just because I go to synagogue, doesn't make me frigid."

"There are 613 commandments and you act like each one was written just for you."

"Especially the mitzvah about tending to the sick. The unwashed." I sniff loudly. He does smell of fruit gone overripe. There is musk underneath as well. Some masculine note, like wet earth overturned.

He rolls over and sits up. He reaches for his glasses. He glares at me with those unblinking brown eyes, his body trembling. Without eye-lashes or eyebrows, he looks surprised. Undefended. I sit up.

"You're out of pills, aren't you?" I say.

"We were supposed to be there soon." He looks at me. He's right. With this delay, by the time we get to the hospital they will whisk him directly to surgery. I shake my head. I have the habit of holding one or two emergency ones for him, but he had already used my store last night. His forehead is drawn, hooding his eyes, and highlighting the sharp angle of his nose. He looks like an eagle chick, all fuzz and corners. His hair used to be thick and black, like mine. Our parents reconvene near the hood of the car. Their voices sound like gravel on glass.

“I can’t believe I won’t get to find out if the Large Hadron Collider does actually make black holes and blow us all up,” he says, still staring at me. I trace a stain on the mattress with my finger. Rearrange the itchy wool blanket, but he doesn’t stop.

“Or see the Serengeti. Or find out who wins the World Series. Or ride a train, an old train with a sleeping car. Or make varsity basketball. Or see Bob Dylan live. Or eat chocolate mousse, again. Or any other sort of mousse. Peanut butter? Can you make a strawberry mousse? Can you cover a girl in peach mousse? Hell, I will probably never get the chance to see a naked girl.”

“Don’t talk like that.”

“Why shouldn’t I?”

“It just isn’t necessary.”

“No?” He holds my gaze. His skin is petal-thin and I think I can see the rogue cells multiplying in the hollows of his cheeks. I miss the stubble that should be there, too, that used to bristle like barbed wire.

“Not once? Not even in the shower?”

“Not in person.” He grimaces, sucks in air.

“It hurts, doesn’t it.”

“I’m sorry,” he says. He lets his body fall back, the glasses slip from his face.

Sometimes other touch can confuse his addled nerve cells. His bones beneath my hands feel like strong scaffolding, like they were built for the burden of weight. Not bird bones, but dinosaur. Our Mom’s voice raises another octave. I’m worried if I look, I will see her shaking Dad, again, asking through her tears why he just can’t fix this. The light through the windows slants. I think about where I stashed the candles, if I remembered matches, the stained cup.

I match my breath to Sam's soft moans. I straddle him and move my hands under his T-shirt. His skin here is nectarine-soft. Of all things on him, it feels alive. I trace the birthmarks on his hip that are laid out like Orion's belt. I want to kiss each one. I wonder if his skin would be salty. I can feel the heat gather under my breasts.

My finger that was cut aches, but I don't stop. Sometimes I think that Sam attempts to dodge our mother's disappointment by being a moving target. During his punk rock phase he would put glue in his hair and I would find it dried in clumps around the sink. On my toothbrush. His teacher called to say it had coagulated on his microscope and my parents needed to pay for it. Sam blinked and went back to whatever new thing he was into. Sam and his acoustic guitar. Sam and his spy kit. Sam and his worn copy of Plato's dialogues. Sam and the chemistry set he lit on fire just to see what would happen. The door to his room is always shut, with strange and splendid clanks coming from it. Today, though, he is wearing a frayed tie-dyed T-shirt. I know there is a small black notebook in his bag that he scribbles in meaningfully. Sam's breathing slows too much and his eyes flutter. My muscles tense.

"Hey. Of all those things, what would you pick?" I use my nails and scratch him and he opens his eyes. He groans as I press a knot in his shoulder.

"You'll think it is lame."

"Most likely."

"Do you ever feel sick with wanting to touch someone?" he asks. "Like, without kissing someone you might die?" I pause in my pushing, hold my breath for a moment.

"You know I'm Shomer Negiah. I don't touch any males but you and Dad." Just a few months ago, I was not, when I would lead men to the backseat and place their hands on me. When I would lie drunk on the bed and their shadows would smear together. Since I stopped any

sort of even casual contact, I know I am keeping touch sacred. Something I will share with my husband. Something I now only really share with Sam.

“Don’t you want to? You are so into the Torah, and there is so much in that about the miracle of two bodies joining together. The frisson, the power. All that dirty stuff in the back.”

“You mean two souls.”

“I’ve read the same books you have. You know that some rabbis think that God would rather you make love on a Friday night than give to the poor.”

“Sure. If you are married.”

I wonder how marriage is this magic alchemy that transforms an act from sin to good deed. Is there any shadow of gold in lead, before the transformation? Maybe I should reread Leviticus. The sweat beads on my neck and I shrug out of my sweatshirt, sit on Sam’s back in my pajama pants and tank-top. His muscles move beneath my thighs. My hair hangs like vines between us. I would weave him a net of it if I could, if it would hold him.

The voices outside stop.

“Thank God,” our mom sighs as she collapses back in the car. The door slams. “I just can’t take any more of that,” she says. I know she checks to see if her mascara ran and reaches for her magenta lipstick. She left us once, when I was little, pre-Sam even. One day it was just Dad’s slumped shoulders and macaroni for dinner every night. He grew his beard out into a nest, but he wouldn’t let me rub my cheek against it. She moved in with her accountant, got pregnant, everything. But then something soured. A miscarriage, stillborn? I’ve never gotten the full story. Within a year she was back, but she closed doors with more force, her footsteps echoed. The remnants of cups littered her wake. I want to ask her about this other shadow family that she seeded, but then shriveled around her. I want to, but I don’t. Sam arrived soon after she returned,

some consolation child. She used to be really rough with him, like if she shook him hard enough he would metamorphosize. Her freshly painted face pokes out of the curtain between the front of the van and the back, and I get off Sam and sit apart on the mattress. For some reason, I blush. “Do you guys want any juice? An apple?” she calls from up front, hopeful. No tears in her voice at all. Sam curls up in ball.

“No,” I shout back. “We’re fine.”

While they are changing the tire, I light the candles and watch the flicker through my fingers. A few months ago right after Sam got diagnosed, when I told them I wanted to bake challah and observe Shabbat, my mom stopped chewing her tofu, and spit it daintily into her napkin. “Well,” my dad said. “You sure you aren’t really gay and just think you are religious? Is this one of those phases?” I know they fret over what to tell their friends. It was easier for them when I stayed out too late, helping Abe make his deliveries, when they could trace the track marks on my arms. They could recognize me smashing plates and eating the shards during a bad trip. Now I catch them staring at me with their mouths open, like they are holding their breath. Waiting to see what I will do next. I miss wine, the cheap, abrasive wine like sugary battery acid. I feel the urge in my throat. The grape juice I brought is too sweet. I spill some juice on my arm and it leaves a thin residue. Sam doesn’t lick it off. Sam mumbles the prayer with me, even as he rolls his eyes, even as he shivers.

When we get moving again, it starts raining. Sam and I point to drops of water on the windows and bet on whose drop will make it to the bottom first. Almost immediately, my drop is subsumed by his.

“Do you know about slugs?” he whispers into my ear as his limbs jerk the blankets.

“What about them?”

“About how they have sex? They leave special scents in their slime trails to find each other. A slug can spend its whole life searching for another slug’s trail. If in the huge forest they are able to locate each other, they do this gyrating ballet. Their foreplay lasts for hours.”

“Hours,” he repeats.

“So?”

“It culminates with one of them spitting out this special silk, which is stronger than a spider’s web. They wrap the silk around themselves and then dangle from it, like in a net. Slugs are hermaphrodites, but somehow they decide which one will be the impregnator. That lucky slug shoots out a ‘love dart’ that rips the other’s ones belly and deposits sperm there. They hang there for a while, and then pregnant slug reels back in the silk, and leaves the other one there to die.”

“Why?”

“I just thought you should know. In case it ever comes up.” Before I can answer, he is back asleep. Each time he closes his eyes, I get that nervous feeling like right before a test I didn’t quite study enough for.

Later, “I just want,” he mumbles. “I want I want I want.” His face is lemon-pinched even as he is dreaming. The pain is there, squirming under his skin. I want to ask God to release him from it, but I can’t seem to remember the words. Trucks roar all around us. The tires shudder over a bridge.

We stop at a McDonald's somewhere in Ohio. There is nothing I can eat except the French fries. Sam can only manage a coke, which he knocks over with his shaking. Dad falls to his knees, sopping it with napkins, and eventually his jacket. "I'm sorry," Mom says to the light haired girl with acne who appears with a mop. "We're all so sorry," she repeats.

"Do you remember Land's End?" he asks. He's pressing his stomach to my back, like spoons, and I can feel the muscles that have survived in his thighs straining against my own.

"I remember trying to smoke oak leaves." Land's End is what we called the small wooded area behind our house. We named the trees and found the ones with the driest pine needles underneath and the branches like walls. We would experiment with herbs and potions, whatever we found growing. This one was supposed to make me beautiful. That one was supposed to give him invincibility. Maybe we each took the other's potions. Maybe that is what the problem is.

I extract myself from our tangle of limbs. I wrap my arms around myself and find a silver dollar pressed against the mattress. It is hiding among the splotched napkin and straws littered between the seats.

I hold the coin in my fist and squeeze hard enough that when I let go, there is a second coin imprinted on my palm.

We pass fields, bewildered cows. I try to name them, but we go by too quickly, so they all get the same name: Abe. After my ex-boyfriend, the last person whose lips I touched besides

Sam. Abe of the gin hangovers and sultry guitar. Abe who liked it when I begged. Abe of the retreating back.

Abe, whom I left when God told me to.

“I don’t know if I can do this,” Sam says.

“Of course you can. They do this procedure a hundred times a week.”

“I haven’t even kissed a girl, ever. I haven’t even felt someone’s clavicle.”

“You can feel mine,” I say. He does and there are small earthquakes in his fingers.

“I just don’t want to never be touched,” he says.

“You are touched,” I say. “Come here.”

We are driving through mountains. We go up and down, as if waves. The shadows beneath Sam’s eyes darken. He gestures, quickly and I hand him the bucket. I rub his back during it, feeling the blades of his shoulders as pterodactyl wings that are too small yet to fly. The other cars are a hurricane around us.

It is night and no one has spoken in an hour, probably because the last thing said was “What kind of idiot doesn’t check tire pressure?” On the mattress, it does feel like we are weightlessly rushing through space, with stars streaking by on our way to an alien destination. If we stopped suddenly I have the feeling that our bodies would continue and be caught somehow in the street light, forever suspended in flight. The road and the rain cover us in a downy hush, but I don’t sleep. Sam is drooling. I want to run my finger over his cracked lips. His teeth chatter even in sleep, and I wrap the scratchy green blanket around him. I am considering. I am weighing the value of giving and the value of living fully. I wonder if I have the courage. I don’t

know what would be kinder. I don't know whom to ask. I try to remember Deuteronomy. Or is it Song of Solomon I should be referencing? The fuzz on his head looks soft. I watch the rain against the windows, the small rivers that do not yet know that they are going nowhere.

“Sam,” I whisper, and stroke his chest. He stirs. I think he sleeps because it is his only alternative to the ache.

“I was dreaming,” he says. “There was a herd of horses, wild horses. In our backyard. We were going to ride them to the hospital. But instead of riding them, we would just jump from their backs to another horse. I could jump like everyone else. Even with the stampede. It was strange though, it was silent. I could smell the horses, but nothing made a sound.”

“I just wanted to let you know that I think it is okay. I think that God wants us to have every joy we can. I don't think we are here to suffer. I don't think you have to.”

“Every joy?”

“Maybe there are other things possible. If you promise that you will do everything you can to live. That you won't give up.” I bite my tongue so hard that my mouth is filled with what feels like a coppery wine. “This is a special circumstance, but you have to promise,” I say, like I believe it.

His shivering becomes shaking.

I hold him and I wish I could take some of that poison into my own flesh. I wish I had smuggled more of his pills. I know it doesn't make sense, but I rewish the years of stupor. I rewrite each moment when I let desire overcome courage. Each time I failed Sam, left him with our mother's stale anger, just to feel Abe's hands on me. I pile these moments on the altar and burn them, hoping God will smell the smoke and forgive me.

We hold each other and measure the speed of our breathing. We calibrate the pace of our pulse.

Here is what may have happened:

Sam and I talk and I decide it is something I want to give. He will have no other chance, no moment at the hospital, no opportunity to call someone to meet us at a rest stop. This is the chance God has offered. The curtain between the front seat and the back does not sway. The radio is a low murmur. It happens silently, darkly. There are tears, of course. Mine, some his. These tear drops must mingle but we do not race them. I know he is not in pain during it, because he stops shaking. My thighs cramp, but I don't stretch. Sam's eyes focus beyond me. I wonder if God will understand that sometimes his circumstances push us beyond ourselves. The car rocks, and the sway of the rain and the windshield wipers, and our bodies, stir together. Is the absence of pain pleasure? The mattress refuses to smell like anything but books that we have read and forgotten.

Here is what did not happen:

Sam survives. He lives through the transplant and every day I can see him gaining strength. The Red Sox win the Series. We scour the Internet and make a series of failed mousses, including avocado and pomegranate. I am reluctant to go to college, but he is already playing basketball a few times a month. I go to synagogue and find peace. Our parents go to counseling and our Dad joins our Mom's kickboxing class. There is still shouting, but it is with a different timbre. The cadence not quite so desperate.

Sam and I both grow up. We move to different coasts after college, but keep in touch through email and the occasional late night drunken phone call. He becomes a physicist and grows his hair out to match. We each marry, by coincidence, someone named Robin. He and his Robin buy a series of dingy duplexes and sell them all shined up for a profit. My Robin and I still light candles every Friday night. We still believe in God. There are children. Our parents die within months of similar heart conditions. The funerals are quiet, but for the scampering gum-chewing grandchildren.

But I know that is not what happens. What happens is that Sam's beautiful body rejects the transplant. His immune system is indiscriminate in its hunger. There are never enough pills. Sam and I don't have a chance to be alone again, even though we let the cartoons on his hospital television flash over us. We don't light any more candles. I'm out getting a sandwich when it is over. I stand in the door with rye and cheese in my hand and my parents stare at me, blinking like under water.

I waver at that threshold, unsure of whether to step inside.

Osiris

Poised in front of my friend's mirror I can see that my hair is doing that thing it does so rarely, those sharp tendrils. I whip my head around. Evan sits behind me, studying me watching myself. He looks like soap in his white t-shirt and scuffed jeans. His glasses just that little crooked. In the mental hospital he wore a similar uniform, with a similar expression.

"Rock star hair," I say. He nods. There is risk in his silence. He observes from the puffy white bedspread, beneath my absent friend's butter yellow curtains. A stack of used Kurt Vonnegut novels, magenta manic-panic hair dye and leather cuffs make a punk rock still life on top of her dresser. The sunlight is shoving through the blinds, marking the room with prison stripes.

"Come here," Evan finally says. Every sentence he says that is not fractured by his bipolar mania I hold as a gift.

"I should feed the cats," I say. My fingers are caught in my hair. This miracle of curls rather than frizz I hope is a sign that that this evening will be blessed. The fact that my friend's family gave me the key to her house this weekend, the last weekend before we all scatter to university, and that Evan and I will actually have a roof over our heads and a bed in which to untangle this that is between us: these are portents that everything will settle. This summer we have perfected the art of making love in public rose gardens, not because thorns turn us on, but because there is nowhere else for you when you are 18. Rain, mosquitoes, stairwells. This is what kissing him tastes like.

"The cats will survive. I won't. I've missed you," he says, but won't meet my eyes.

I join him. The bed smells like perfume, orangey and musky. We are so obviously strangers here. He traces my cheek, softly, like he used to before he started speaking in cubist paintings. At the mental hospital the view out his window was equal portion mountain/leaves. It made me think of centaurs, sphinxes and other chimeras. He, too, was a Gemini, split between his smile and his mania. His parents were little boxes of pain. Evan's father wouldn't even acknowledge that I was there visiting. His parents blamed me that weekend he stopped sleeping, when he began elaborate chess games with God and declaring that he knew how to heal the world. That weekend he had promised to take a bus the two hours from his town in the mountains to mine in the city. His parents connected me with his breakdown, as some way to cobble control over the narrative of what prompted their only child to speak to angels. Or maybe I am just explaining it that way to myself. For their own reasons, they concluded that it was my intensity that withered his ability to distinguish between real and false. Evan had never had anything that really diverted his attention away from his home before. From the beginning they doubted that we were really in love, we were too young, it was too soon. It was just puppy love. This, too, will pass. They said.

In the hospital, Evan borrowed a voice from his guitar. Instead of speaking, we listened to his hands coax that wood into song.

His friend there, with depakote in her joints, made us floats with orange sherbet and diet ginger-ale. Tasted the way the hospital felt, stale and out of place. I beat him at connect four. He rubbed my back and I leaned towards his hand on my neck.

The phone call right before the hospital, He rambled. He would start a sent- then begin anoth- but clouds are everywhere- missed the bus, but god meant it that way, did you know about the prophesies? I spoke sharply, didn't he want to see me? What about the next bus? The illness

speaking in his tongues flowed right over me. As he strung together words, I watched a spider crawl on the ceiling, dodging gravity. Every so often it faltered and I would inhale. Then it would right itself and jerk its spider-movements into the corner. I was left alone with the white ceiling and his strange voice in my ear.

A phone call a few hours later, his mother informed me he was in the hospital and that he was begging for me to visit.

The hospital released him, but he told me that music was his angel now. He signed his letters Twee. Maybe his parents were right, he said. Maybe this wasn't love after all. But another beast. He regretted his openness, loving me without really knowing me. It is true that the first night we met, we stayed up laughing and only meeting lips at dawn. We spoke constantly but couldn't see each other until two weeks later, because we lived so far apart. It is true that he told me he loved me after only one night, yet he has told me every night since for the past four months until he told it to God instead. He always made sure my feet were covered in bed. He read to me to from my favorite childhood books. I would like to present stacks of his love letters as exhibit A. Here are the songs he wrote about my bravery. The first night we met, I had just come from work with my hair in two braids, no make-up and glasses. We talked politics and he explained that he was the head of his high school's Gay-Straight Alliance and he liked it when girls assumed he was gay because then they treated him more like a friend. At dawn, he told me that he just wanted to watch me sleep and woke me with a kiss. I'd like to present our third date at the end of March. We did Passover dinner with my extended family and then dessert with his. He held my hand under both tables. That night, we drove to Walden Pond and rushed through the dark forest. He took off his clothes and seamed the cold waters with his pale, lean body. I kissed each goosebump. He entrusted me with a small stuffed monkey that was his beloved childhood

toy so that I wouldn't be lonely in his absence. Evan wasn't my first, but I had never allowed myself tenderness. This is the evidence, your honor. Who is to say what is real?

Evan holds my hair in handfuls.

"This," he breathes, "I missed."

"Stop it." I lean against him. Someone's stomach grumbles.

"Yours?" I ask. He strokes my forehead, the way that my grandmother used to. Right now I don't feel anything but a low buzzing, like a nest of buried hornets.

"I know this isn't what you wanted or what you thought. I just know that holding you like this. Being with you."

We shift and lay down on the bed, I can hear his inner workings, the organs moving together in their secret mechanical language. His innards sound factory-like, perfect. His heartbeat comes and comes and comes.

"The nearness of you fills me with such warmth," he says.

"Gratitude. Ok. I'll take it."

"You were there when things were so bad. When nothing made sense."

"You would have been there for me." I say this, but am unable to imagine him sustaining the attention that I have had to devote to loving him while he is broken. He is so easily distracted. I can see him licking my tears, but his gaze on his guitar.

"What was it like?" I say.

"It was like, everything moving at warp speed. Too many words. I could only say every other idea before new ones. Like some sort of giant avalanche. Flying. Woosh. But I could do everything. I knew everything. God told me things. I wish I had written them down."

"I want to know everything."

“No. You don’t.” He kisses my forehead. My stomach groans. “Woosh.”

We are quiet. I try to count to his heart beats.

“Now? What do you know now?”

“I do love you. I was wrong. Confused before.”

“I thought it was all about your music.”

“No. The music is about you. Every note is you.”

We roll over. I’m on my back and Evan finally kisses me. Shyly. A barrage of soft air kisses, like whispers. He leans over my parted lips, my naked throat. Lifts up my white dress. I keep my eyes closed and my hands up by my head. I can’t help twisting and moaning, a horrible habit. Harder to break than skin. Evan pushes the bra straps off my shoulders, I know better than to reach for him. He needs his control. So I am on my back, eyes closed, removing as much of myself as I can. If I cough, he will disintegrate. He tells me he loves me, after all. Sings it to me and I open my eyes when he enters me. He says my body is home. The familiar stinging warmth. The fullness, and then the pain. We clutch it like that. For a moment, two. It hurts too much and we try again. I hold my teeth against the pain. Hating my body for betraying me. I clench my eyes and tears leak through the corners.

He rolls off. I get up to go to the bathroom and miraculously, my hair is still perfect. The girl in the mirror tells me it is a force-field.

When I come back to Sarah’s bed I see it. A reddish brown stain the shape of Montana on Sarah’s pristine comforter. I’m not due for my period for another two weeks, but something must have broken inside me. The stain is inside me, too. Growing. I am sure Evan can smell it on me. I tell him to go feed the cats. He doesn’t understand me, so I have to say again and it sounds like I am shouting. I tear through all the cabinets in the house. Windex? No. Tile cleaner? No.

Comet? No. No. No. No. I envision Sarah returning. Revealing to all our friends at school the exact substance I am made of. I finally find some bleachy detergent and wet the stain. Now it is just a huger wet spot. It looks angry.

We go to the kitchen and burn chicken nuggets. Our hips bump near the stove. “Sorry.” “Ooops.” We say. We watch Grease 2 on Sarah’s parents’ huge TV. Yet, I can’t forget the stain. Has it grown? When we go back upstairs will it have taken over the room? The entire upper floor a swamp? We bumble around each other. On the lithium he moves like swimming. I want to feel relieved. He does love me. Things will go back to the ways things were before. The sudden smiles, the storms of laughter. We are all elbows under the green afghan on the couch. Michelle Pfeiffer sings about reproduction.

“I’m sorry,” he says.

“It wasn’t your fault that you got sick, baby. We’ll make it through this.” I want him to say it wasn’t my fault either, but instead he pushes the pause button. Michelle is frozen with her mouth contorted. Even her tonsils are lovely.

“I think...” he begins, and I notice that he is trembling.

“It’s ok, sweetheart. Woosh.”

“I was wrong. I’m not really in love with you. I tried.”

I can almost see the words hanging there between us. Evan begins to cry and there is a moment where I can make a decision. Do I tell him to leave, that I can’t abide his emotional manipulations? That this is the edge. Being bipolar doesn’t allow you to tell someone you love them only when you want to have sex. Do I feel betrayed? Rageful? Weary? Compassion? In truth, no. I just feel the sound of those buzzing hornets, graying everything out. But I know this is the moment, I either leave now or I submit to his emotional earthquakes. If I stay, this is what

college will be, an ultimate privileging of his feelings over mine. I can stay and hope that the part of him that loved me so purely once, the part of him that I am currently in service to, will return. Or I can accept that all things erode. I am not fooling myself. I have a choice. His chin glistens with snot. He is not handsome when he cries.

I do feel his brain aching. His tears burn. I hold him. I tell him it is fine, it is all going to be just fine. I rub his back and press my lips to his forehead. I wait for emotion to swell in me. I'm empty. I hand him tissue after tissue. I remove them when he is through.

We crawl into Sarah's bed at ten o'clock. Another miracle, the stain has vanished, gone to more verdant climes. But I can still feel it there, stalking us. Evan rolls and snorts during the night. He is a furnace and the bed sweats with his heat. Even this, I find myself adoring.

Evan's madness is slippery. It will come for me, too.

The Fat Man

Ok the fat man and a woman are sitting on a bench. Why kind of day is it? Not sunny, more like gray. It's April. The world is drowned in mud. There is all this heat churning under the surface, earthworms and roots wriggling. Even the sky is brown, fertile. They sit on the bench in silence. The fat man loosens his tie. The woman is wearing a blue floral print dress that is too light. She wraps her cardigan around her more tightly and watches the people walk by in their muddy shoes. City street, right at the entrance of the park. Sky scrapers rising over one shoulder, trees and squirrels chittering over the other. Old men muttering to their chess pieces. On a bench next to them, a man is stretched out, snoring lightly. Even just one step from the city, it is quieter. The buzz of everything is just slightly dulled. She thinks she can hear the squirrels crunching. Of course, she can't. It's a lie.

The fat man's name is Darryl. He is 25 but looks at least 40. He is inarguably, entirely, impossibly happy. He leans back, and slowly puts his arm around the bench behind the woman. She is actually 40. She teaches 4th graders how to write in cursive. She's thinking about one of them now. A black boy named Jackie who drew a picture of a forest that she can't get out her head. He managed to draw shapes lurking in the leaves that were somehow certainly tigers. She shivers again.

Why are they together? How many ways to connect them? She could be his long-lost aunt, traveled from Kansas to tell him that his mother finally succumbed to her madness. She could have been his teacher, years and years ago. He could be her son, billowing out and doughy. They could be brother and sister. With 15 years apart? It's more than possible, especially when their father is a philandering English professor with an insatiable appetite for

biology majors. Or even more shocking, they could just be good friends. He's her student teacher. Or a new teacher and fresh enough to try to make American history fun. His students are always in the hallways cluttering up the floor with markers and glue. They talk in the teachers lounge. At first in whispers later, he spills coffee on one of her dresses and to both their surprise they just laugh and laugh. She doesn't mention the stain, and smiles all through the geography lesson. Or he could be Jackie's father, fat on barbecue and misplaced plans. He could be her cashier. Her partner in Yoga class. They met at the gym. She's his aerobics instructor and so quiet that no one could hear her over the bass line. No, he doesn't go to the gym. He is far too happy for that.

And obviously because I am writing this and I am still in my 20s and I wear my loneliness like a perfume, they must be lovers. Whatever they are to each other, they know each others bodies like rice knows the bowl. Still it doesn't mean they are lovers yet, on this heavy Sunday afternoon, with the slats of the bench digging into his soft back. But they will be. Somehow, this moment, of two people on a bench and a sun high above them dressed in clouds, dictates it. The breeze rips strands of hair out of her ponytail and she brushes them away from her eyes, and sees his face for a second.

She breathes out, and realizes that she is happy, too.

Chorea

The tyranny of the immediate begins for me when I had to start dancing the lunch shift at the Fantasy Factory across from the new castle casino, on the block right before the city gets real seedy. I think the Factory gets off on taunting that edge, like it hasn't decided yet whether to be all classy with crushed red velvet curtains or if the whole place will just sigh and relent to the crack dealers who stalk from next block. Right now though, the gravy stains, the fried chicken particles suspended in the air, anchor me in the moment. Everything is exactly what it is. The wood panel-siding watches, the light sticks in the cracks in the laminate floor, the glitter glitters, and does nothing else. There is no room for thoughts of David and little Vashti, and whether or not I will tell him that there is venom in my cells that may have seeped into her. No place here in this poorly lit room for the guilt I can taste in the back of my throat. There is no room for anything else but the forgotten, sticky beer beneath my boots and the wide-hipped man who taps his fingers on the table along with the music while I move for him.

My right leg is up by his ear. My thigh burns. I try to remember the last time David and I actually went for those runs we keep on insisting that we do. We did before Vashti, anyway. Now my whole body feels new, undefined. I wonder how it will feel when the faulty gene finally manifests itself, when my muscles will dance on their own accord. Here, I have control. I look him in the eye.

The song shifts, and I turn slowly letting myself fall into the new rhythm. I long for Tammy's sinewy grace, but instead I sway along to the bass. The buffet has one lonely chicken leg, a few puddles of mashed potatoes. Most of the men examine their plates behind fortresses of

crumbled napkins. A table of secretaries in the back giggle shrilly, though we aren't allowed to start serving until 5. Tammy adjusts her tits in the darkest corner when she thinks no one is watching. Tammy has great tits, but they just won't stay put. Mine are unfamiliar now and bulge out of my black sequined bikini top.

This is the part where I am supposed to purr about how smart he is and ask about his favorite book. This is where I am supposed to step into it. I do it like velvet on the night shift, when there is liquor on the table rather than this meager cup of orange juice the color of the sunshine that I know is trapped outside the splintered doors. I open my mouth, but he is just this older man in a stained wind breaker, with watery eyes who wants something from me that I can't give.

"My kid might be sick," I blurt out. I'm still shaking it, my own cleavage is distracting.

"Mine died," he says. "It's a hell of a thing."

He shuffles away towards the dregs of the buffet table.

"This is what I do." I say to the warmth he left behind on his folding chair. I open my arms wide. "Just this."

I wander over to a table of wrinkled suits, as they stir their ice teas. I don't know if it is the new curves to my body or the fact that I see them for who they are: glances searching, yet slipping past each other, but no one wants a lap dance. My skin feels tight. I stumble, and I wonder if this is when it starts. For my mother it started in her hands, little jerks that she barely noticed. It traveled from her fingers to her mouth, and she would smile and sneer at the walls. I touch my face. It still feels like mine.

Outside, our breath coalesces. Tammy holds her hand out for a cigarette. The back of the factory looks almost like an actual factory, cement blocks, the obligatory November dandelion pushing its way through the concrete fissures. Forgotten snakeskin condoms slither in the shadows. This is what it is.

“New lipstick?” she says.

“Pearl Pink,” I say. “More of a lunchtime color. Goes with the lemonade.”

“More like, goes with pepto. Which you need if you eat any of what is on the buffet.”

Tammy doesn't smile. She doesn't want to risk the wrinkles. That is one thing I am free from. I smile recklessly.

“What would you be doing,” I ask. “If you weren't doing this?”

She sucks hard on the cigarettes and brushes her dark curls out of her eyes. Her black eyeliner has seeped into the tiny lines there, outlining a miniature web. Her lips, too, glossy, but up close in the daylight like this, I can see the etchings surrounding them. A second Tammy, drawn on the first one.

“Acapulco.” She says. “I would be a great beach girl. Sleep in the jungle. Wake up, sell the tourists some coconuts. Swim with the sea turtles. Ride a dolphin.”

“What about when it rains?”

“Fine. I dunno. I've always wanted to be a vet tech.” She scratches her neck and it is still long and beautiful, it does not need to hide from the light. “To calm down the dogs before their shots. I'm good at that. When this gives out.” She sweeps her hand up and down her body.

“Maybe I'll go back to that. Maybe I'll just move in with my kids and watch Judge Judy all day and eat caramels.”

“I should do that. I should quit and eat caramels all day.”

“Girl, with a husband like you have and a new baby I have no idea why you came back at all. It should be all sugar all the time.”

If it was true, if Vashti is OK, if David still loves me despite my keeping this information from him I would still do this, enjoying my muscles while I can. Loving while I can. I don't let myself think about what I would do if I didn't know that there was a sleeping panther inside me.

After being out in the sun, back inside the light seems stale. The hunger has filtered out. Stomachs are satiated. I swivel my hips and the light catches on the sequins but no one will meet my eye. The man in the windbreaker motions for me to move on when I approach him to apologize. The chattering secretaries have gone, and in their absence there is noticeably less joy.

A college-aged guy in a red sox cap and jeans scratches a scab on his left arm while I undulate to 80s hair bands.

“Undulate is a cool word, isn't it?” I whisper in his ear. He murmurs, and slaps a five on the table.

There is no set show during the day, and the empty plywood stage reminds me of failure. The border lights insist on blinking on and off and continue to trick me into turning my head, sensing movement in my peripheral vision. Eventually my feet ache and I lean against one of the walls, watching the few tables still full of men, and the girls on the floor smiling. In this light, Tammy is released from age again. There is only one Tammy, and I try to relax. I remind myself that there is only a 50% chance that Vashti has my defective gene. She could grow to have fear of wrinkles. Before my mother started twitching at 30, she became irritable, then quiet. Withdrawn. Is this insistence on seeing things only as they are the beginning? Is being weary of

artifice a sign of decline? I walk past the booths, and even a past a familiar customer who stares me up and down to tell Brian to play my set.

“Come on,” he says. “It is barely 3pm.”

“Please. I’m dying out there.”

“Your choice.” He shrugs.

As the first chords of “Hit Me Baby, One More Time” shudder through the room, I know that I’m not going to do my regular routine. My body feels heavy in new places, and light in others. I climb to the center of the stage. Turn my back and close my eyes. I listen to my body, trying to hear synapse calling to synapse, nerve and fiber and bone stretching. I reach my fingers towards the ceiling. The beat insists. My thigh muscles itch to do a cartwheel. So I do. The plywood is rough under my hands. When I come back up I am laughing.

My muscles say “Move!” So I move! I spin, and twirl like I’m in Ballet class as a child. I pirouette. I feel my top pop off, but I don’t care. There are scatters hoots and hollers, but they are far away like on another mountain top. I practice my high-kicks. Britney sings “Give me a sign” and I do a top-less karate chop. The blood is flowing so hot and sweet and every cell is alive, and alert and under my control. I am in my body. I am able to be my body.

When the song ends, I stagger off the stage. It isn’t enough. There are only a few ones thrown up there. It is silly to do a show at lunch. Bruce, the manager, shakes his head and tells me to keep my clothes on. Tammy is waiting for me at the dressing room. “Girl,” she says. “Ok.” Her gaze goes from my boots to my eyes, assessing for damage. “That was some type of sugar.”

After paying out the house, and the front, and the bar, and giving a little something to Tammy because I know her boyfriend left her with three kids, I only make 15 dollars in tips. Just enough for the cab ride home.

At the apartment, David is just waking up for his shift at the gas station. This change in my schedule lets us ride quietly on each other's wakes. It also is supposed to make it possible for us to keep Vashti from smothering herself, or accidentally being lit on fire, or starving. Or the million other calamities that may befall a hapless child. The doctor promised me she would leave me a message telling me when Vashti's results were in a way that wouldn't alert David of what they were, but there is nothing for me on the counter. I tiptoe into the bedroom and touch the softest part of Vashti's cheek. I rub David's back so tenderly that I wonder if he will get suspicious. I kiss his sleepy eye-lids one by one, his eye lashes brushing against my lips like feathers. How could he ever forgive me? I remember my mom in her last days, the raving and the twitching in her limbs, like a ballet she could never recover from. I peel off my boots.

"How was work, baby?" he says.

"Fried. Greasy." I start pulling out my hair extensions, and we have a sea garden of golden ringlets on the sheets. "I would have made more money as a waitress."

"Yeah, but then you wouldn't have gotten a chance to be so bodacious. To show off. You are such a good dancer." He tastes my clavicle, the salt there, right where he knows I like it. I look towards Vashti's crib. We met only a year and a half ago, when I still thought it was a reasonable thing for someone with my lifespan to study real dance. He played piano for auditions for this modern ensemble. His hands are marble-perfect. I meant to tell him, I did.

"Shhhh. It's fine. She just went down. We'll be gentle."

He is soft, and slow. Everything that the music in the Factory is not. But my mother's face hovers whenever I shut my eyes. The jerking of her legs, the endless clenching and unclenching of her hands. What was she grasping for? What will I grasp for when it is my time? Because I have had the test and it has given me the curse of clairvoyance. I see the future as a dark horizon I am tripping towards. It does not include lawyering or astrophysicking or modern dancing.

Vashti hiccups.

David comforts her and the sight of her smallness against the hardness of his chest, the contrast there is enough to stir me. There is no reason to tell him, not now when I am healthy. The immediate is a bully, muscles out all else. The sun insists its way through the blinds and highlights his jaw, lays bare her forehead. There is an ambulance somewhere, but it is faded, irrelevant. Musical. Now I can watch my husband and my child with a clear mind and I squirm and feel the mattress give underneath me, the sheets cool on the backs of my knees. My muscles are my domain. There is still a chance that Vashti will not carry my legacy of brokenness and disrepair, that she will be as pure and safe forever as she is now, held in her father's arms. The ceiling of our little apartment is textured, mapped. If I could put my fingers to it, I could read the patterns and know if I will be absolved of my selfish desire for living.

David coos at Vashti in her crib. Then he salsas back, falls to the bed and while he traces my hip, a trail of goosebumps follow his fingers.

"I don't have to leave for work for a little while, love." He whispers, his breath warming my ear.

I kiss him, and I want, I want, I do.

What Comes Next

Petra doesn't speak back, she doesn't cry when her daddy does. She cleans up the clattered bottles, the sticky spills. She drags her daddy to bed, leaves a pail nearby for the sick. Unlike her mama who left a week ago in an old black Cadillac, thirteen year-old Petra does not shy from things. She tries not to flinch even when the older kids snicker that she puts out behind the bleachers, when they offer her a dollar for a feel.

Petra thinks of those boys and their wounded eyes during Easter service. Sitting in a sea of hats, she thinks of her mama's absent bright green hat. For years during sermons about hellfire, Petra would look for the lime in a bowl of roses and be anchored. This year, the church's staggering warmth and her bent-over father and her slack-jawed older brother and the flies flitting at the edges, singeing their wings in the candles, all gather like residue in her lungs and allow Petra to take her breath only in thimblefuls. Her brother Simon rocks out of rhythm, his Sunday shoes scuffing the floor boards. She can hear him humming, like an insect's drone. She wishes she and Simon could play one of their singing games. He has perfect pitch, "like an angel" their mama said a few days before she left them. Petra and her mama were wrist-deep in meat loaf, and Simon sang as he sprinkled in the bread crumbs. The simplicity of that memory presses on her, and her stomach curdles. She staggers through her remaining family member's crooked legs. Petra shakes off her father's hard hand on her arm. She feels waves of fuchsia hats bobbing in dark sympathy, and for a moment she teeters, but then she stumbles from the pew, makes it up the aisle and finally past the heavy door.

She stands outside and breathes deep bellyfulls of breath. Beyond the church, everything is spinning on the edge of spring, eager to drop over. Her teachers write “makes good choices” on every report card, yet Petra walks down the one dirt road leading from the church and she doesn’t look behind her. The dust smudges the hem of her blue dress and gathers between the ruffles at her newly swollen bust. She has one hand on her mama’s costume pearls around her neck, counting them. She practices swishing her hips. She practices being alone in such a large space. She has never done either before. She lets the day empty her mind and take up all the blue space there. She swish swishes after a toad down the road.

She gets to town, and stands on the main corner. In the soda shop across the street, she sees someone who looks like her mama. There is a light-skinned man in a derby on the stool next to her, feeding her bites of his ice-cream sundae. The woman who is and is not her mama has whipped cream on her nose. She’s throwing her head back and laughing the way her mama laughed, holding her belly and delicately snorting. Petra stares. It is Easter. She left them a week ago, screaming at daddy and daddy too far gone to scream back. Her face stretched and Petra could see the white of her teeth, the blackness hidden in her mouth beyond.

The Cadillac didn’t start at first, and daddy dropped a half empty gin bottle and it lolled against the bumper. Simon started to cry and Petra murmured to him that it wasn’t because he couldn’t read. Mama didn’t leave because Simon wasn’t smart like Petra. A part of Petra accepts that her mama somehow found out about what she was doing after school. Her mama talked to Jesus and Jesus doesn’t lie so he had to tell her mama that Petra liked it when the boys did that, she liked the light up feeling in her stomach, the urge to lean solidly against a brick wall. That heavy car did start, her mama did take herself and her flaring nostrils and her big laugh away. It couldn’t be her. Someone else must have borrowed her green Easter dress.

For one hanging moment, Petra watches the woman who looks like her mama, and she could go over and sit on her lap and shake her finger and say “Mama, don’t be silly.” She could say, “Mama, I’ll never let them touch me again. I’ll never let that flutter go too high, I will keep myself like you and Jesus told me to.” She could say, “Mama, I’m sorry,” and the woman that could be her mama would reach down to Petra and bless her.

The sun is an insistent weight. The sidewalk exerts a great gravity, an irresistible magnetism between the concrete and her new thrift-store alligator shoes. A cloud dilutes the light. Petra turns away from the woman who looks like her mama and keeps on walking. She thinks there are other, better roads further on. Right now her daddy must be leading Simon to the potato salad, both of them collecting clucking tongues as they go. It isn’t cold, but Petra wraps her arms around herself as she walks. She wonders how old she will be when the other thirsts will come for her, too. Her new shoes grate on her ankle. She is released from town, free to wander back to the fields. Then, the boys surround her.

First there is only sky, the dirt road and the new grass but then these things are all blotted out by three boys she recognizes from the high school. Two of them won the science fair last year, which Petra remembers because she was the only Middle Schooler that qualified. She had filled a fish tank with forest where you could see the dark insects hustle through the soil, scuttling beneath torn blades of grass. Their minute breathings fogged the glass.

The three boys are standing like ruffian soldiers, shoulders thrown back. The husky one, who is straining his overalls, has a BB gun slung over his arm, but in her new shoes, Petra is still the tallest.

“We’re lost. We need directions,” the short one says. His voice has the intonations of a much larger person, a person with a continent sized-stomach. A smudge of hair grows shyly on his upper lip.

Petra keeps walking.

“Come on, baby. Help us out.”

They circle her and she is reminded of games she played in grade school. The short one is behind her. Now in front. She looks closer. One of them is handsome and limps, but is the only one without crooked teeth.

“Where are you trying to get to?” Petra sighs.

“That depends.” The chubby one snickers. He leans on his gun. Sweat stains his T-shirt.

Petra glares at him. There’s too much space, no trees nearby. Just the soft whirring of grasshoppers hidden beneath the skin of the field.

“There’s only one road. I would say follow it.” She says, staring in the short one’s small eyes. The three of them are in front of her, none of them smiling. She tries to go around them.

“Come on.”

“That sure is a nice dress,” says the one with the straight smile. He bows his head and Petra is sorry for his limp.

She knows him, those thick lips and almond eyes ripen something inside her. He was there one time when she was behind the school. She remembers that their winning experiment involved pea plants growing in darkness. She sees the tendrils reaching for light. The fat one brings a hand towards her but then runs it through his slicked hair. She can see the road over their heads. She can feel their eyes on her.

“Maybe,” she concedes.

“Yeah, that’s right. We all know you how much you like to give. Such a giving girl,” the short one says, grimacing beneath his shadow mustache.

“Actually, maybe not. Maybe get out of my way.”

The two boys look to the short one, who scratches his cheek.

“Well, what would you say if you don’t, then we come to your house later and get your retard brother.”

The fat one aims his gun at her “Pow”, he mouths. The handsome one places a hand softly on her cheek, and another on her left breast.

“Pretty blue. Like the sky,” he says, the words formed from his perfect tongue.

Petra feels it well up inside her, and then she is actually growling.

“Jesus.”

She starts barking and flapping her arms.

“Fuck.”

“Is she having a fit?”

Petra drops to the ground and rolls, even though the dust is getting on her pretty blue dress. She kicks at their legs. Then she curls up and pretends she is a snail. She hears the boys shuffle their feet. Then there are hands on her shoulders, pulling. She opens her eyes and looks into the even face of the handsome one. She sees the level hairs in his eyebrows, his oval nostrils. Dandruff on his shoulders. She can smell the tuna salad on his breath. There is a dandelion still furled into itself by Petra’s cheek. She spits.

Someone kicks her.

“Crazy like her brother.”

“Slut. Like her mom.”

“Those fuckers are all nuts.”

The handsome one is by her ear again. His fingers are stroking her neck.

“I promise it won't hurt. It will be like those times before. You'll like it.”

He whispers to her. She thinks of the one time she let him kiss her, in the woods behind school, with pine needles crunching under their feet. He brought her a piece of bubblegum. She thinks of the endings of her favorite movies, where starlets are rescued as their lips are pressed by other lips and the music carries them all to darkness. She leans towards the darkness that rises to transform the starlets and cowboys, to relieve them of those weights of body, bone, flesh.

“Will I?”

“I'll be gentle. We'll be gentle.”

She could close her eyes and let the boys do the things they want to do. She could give of herself, just enough. Afterwards, maybe they would buy her a soda. Jesus would frown, but she could let the shiver feeling overcome her. She could kiss them back. Kiss away mama leaving. She could like it.

“No. Damnit, No,” she says, through clenched teeth. The words taste like regret.

“These pellets raise welts. Simon always was a crier.”

“Remember the Walker's dog? One BB in the eye was all it took.”

“He still a cry-baby, your big retard brother?”

Any other day, maybe, she could empty enough of herself. There is a hardness there today, beneath her breastbone. A calcified chunk of granite that will not be scraped off. It is the part of her that wants to be home with Simon and stroke his head and tell him over and over again that everything will be all right. She wants to tell him until the words blur, indistinct and therefore possibly more than themselves. She wants to be purely those words.

She is still on the ground when the handsome one places his faultless tongue in her mouth. There is no moment of decision but she bites it and the blood flows hot and coppery. He screams. His friends surround her and the blows fall on her stomach, back, temples. It is just another kind of touch, just another flutter. The bruises mushroom under her skin. A car comes near and she hears the grass crackle through the fields under their boots, their grim laughter beyond. She stays snailed on the side of the road, but the car does not stop. She waits, but the boys are gone.

When she gets up, the skin is broken on her ankle, and it is raw there. Each step brings blood. She thinks she will find her way back by following the drops. She brushes off her dress, but her pearls broke. They are scattered there in the dirt. If her mama hadn't left, she would have buried them and then taken Simon out here to see if they grew into pearl trees. The sun on her neck, one cloud, the wildflowers waiting to unwither. These are the things she limps towards while practicing being alone. She glances over her shoulder. She watches for snakes.

* * *

Later, it is too dark for Petra to follow her blood trail back home. There are no boys, no toads. She still finds her way, but with each step she can feel the shoes gnawing deeper inside her, eager to reveal the bone. She refuses to take them off, so the pain in her feet rises to meet other sorenesses. When she's home, nothing obvious has changed and she throws the empty bottles clangingly into the trash. She listens, but her daddy's bedroom is silent. There is no black Cadillac in the drive. Simon hops up to her and crushes her in his arms. He smells like he always does, like soap and just soured milk.

He looks down.

“You got a hurt?”

His face scrunches up.

They sit together on the dark porch. He murmurs as he gathers a bucket and fills it with water and soap. Out in the night, Petra can feel the earthworms churning beneath them, preparing the soil for what comes next. She can feel the ground rise and fall with their blind exertions. So in this small way, the earth moves as Simon sings to Petra and washes the blood and grit from her feet. The earth exhales, and he kisses each toe in its turn, because no one has yet taught him not to.

Brunhilde's Escape

Brunhilde, the zoo's most duchess hippo, was rumored to last be seen near a clump of oak trees by I-95. We fret for the moistness of her skin, and we wonder about the hoof of a hippo. Can she withstand concrete? What if a shard of glass pierces her prehensile toes? Nonetheless, she soldiers on. Heinz, her compatriot and consort, remains cowed in the lagoon, shunning the gate an errant zoo-keeper left to swing over night. We avoid his gaze, not wanting to remind him of his cowardice and his loss. Brunhilde, Brunhilde! We imagine him calling, his great teeth clacking in the sunlight. But no, he remains diminished, refusing even the frozen carp we tempt him with. So it is our voices instead, lacking Heinz's authoritative baritone, which call for Brunhilde. We split into even groups and tramp through the forest, being sure to stare suspiciously into every puddle. Brunhilde! We whisper, like lovers. Come back to us. Secretly, though, we each harbor delight that her proud and foreboding footsteps are now free to stomp on pasture and road alike. We leave offerings of salmon on our doorsteps, buckets of cool water. We hose our yards into refreshing glomps of mud, and in Brunhilde's absence, we roll in it ourselves. Cover ourselves in the muck until we are indistinguishable wet joyful creatures. Still, she does not return. As a city, bereft, we hunch ever-forward.

Entanglement

You say we aren't out of the swamp. Like I don't notice the mud still gumming at our stolen boots, sucking. The mosquitoes' tantrum. I wonder if our sweat salts this marsh. If the crayfish and the crane will die of too much sodium, curl up and sizzle, slug-like. You stop, your breath catches, but it is just a frog who bellows again. It rumbles in my gut.

"Come on, Rebecca," I say, with as much gentleness as I can. "The sun is almost up."

You diminish, your head cocked. You are why we are here, covered in darkness, with filth up to our thighs. Yet, your left braid is undone, the wet hair veined across your forehead. Your scar hides under the mud on your cheeks. Those cheeks! Still, you look defiant in this muggy moonlight. You reach for me, but then pull back. Later, I would remember this moment and wonder how things would have been different if you had not shrank from me, there in the reeds. You turn and once more we slurp through the muck, our petticoats drenched in swamp, the ground clutching for us.

It isn't that the thirst is worse than the hunger, it is that they merge into an ache without edges. Even in the barn, late at night with you, I've never known this desire. Cattails break as we plow through. We suck at the fibrous green stems, but they are bitter, salty. The lily pads, the green on the skin of the swamp. Even in the minor relief of dry land, the leaves are anorexic and crunch. No water to be had. You try to catch a catfish, your brown fingers plunge into the muck, but there are no watery shelves, no holes. No place for the catfish to curl up and hide. Instead we envision them swimming, skimming the bottom just beyond our fingers. After a day you sing little songs to them. "Mr. Catfish!" You call, defiant of the dogs and our pursuers. "Supper

time!” Your volume makes my pulse pound until I am sure I hear their hooves and paws upon us. You stare at me. Dare me to sing as well. My tongue dries.

“Don’t be afraid,” you say. “We must be miles away by now.”

The swamp murmurs its hum, muddled by my hunger. Your eyes are so vivid, I want you to flutter at my adventures, to stretch on tiptoes and blush to glimpse my brazenness.

You pull a bramble from my hair.

“I’ll protect you. You know that,” you say.

But the song loses grip in my throat and drowns in my stomach. You turn away, ashamed for me, still. The birds stop to hear you call death lullabies to fish we are sure are there, taunting us swimming through blackest water.

Leeches. Horseflies. Weasels. Cat-like shapes. We disturb sleeping fowl. Fish that knock against our knees. Willow trees. Roots. Rocks. Spiders skimming on the top, walking as if Jesus. But also, of course, snakes.

“I didn’t plan this,” you say. But the thing is, Rebecca, you lie. That is why we are here, moving through tree trunks. You opened your silver tongue and these stories of us up North, free within each other and I think that my cup runneth over. When we curl in the thicket during the day, sleeping in fits, I dream that you are a witch and you have come for my liver. You tell such pretty lies.

The dragon flies are out in cascades. The twilight catches on their needled-bodies, and they flicker for an instant, lizard green. They glint on and off leaves. One hovers near your ear, then lands in your hair looking in the fading light like a bow. You tied a strip of your dress

around your forehead yesterday to keep the sweat from blinding you. A crown of cotton. You are knee deep in swamp, as if rising from it. Born of the muck. Fireflies have begun to wink. In the past few days, your cheek bones stand out even more sharply. I would trace your scar with my tongue. You look like a queen, with the dragon flies adorning you, and the last drips of sunlight catching on the moisture on your skin. You are bejeweled in your loss. I shrug. I do not kiss you.

“We’ll be there soon.” You stare up at the glow behind the clouds, the stars are there. They must be, somewhere. This is called faith. “Another day. Two at the most.”

“Another night.”

“Remember watching the stars through the slats in the barn?”

“I would count them waiting for you.”

“You were brave then. We could have been caught then.”

“No, the barn was protected. Otherwordly, somehow. Not of the plantation. Blessed.”

“Oh, sweetheart,” you say, and the light catches in your eyes like you are praying.

“They would never have caught us. We would have had years curled up in each other every night in the barn.”

You don’t say anything then, like the only thing to say is that of course they would have caught us, and of course they would have peeled our skin slowly from our flesh for loving each other like we did. Hung our self-shaped skins from the fences as flags to other slaves who may consider their bodies free. And in the barn, we were in bondage. In the swamp we are held only by the contours of our fear. The dark water parts before us, and seams perfectly behind us, leaving no path, no trace that we were ever there.

I see the knotted oak tree again, its side burnt from a long past fire. But so many trees have knots, that is way of trees, I hope. So many trees have scars. Part of me knows though that these knots, the particular dips and folds of bark, the way they look like a dog with a pointed face that at this point I would be glad to see, that I know it is familiar. I dare not tell you, Rebecca.

Traveling by night, the stars shift and are hidden by clouds. Each night of fighting through this, we follow the North Star. We borrow each other's bravery in small sips. We do not speak of our mothers. We do not speak of who we left behind. We do not say what will become of us if we are found. We both are familiar with pain. The ache in our muscles, finger tips bleeding, the scratch of the cotton branches against our bare legs. What would be new to us would be the promise of each other. The ability to learn the language of each other's bodies. To speak through flesh. We do not talk of why we left, and why we left those behind.

When we left that night, it was unplanned. You had unfolded under me and there was this moment when we both understood that this unfolding was too large to be tidied. We were unkempt, tremulous. Sinful. We could not return to our families' quarters. We could not marry. We would not lie with men. We would instead, give ourselves to the forest.

"If we follow the North Star, eventually...I can sew. You can clean houses. These hands are so artful with a broom." You had said, your eyes liquidy, kissing my palms.

"If you go, you will lose everything."

"You are all I have anyway," you said.

"It's too much. I'm not everything to anybody."

"You are."

"It's too much. All of this."

"Don't say that."

“We’ll grow out it. We’ll love men. We’ll pray harder.”

“I don’t believe you want to pray this away. I believe you rejoice in it.”

“Isn’t that more proof of this sin?”

“Look at me,” you said, your wide brown eyes, your soft skin marked by the scar on your cheek, your dainty chin. Your lips, quivering. “What are you so afraid of?”

I looked up through the crack in the barn, but there were no stars visible. I thought of my mother and my brothers and sisters turning on their mats. I saw my whole life unroll before me like a field of unsown wheat. There was no color there. No chance for ripeness.

“You.”

“Just try,” you said, in this voice, like a mewling kitten.

So, Rebecca, I do not tell you about the tree. Even though I know that this march, through the swamp, is towards starvation. We watch constantly for gators. You no longer sing to catfish.

You shake me awake. The sun rushes against my eyes. I am aware of the harsh red welts on my neck, itching as soon as I am conscious. My thigh burns where a branch scraped the skin. My throat is parchment. Sawdust.

“Don’t hate me.” You whisper. “Another night. I read the stars wrong. The path that we take should only be one more night away. Please, please don’t hate me. It will all be worth it if we can still be together.”

I don’t have the energy to panic that she is speaking in daylight. My ears bristle for barks and shouts. I don’t say anything, turn my back, crawl deeper into the thicket. The thorns catch in my hair. I tumble back into sleep.

The rain! The rain! We laugh again! Tilt our heads back and drink in salvation. We pour the water caught in the wide ivy leaves into each other's mouths. My throat sings, and I feel the water through my stomach all the way to my toes and finger tips. I engorge. We splash. The swamp gurgles gleefully, and swells with pride. It is up to our navels. Fat, juicy beetles crawl on logs floating past and I dare you to eat one. Manna. You do and smile. We clutch each other and your skin against mine in this wetness eases the rawness from journeying in a place that would scrape us against its teeth. Your heart beats with the rain. We might reach, I think, as the rain lashes against that burnt tree. The dog face is familiar and somehow comforting.

There is certainly a gator here. A large one. We hear him swimming. The tiny ripples, the soft inhalation of his snout. The current of his mighty tails sweeps against our shins.

"It will be quick," you say. "Stop trembling."

I wonder if I prefer the dogs or the gators. Or the fever that warms the wound on my leg. I look at you teeth bared, muscles clenched and I hope that warrior-you will be the last image I see. I hope that maybe by then I will finally have stopped trembling. I will come to you as sturdy and strong as you have been for me and I will say "Yes, I will. I am ready." I will rescue you from the fear that I do not love you as much as you love me.

You collect willow leaves and press them against the gash in my thigh.

"Here," you say, offering a piece willow bark in your hand but not meeting my gaze.

You are thinner than when we left. Your collar bone is etched out of your neck as if you were made of stone, not flesh. Your eyes so much larger without the flesh of your face to rest in. You are stripped of any artifice, any comfort, any ornament that might obscure the truth of your hard edges. You could slice me with your hipbones, which I can now see jutting through the scraps left of your dress. I see you, the breadth and weight of you. It is like you were born of this journey. Like maybe you are already home.

By the end, you carry me.

The dogs that haunt our dreams bite our ankles. We start, but it is too late. This patch of thicket beneath that burnt tree does not conceal us. The swamp, itself, our ultimate protector, failed to eliminate our scent. We have not traveled far in distance.

You reach for my hand while we hear the boots and the rough voices tramp through the branches. I let go when they find us.

Out Tiger the Tiger

When Michael and Gabriel come to Evelyn the first time, she is surprised their wings fit through the window of her bungalow on the edge of the desert.

“Shhh,” she says. “Don’t wake up Abby.”

Michael sets down his fiery sword, and raises his eyebrow. Gabriel shrugs. The sword lights sends shadows across the crumbled waitress uniform, the strewn bible, the one strand of fake pearls tangled on the dresser. The painting of Jesus over her bed flickers, too. She thinks she sees a lizard on the wall and reaches for her glasses. Michael places his hand on hers. It is too smooth, marble like. But warm. Like one of the sunned rocks that she used to take Abby to on weekends. Evelyn has to explain to Abby that stones aren’t alive but scorpions are. Cactus, alive but not warm. There is no rubric. Evelyn eventually has to agree with Abby that rain must be alive. It moves. It consumes. It dies.

Michael shakes his head, locks of blond hair, to his chin fall back in place. In another time he could be a young surfer. His face is chiseled, and his mouth is swollen. He could look cruel, like a judge or a soldier or the last face you see before you die, but his eyes are kind when he gently pushes her to lie back on the bed. Evelyn wants to giggle to herself but something tells her this is a portentous moment. There is weight here. Something much larger than when Tony left her. Her years of faith and hardwork, they have manifested both into heavy ankles and into Gabriel standing back, his slight frame leaning against the window. More athletic than a slab of marble. His roped easy muscles, those giants hands, like he should be building something, a ladder, a house, a clay pot. There is a warm pulse coming from him too, not breath but something deeper. His wings are brown feathers, duck wings. Down. She wants to smooth her cheek against

them and be saved. She rubs the blisters on her heels against the sheets and is so grateful that she has kept herself pure and clean. Sensible. Somehow always ready for this moment. Their gazes warm her like perfect patience. Her room smells like earth, or rain. The air right after the rain, she decides. Evelyn thinks she should be afraid. She should call the police. She should scream. She listens and there are no little Abby footsteps in the hall. No lung-clenching coughs. Yes, Abby took her full dose before bed. Evelyn knows enough not to look at the clock. Time dilutes. Dilates.

She nods yes, yes, I will. She prays.

In the morning she over-pours Abby's milk. She does not cry over it. Abby swallows the red liquid in a single gulp. Her breath is almost smooth, sweet. There is not the usual odor of something festering right under the smell of bubblegum toothpaste. Evelyn thinks maybe the doctors are wrong. Maybe Abby is blessed. Evelyn uses the last of the peanut butter for a sandwich, grabs Abby's bag. She remembers Billy, the stuffed giraffe that Tony left behind. Abby doesn't fuss this morning. She sings a song about Noah's Ark under her breath all the way to pre-school. "Twosie-twosie." She giggles.

Evelyn gets to work a full ten minutes early and the manager asks her if everything is ok. Evelyn smiles. The drinks refill themselves. Mary, the younger waitress brings her a fresh cup of coffee and asks if there is anything she wants to talk about. She feels blessed that she is allowed to alleviate the hunger of the families with their grubby toddlers and the men with dust on their jeans who fill up her section. Everyone shares clever observations about the menu. She laughs the whole shift flying. Her cheeks ache. The world, so full of kindness. When she closes her eyes she sees herself filled in a golden egg of light.

She makes enough in tips to buy peanut butter and bread for the week. She has enough energy when she is home to pick through the discarded pizza boxes. She considers doing laundry. She throws out a stack of newspapers. She brings out her paints and suddenly wants to see them on canvas, Michael with his hard chin. Gabriel and the vulnerable slope to his shoulders. With a little water and turpentine the burnt sienna and cobalt rev her. The phone rings and it sounds like chimes. Her mother sings to her from the answering machine. She could dance to it. She picks Abby up and they swirl around. The sweat sticks them together. Just little coughs, none of the gasping hurricane coughing. They read the Noah story, and end up devouring Genesis. No asking questions about Tony. Just chatter about the preschool Guinea pig, Chester. Chester likes lettuce, does he?

She doesn't think about Tony. She thinks about Michael and Gabriel and how they made her feel. She thanks god. She thanks god.

On the Seventh Night, Michael is stretched out next to her. Evelyn marvels at the inhuman humanness of his tiny nipple. Gabriel runs a stray feather- white, Michael's- across her collar bone. Evelyn gladdens with God's goodness. A drop of sweat glistens in the indentation above Gabriel's lip. She stretches up to lick it off. In this moment she has no awareness of the heft of her hips, or lumps on her thighs. There are no stray hairs on her chin or pimples on her back. Her stomach, carefully erased of stretch marks, is taut, perfect. She is a foal-like. Her ass rounds. She is reborn, limbs like stems. She is besides herself, blooming beyond the limits of her bones.

Michael says to her, in the strange guttural tongue that is not quite English and that she hears not quite with her ears.

“Tomorrow you must speak to the Church. It’s time for them to know.”

“I don’t want to share you.”

“You will never lose us, love.” Gabriele says this. She can tell because she can feel his words vibrating in her own throat.

“They’ll never believe me.”

“They are men of God. They are waiting for the truth, just like you were.”

He puts his mouth on hers and she is swallowed whole.

The chapel is cramped, yet the air conditioner struggles. The ratatatatat-tat-tat punctuates the silence in their conversation. Pastor Joseph leans back from his desk and steepled his fingers. His hair is brown and shellacked, like he is wearing a hair hat. His face usually looks like milk, but right now there are two pink spots high on his baby-fat cheeks.

“So they’ve come to you every night for the past week?”

“Yes, Pastor. I’ve never felt so blessed.”

“What exactly happens when they come?”

Evelyn shifts in her chair, it suffers under her weight. She fiddles with the button on the yellow church cardigan she wore. Her nicest wool skirt, despite the heat, is the only appropriate thing for this meeting. Her stockings already have a run starting from the thigh. She wonders if the lipstick she is wearing is too much. One of Abby’s early morning coughs is still echoing in her head.

“Well, they are angels, sir, but men as well.”

“I see.” Pastor Joe is rounder than most people. He dislikes being tricked. “Have you noticed anything else?”

Evelyn leans forward. “Oh! I have so much more energy. I don’t need sleep at all. Everything seems exactly like it should be. Like all the stars are exactly in the right places. I feel like I am being run through by this...electric blessing. Like I am made of love. I know I should be humble, but this is what I’ve been but on Earth for. I was chosen for this. To bring this message to you, and to you to the people. Together we are going to change the world.” She is breathless, her face shining as if there was an actual light. Pastor Joseph feels himself being slowly lifted, being pulled, like a sunflower urged to turn towards the sun.

“Here,” he says, and scribbles down a name and number. “I want you to talk to this person. Immediately. It’s very important. She’ll want to know everything that has been going on.”

The doctor’s office is 30 minutes through the dessert. The road is familiar. The silence, the space. All of this. Evelyn fills herself with prayer. She opens her eyes just in time to miss a cactus. She drives to the edge. She thinks this was an ocean once. She is standing on fossils of sea-shells. She closes her eyes and sees a glacier slowly advancing, razing the land. A river of ice, of erasure. In the end water bests rock. Yet neither are alive. So how could they press so hard against each other? How could non-life have such determination to survive? Nothing moves but the electricity in Evelyn’s head. Each neuron calling out to a thousand others. Churning. An engine of zips and zaps.

The doctor says “manic episode with psychotic features.” Her hair is too shiny and her smile is stretched by a crank. Evelyn considers where Satan may hide. The doctor’s eyes are too flat, they may be painted on. Evelyn decides she will prove them wrong. She will take their lithium and their valproate. Michael and Gabriel will still come to her, they will open her and bring her dawn. She has been chosen for this mission. No pill can unweave God’s tapestry. This is her whale.

One pill is too large, chalky. She chokes it back up. The bitterness seeps from her throat to her blood. Needs a whole glass of orange juice. The other one is small, innocuous. Pale blue. The size of a squished pea. She feeds Abby some noodles. Evelyn can’t remember the last time she made Abby eat dinner. She moves as if through water. The air seems viscous, full of something thick that she can’t quite touch, but it tastes like ash. Evelyn floats from prayer into sleep. She merely rolls over when Abby’s lungs are struck by a storm during the night.

The next morning the pills go down like air. Abby shrieks and sputters as soon as she wakes. Evelyn sees the overfilled trash, the pile of crusted dishes. Brown bananas have seeped onto the counter. Tiny flies like unformed ideas swarm. Why open the fridge when the milk has turned. She listens to her messages. She will return her mother’s call. She will call Tony back. He will want to see Abby. He will want to talk about diagnoses and insurance and organic peanut butter. He will want her to meet his new fiancée. He will want things.

She forgets Billy. It takes ten minutes to turn around. She rushes in during the middle of Mary screaming at the cook about the difference between over easy and over hard. The linoleum floor sticks to her sneakers. No one asks how Abby is doing. The fluorescent lights starkly define Evelyn’s crow’s feet when she catches a glimpse of herself in the mirror. Her image reminds her

of a pear, of a frumpy nobody. The tables sigh with lack of saints. The green booths creak. The hamburgers limp. No one has enough soda. Section 8 will perish without a grove of lemons in their water. The air suffocates with overuse. Evelyn lifts and shifts her body, turning her face, her heart, but there is no light.

Pastor Joseph sits at the edge of the couch cushion, staring at a brown stain the shape of a pirate ship. Abby sucks her thumb and clutches Billy staring at Pastor Joe. She has a similar stain on her blue dress.

“Would you like some tea? Or a pop?” Evelyn asks, trying not to look at the vein throbbing on his neck.

“No, thank you for your kindness.” He clears his throat and Evelyn is reminded of a pig she loved when she was a child. “I wanted to stop by to check and see how you were feeling.”

“We’ve been doing fine, thank you.” Evelyn grits her teeth. Abby swivels Billy head so he can look at both adults.

“Have you had anymore...uh, visions?”

“What does it matter?”

“The church has always been very interested in...”

“No. They’ve forsaken me.”

Pastor Joe reaches out and put his hand on hers. She doesn’t move. It is unnaturally clammy, both too hot and too cold. He takes it off, and wipes it quietly on the rough couch cushion.

“I just, well, have been thinking about you.” He smiles at Abby. She sucks her thumb harder. It is the only noise in the room. “I wanted to let you know that the sort of activities you were saying happened in your vision, well, the church just wouldn’t be able to endorse them. So I’m glad we don’t have to come to any sort of public....well, I’m glad we can be here to support you. We’re always here for you.”

“If they come back?”

“We’ll deal with that.”

“You don’t believe me, do you. You think I’m just some crazy pervert lady. You don’t believe I could possibly be chosen.”

“God works in ways that I wouldn’t dare to try to understand.” He increases his smile by three notches. Abby curls into a ball and starts rocking.

“Oh man,” Evelyn says. “Here it comes.” The wail starts as a seedling somewhere in Abby’s belly, but grows to an oak, and then an oak on fire with branches hurtling out of her, piercing both the pastor and her mother. Evelyn stands up and swaddles Abby in her arms. They sway. Evelyn feels something pacing inside her, something wild that will not accept her ribcage as such easy restraints.

The screaming becomes coughing and with it, the ragged struggle for breath that cuts through the haze around Evelyn. Rouses her, if slowly.

“I want daddy.” Abby gasps between the black hacking.

The alarm is still going when the pastor closes the door behind him and steps out into the night.

Abby is finally asleep. The wind pushes against Evelyn's bedroom window, but otherwise the house is quiet. Evelyn chooses her favorite black slip, that was not silk but could be. The light of the full moon articulates each wound on the painting of her savior, each discarded sock on the floor, Abby's forgotten alphabet block "d" for dinosaur, Evelyn's wide eyes in the mirror. She pushes her hair off her shoulders and touches the silver cross around her neck. The lines that frame her mouth are fainter in this light, almost gone. The tiny pockmark, the scar on her forehead: disappeared. She is unblemished. Untouched. She reaches for an almost empty tube of lipstick, "Tulip." A blushing color, subtle, really. Like flowers just beginning to be known. Not too indulgent. The lithium languishes in front of her like a bloated blimp. The valproate, so small. Nothing really. Just a tiny blue thing. Such an easy blue thing.

A taste, that transforms on the tongue.

The Love Equation, Amended

For Isaac

I was curled up on my cot, searching for slivers of the Ugandan moon and teasing apart the normal night rustlings for Dayo's familiar foot steps when the first bat landed lightly on the mosquito netting. My major in mathematics and logic taught me that when information isn't congruent, you should check again. I blinked. I wanted to see Dayo there, all six and a half feet of his muscled body stretched beneath his grin. I wanted to see the way the hook-shaped scar on his right cheek would curve when he smiled. This was something he would do, let a bat loose in my little hut and wait until I screamed for his help. He was so eager to point out my helplessness, my very Americanness.

"Ah," he would say, tucking my hair behind my ear, "Just because your father is African, doesn't make you one."

I took a step back and shook my hair back out, until it stood around me in a cloud.

"He's from Jamaica."

"Jamaicans are my favorite kind of Americans." He would lean down and kiss my forehead.

I would tease him and say that he was misnamed, "Bringer of Joy, my ass. You should have been named Bringer of All Things Mischief. You should be called Breaker of Lightbulbs and Loser of Keys." He would laugh then. "Then you, Ingrid, are Maker of Lists." He liked when the blood showed in my cheeks. Then at dawn, he would turn away and creep back through the field to his house, where his two wives and six daughters slept peacefully.

I hoped he was out in the loose shrubs outside my door, trying to contain his laughter. I would have thought that if three days ago I hadn't told him that he had to choose. Me or his wives. I had struggled through the addition. Something didn't add up. My Swedish mother left me and my father to backpack across Europe with one of her students last October. That last night with Dayo, I had received a letter from my father, saying basically that his heart was broken and that Mom was not coming back. That was a simple case of subtraction. Dayo had explained the love for his wives and his family was different than the love we made in my thin cot. It was different spheres, he said. I almost believed him, until three days ago I opened my father's letter and understood that you needed to grasp what you owned. Besides, I could sense the other villagers being wary of me. Like they could smell my shame. A second bat clung to the netting. Then another until they were ink blotting out the part of the fat moon I could see. Instead of the normal whirring of grasses against the walls, the room was filled with a gentle flap-flap, like shaking out laundry.

Despite all powers of logic saying that bats could not be in my small house, the darkness fluttered. I swung my legs over the bed, fumbled for the cement mixing stick and started swinging blindly. Earlier I had sealed off the corner of the roof where the bats fled to every morning. I should have predicted that bats, like all living things, were driven solely by that prime directive: do not perish. Finding their exit blocked they must have chartered new territory from the crawl space, directly into my room. There were still clumps of crumbling cement at the end of the stick. The bats screeched.

All of my muscles clenched. A bat swooped in near my hair. I wanted Dayo. He would know what to do, some sort of native ritual and my small home wouldn't be flooded. The first time Dayo came to visit it was with a native fruit called a gloya that smelled wretchedly of

onions. He told me how to cut it, but made me do it myself. I sliced through the thick green skin to the yellow fruit inside. He laughed when the juice squirted on my face. He showed me that to get the sweetness you had to suck on the tight brown seeds, to the sugary center. At first, I thought it was a ritual. Some sort of welcome initiation rite that every outsider had to go through. But Dayo kept on coming back.

At school he was one of the locals I was instructing in the art of teaching. Most of them were former farmers and were caught between a cross of over enthusiasm and a deep distrust I could sense on my skin like coldness. Dayo knew I wasn't there to take anything from them. He would be able to translate these bats, make them into creatures I could understand.

I swung as hard as I could, trying to clear a path to get to the light. I have a lamp with a crooked shade and a stereo that run on an old car battery. With the light on it was even more gruesome. I could see their squished rat faces, terrified. They were trying to get out. If I opened the door, I would be opening my arms to malaria. I sneezed. Another one swooped almost into my face. It looked directly into my eyes, and there was an electric moment of recognition. I screamed and swung around, droplets of sweat flying off my neck. My stick came into contact with a living thing. I could hear the bones crunching. My stomach curdled, but I took a deep breath. Damn it, Ingrid. I thought. You did not leave your father and your comfortable bed to prove that you were more than what the college counselor said, just to be beaten by a couple of lousy mice with wings.

I took another breath, like the kind where you picture holding it in a bowl in your diaphragm. My Mom taught me that. She was an actress, or tried to be anyway. When I was little we would do all of her drama exercises together. Once she had us sit cross-legged across from each other, match our breaths and stare into each others eyes. Everything became pixilated. Like

if only I looked hard enough there would be something written on her face in the space between the molecules. Sometimes, when I was holding Dayo from behind as he slept, I tried to make my breath match his, but it wasn't the same. I swung so hard I turned myself around. My breath was ragged. I couldn't stop my heart from catching every time I thought I heard Dayo's footsteps underneath the whirl of bats.

The corpses were piling up. I couldn't withstand their tinny shrieks as they lunged around me. I turned my stereo on. Bessie Smith started singing to me in that low smoky voice that would have made me want a cigarette if I smoked. I turned it up to full blast and closed my eyes each time I made contact. Bessie was still crooning about lost love, when I kicked the corpses onto the doorstep. With the bats still shrieking and guano splattered on my milk jug and my faded poster of the periodic table, I must have somehow went to sleep.

The next morning they had disappeared. No live bat curled anywhere. The whole place stunk like a barn. The splatters of blood were already attracting flies. I gagged, but threw on my clothes and rushed out.

That day at the five-room schoolhouse, that still smelled of fresh paint, in between showing teachers how to teach kids math and actually instructing kids in basic algebra, everyone was strangely nice. The English teacher asked me how I slept and then waited for my answer. In the morning one of the four little girls in my class named Innocent brought me the mango from her lunch. I tried to give it back but she shook her head and said "It's a lucky mango."

Before the noon break, Manoset, a woman who had hugged me and kissed both my cheeks before she even introduced herself a few weeks before, touched my arm and said softly.

“Eeingrid.” Which I actually like better than the American pronunciation. She didn’t flinch from me even though I think she saw the way I looked at Dayo.

“If you need something, you will tell? Right?” She kept on glancing out of the corner of her eye. She smoothed her simple purple dress and pursed her lips. She was teaching to try to keep three of her boys in school. She was saving up to send the next three. I wanted to give her money but Dayo told me not to. “If you give to one, you are only not giving to many. You don’t want people to see you as a coin machine. You would lose respect.” I didn’t understand, but I resisted the urge to slip bills into her pockets.

“No, No. Thank you. But really, I’m fine.” Manoset nodded and waited a few seconds. She launched into a familiar story involving her oldest son, three pigs and an unfortunate llama.

Dayo was there, too. He worked at the school while his wives tended his small farm. But he didn’t talk to me that day. I watched him across the court-yard crouching down to a smooth-skinned boy and showing him something on his empty palm. The boy was grinning. Dayo was known for his stories. I was forever having to tell his students that Americans didn’t live in tree tops like monkeys or that the ocean wasn’t filled with tears of lonely children. His face was grave while he talked to the boy. Dayo inclined his head towards me and almost met my gaze. I saw the corners of his lips twitch into a smile. I took a deep breath. In that almost smile I knew that Dayo would choose me. He would fall asleep next to me every night. He would still support his family, but he would give me his body, anchoring me to this place. Or maybe I would join them. Be welcomed.

Back at the house, Manoset was shuffling her feet and hugging herself.

“Aye, Aye. Ingrid. Do not worry, girl. The guilty will not get away.”

“They won’t?” I had never seen her this agitated.

“Have no fear, I have already called for the Obeah woman. She will arrive.”

“What’s the problem?”

She pointed to the pile of now severely decomposing bat carcasses on the front step.

“This is very strong curse. I do not know who would want to curse you as such.” She looked down. “Unthinkable.”

“Oh, no.” I laughed. “I put those there. The cement yesterday blocked the bats’ exit, but they found a way into the house. They were everywhere. It’s disgusting. Can this Obeah woman help with that?”

“Doesn’t matter.” She frowned. “Curses are very tricky. They can come inside, make you curse yourself.”

I had a series of exes that said the same thing. The poet claimed I could never be true to my desires. The one experimental girlfriend I had in sophomore year, who was a psychology major, insisted that I sabotaged myself. The physicist said I orchestrated coldness. It didn’t matter. Eventually, they all left me. I spent the next months searching for the equation that would explain what changed, so I could point to something and say “Ah. This is why they forgot they loved me.” I wanted it to be my thesis, but it was always in flux. During my time with the bats the equation looked like this:

$$P[(A's \text{ desire for } B) (B's \text{ desire for } A) - (A's \text{ fear of } B)(B's \text{ fear of } A)]$$

Relationship Potential $\equiv \frac{c}{\text{length of relationship} - \text{shared recklessness}}$

(length of relationship) – (shared recklessness)

In this equation, A is one person in a relationship, and B is the other. Also p equals number of pizzas shared, and c is the speed of light.

The equation for my mom's departure was much simpler:

$$(\text{her feeling of trappedness})^y > (\text{her feeling of contentment})(y)$$

with y being any unit of time. After she left, my Dad became obsessed with cleaning. He invested hundreds of dollars in organic ultra bionic cleaning solutions. Whenever I smell ammonia it reminds me of home. This is when we both still clung to the idea that she was just on a trip. In a month or two she would come home and repaint the walls turquoise or cook twizzler stir-fry for dinner. Dad started cleaning and I left for Africa.

Manoset opened the door, and instead of tending to her farm, we spent the last hours of daylight scrubbing the dried gunk off the walls. I stood there, under the heavy heat, feeling waves of gratitude for this tiny woman. She hummed under her breath. The Obeah woman came to the house and Manoset spoke with her quietly outside. I peeked through the window, clutching my stick. She was a good foot taller than Manoset and wearing a red oversized t-shirt, faded jean-shorts and sneakers that were bright white, even in the dust. Her forehead was high, and her jaw gave the impression of being carved from rock. Her eyes were small stones beneath a furrowed brow. When Manoset came back inside, she shrugged. "She says the time is not right yet." I watched the Obeah woman leave. Her back was straight. At night under the familiar netting, I wasn't waiting for Dayo, but for the sound of leathery wings beginning to stir.

I began to feel a sort of prickly itching through the next day. All through class, an energy settled in my throat, like I was wearing an electric necklace. Innocent again gave me her mango, and Manoset put three red beads in my palm and closed my fingers over them. I kept the beads and the lucky mango with me when I left school early and walked through the brush to the market. I didn't care if the Peace Corps fired me. I wiped sweat off my neck. I stumbled through a herd of goats, not paying attention. The colors, the bright fabrics, the sun scattering off the tin lean-tos, the smells of chilies and sizzling meat weren't enough. The children hiding under their mother's skirts, rattling coke bottles seemed like they knew that I was never going to be a part of them. I tried to distract myself with the usual haranguing and negotiating. By then, I had been there long enough that my foreignness did not immediately mean an inflated price for the onions, yams and bananas. Or if it did, I could argue down and the vendor would eventually smile at me and put something extra in my bag, a fistful of scallions. Today though, as I ran through my whole list and none of them even bothered to inflate the price or meet my eyes. Even the goats were not interested in chewing on my shorts.

On the walk home I passed the Obeah woman in her same red t-shirt. I bowed hello but she crouched and started petting a brown dog that came to investigate. I dropped my bag of onions and blushed as I gathered them up, still marked with soil. She and the dog followed me all the way back to my house. Every couple of minutes I would turn and she would be standing still, just a couple of meters behind me. She wouldn't meet my eye. She reminded me of the pride of lions sometimes you see beyond the hills. My T-shirt was soaked through, but her skin wasn't even damp. When we got to the house she nodded at me and stood there until I went inside. Over my shoulder I saw her turn off into the brush.

I was jittery with Manoset that afternoon, started seeing bats where there were just shadows. We waited, but there was nothing. I sent her home to her family, but I kept watch. At midnight they returned, in swarms. It wasn't until deep into the night, when I was locked in battle with them, their dead lining my floor, their shit sticky under my feet, it wasn't until then that the strange tingling dissipated. I didn't sleep at all that third night of the bats.

At school, the chalk shook in my hand as I demonstrated long division. At the noon break I tried to explain to Manoset that math is really the universal language. It was suddenly necessary that she understand. No matter who you are, one mango plus another mango always equals two mangos. Logic is infallible by definition. My mother didn't believe this, she resisted constraints of physics, meal times or dental appointments. I don't think Manoset really got what I was saying. The words kept tangling in my mouth. Two creases kept appearing in her forehead.

“Aye.” She said. “Tell me what is really going on.”

But even when I spoke about Euclid and the golden mean and fractals and the secret pattern in cliffs and sea shells and leaves and all the other miracles tucked into numbers, she didn't understand.

By the fourth night, I knew there should be less of them. Logically, I had killed so many and they couldn't be reproducing so quickly. My bats were a finite population. Yet the air was still swarming, a fluttering fetid mass, as much so as the first night. The last time I had seen Dayo was just about a week ago. Ever since he started coming to visit at night, after both his wives were asleep, he didn't skip more than two days in a row. He would offer small presents, a yellow flower he found, fruit. He would gently touch the few possessions I had brought with me, and ask for their stories. He fingered my passport and once made me try to recount a college

lecture on art history, which he would frantically try to capture on scraps of paper. It was Dayo who remembered my mother's birthday and helped me write her a letter that we never sent. He told me the stories he tells his six daughters, about men turning into crocodiles and the sun being covered in red mud. He told me the story of his scar, and it changed every time. His father slipped when teaching him how to carve. He saved his baby sister from a hungry jackal. His youngest wife did it with a fishing hook when he spent all their harvest money. Part of me understood that each story was true.

Dayo was my age. In America the corporate world would have claimed him quickly for his sharp mind and agile hands. But here, he was a farmer, a father, a husband. Using those beautiful hands to support all the members of his family was a struggle. So few things grow in the desert. When he first touched me with those hands, so many nights ago, I shivered like I wasn't in the desert, like I was anywhere but Uganda.

His wife, his kids, his life was this invisible sun that all conversation revolved around. In the beginning, he would come over and we discussed possibilities of what we wanted to be when we grew up. I was wavering between professor and rock-star accountant. Here, he would be a teacher or a farmer. In America, he insisted, he would be a chef or own a McDonalds. It was too late for him to walk home. We would drop exhausted next to each other, still holding on to the murmured conversations. His sweat would be on my sheets in the morning. Eventually I began to miss his scent. Still I froze, when he first leaned towards me. The kiss became the extended conversation. Eventually it became a habit that was even stronger than loneliness. Dayo made me feel like I was of no country, of no place but the thin bed we were lying on.

The day I got the letter from my father, and the last time Dayo was in my bed, we lay listening to the bats returning at dawn. He had found an absurd book of overly translated poetry

at the public market. He tried to read to me. “Ornament your sadness with whiskey and roses.” He stroked my back but I wouldn’t turn my face to him. “Your beauty is the beauty of struggling zebras” He kissed my hair.

I didn’t respond. I kept thinking of his wives. One so short she was mistaken for a child, but she had this lovely laugh, like water against the rock. I liked the taller one better. She was sharper, less inclined towards giggling. She brought over a yam pie my first week here. She didn’t speak much. I thought of her with her offering of calories, which are so precious. Dayo was blessed with the ability of presence. When he was with me, he was totally with me, bad poetry and all. I kept slipping towards other places, like those huts a mile away where Dayo’s children slept. Like that house, 5,000 miles away where I knew my father lay lonely. Even that dorm room years away when I first told someone I loved him. My throat was like parchment, if I spoke it would crumble. Being with him would do that, like each time he kissed me I gave him some ripeness, had less for myself. Dayo pulled my shoulder, spun me over. I growled through my teeth. His eyes were wide and clear. We lay listening to the land around us stumble from sleep.

“Please,” I said. “I just want to know.” He looked at the ceiling, then back to me. “If you will or if you won’t, either way. Anyway. I just need to know so I can sleep.” I turned my head to the bed sheets. “Just pick.”

“Damnit, Ingrid. What terrifies you so? What is your obsession with more?” His dark hand hovered over me, like I was too hot to touch. “Leaving them won't change anything, Ingrid. Neither would leaving you.” He sighed. “I can’t afford to take you as a wife. I can’t support you.” We sat up and stared at each other, surrounded by the safety of the mosquito

netting. “We would starve.” He swallowed, in the moonlight I could see wetness gathering in the corners of his eyes. “This is what we have, dahrling.”

I shook my head. He didn't understand that for every action there is always the complete and opposite reaction. Each word has consequences. He withdrew his warm body and slipped out from the netting and from my tiny one room house.

The next night I listened to the bats by myself. The afternoon after that, I was on the chair with the cement and the bucket, determined to win.

This time I was listening to Aretha Franklin, juicing that car battery for all it was worth. Spinning on my heels and flicking blood off my cheek with a practiced hand, when I heard that scratch on the door. Dayo slipped inside, letting only a few mosquitoes in and not a single of those damn bats out.

“Oh, God.” He said surveying the guano-splattered room; the new bat remains littered through out. A bat whizzed right by his ear. “You are living in a cave.”

“Why didn't you come?” I swung at a pair clinging to the ceiling.

“Why didn't you ask me?” He said.

“I was too busy avoiding curses.”

“Yes.” He said. He stumbled on a clump of corpses. “The Obeah woman told me as much when she woke me 20 minutes ago.” He yawned. “Did Manoset tell you what the curse is, when someone leaves a pile of bats on your doorstep?”

“No, she was too busy freaking out to explain.”

He took a step towards me as if he was going to touch me, but he took the splintered stick. "Lie down." He said. "Please, let someone else do the fighting."

I looked at my bed, there were globules of bat shit dripping through the netting. My muscles were flaming and I knew my eyes were rimmed in red, but I was not tired. I refused to be tired.

"No." I took the stick back. "Take that." I pointed to an old tennis racket I had brought with me during the delusional time when the Peace Corps sounded like a long summer vacation.

Dayo had a good steady swing. I admired his form. The sound of the bluesy songstress and the squealing concentration of the task at hand precluded any speech. I wanted to ask him about his wives. If they fought at dinner. If he loved them, if they kept secrets from him. I wondered if they giggled together. If he loved me more. If the love he said he gave them was really stealing from me, or if love was not a pie. If maybe it was an infinite variable. Sometime before dawn the car battery gave out. The moon spread just enough light to avoid hitting each other. There was a staccato to our rhythm. The bats were slowing down. Whole minutes went by until one would swoop through. There couldn't have been that many left. The silence filled in the corners of the house. There were no lizards dropping from walls, no wind through the banana tree. Only the occasional bat shriek and Dayo's labored breathing. I tried to match my breath to his.

"But I don't want to be cursed." I said. He was quiet for a moment, the racket hung limply by his hand. He shook his head.

"You know, you forgot a big component of your love equation."

"What's that?"

"Acceptance," he touched his lower lip. "You left out acceptance."

I swung at a bat behind me, it fell with a familiar thump. They managed to fill so much tenacity into such little bodies. They kept on flying even though they knew they were doomed.

“The curse, Ingrid, it would have been the curse of well, it doesn’t translate correctly.” He paused, and brought his free hand up to the scar on his cheek. “Simply,” he said. “It is the curse of getting what you want.”

I sweated in my room filled with the sulfur of rotting mammals, covered in bat shit and god knows how many beetles and spiders and deadly pathogens dying to infect. In a room a mile away from any other human, and many miles from the room I grew up in and my vacuuming father and my mother on a distant mountain and my shoe box filled with silly love poems and my math books packed with explanations and bursting with predictions. Compasses in which to see the world. Dictionaries! Everything that could fit in my equation.

“I want to go home.” I took in a big gulpfull of breath.

He took a step towards me, but didn’t touch me. I didn’t know which scale to use to weigh kindness or obligation. I couldn’t measure his love, turn it in my hand and say “See? Here is proof that once we were young, once we loved each other.” I felt his wives tossing on their cots, his daughters murmuring in their sleep. I could feel the warmth of him, the quiet clenching of his muscles. I took a step near him, letting his scent of grass and sweat, enter me through my throat. I could feel roots growing from the soles of our feet, trying to cling to this very patch of dirt, this tiny section of space and time. I took a breath, then another. I could feel my heart as it was, a heavy hot muscle.

He turned towards me. “I want you to stay.”

“Why?” I asked.

He was quiet, for a moment. Words were forming in my throat, itching to be released.

“No reason.” He finally said.

Together we waited for the last bat, still curled in its secret place; still sure it would see the dawn.

Breasts

I don't belong here. Forty-five is at least twenty years too old to be sitting on this black chair, in this pine wood store front, looking at the blue bottles of antiseptics in the front case and the wrinkled tattoo magazines strewn on the table to my left. Teenagers that are scarred and painted wander through it all. They're from a different tribe. I look at where their skin puckers around steel, holes in their nostrils, eyebrows, between their eyes. Like knives sticking from their lips.

I look at that and I understand.

Nobody knows I'm here. Nobody knows why either. I don't know how to tell them. Maybe one shock will neutralize the other. I have breast cancer. I got my nipples pierced.

How long was my mother sick? Just a few months? Just a decade? It's funny the way law school brought only certain things into focus, tax codes for instance. But not my Italian mother, dying in her bed with sugar still on her lips. I couldn't tell you how long she was there. But there was a half-eaten éclair on the bedside table. Even the chemo that stole her hair and rubbed her petal-skin raw, didn't stop her from asking for dessert in the thick accent that everyone but me could hear.

My father said it was good luck, to die that way. In sweetness.

I thought, good luck for her or for us?

I wanted my doctor to be her doctor, the same one that came to our house and spoke in soft tones. Grey pants, dust on his jacket. My version is freshly scrubbed. He talks like an auctioneer. Trying to negotiate something. I hear one breast? Do I hear two? The MRIs looked like a spider with its dark legs clutched around my heart.

He said it was too late. I had no choice.

Law school taught me something. I always have a choice.

As my 17 year old daughter Kendra says to me whenever she comes home late, “At least I’m not on drugs. At least I’m not pregnant.” I’m not on coke and haven’t been pregnant for 12 years. What I am now is dying.

I am fidgeting in my seat waiting for my name to be called. I look at the twenty-something boy slumped next to me, with one of those magazines resting on his leather jeans. I almost want to whisper, “What are you in for?” In one hand I’m clutching a release form saying if they accidentally stab me in the brain, I can’t sue. Hidden in my other hand are plastic baggies holding two perfectly round beautiful silver hoops. What was it Aristotle said about a perfect circle? “Hello.” I want to whisper to them. “Welcome to my body. We’ve got all the amenities. Rents low, neighborhood is good. The view can’t be beat.”

Are hysterics a good sign? If I roll off my chair and cackle into the polished wooden planks, would these tattooed strangers look at me like I belonged? Would they understand?

I should be at home cooking dinner. Thursday is lasagna day. I hate lasagna, it's too indistinct. The layers are all gooey and becoming each other. I like my dinners in straight lines. Tony loves it though. My stomach rumbles to remind me. "Shhhh," I say to it. I want to soothe it. Soothe all of it. If I squint hard enough these two baggies might turn into a spatula, a wooden spoon.

No. They are still little silver rings that I will take inside myself. Take under my skin. Love and show them my secret.

I rock back and forth a little. I try to find the rhythm of my heartbeat. Vibrations of the earth and all that. I close my eyes. I'm in my garden, my fingers moving through the ground like blind earthworms. The worms die, don't they? Why not me? What is so terrible about laying down in the bed of earth and pulling the blanket of grass over me? I look down. I carry the dirt with me under my fingernails. Ten slightly grey smiles for me during court.

I want to negotiate this away.

There's a boy with blue hair and jeans so big he's swimming and not walking. He's got a smudge around his eyes that looks like he put his eyeliner on in an earthquake. He's trying to

walk purposefully, toward Newbury Comics. But I can tell, he keeps checking the corner of his eyes to see who is watching him. Who is loving him.

“Me,” I mouth to him. “Me. I’m watching. I’m here.” And it’s true. I do love him, if for that moment. For the way he walks. For wanting. For breathing big throatfulls of breath. I love him for his life. The store swallows him whole.

I wanted a tattoo when I was younger. In college with Tolstoy in my dreams every night. I wanted to get a blue inked peace sign on my right hip. But I didn’t. I didn’t want it to wrinkle when I was old. I wasn’t in the mood for a sixty, seventy year commitment. Haha. I think.

My hips feel naked now. And my ankles, peering out above the socks are lonely and blind. Searching.

“Shh,” I tell them. “I am here.”

“Anita,” my mother would have said, clucking. “I understand.” She would understand why I was here. She was the one who taught me to knock on wood, to avoid the evil eye. Also, about staying through the pain. About loyalty and forgiveness. I don’t know how she could forgive my father when I still carry Tony’s indiscretion with me, a stone in my chest. She was the master of clenching your eyes shut and holding on. Even when you know there’s nothing there. Especially when there is nothing there.

The girl with knots as hair looks at me and smiles.

That smile means I'm going to live. I'm going to walk out of here and into the busy square. Find my blue Volvo and turn the gas and drive 30 minutes to home home home and reach my kitchen to see Jeremy playing videogames and Kendra at the table. She'll look up and immediately apologize for not doing the dishes. Not doing the laundry. Forgetting about her homework. See, Mom. There was this emergency.

I'll fall into the big red chair and I'll say "Shhh. Kendra. You're not on drugs. You're not pregnant." Jeremy will start jabbering while slaughtering pixelated aliens. Tony will come home and I'll kiss him like last year never even happened. Like I am actually capable of forgiving him. I'll kiss him like in a movie. I'll kiss him like I just leaped a gorge, or wrestled a shark, poisoned the spy. Kendra and Jeremy won't notice. But Tony will. He will kiss me back.

The smile means it my turn. I try to gather up my brown bulk of a purse, but the rings in my hand make me clumsy. I almost stumble. I sway on the fumes of rubbing alcohol. She shakes my hand. Hi, I say to Zoe. Let's do this.

We go into a little cubicle. It's sort of like a dressing room only with bright lights and a sink and pictures of rock bands on the walls. The colors are too bright. They swirl. They take up too much room too loudly. Shhhh. I say. They don't listen. I wish I remembered how to swear in Italian. I mean, how to pray.

Yes. Zoe. I will buy your saline solution and mild non-allergenic soap. Yes I understand proper piercing care. No I am not drunk, I am not high. No oral contact for three to six months.

Be gentle she says.

I want to be. I do I do.

She stretches the rubber gloves and starts ripping open plastic bags. I hand her my two baggies and I do really feel naked. She gestures, and I count the seconds as I slowly unbutton the cream colored blouse that Jeremy bought me for my forty-second birthday. “Happy Birthday to me” the voice insists inside my head.

I wish my bra was red lace, or black leather. With daisy holes for the pink nipples to shyly peek out. Or really metal chain-mail. A cage, to enclose the disease. Trap it. So then I could hang it on a rafter and wait, see if it would sing to me.

I’ll kiss Tony like tulips are growing under the crescents of my nails.

I lean back, the ceiling of The Chameleon is like so many other ceilings. I’m expecting scrawled love poetry, political diatribes, maybe a great scarlet dragon watching us all. Whispering jewelry and tattoo decisions to disaffected youth. Is there a god of piercing? A patron saint of scars? All I get is ceiling.

I avoid looking at my breasts. I am punishing them. For misbehaving. For doing drugs and getting pregnant. I am loving them, too. Dressing them up for their last ball.

Besides, I know what they look like.

Innocent and soft. More and more round. Freckled lightly. Tony says he likes it. That I fit in his hands. I think about his hands. Wrapped around the steering wheel. He is driving home, dreaming of gooey lasagna. He will ask me how my doctor's appointment went, between mouthfuls of salad. He'll shout at Jeremy to turn it down before I can answer. I won't answer. There is no answer.

I don't want him here now.

If my mom was here she would remind me that everything we do is a choice. To not do something is a choice. I chose to stay with Tony. I choose to be lying here on my back, my breasts pointed to the empty ceiling. The giggle climbs slowly up my throat. I have a choice about the operation. The substitution of other parts. A copper pipe, for instance for a throat. Cherry stone as navel, a tulip bulb to where my heart used to be.

Zoe smiles again. You ready? She takes a felt tip pen and puts a dot on both sides of my right nipple. I am told to inspect it. I nod and grip my teeth, eager for the pain.

Because that pain will be practice. It will be. It will be a talisman against the dark mass of cells I feel squirming against my heart. The cells that ate away at my mother's heart and now are ready for dessert. They are ready for sweetness. The needle is a reminder. It is a shout. An exclamation.

Because if it hurts if it hurts when it hurts

It means you are still here.