

APHASIA

by

Amanda Smith Barusch

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
The University of Utah
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing

Department of English

The University of Utah

August 2015

Copyright © Amanda Smith Barusch 2015

All Rights Reserved

The University of Utah Graduate School

STATEMENT OF THESIS APPROVAL

The thesis of Amanda Smith Barusch
has been approved by the following supervisory committee members:

<u>Lance Olsen</u>	, Chair	<u>April 21, 2015</u> Date Approved
<u>Michael Francis Mejia</u>	, Member	<u>April 21, 2015</u> Date Approved
<u>Mary Noreen Powers-Torrey</u>	, Member	<u>April 21, 2015</u> Date Approved

and by Barry Weller, Chair of
the Department of English

and by David B. Kieda, Dean of The Graduate School.

ABSTRACT

Aphasia is a failure of language. It's an incredibly variable condition, associated with organic brain disorders and trauma, with manifestations that reveal much about language and what it means to be human. Inspired in part by my father's experience of Aphasia, this collection explores the possibility space created by the absence of language as we know it. It includes five short prose pieces and two brief works that I think of as poems, all of which take place in the American West. These were gathered into an artist book that was displayed as part of the *Booking A Brouhaha* exhibit at J. Willard Marriott Library in the summer of 2015. Photos of the book are provided at the end of this document.

In memory of Dad

CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
PREFACE	vi
THE HISTORY OF IRRIGATION	1
AS KINGFISHERS CATCH FIRE	10
I. Saemyi loved life	11
II. That's how he saw her	14
III. A nondescript man shuffling	16
IV. Ty and Saemyi didn't stay	16
V. The immense concrete wall	19
VI. Bruce ran a lucrative business	22
VII. It was three long days	23
Excerpts from Saemyi's journal	26
VIII. Saemyi was thrown in the hoosgow	29
IX. The first person who picked her up	31
X. At first, being home	35
XI. She left home	37
XII. The story ended	39
THE PERSISTENCE OF MEMORY	41
POPCORN AND HYACINTHS	58
THE TRUE SHAPE OF RAINDROPS	75
DEVIL WIND	96
EVERYONE IS SINGULAR	97
APPENDIX: PHOTOS OF ARTIST BOOK	98

PREFACE



Bastantes! Basta ya! That's my Anglo father shouting from his wheelchair down the hallway, *Enough already!* The aides ignore him as they stretch tennis shoes over his swollen feet. My father has aphasia. When he can't find his English words, he resorts to Spanish.

Aphasia is a failure of language. It's an incredibly variable condition. Sometimes people can't find specific language components (like nouns or conjunctions). Sometimes they can understand, but cannot produce language. Some use substitute words that nearly mean what they want to say. Sometimes irrelevant words sneak in to confuse things. Sometimes, after years of brief utterances, only nonsense syllables remain.

Aphasia is many things, but it is always a negation. By precluding familiar language, it opens up a possibility space of tremendous creative potential. When we peel away language, we can see what it has concealed. We can touch the ineffables that crouch before, beyond and between our words—like a secret half-shared, a silent agreement, or an unnecessary apology—like Nietzschean ellipses . . .

These works explore the possibility that aphasia might be a pervasive part of ordinary life. It complicates our language and even silences us from time to time. What if culture and family, rather than insidious neuro-tangles, were the causes of aphasia? What if the habit of silence became so ingrained that we forgot how to speak? What if our burden of build was so heavy that all we could do was apologize? Through the lens of aphasia, ordinary conversation becomes . . . unfamiliar.

In *The History of Irrigation*, Dad comes back from Viet Nam unable to speak words of affection or kindness to people, even as he tenderly nourishes the roots of his trees. His daughter learns to navigate his anger, and sustain a relationship that proves essential to both of them.

Where war induces Dad's emotional aphasia, a redemptive opportunity demands silence from Opal, in *Persistence of Memory*. She decides never to speak of the rape that gave her Emma. This habit of silence imposes an isolation that complicates relationships to an extent that may become untenable when her daughter leaves home.

As Kingfishers Catch Fire explores apology as a form of aphasia. What do we apologize for? What do we leave unsaid? An everyday event was the impetus here. I stood in the foyer of a grocery store looking for the perfect shopping cart. A man rushed in. Shuffling out of his way, I muttered, *Sorry*.

You're OK, he assured me.

Of course I am! I said to myself. What was I apologizing for? Had I absorbed the sins of the world? How did I become so permeable?

I am entranced by the scents of *Popcorn and Hyacinths*, and by the notion that we live in a multi-verse. This story asks what might happen if a woman met her other possible self on a park bench. Would they know each other? What could they talk about? What couldn't they talk about? The text explores a new aspect of aphasia: redaction by ellipses. You'll see.

The True Shape of Raindrops is the simple tale of an ordinary family who take the ghost they don't talk about on a river trip in Alaska. It is not completely aphasic, as one family member does talk to the ghost.

Two brief pieces, *Devil Wind* and *Everyone is Singular*, examine nomenclature. In *Devil Wind*, authoritative narrative meets the poetic form. As pundits dispute the origins of the name, "Santana," a child simply describes the experience. *Everyone is Singular* looks at how we refer to people when we don't know (or can't find) their names.



This book was made in the Book Arts Program at the J. Willard Marriott Library, in Salt Lake City. The frame was built by Bart Kadleck, of recycled wood from a Nebraska barn. Booklets were digitally printed on French paper, and hand-sewn into covers made of Bugra and cover stock. The Alegreya font was designed by Juan Pablo del Peral, for Huerta Tipográfica (An Argentinian foundry). Huge thanks go to Michael Mejia, Lance Olsen, Emily Tipps, Marnie Torres-Powers, David Wolske, and my classmates.

THE PAST OF FLYING WATER



Humans irrigate 689 million acres. These acres represent about 16% of the world's croplands. They produce 36% of the food we eat. They use 70% of the world's fresh water. California has one of earth's largest areas of what experts call "high irrigation density." I grew up on 160 acres right smack in the middle of it.

I had a tree house and I had chores. I had a paper to write for history class. Mornings, I woke up sleepy to feed the calves: filled buckets with milk powder then ran the water until it was good and hot; splashed it over the powder and if it ran strong enough, the milk mixed up all by itself and I didn't have to stir; then, filled up the bottles without spilling too much; snapped on the rubber nipples; and hauled them out to the corral. The first two got the warmest milk.

I held the bottles while they tugged and gulped and the others huddled around me with their sweet breath and their wide eyes. Calves could be patient, but the last ones always ended up with cool milk, not body temperature like the extension manual said. But nobody complained. Tossed a few flakes of hay over the fence to the horses; scooped out some dog food; spread grain for the chickens, and I was ready to go in, pack my lunch, and head to the bus stop.

before . . . past

Dad was busy too. Summer, he went out in the middle of the night to change the sprinklers; hauling pipes as long as our house through the fields to water the alfalfa and its little purple flowers. He stomped in while I was supposed to be sleeping, rubber boots caked in mud. Twice a year he rented a combine. He'd be out all night running it through the fields. Back and forth. As it came close, the shuddering engine got really loud. Headlights through my bedroom window made tree shadows that twitched in the wind. Then he circled. Noises retreated into the smooth night.

Next morning the hay and all those little purple flowers were tied up with wire in tight bales. For a while you couldn't walk through the fields because the stubs would tear your feet up. Later, I asked why he had to do the baling at night and Dad said *Dew needs to settle on the alfalfa or its stems just snap, like matchsticks*. Anyway, he never did sleep much.

Not like Mama. She slept all the time. Even in the day. When she wasn't sleeping she was busy cooking and sewing. She made dresses and stuff. She made all our food from scratch, said those tortillas you buy at the grocery store were *mierda*. None of those for us. She made the tortillas every day and when I came home from school she'd have one ready for me, warm with honey and butter dripping out. Mama grew up in Guadalajara with all her aunts and uncles and cousins. She used to hum when she was cooking. Then she stopped humming. She still cooked, though.

The Past of . . .

The first patent for an irrigation sprinkler was issued to John Gibson of San Francisco in 1872. By 1980, The United States Patent Office had issued thousands.

Dad lost something in Viet Nam. Mama said when he came back he wasn't himself. I wouldn't know. He didn't talk much. Mama said, *Your father loves you, Linda. He just doesn't know how to show it.*

Linda means beautiful in Spanish. That's my name. Beautiful.

Dad learned some nasty army ditties in Viet Nam. He'd drink beer and teach them to me. I know some really dirty songs. Mama used to hate it when I sang them. She used to hate it when I wore pants. Shorts were even worse. *You're a girl!* she'd whine.

Dad used to haul fertilizer for the dairies. He had his very own skip loader that he used to scrape out the corrals and dump the manure in his truck. He made money both ways. The dairies paid him to clear the corrals and the farmers paid him for the manure.

Sometimes he picked me up from the bus in his skip loader. We'd be bouncing along in the bus teasing and poking each other and I'd spot the skip loader. I'd say to the driver, *You have to let me off here.*

Throwing Water

But it's not your stop, he complained.

I said, *No, but that's my dad. You have to let me out*. The kids yelled *Eeuw*. But it was fine. He cleaned it after he scraped the corrals. Dad lowered the hoist to the ground and I got in. Then he lifted it as high as it would go—higher than the bus—and we drove away like royalty. Like a princess. When we got home, Mama wrinkled her nose and said, *You two smell awful!*

Yeah, we're pungent! Dad laughed.

We're pungent! I laughed too.

Sometimes we stopped at Tate's to get soda pop. *Don't ruin your dinner*, he warned.

Mama could not abide food left on a plate.

Once us kids were playing hide and seek. I was running for home and Jimmy Snyder pushed me from behind. I fell and hit my forehead on the corner of a metal box. Blood running down my face, I ran out to where he was mending fences and screamed, *Dad! I'm dying!*

God dammmmit! We're going to have to get you stitched up. He said, pushing his palm against my forehead.

I got fourteen stitches and the doctor said, *It's a shame. That's going to leave a scar right in the middle of her forehead*.

Mama cried when she saw it.

Then there was the time my period started. We'd already seen the "Boys to Men"

No. Flying

and “Girls to Women” films in health class. Not together with the boys. Girls and boys were separate for those classes. But my period came really late and I’d sort of given up on it. I didn’t have any “supplies” on hand and there was blood dripping down my leg. Toilet paper didn’t work so good. Mama wouldn’t get out of bed.

Dad was out planting almond saplings in the field that used to be alfalfa. When I told him, he just got in his truck, drove down to Tate’s, and bought me some Kotex.

He tossed me the paper bag and muttered, *Shit-for-brains. I don’t know why you couldn’t have done this for yourself.* I guess he was embarrassed.



In ancient Egypt they used water wheels called norias to raise water from the river. Then they would pour it over the fields. These days, most irrigation involves putting water under pressure then releasing it so it flies through the air and lands where you want it, a practice known as “sprinkling.”

One day I came home from school and Mama was on the phone speaking in Spanish. *Who is it?* I asked.

Shush! It’s my auntie. She put her hand over the hand set. *Leave me alone. Go get some potato chips from the pantry.* She never let me eat potato chips before dinner, so I didn’t ask questions. I just went in and scarfed ‘em down. Mama kept talking, *lo que puede.* . . She might have been upset about something. Me, I don’t speak Spanish, so I don’t know; seems like she

Flying Water

was talking to her auntie a lot those days.

Jimmy Snyder was a jackass. Really. I wrote it on the stand pipe with red paint, "Jimmy Snyder is a jackass." That was the time he broke the turn signal on the combine. It wasn't really his fault. We were climbing on it and he lost his balance and when he fell he hit the turn signal and it snapped right off. We didn't think anyone would notice, so we got some juice and went to my tree house. But Dad noticed. He yelled, *LINDA!* When he yells like that, you better get your sorry ass over there. So yeah, we let the rope ladder down and ran over to the combine. *Were you two planning to tell me about this?* He asked, and Jimmy's chin started shaking.

What were you kids doing? How could you break the damned turn signal off? Shit! The rental place is going to charge me an arm and a leg to fix it. Now get your sorry asses out of here before I do something I'll regret.

Dad was out baling that night when I heard Mama wail, *Ooooooh*. Like a ghost. I tip toe'd to the doorway, but I couldn't see her in the dark. She kept whimpering in Spanish, and tree shadows kept passing on the wall. *Oh pobrecita! You go back to bed. I'm alright. Really. Everything's OK. Go back to bed.* I did. But she kept on crying. I fell asleep. She was still crying.

I came home from school and Mama was curled up in bed. I tried to wake her up. I was hungry. But she yelled at me, *Dejarme! Leave me alone!* So I went to the kitchen and got some chips.

Mamma had a bruise on her cheek when she picked me up at school. *I fell*, was all

Yeah

she said. *But listen, chiquita, I have to go away for a while to see my auntie in Guadalajara. You remember Auntie Louisa? She's sick. You take care of your Dad. OK? You do that for me?"*



Sometimes water pressure can get so high that it blows the top off a sprinkler and then you have a broken sprinkler and a gusher. Gushers do all kinds of damage.

I couldn't drive, but Dad taught me how to pump gas from our ranch tank into his truck. It was a hand pump, and you had to prime it a little, making sure you didn't spill gas on the ground. I was careful. But that day, I made one too many priming pumps and a little bit spilled. Across the drive, Dad saw me.

God damn shit for brains! He ran over. *Don't you know better than to throw gas on the ground?* He slapped my cheek.

Dad leaned against the pump and rubbed his face with his hands. I couldn't move. Gas fumes rose from the ground. It seemed like a long time, and then he said he was sorry. *But, if you could just be more careful. Your mother—*

Mama came back later that week. She brought me a mariachi record, "Mariachi Vargas." I still have it, but I don't really like that kind of music. And she brought me some shiny zapatos and this awful red dress with a huge skirt, *for your quinceañera party, baby.*

The Past of Flying Water

You'll be so pretty, mi niña bonita.

I think Dad was drinking beer. I was in my room doing homework when I heard them yelling in the kitchen. He was swearing, and Mama said, *You stinking cabron! You don't love anybody! Just those stinking trees! You spend all your life with those stinking trees!*

I ran to the kitchen. He had his belt in his hand. He swung. It whipped the back of her thigh. The sound was sharp, like a gunshot. I think she screamed, but it could have been me. He pulled back to whip her again, but then he saw me. Mama knelt down. There was something spilled on the floor. She rubbed at it with a rag in her hand, smearing the mess and crying, *Chinga tu madre. I hope you are happy now, you fucking puto.*



Years of irrigation have depleted the aquifers, leading agricultural organizations around the world to call for a more sustainable approach.

Dad gave up sprinkling after that. For the past couple years, he has watered the almond trees using drip irrigation. He figured out how to make plastic five-gallon tanks slowly drip water through a thin tube from the hardware store. The secret is planting the saplings low so there was a pocket to catch the water; and syphoning the water out of the tank. That way you don't have to drag a hose all over the place. I can syphon pretty much anything now. But when the tanks are empty you have to haul them in with your wagon or

a wheelbarrow. That takes time, but Dad figures it's better than hauling pipe and worrying about the water pressure busting his sprinklers.

It's just the two of us now. Yesterday, I helped him plant a dozen new saplings on that south-facing slope behind the corral— bay trees, this time. Even the saplings smell nice.

Mmm, pungent, Dad said as he heaved a sapling into its hole. His knees cracked when he knelt down to fill it with dirt and bank up the sides with his hands. He patted the dirt and said, *There! Now we're ready for some water.* It was sweaty and hot hauling tanks of water up the hill, but we soaked those roots real good.

The happiness of the dolphin is to exist.

—Jacques Cousteau

AS KINGFISHERS CATCH FIRE

Saemyi was semi-permeable to living things. This was unusual, but not unheard of, and she probably inherited the disposition from her mother. But, where her mother was often permeable to humans (particularly men), Saemyi was only permeable to non-human creatures (seldom to men and never to women or, as far as we know, to children).¹ As a small child, she loved to feel cricket music vibrating through her chest, and the itch of their crusty little bodies passing through her legs.

When her parents took her to the sea for a holiday, she swam in warm water and a clown fish moved into her right shoulder. He snuggled in and settled down, his bright white stripes and broad grin shining through her olive skin like a tattoo. Back home, he spent most of his time nesting in her curtains and criticizing her clothing.

After a few years, Saemyi's mother said, "Your floating fish reminds me of that cheesy cat in the Rabbit Hole Story. Remember that story?"² Other than that, no one really noticed the clown fish. He melted into the background; a smiling, sardonic, and sometimes irritating presence.

¹ We know quite a bit. Our knowledge is not infinite, but it does exceed yours. Does this make you uncomfortable?

² Do you remember that story? Do you remember anything from that time?

Her father was gone a lot during Saemyi's childhood, and he evaporated altogether when she was seventeen.³ This left her mother dejected until she discovered religion and became judgmental. Most of her judgments were directed at Saemyi. So, on the morning of her 16th birthday, Saemyi broke her piglet bank, bought a dented red pick-up named Reba, and drove away from her childhood home. All she said to her mother was *I want to see the ocean*.

I. Saemyi loved life

in Venice. She loved prowling the boardwalks and listening to palm trees rustle. She loved watching girls whiz by on rollerblades. She loved watching boys sunbathing. She loved walking past the little windows where the prostitutes waved at passersby. She loved not returning her mother's phone calls.

Though she did not find a job, she did find a costume that supplied the credits she needed to live on local fruits and vegetables in a small walk-up above a tattoo parlor a mile from the beach. Three days a week she stood on a box in a busy intersection dressed as a flamingo. When a driver at a red light tossed coins into the glass bowl at her feet, the flamingo danced the can can, skinny legs flying until the light turned green.⁴ Some days,

³ In those days you didn't need a permit to evaporate. Anyone with a little initiative and plenty of time could abandon identity altogether. Evaporation was a great escape hatch for people trapped in unlivable lives. Of course, in those days there were no undisclosed locations. Besides that, it was unclear what, exactly, you were escaping to.

⁴ Remember the can can? Sweet little engine of a dance.

when she was especially energetic, feathers flew and a lucky driver found one in his back seat.⁵

One Sunday, she was sweeping her kitchen when she felt a strange pressure in her lunar nexus.⁶ She gazed down and saw that a baby dolphin had taken up residence.

Sweet! How did you get here? she asked.

I have no idea. I just woke up inside of you, he chattered.

Must have been while I was swimming last night; but, where's your mama?

Aren't you my mama?

They spent a delightful morning swishing around the apartment and laughing. Saemyi named him Henry. He was good company for the next few weeks—a little naïve, but eager to learn. He loved watching her flamingo act, and she loved telling him walked-into-the-bar jokes.

But a baby dolphin has needs, and Saemyi wasn't his mama. She couldn't teach him to speak dolphin, or catch squid, or bubble dance. Besides, her clown fish was acting out. It broke her heart, but Saemyi knew she could not keep Henry.

There was only one thing to do. She made for the sea—usually a quick trip, a short hop to the candy shop, but that day was racing day and everyone who was anyone was off to the

⁵ How lucky that driver would be if only I'd saved the feather instead of using it to tickle my gal's tummy until she giggled. One thing led to another, and the feather was lost under the bed.

⁶ I don't want to exaggerate, but this was a momentous Sunday. You'll notice that she did not go to church, which would have disappointed her mama.

track to watch the ostriches. And of course they were driving. So traffic was incessant. Minutes stretched to hours. Saemyi's young lungs filled with exhaust. She pounded on her steering wheel, *Come on come on come on people!* When the traffic finally picked up speed, a cooler fell out of the truck in front of her and she swerved around it. *Take that!* Her mother had warned her never to drive barefoot. So she did. Always. She was like that. Still, it was a long, slow bitch of a drive for a young girl about to say good bye to her baby dolphin.

Finally, she stood on the hot, smooth sand of Runaway Beach.⁷ She paused to sniff the salt air, but all she could smell was greasy bodies on thin towels with picnics in coolers and radios and blow-up toys all around them.⁸ Saemyi tiptoed around the bodies and surrendered to the waves.

Henry was reabsorbed by the welcoming sea. Without a thought for Saemyi, he went whooshing into the dappled depths to graze on rust-colored kelp next to an iridescent jellyfish, who wasn't grazing on anything.⁹ The clown fish was so busy gulping up plankton that he didn't even give Henry a wave.

Bereft, Saemyi floated on her back in the shallows, loose, empty, and barely breathing.

⁷ In those days there was sand at Runaway Beach.

⁸ This was before blow up toys were banned.

⁹ Jellyfish didn't graze. They were carnivores. Beautiful creatures, really.

II. That's how he saw her

the first time, a bit of brown flotsam on the golden sea. Ignoring both sign and queue,¹⁰ he ran towards Saemyi. He spilled a large woman's beer and didn't stop to hear her swear. He kicked sand in the face of a six-month-old boy with undiagnosed Tepid Disorder. He tripped on a cooler and lost his flip flop. Finally, he splashed into the waves. She was still there, right where he'd seen her. Saemyi's eyes were clothed, but he wanted to taste those naked lips. He wanted to stroke her breasts and make her nipples smile.

Have we met in another life? she breathed, still not opening her eyes.

Damn! I lost my flip flop. Oh shit! I can't believe I said that!

I can't believe you said that.

But it was his favorite pair. Ty tried to spot his pink sandal on the teaming shore, but it was lost in a sea of sweaty bodies.

Beached whales, she said, and he giggled. Beached whales. Already they had a private joke!

Hey! What do you two think you're doing out there?

It was the lifeguard. Saemyi's eyes flew open and she squinted at the sun. Ty watched the lifeguard race towards them, quadriceps pounding. He had to head the guy off before things got nasty. No one that. No one wanted nasty.¹¹ And things could go there so fast.

¹⁰ In those days, the line at Runaway Beach extended around the block.

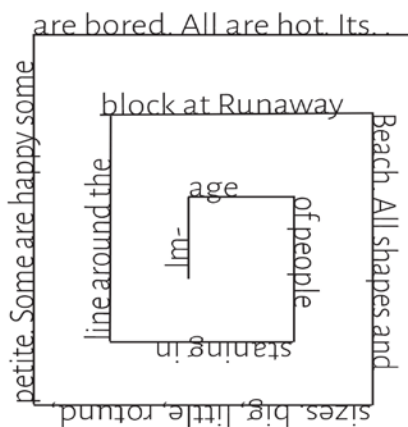
¹¹ You don't want nasty, do you?

But the life guard was about to go off his shift. He didn't want to get his hair wet. Instead of tromping through the waves he perched at the edge while Ty reassured him,

No problem, man. We're just leaving.

Well, that's good because you've been in there well over thirteen minutes and some people here have been waiting for hours.

*Sorry, man. We're just leaving.*¹²



Ty smiled, pulled Saemyi to his chest, and rose, dripping, from the golden sea.

¹² When confronted, acknowledge authority and keep your chin down. Repeat as necessary.

III. A nondescript man shuffling

down the sidewalk passed the couple drinking mango smoothies at a sidewalk juice bar; she so dark, he so light. With his platinum hair and sunburned nose he could have been any of a thousand sun worshippers on the block. But she sparkled with exotic elements. Her hair was black as a Golem's cave. It absorbed heat from the sun as she sipped her juice. The platinum man touched the shiny spot on her head and yanked his hand away as if it burned. They laughed. He stroked her cheek.

Suddenly before the man's very eyes, they merged. The man had never seen such permeability, one minute two separate people laughing in a juice bar like anyone else; the next, their faces joined. All he saw were the backs of two heads and a wavery blue light in the middle. He blinked, and they were kissing like regular folk.¹³ She mumbled something about succulent lips. The man couldn't stand it any- more. He had to ask them for spare change. They gave him a fiver and made his day.

IV. Ty and Saemyi didn't stay

in Venice for long. They moved to Palm Springs when Ty took a job managing the hydro-recovery plant.¹⁴ The desert was harsh after the coast. Instead of bathing in it, people hid from the sun. Instead of roller blading they drove around in cooped-up vehicles. This was no

¹³ Well, not regular folk. Regular folk don't kiss in public, do they? Regular folk kiss in the dark, don't they? Don't they?

¹⁴ It was a job worth uprooting for: long hours, lots of responsibility and lots of credits, cute coworkers, free water.

place for a costumed flamingo. So, while Ty worked, Saemyi passed her time in hydrocolor classes at the community center.

They found friends, and used the pronoun “we” a lot. They gave supper parties and told their guests a lifeguard had brought them together.¹⁵

They spun the tale so tight that they came to believe it. Ty always delivered the punch line: *And that’s when we knew we would spend the rest of our lives with each other.*

They never mentioned the dolphin. But Saemyi sometimes woke in deepest night and wondered what might have been. Could she have kept Henry? Would her life have been different? Would Ty still touch her like he did that day? Would he be less absent? Less irritable?

Oh, some things were pleasant. On still mornings they ate breakfast on their tiny balcony and the scent of nectarines made their barley buns taste sweet. Sometimes butterflies fluttered through Saemyi’s fingers.

That day was already breezy and the forecast called for a westerly haboob. Saemyi woke with a groan and stretched. Ty cringed when her toenail scratched his calf. She tried that smile he couldn’t resist. *Are you sure you have to go to work?*

The Water System won’t run itself.

But you’re liable to be trapped. There’s a big storm coming in—no visibility and sand between your teeth. You should stay home. I’ll fix a nice brunch. I got some ripe kumquats from the new fruit guy.

¹⁵ This little fib took on a life of its own. Their guests would later tell their friends, “They used to live on the coast. Did you know a lifeguard introduced them? Have you ever seen a lifeguard?” Most of them hadn’t even heard of lifeguards.

He wasn't listening. He was gone. The door slid shut behind him with a slurp. Saemyi sighed and slipped into the mist cabinet to scrape off the night's sweat. She replaced it with a thin layer of caterpillar juice.¹⁶ Then, while her coffee steeped, she checked the news screen for traffic congestion. She couldn't resist a peek at the fatality report.¹⁷

Ty didn't come home that night. He didn't call or text or even think about her all day long. When she couldn't pace any longer, Saemyi lay on the couch facing the door. She'd see him when he walked in and . . . what? Would she kiss him or kill him? It didn't matter as long as he came through the door. But when she woke up the next morning he still hadn't returned.

She called the hydro plant and it took half an hour to get through the diversion robots. Finally she reached someone named, Sandy Jensen-Human-Resources-How-may-I-help-you? Sandy explained that under the Federal Employment Rights and Privacy Act she could not divulge the status of any employee without written authorization.

OK, I'll give you written authorization. Saemyi offered. But she wasn't authorized to give written authorization. Only Ty could do that. *But Ty's not here.*

No. Ty was not there, but Sandy had an idea, *He might have given prior authorization when he was hired. There's a form for that. I can check. Please hold.* Saemyi chewed her lips and listened to muzak for what seemed like a very long time. *Nope, I'm afraid you are not his designated informee.* Sandy reported. Saemyi didn't even know there was such a thing. She was his soul-mate, wasn't that enough?

¹⁶ Her hydrocolor teacher liked her in caterpillar juice and Saemyi had a thing for her.

¹⁷ Even in those tame old days, the fatality report could be titillating.

Well, who is Ty's designated informee? She was getting a little bit loud.

I'm sorry, but I cannot divulge that information.

Would it help if I cried in your ear?

No, I'm afraid not, Sandy explained, as hiccups trotted over the phone line.

While Sandy tried to shush her, Saemyi was hatching a plan. If she could just get past the guard robot she'd search every inch of that hydro plant Ty loved so much, and when she found him she would fall on his neck and apologize for mistrusting him and not supporting him and lying to him (but only on very minor issues) and for that one time she didn't want to make love when he had seeds in his teeth. She'd apologize for the mild crush on her hydrocolor teacher. She'd . . .

She told Sandy, You've been so empathetic and I really appreciate the way you've tried to help me. Can I take you to lunch? It would be my treat.

*Hey, I know. You're in a tough spot. I bet you could use someone to talk to. Sure. I'd love to have lunch.*¹⁸

V. The immense concrete wall

around the hydro plant had only one gate, and it was staffed by an aggressive robot with no name. Saemyi drove up and the robot scanned the pass Sandy had sent her. *Authorized. Enter immediately.* It droned.

Reba was dwarfed by the giant cars in the plant parking lot. They were all named for

¹⁸ Sandy had never had a free lunch. Besides, this soul-mate business was interesting.

ancient warriors: Lothair, Chien, Liudvik, Murtagh, Gwrgenau, Jeonsa; and they were ticking and hissing. Saemyi was afraid to leave her little truck in such intimidating company but an automated shuttle was waiting to take her to Sandy.¹⁹

She didn't realize there would be a shuttle. She thought once she got past the gate she'd be free to search for Ty. Instead, the shuttle demanded her pass and whizzed her straight to the building labelled, "HR West." As she stepped down, the shuttle said, *You are authorized for room 1503 North*, and a glassdoor opened with a swish.

Once inside, she followed the lighted pathway to Sandy's office. She peeked in a room where miles of people were watching screens. A few of them walked along the carpeted hallway staring at portable screens. Everything was quiet until Sandy burst through. *Lunchtime!* she cheered.

Saemyi and Sandy huddled over sushi and hot sake at a standing table in the cafeteria while hundreds of workers streamed past and tried not to stare. The two women shared an interest in hydrocolor so they had a lot to talk about. They knew some of the same people. Making sure that Sandy drank most of the sake, Saemyi offered to show her how to paint lovely cloud-in-blue-skies. In return Sandy offered to show her some tree-in-autumn techniques. . They had both gone to Bruce for help finding lost ancestors. *Maybe we're related!* Sandyjoked.

Seaemyi knew it was time. She leaned in and whispered, *I just don't know what to do. I'm*

¹⁹ They used shuttles to get around those early hydro recovery plants because they were enormous! They took everything from kitchen scraps to manure; from lawn shavings to corpses, and turned it all into clean, clear drinking water using a complex, multi-stage process involving choppers, heaters, chemical extractors, and lots and lots of pipes.

afraid Ty was blown away in yesterday's haboob, but he doesn't show up in any of the fatality lists. I'm going a little bit crazy here.

Look, Sandy whispered, Don't say anything, but Ty hasn't been in to work for days. He had some chick named Pam in for lunch a week ago, and then he signed out. He was due back yesterday, and if he doesn't show up soon he's going to be terminated. Those engineers are so arrogant. They think they can just come and go as they please, but there are regulations, you know?

Saemyi knew. She poured Sandy into a shuttle and wandered the streets and hallways of the hydro plant. Sun was setting by the time she found Reba and settled into her soft red cushions. The gate opened automatically to let her out, and Saemyi slowly drove back to the apartment.



VI. Bruce ran a lucrative business

out of a tiny booth at the downtown mall. He could retrieve just about anything, but his specialty was secrets. Bruce was dogged in the pursuit of secrets. He said with him it was philosophical.²⁰ On the outside of his booth he painted a moon, stars and grass. Sometimes lavender bunnies frolicked in the grass. It looked so real.

Saemyi was hardly a regular, but she had Bruce retrieve the odd item for her: a misplaced skirt here, a lost ancestor, there. Today she was looking to retrieve her soul-mate.

Today, Saemyi had to stand in line. She stood on one foot, then the other, intensely aware of a sweaty itch under her merino jacket. Could the white guy in front with the awesome dreads and the torn wife-beater move any more slowly? Did that tall lady in the peacock hat have to talk so much? And what was with those Siamese twins?

When her turn came, Saemyi leaped to the counter. Wearing his gold cardboard crown, Bruce was ensconced in the cracked green La-Z-Boy recliner he took from his great aunt when she couldn't pay for a simple card retrieval.²¹

Gadgets clicked and whirred around him. Most didn't do anything, but their blinking lights added to the wizardry effect. He leered, *Sammy! Long time no see! Last time you brought me that twisted hard-drive— took me three days to extract the data from that sucker. I should have charged you more, but what can I say? I'm a sucker for a pretty face.* With a groan, he pushed

²⁰ With him it was personal. Bruce was a fanatic about secrets owing his mother's infidelity. The old bag confided in little Brucey; told him the gory details of her trysts like he was her only friend. Things got ugly when Bruce shared the details with his dad.

²¹ Silly old broad!

himself up to the counter. *You know, you aren't looking too good. Betel nut?*²²

She wrinkled her nose at the blast from his mouth. *I'm fasting. Look, Ty disappeared in the last haboob. Could you find him for me?*

Ah, my gazelle, that depends. Did you lie to him before he disappeared?

Do you mean right before he disappeared? Not that I know of, Off-hand, she couldn't remember the last time she lied to Ty.²³ *Is it important?*

We'll see. He stroked his goatee in a way that reminded Saemyi of her father. *Was he irritable that day? He's irritable every day.*

Have you ever wished he would disappear? Without waiting for an answer, Bruce turned to his computer screen. He tapped it a few times, then traced some curves with his middle finger. Saemyi couldn't see the screen.²⁴ *I don't see him in any of the fatality reports.*

Bruce. This needs to be done in a hurry. I'm fasting

for his return. Count on it, babe.

VII. It was three long days

of waiting and starving, three sleepless nights with the thrum of crickets, the pulse at her temple, and the clown fish's snide remarks. Whenever Saemyi sniffled he said, *I never did like*

²² Bruce got addicted on his tour in the upper Assam.

²³ It was the day she bought the petite sofa from that fancy furniture dealer. When Ty asked, she told him it cost half what she'd actually paid. She didn't want to upset him, but a lie's a lie's a lie's a lie.

²⁴ No customer ever saw Bruce's computer screen. He had to protect his trade secrets. But that last question was just theater.

that blond dude. Each morning she called Bruce, and each morning he said the same thing, *I'm working on it.* Then he hung up on her.

Skipping class for the first time ever, Saemyi wandered the parched streets looking for Ty. In a sporting goods store she followed a man with platinum hair and grabbed his shoulder only to find herself staring at a face that wasn't Ty's. *Sorry. I'm sorry.* She said over and over. To the strange man. To Ty. To herself. She was sorry, but she didn't know why.

She drove Reba back to the hydro-recovery plant, but without a pass the gate robot wouldn't let her in. *Unauthorized. Depart immediately.* She talked back until an alarm went off. Jangled by its shrieking, she jammed Reba into reverse. She ran over the curb in her rush to get away.²⁵

She went to the mall and left Reba in the parking labyrinth. She had to walk a few miles along empty sidewalk to get to Bruce's booth.²⁶ In her rush, Saemyi stepped on the ankle of a raggedy old gypsy sleeping on the sidewalk. Agatha swore like a sailor, as was her habit. Then, she whispered, *Bruce will never find your soul-mate.*

Saemyi froze. *What? What did you say?*

I said, 'Bruce will never find the platinum haired boy of the succulent lips. That boy is lost to you.' Is that clear enough sweetie? Or do you need me to spell it out? You should be thinking about how you're going to pay the rent!

In the woman's oscillating irises Saemyi saw Ty entwined with a platinum-haired girl. She saw him smile and stroke the girl's cheek. She saw him bleeding by the side of the road.

²⁵ This ruined Reba's alignment, possibly for the duration, which does explain some things, doesn't it?

²⁶ You know you're in trouble when you're walking on a deserted sidewalk. If other people know enough to stay off, shouldn't you?

She screamed and ran towards Bruce's booth. For once, there was no line.²⁷ Leaning over the counter, Saemyi meant to beg Bruce for help, but all she could say was, *I'm sorry.*

Sorry for what, my velvet kumquat?

I'm sorry.

Look, babe, it's no problem. I do this for a living.

I'm sorry.

So, what did you do? Did you steal my vapor tracer? Nope, it's right here.

I'm sorry.

Did you talk shit about my professional abilities? Aw, who would believe you?

I'm sorry.

Bruce sniffed. *Oh, God. I'm sorry too!* Then he sobbed. *I never should have told you I could find him. I just wanted to be your hero. I'm so so so so so sorry.* Saemyi and Bruce leaned on the counter and cried for what felt like a very long time. Sometimes their foreheads bumped and they apologized.

I'm sorry, she sighed.

I'm the one who should apologize, he sniffed. Now you go home, take a nice mist shower, and eat something sweet. I need to take care of that man in the bowler hat who's been waiting patiently for what must seem to him like a very long time.

Bruce turned to the unusually patient man, while Saemyi stumbled off to look for Reba.

She found her in the fifth labyrinth and drove slowly out through its winding curves.²⁸ Somehow, she got back to the apartment, ate some over-ripe fruit and went to bed.

²⁷ For once, Bruce wasn't wearing that stupid crown.

²⁸ Slowly is right, the teenage couple in the car behind her had time to smoke three bajeobies waiting for her to get to the exit. They didn't mind. It was for a good cause.

Excerpts from Saemyi's journal²⁹

Thursday morning, overcast.

Went to the carb store for comfort food. When the baby boy gave me my bag, I meant to say "Thank you" but "I'm sorry" came of my mouth. He said, "You're welcome" and I walked away. So embarrassing!

Tomorrow I'm going to the doctor. Then I'm going to look for Ty. What if he's uncon- scious in the middle of the dirt road to that invigorant reservoir no one uses anymore?

Saturday, midnight, clown fish sleeping in

Doctor says I have a rare but treatable condition: dysphonia. He gave me an intralaryn- geal injection of botulinium, charged half a month's rent, and promised I'd be talking all I want in a few days. Thank God I can still write! Mom always said, "You'd better get down on your knees and thank God young lady."

²⁹ I hope you appreciate that these artifacts were not easy to get—something of a wild goose chase on a train with a weasel man in a velvet overcoat whose pet fox shed like crazy. All for you, my pretty!

No energy for looking. Maybe Ty will come home. Maybe he evaporated.

NoNoNoNoNoNo

Thursday afternoon, hot and breezy

Doctor's a quack. Still apologizing. Can't sleep. Where's Ty? Looked everywhere. Tired.

Friday 2PM, what's wrong with the clock?

It ticks so loud and so slow.

Washed my face with lavender mist, but when I looked in the mirror there was this bright line of blood running down my forehead. I wiped, but it wouldn't come off. Everytime

I look it's there, trickling down the same patch of forehead, sweet hot blood trembling over my left eye—no, my right eye. No stains on the pillowcase. Mom whispers, "Thank God for small favours." Where is she? Where is Ty?

Saturday, morning, need coffee

Sandy came by. Her cousin told her he saw Ty with an older woman, someone more caring. More EMPATHETIC. Maybe Pam??? She asked if I could have missed the warning signs? What warning signs? All I could do was apologize.

She gave me brochures: "Is your relationship in trouble?" "Surviving Partner Evaporation," "Contents under Pressure." She patted my shoulder and left some figs on the counter.

Sunday afternoon, light fog

"I'm sorry." "I'm." "Sorry." "Sorry sorry sorry sorry sorry." Can't sleep. Who cares? Forehead still bleeding and not bleeding. Rent notice on the news screen. What rent?

Wednesday, clump day

Ha ha ha ha ha. Clump day. Get it? Hair falling out in clumps. Stop pulling it. Pack Reba. Go Home.

Friday, TGIF

Breathe

in.

Breathe

out.

Some day, hazy

Woke up and looked in the mirror. Bloody forehead. Eviction notice on the news screen.

Better get Reba packed. Too tired. Only take what you need. Take nothing but

pictures, leave nothing but waste.

Nuclear.

Today

Enforcement officer said I was driving on the wrong side. Wrong side of what?

The mirror?

VIII. Saemyi was thrown in the hoosegow³⁰

and charged with disorderly operation of a vehicle on a Wednesday. The charge was trumped up. It was Thursday.³¹ But her time in lock-up wasn't so bad. Sandy couldn't pester her with brochures and there was no Agatha to trip over. She ate artificial ingredients and slept well, despite the rattle and snores of other detainees. The clown fish wasn't wild about the place, but he made do in the space between bars and window.

It was Bruce who sprang her. He saw her name on the weekly list of detained and made an appointment with the court.³² The judge was sympathetic to wide-eyed girls with blood dripping on their foreheads and Bruce signed a form that said he wouldn't let Saemyi drive Reba while actively grieving the alleged evaporation of her soul-mate.

Later, when all the world knew her name, Bruce would admit that he half-hoped

³⁰ An archaic name for an archaic practice: confining people who misbehave. In those days respect for freedom was limited to a few vague evasive liberties.

³¹ Yes, Thursday. I'm sure of it. Records have been doctored to suggest otherwise. Some kind of unthwarted conspiracy.

³² Bruce told the wheezing judge he was a close family relation. In his dreams, eh?

Saemyi would decide to stay with him. She didn't. Reba was packed and, with barely a glance for the man who made it all possible, Saemyi left for her ancestral home in Panacea. Where better to stretch her legs, curse men, and eat stone fruit straight from the tree?

What a relief to be alone in Reba's cab! As the wheels spun along Interstate 15, she listened to music and told herself stories. She ate what she wanted, when she wanted. Real food. Not that artificial crap they served in the hoosegow. The hum of the engine drowned out thoughts of Ty.

Until it didn't. Thirty-seven miles out, the hum of the engine stilled and the truck's wheels slowed to a stop. Reba was tired. No, Reba was broken. Through Saemyi's apologies, the garage man explained. *Her timing belt's busted. You ain't goin' anyplace 'til it's fixed.*

\$\$\$??? Saemyi wrote on the edge of a map. The repair cost more credits than she had.

But I'll buy her offya.

With credits in her account and a newfound appreciation for garage men, Saemyi packed what she could carry on her back and set out for home. Walking and hitchhiking would be less costly than taking the train.³³ For a while, the frontage road was quiet and

³³ and much less smelly.

smooth, easy breathing. But once the morning traffic got started grit pinged into her eyes and a glycerine residue coated her lungs. It was time to put her thumb out.

IX. The first person who picked her up was a crusty old cowboy who wanted her to weave him a story. *Hey sister, I been up for 84 hours castrating cows. Tell me a tale to keep me awake and I'll take you as far as it lasts. We can go all the way if you want. Just toss that clown fish in the backseat.*

Even when she wasn't apologizing, Saemyi was no Scheherazade, but she could make music with objects: a couple of spoons in her hand, a wash board, a bit of grass. If only she'd thought to bring an object!

She thought of a story and made clucking noises with the back of her tongue in rhythm to the words. It worked until they were deep in the middle of the shimmering salt flats. That's when the cowboy realized there was no plot to her clucking, *That ain't no damn narrative!* He left her at the side of the road, *Shit kind of story you tell, baby.* Then he drove away. His spinning wheels spattered her with sand.

Her trip was starting out slow. It was starting out hot. It was starting out dry, and the purple mountains looked further away than ever. They wavered at her across the salt as if to say, *Don't cry, little girl, you'll waste your fluids.*

Her fluids trickled down her cheeks and her sides as Saemyi walked along the interstate with her left arm reaching out at 90 degrees to her trunk and her thumb pointing

up at 90 degrees to her palm. Resolute. The tip of her nose slowly turned a charming shade of vermillion. Tumbleweeds rolled across the melting asphalt. She remembered someone told her you could chew the asphalt like gum. She tried, but it made her more thirsty. *Too much magnesium*, a chalk-browed mockingbird explained.³⁴ She threw her chewed up asphalt at him. She missed.

Saemyi subsided in the shade of a giant *Ferocactus pilosus*. The clown fish snuck in under her arm pit. She sat cross-legged in the sand and thought about nectarines. She thought about manzanita steaks cooked medium rare. Her mouth was too dry to water and as the sun moved, she did too. She stayed in the shade of that *Ferocactus*. She stayed while the beetles wandered through her ankles . . . then her calves . . . then her thighs. When a king snake slid through her wrist she decided it was time to move on.

The sun slipped below the cardboard mountains, and in the darkling dusk, she walked the shores of an ancient lake, long gone. She didn't notice the fossils of little fish and maybe even a dolphin. She took the turn-off to Farson, Nevada, figuring she might get a job dealing blackjack.

Then she came across a dirt driveway with a crooked sign hanging by a single nail from a post. Someone had carved a rifle underneath the words, "No solicitors or evangelists." *My kind of people*, she thought.

Walking up the drive in the dark, she tripped over Agatha. *I'm sorry*. She whispered.³⁵

S'okay, Agatha dusted off her gypsy skirt and rose to the occasion. *What are you doing*

³⁴ Which was, of course, ridiculous.

³⁵ Like most people, Saemyi tended to whisper at night.

here? Shouldn't you be on your way home?

Saemyi nodded.

Ah yeah. You're from Panacea. I once dated a motorcycle fiend from Panacea. We had some fun, we did. Beautiful country around there.

Saemyi nodded, wondering how the gypsy knew where she came from.

Agatha went on, Of course the evergreens are all dying and the mushrooms are going spotted. You ever try a spotted mushroom? Tastes like pickles and the visions are psychedelic. Something about the bifurcated fungus.

Saemyi never liked mushrooms. As she turned her back, the gypsy said,
Catch you later.

Not if I can help it, Saemyi thought. But she said, *Sorry!* and gave Agatha a jaunty wave.

Half a mile up the drive, the light from a candle in the window of a plywood cabin made Saemyi feel tired and hungry. A weasel-man holding a red fox opened the door to her knock, *What took you so long?*

I'm sorry. Saemyi really meant it this time. She hated to make people wait.

Oh, that's okay. Come on in. Have some scotch. Your bed's all ready. Don't mind the fox fur. Sagittarius sheds but he loves people, especially pretty ladies. He gave her an innocuous grin and shouted, *Come in come in come in come in.*

Saemyi shrank around him. A weasel-woman handed her a triangular green mug. Rust-colored liquid swirled in its depths. *My best brew ever,* the woman bragged.

Saemyi drank and smiled and drank and smiled while the weasel-man and woman

chatted away. Sometimes she apologized, and that held up her end of the conversation until well past bedtime. The next morning, the weasel couple was gone. They took her backpack.

Hmmm, she thought, I guess it wasn't their cabin after all. They were pretending and I was pretending. Strange.

With a shrug, she wandered down the drive and headed east towards home.³⁶

A few days later,² the curves of the road started to look familiar and the stars were lined up just so. But Saemyi didn't realize how close home was until her favorite uncle, Akifumi, came wiggling towards her on his scooter. Of course, he wore no helmet. *Not the best vehicle for this bumpy road, eh Saemyi-chan? Want a ride to your mom's?* Saemyi nodded. *Hop on! Put that clown fish behind you.*

She held on tight and tucked her forehead against his back while Uncle Akifumi revved the scooter. Patches of cool air and the elusive whiff of sage. She sniffed with delight.

Like it? That's my new hair fume. He revved and the scooter lurched in a wheelie.

The clown fish fell off and bounced on his head. Saemyi giggled.

Her little round mother was standing in the door of a little round yurt hugging a thin wool shawl tight across her shoulders. Before the scooter came to a full stop she shouted, *Saemyi you are way too skinny. Come inside, girl! Have a fresh batch of stone soup. It'll fatten you up!* *And you, Akifumi-san, go get your helmet.*

³⁶ How did that weasel couple know that Saemyi was going to become *The Saemyi*? Anyway, they made a fortune selling artifacts.

³⁷ And a few apologetic rides later. Countless people claim to have given Saemyi a ride on her journey home. For a while their stories scrolled along the news feeds, but eventually the public appetite waned. These days claiming to have given Saemyi a ride is considered one of the markers of dementia.

The yurt looked just the same as it always had, full of the rubble Mama collected because *You never know when you might need it*. The naked parrot still watched from his perch by the window. Saemyi wrote a note, “No soup, Mama-san, I’m fasting.”

Fasting? So you’re beginning new life, eh?

What happened?

I’m sorry.

Honey, you can tell me. ShhhhhShShShSh don’t cry baby. What happened to that platinum-haired sex pot you were hanging out with on the coast? See, you don’t have to call me on the phone. I have eyes everywhere. You may think your poor old mother is just a has-been religious nut, but I know what you’ve been up to and I know it hasn’t been good. Apologize as much as you want, but there’s no place like home. Look. I’m planting an orchard. You can help. Just like olden times. Here, let me get some clean envelopes for your bed.

X. At first, being home

felt perfect. Cool mornings, with nearly-mist and apricot-colored clouds, murmuring voices and bleating goats; the cooking aromas and the daily routine were so familiar that Saemyi just snuggled back into the old hollow of her childhood bed and nursed her hangover while the clown fish knitted on top of her curtains.

Afternoons, she spent working, like in olden times, on projects her mother invented. She made a book mobile from lizard bones and an old coil of copper wire. With stakes and

string she mapped out the stone orchard on a south-facing slope below the yurt. She dismantled the ancient generator to clean and lubricate its parts with glycerine from Uncle Akifumi's garage. She beat the branches of the ever-greens to slow the march of the ravenous beetles. She gave up on fasting, and made fromage blanc with wild cilantro even though no one but her ever really liked it.

Evenings, she spent drinking with the kids and laughing at their antics. Akifumi knew every young person within a twenty-mile radius, and each day, as sun set, they ambled into the meadow behind the yurt: urchins with streaming eyes and articulate skin, mama's boys with hair fume reeking of pheromones, anorexics and bulemics whose clothes weighed more than they did.

As the sun slipped away, they drifted in, one-by-one, with the intoxicant of their choice for an evening of drowsy conversation, a fight or two and yes, a little sex, as well. Saemyi watched them all with a smile that grew more indulgent as the night progressed.

Time to go crept up on her. One day, as she was walking up the trail to Akifumi's, a mutant beetle landed on top of her head. Clinging tight to a knot in her hair, he whispered, *Singing bowls, baby. Singing bowls.*³⁸ He flew away leaving behind an idea and a tiny, sky-blue piece of mutant beetle dung. Mama noticed the dung, *Eeeuw! You've got beetle dung in your hair. Why's it blue? Oh, man, that looks like some mutant beetle dung. I'll have to raise a search*

³⁸ In those days singing bowls were made of special metals by artisans in a land far away. They were played by rubbing a finger over the rim with just the right amount of pressure to produce a vibration. They were popular among incense-dwellers, who found their hum an aid to meditation, but most people lost interest after 27 seconds.

party.³⁹ Did he say anything to you? What did he say? Write me a note. No? Well, you'd better think long and hard about whatever it was. These mutant beetles are wise beyond their size.

Saemyi did think about it and the mutant beetle's idea made her restless. Being home no longer felt so perfect. Akifumi no longer seemed so clever. Stone soup became monotonous. Afternoon chores turned into just that. Evening parties became predictable. The hollow in her bed became a defect.

XI. She left home

the same way she had arrived—by the same road, on the same feet, with the same clothes, in the same direction. But she was different. She was eating. She was planning. She had what some might call, “a project.”⁴⁰

She climbed high into the purple mountains. As the air grew thin, an alpine silence descended. Then, one momentous morning, the silence was broken by a rare, endangered, and lovely sound: the call of a Purple Mountain Meadowlark.

The sweet, lazy whistles of Purple Mountain Meadowlarks once wafted over the farms and grass-lands of the prairies. Their song consisted of 3 to 5 (sometimes up to 8) pure, plaintive flute-like whistles all slurred together before they gradually dropped in

³⁹ The search party combed the area. They took beetle-sniffing dogs, but they never did find him. Posters seeking information about “A Mutant Beetle with Sky Blue Poop” showed up in coffee shops throughout the hill region. Eventually, a girl band wrote a song about him. But he never was found. Too bad.

⁴⁰ Saemyi also had some new hiking boots that her mother gave to her because they irritated Mama's corns.

pitch. Each bird sang its owntune, usually from a high, exposed perch.⁴¹

Listening to the song in the mountain air while she was thinking about singing bowls and missing Ty just a little bit, Saemyi had an epiphany, What if I could make the Meadowlark's song with singing bowls?

The rest, of course, is history. We all learned in school how Saemyi apprenticed herself to the singing bowl master and how, within a decade, her skill far surpassed his.⁴² We know she held audiences enthralled, from her debut at the Santa Fe Opera House to her final performance for the world's religious leaders in a private garden somewhere near Kathmandu. We all recognize her tones: clear, complex, and luminous. Those of us who studied music theory learned about the composers who created pieces only she could perform. Perhaps some of us had ancestors in the audience who experienced prophetic hallucinations and miraculous cures brought on by The Saemyi's sound.⁴³



⁴¹ Which could be why there are none of them left, little boys with beebie guns being what they are. Monsters. Really.

⁴² He then, conveniently, evaporated. Isn't that just a little suspicious?

⁴³ Yes, and some (like me) might owe our very births to Saemyi's more aphrodisiacal tunes.

XII. The story ended

one afternoon, following what the Dalai Lama called, “an earth-shattering performance,” The Saemyi disappeared. She may have evaporated. Yes, her life may have become unlivable. Perhaps she grew tired of apologizing, but she never did speak another word. Her music had become more eerie, more esoteric, than ever.

Critics suggested she was entering a cosmological phase.

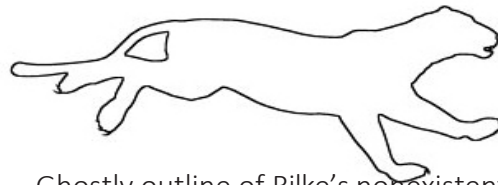
Professor Bloom explained that Sagittarius was rising and this was a time of transition, which didn't shed any light on where Saemyi might be. Her adoring fans could not accept the possibility of evaporation.

Samantha Wyle, the head of her fan society, knew in her heart that Saemyi was holed up in an undisclosed location. Saemyi's grandmother used to do that all the time. Anyway, Samantha knew in her heart that Saemyi would return someday with new music to amaze and thrill her fans.

Meanwhile, Agatha told everyone who would listen that Saemyi had found her words and lost her musical gift. She said Saemyi was dealing blackjack on an island in the Caribbean.

Me? I think she got tired of being “The Saemyi.” Ty came back when he escaped from whatever disappeared him. He and Saemyi holed up in a little cabin near the sea, and the clown fish supported them all by knitting angora scarves for sale to passing tourists. Henry, all grown up, with baby dolphins of his own, whooshed by from time to time to spout off.

Of course, no one but Bruce really knew, and he wouldn't say.⁴⁴



Ghostly outline of Rilke's nonexistent panther.

⁴⁴ and that, my dear, is another story.

THE PERSISTENCE OF MEMORY



Opal didn't want a front lawn. She wanted a back lawn with green grass and flowers and bottlebrush around the edges to protect it from the wind; maybe a new wood fence. After twenty years in the Wind River Range, she was tired of having brown dirt around her house. With Emma gone, she wanted a back lawn. She wanted it bad.

As she shoveled at the cracked dirt to make room, she heard the old cowboy's voice, *Come on. Get in. I'll give you a ride.* She heard Jean Shepard wailing that hit song on the radio, *You can take possession darlin' when I hear you say I do. When you slip the ring on my finger, take possession. I belong to you.* She heard his Dodge truck skid to a stop.

The cowboy stroked her forearm. Those scratchy fingers.

Your skin is so soft.

She could not feel it.

That was a long time ago. Now, it was time to call Bernie.

Bernard, I could use some help over here. You got any time free today? And he came right over like he always did, in his Ford pickup with its bed full of cow manure.

My but you do smell ripe!

Opal, honey, this manure is your only hope of getting that green green grass you're dreaming of.

He didn't pat her shoulder. Instead, he turned to fiddle with the tailgate.

You are a true hero.

So what do you want now?

She wanted him to break up the hard clay. She wanted him to help her dig down to a place where grass could take root. She wanted him to mix that manure in real good. She wanted him to—

All morning, they shoveled and raked and stomped around the crusty patch behind the ranch house. They talked while they worked. The Bennett kid was neglecting his dad's dairy something awful, and Bernie figured it would be up for sale in a few months. If you had any money it would be a great investment. That crazy old Korean woman down in Panacea was starting a new religion. Just an excuse to smoke pot. Ford was coming out with a new hybrid. Ford had always made the best pickups, but hybrids were another story. Those Japanese . . . With the drought in Texas alfalfa was going to skyrocket. Bernie didn't think she'd need a fence. Not really. Oh, and Maisey Petersen was pregnant. Again.

Opal got pregnant her third year of high school, and Emma was born that summer. Opal quit school, Dad sold the ranch, and they moved to Wyoming. Dad said it would be a better place to raise the child; more wholesome than Yerington.

In Dad's time, Yerington, Nevada wasn't a bad place; wasn't hardly a place, really, just a feed store and a post office serving ranchers in the three counties. A couple of churches squatted on the edges: potlucks on Sunday, weddings and funerals. That casino changed everything. It brought dealers and losers and a new brand of violence.



The cowboy has a pretty good buzz on. Rum and coke, and pushing his Dodge as fast as it can go, after a long day dehorning heifers at the Sutherland place. His back's pretty sore and it is damn cold outside. The truck's heater doesn't make a dent in the November chill and those dark clouds promise one hell of a snowstorm.

Opal's day-dreaming as she walks home from the bus stop. Thinking about those paintings she saw in class by that guy from Spain. *Surrealist*, Mrs. Moore said. Opal's chewing on that word—surreal. Then she hears the truck behind her; hears the old cowboy, *Girl it's fixing to snow. Come on. Get in. I'll give you a ride.*

Jean Shepard wailing on radio, *You can take possession darlin' when I hear you say I do. When you slip the ring on my finger, take possession I belong to you.*

Hey girl, I gotta stop at my trailer, pick something up. Come on in, It's cold out here.

She doesn't want to go in the trailer; but she doesn't want to stay in the truck, either. She wants to be walking home thinking about words and paintings. She wants—

You can take possession darlin'

He yanks open the passenger door and aims his gun at her forehead. *I call this here my cow-killer. It takes a captive bolt pistol to get through a thick cow skull. Just think what it could do to your little girl skull.*

He strokes her cheek with the barrel of the gun.

You get your sorry ass out of my truck. Now!

It's alright. You just come inside for a minute while I get something. Then I'll take you home.

He walks with a hitch; his back, sore. from bending over heifers. Inside the trailer is cold and dark.

Fried onion, stale coffee, and sweat.

He pushes her towards the back, towards the dark.

There's a deerskin on the bed.

Yeah, I killed that one last year. Pretty nice rack on him. Take off your shirt.

What?

Take off your damned shirt. Do I have to do everything? He rips her blouse open and she—

Damn you are one butt-ugly girl. You call those jugs?

He unbuckles his belt and pushes her down on the bed. She—

See this? This is all for you, girl. All for you. Now you take off those pants and I'll give you a ride you won't soon forget.

He climbs up on top of her and holds her wrists above her head. He makes to kiss her mouth,

Don't you turn your face away from me girl.

squeezes her neck.

Where's the gun?

She can't move.

She looks out the window and starts building her house in the clouds. She can stay there, in the soft, cool light.

While he grunts, she watches from the clouds and a hawk flies by. Maybe it is really there.

You know, this would work a lot better if you'd at least pretend to be having a good time. Tell me you want it. Come on! Open your eyes! Tell me you want it.

He did drive her home, and he kissed her on the mouth just before he shoved her out the door.

Her jeans were stiff with blood and each step tore something inside, but she ran towards the barn, towards her dad, towards hay and the warm breath of horses.

Daddy! I need you!

He knew what happened. She was shaking so bad, hair all tangled. He couldn't fix her, couldn't touch her. He walked her to the house and sat on the toilet while she showered—hot and steamy. He handed her a towel. Gave her a pill. Put her to bed.

When she told him what happened, Dad said *You say nothing about this. Nothing. Period. This is over. I don't want to hear about it ever again.* Snow was falling hard by the time he went out to the barn to get his Winchester.

Emma was born in late August—an easy, happy baby, with olive skin and straight black hair, just like her mother. After they moved to the Wind Rivers, Opal took her out on the trails every day. That baby spent half her life wedged between her mother's tummy and the saddle horn, with Opal singing real low, *You are my sunshine, my only sunshine.* . . .

When kindergarten rolled around, Emma knew horses better than she knew people. Opal cried her eyes out that first day of school. She never let her daughter ride the bus. She dropped the child off at school and picked her up every day—forty-five miles each way—dust trailing out behind the truck. Then one day Opal was early. She sneaked into the classroom while Mrs. Love was breaking up a fight, *Use your words, Samuel! Don't hit him. Use your words!*

Emma used her words to ask questions:

What happened to my father? He died.

How?

In a car accident.

Where?

Out ofstate, Emma. He died in another state.

What otherstate?

I forget.

What did he look like?

Emma, I don't want to talk about this. It makes me sad, honey.

Mostly it was a matter of waiting her out, distracting her, keeping her safe. Letting that secret harden and shrink.



Say, Bernie, do you remember that kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Love? Any of your kids ever have her?

Oh yeah, she was a good one.

Remember that Spanish painter she was so fond of? The one who came to the U.S. for a visit? Painted all those weird melting pictures?

Yeah, that was Dali. She taped up posters all over the walls.

Yeah. That's it. Dali.

Man, that teacher broke some hearts when she married the Nebraska cattleman. What say we take a break?

I'll fix us some sandwiches.

While Opal sliced the pork roast, Bernie planned their afternoon labors. They'd get the ground nice and smooth and then they'd spread the manure. They'd scatter the grass seed and set some sprinklers after the heat of the day had passed. But first, they'd have some iced tea and sandwiches.

Oh look, there's a hummingbird at your feeder.



There was a hummingbird at the feeder the morning Emma left for college. It nibbled at the shiny red liquid dangling from the apricot tree. Emma and Opal watched him eat, framed by the meadow and peaks, beyond.

Oh Sunshine, you remember that day in the meadow? You couldn't have been more than five, in that pink tutu with red cowboy boots, your little hand in mine, running to keep up, your boots getting all dusty. Man you loved those boots.

Through the wooden gate, there's the buzzing meadow. Crickets jump ahead to clear their path, and they step around drying mounds of manure. Boulders squat between hillside and lake. Outflow burbles and Emma stops to watch a baby duck weave his way through lily pads. Sun warms her neck and her stork bite turns pink. A neon blue dragonfly hovers just out of reach. She trots after him.

Then she spots the horses across the meadow. So many colors: bay, grey, pinto, buckskin, appaloosa, palomino, all shining against the backdrop of pines. They stretch their long necks down to nibble the grasses; lazy tails swish at flies. One by one they sense the human presence. Heads rise. Nostrils flare as they sniff the air in great gusts. After a still moment they set off galloping towards Emma and Opal; manes blowing, hooves pounding. The earth could be shaking and a shrill voice in Opal's head screams, *Run!*

But Emma—

Emma laughs, and they hold their ground while Opal listens to the ghost of Dad's refrain, *You're OK*. The horses slide to a halt just out of reach. Dust drifts and they approach, blowing, testing the scent, while Emma and Opal stand still, hands outstretched, palms up. An old mare nickers, low rumble from her middle. She nuzzles Opal's pocket for a treat. A gelding musses Emma's hair with his lips. The others circle, eyes wide, muzzles soft.

By three o'clock, Bernie was ready for a break. Easing off his hat, he wiped the sweat from the back of his neck. Opal was raking up loose clods around the edges.

Look, there's a vapor trail up there. When I was a kid, my Dad used to ask me 'Where's that jet going? I always guessed Hawaii, and he'd say, 'Hawaii? Hawaii's to the South. That jet's heading due east. Now what's east of here?' The guessing would go on and on. You ever meet Dad? I didn't think so. He died a year or so after we moved here. God.

You never talk about your mother.

Not much to say, really. She left when I was little. She—

Hmm. Well, I'm gonna go set those sprinklers.

When he came back, Bernie asked. *Say, where's Emma's pinto pony? I haven't seen him all day. Where'd he get off to?*

Oh, Bernie! She reached for his elbow. Poor old Chico, he got the colic somethin' awful. Panting and moaning. Sometimes he'd scream with a cramp. You can't let a horse suffer like that. I'd never put one down. I shot him full of painkillers. Look. I saved the damned Brochure I got from the Extension office: 'Make sure when the body falls that it is where you want because it will be heavy.' Dead weight. Oh yeah. And this part: 'Draw an imaginary X from right ear to left eye and left ear to

right eye. Hold the gun 2-6 inches from the point of impact. Aim carefully. Shoot in the middle and death will be instantaneous. Stand back because the horse will lunge forward.' How are you supposed to hold the damn gun 2-6 inches away and stand back at the same time?

Anyway, Chico didn't lunge forward. He just crumpled like somebody was holding him up by strings and let go. Like a puppet. I buried him in the north end of the meadow next to that pile of boulders. Shoot, I guess it went about as well it could.

Emma found Chico lame and starving in the dry creek bed; his hooves curled and split. I took Opal weeks to trim them down. Chico. He'd lick Emma's hair and follow her around like a dog. Then she'd climb up on his back and take off for parts unknown. She must have been all of eight years old. She—

One day they didn't come home by dinner time. Opal paced the floor, howling, "Where is my baby?" What if that pony spooked? What if he tripped in a hole and fell and crushed her spine? What if she got bit by a snake? What if the saddle slipped under his belly and he ran away and left her stranded? What would Opal do if Emma was gone? Then the child came back, and Opal could have killed her for all that worry. Emma went to college and Chico got colic.

You told Emma?

Not yet. I don't want her upset when she's so far away from home. You know, I think those sprinklers are missing the far corner over there. . .

By the time he'd set the sprinklers to Opal's satisfaction, Bernie's back was aching. He walked with a hitch that reminded her of something she couldn't put a finger on. She decided it was time for him to be gone. She needed to go check on that pregnant mare.

I guess I'll skeedadle then. You be sure to run those sprinklers when the sun gets low.

You bet.

She watched the dust billow behind his truck, and then headed out to the barn.

POPCORN AND HYACINTHS



She sat on the old park bench, shining like a princess, with golden hair. I never expected to see her again. But then, she always did love the fireworks, the oohs and ahs and hot dogs and sticky fingers. Tired rides home from grandma's. Father lifting her from the back seat, holding her tight against his chest while she pretended to sleep.

Fourth of July, But this woman wasn't celebrating. She looked sad and a little confused. We needed to talk. I wanted to know what had happened to her. Natural, isn't it? I wanted to know what could have happened to me.

Well, I had to keep the baby. Ford was adorable. When he turned two, everybody said, "Terrible twos" but watching him ponder a snail trail, hearing him shriek when he found that little king snake. That was pure wonderful. I wondered whether she ever did have babies, and that was enough to get me over to the park bench where she perched, right next to the swings. We needed to talk.

Crunchy

I don't know how I came to this town. One minute, I was home watering the pomegranate bushes while the boys tossed their wooden hoops back and forth sketching golden trails in the blue sky. The next minute, we were here, all three of us, in my ancestral home, our voices muted by earth, pines, wind.

They surprised me; I, who had known them since before they were born. Cleobis seemed awfully tall for a four-year-old and Biton, oddly subdued—none of the slap and tickle of his usual self. They held hands and walked slowly as if a force threatened to engulf them. They napped on their grandfather's bed, long golden hair mingled in the space between their breaths. Just like hyacinths.

While the boys slept, I walked to town—maybe I'd see a familiar face and remember.

Maybe I didn't want to remember. I wasn't sure.

As I paused on a wooden bench in the park, a crooked woman glided into sight. The swings creaked when she went by in her wheeled chair. Her hair glowed in the sunlight. Glowed purple. Hyacinths.

At the movies

“You aren’t dressed for the occasion,
dearie.”

I must have been staring; time to rearrange my face into a mask of polite curiosity, of mild welcome. I nodded in the regal manner that I had somehow acquired.

You look like you’re going to a party. I’ve never seen satin in such a luscious purple. And that lace! Where on earth did you find it? I’ll tell you, those slippers are precious!”

She seemed to expect an answer. “I’m sorry. I don’t recall,” I sighed and shifted on the bench. “I think I’ve had it for a very long time. The lace, that is. Where did you get your purple hair? I’ve never seen such a glorious shade. . .”

“Aw, you’re cute! Lolla, over at the Poodle Salon, does my color. She’s great! I love it, don’t you?”

“Hmmm.” I must have learned this from the British: a non-committal, vaguely agreeable response, when you don’t want to say what you really think. The British seldom say what they really think.

Can I have some please?

How could she not recognize me? I guess Artemis does distract from the look. And we were only sixteen. Isn't there a song? "She was too young to fall in love and I was too young to know." Ha! He was eighteen, out of school, with a ford pickup and time on his hands. Jimmy worked at the feed store, but that left plenty of time for messing around—especially at the movie theater.

He eased his arm around me, pretending to watch the movie, and I leaned in. He nuzzled my ear with his tongue, and I smiled. He made wavy designs with his finger around my shoulder then down my chest until finally he cupped his warm palm over my breast and I sighed. He was the one. I still go moist when I smell popcorn.

The first time, he brought me a handful of hyacinths. Afterwards I had this deep throb whenever I smelled them, whenever I thought about the way he walked, how he tipped his head when he smiled, the way he touched my knee and that gasp I made when he entered into me. I could feel myself blush, even in algebra class.

And then Jimmy came by the house, all swagger and grin, to pick me up in that old pickup. Father answered the door and called upstairs, "Louise! Your young man is here." Later, Father asked what was going on. He said I had 'a strange sly smile.'"

So I guess it was no surprise I turned up pregnant. I was never very regular, but when my breasts got so sore I knew something was going on. There was no way on earth I was going to tell the parents. They'd kill us. Kill me. And Jimmy, he was no help, Mr. Get-Rid-of-It. Eventually everyone would know, so I went to Aunt Jane after school on Wednesday when I was supposed to be at swim practice. It was Aunt Jane who got the address for Planned

of those purple

Parenthood, made the appointment; Aunt Jane, who would have held our hand in the waiting room or arranged the adoption if it came to that. That was OK for her. But not for me. I kept my baby and she disappeared and now she doesn't even recognize me.

"What brings you to Harriman?"

"Oh wow! That must have been weird for you, growing up in this podunk town! I mean, the people are nice, but . . ."

I . . . well . . . I grew up here."

"Really? Me too. I never left, never wanted to. Oh, I go into the city sometimes to see a doctor, get my prescriptions, do a little shopping. But I've never really left. You know? Not like you. This place is enough for me. Really. I can't imagine where I'd go."

"I was different then."

The purple-haired woman seemed to want something from me,

*Some kind of acknowledgement.
Recognition.*

"You here for the Fourth? Everybody comes home for the Fourth. It's so much fun. I love the fireworks and the food. You like spuds? They love spuds. I love 'em baked, I love 'em fried. I love 'em crinkled. I love 'em in stew. I love 'em in anything. I could be a damned TV commercial!"

*She had a vaguely hostile tone. I could feel it. But her words were so friendly.
Confusing.*

What on earth was she getting at?

smelling

those 200 acres due South of town
—great black soil and a Southern
exposure. He could get five
hundred pounds an acre. Hard
work, farming. Even with all that
fancy equipment he was up from
sunrise to midnight; never made
much of a living from it. I always
wanted to put in an orchard; none
of this digging and hoeing every
year. Just prune the trees and pick
the fruit. It would have been
beautiful.

*The old woman seemed to be lost in
thought*

“But Hank, he said, ‘Idaho
potatoes. There’s a reason why
they’re planted here. Nobody’s
planting orchards in this here dirt.’
Hank always did think he knew it
all. Died early, he did. You know,
he fired blanks. We never did have
any kids. Not together. You got
kids? Two boys! Oh! That’s
wonderful.”

I never thought she’d have kids. I
wasn’t sure she could after giving
up our baby. Mind you, children
are a blessing. Even with Ford in
prison and a n’t give him
up. I don’t vis. at I do love
him. That girl’s parents spoke at
his parole hearing like he was
some kind of monster, but he was
just confused and messed up and
that girl was leading him on. Yeah,
what he did was horrible.

But I think her parents need to look at how they raised their daughter. She was leading him on. He was a shy boy; didn't know what to do when she teased him like that.

"Oh, me too. Sweet little girl you could dress up! Have you seen those baby clothes they've got down at the Bon Marche? They are irresistible. I go in just to look at 'em. And whenever I hear of anybody having a baby girl I just go wild with the presents. I love baby showers! Don't you?"

"Yeah, I know."

It wasn't an easy decision. We didn't sleep a minute, tossing and turning, thinking about what would happen if we kept the baby, what would happen if we didn't. What mother and father would say. What if we died in childbirth? What were we supposed to do? And the baby grew bigger and bigger.

We had dreams, you know? We wanted to go away to a big city, maybe even the capitol, get married to some handsome prince. You know? Sure, it sounds like a fantasy now. But these things happened. You saw it on TV all the time.

sex pots?

Why did she look so sad?

I told her I'd always wanted a little girl.

That seemed to wake her up.

Hmmm."

What did she know?

Don't ask me

Mother. She was the one who taught me how to make decisions. She taught me how to choose when I absolutely could not.

The old woman was friendly; one minute; angry, the next. one minute, silent; and then she'd go on and on.

Mother. Before I started to show I went clothes-shopping with mother. She drove us into the city. It took an hour but school was starting and she wanted me to have a nice wardrobe for school, none of this Bon Marche for her. No, she wanted to get me some really nice clothes. She was like that. Oh she did love the saleswomen. They saw her coming and their eyes lit up. They coo'ed over me, "Oh, isn't she the sweetest thing?" And they brought blouses and skirts and those little culottes that were all the rage.

What did she want?

"Now here's the thing. Mother let me do the choosing. She said I needed to learn to do that kind of thing for myself. But I couldn't make up my mind between the flowery dress and a pair of culottes." We said, "If you can't decide between the two, there's only one thing to do. Get both!" Then, she chuckled. Lucky she married a man with money. We got both, and went off for

Why did she talk so much?

I remember. I just

lunch in the café before the long drive home.

Mother. She made things seem possible. So we did both. I kept the baby and other Louise didn't, and I never saw her again, until now.

"Signify? Now there's a word you don't hear every day! That, my dear, is the emblem of our nation. Funny you'd ask. Usually I just have a little orange flag, but this being fourth of July. . . That flag pokes up so the cars can see me crossing the street. You know lots of people in wheelchairs get hit by cars that didn't see 'em. So that flag says, 'Look out fuckers! Louise is comin'!' I don't want to be a statistic."

"Sure is."

We have the same name, the same hair, the same neck, same cheek bones, and she called it a god-damn ko-ink-ee-dink. I could not fathom this woman. I just wanted to know what could have happened. But I couldn't just straight up ask her. What if I was wrong? She'd think I was nuts! Then she took out a file and started rubbing at her perfect nails. Slow, like she just wanted to

*When she paused for breath, I asked
"What's that flag signify?"*

"Louise. Is that your name?"

"It's my name, too. What a coincidence!"

can't right now

remind herself they were still there.

She sat there, FILING HER NAILS!

Oh, there's lots of Louises around. I knew one, lived in that little Victorian on the outskirts of town. You know it? An had this cat. She used it just like a dog. No leash or anything. The cat would follow her all around. Once she and her cousin, they took it camping. The cat followed 'em into a meadow. Then it got distracted by a gopher hole. When the cat realized they were so far ahead it ran to catch up. But by then they'd crossed a little creek. That galloping cat didn't the creek was there until right over it. Ever seen a cat try to fly? Louise P. said it was the funniest thing she ever saw. Poor cat got drenched but she never did get that far behind again. Good cat. So how about you?"

"You got any pets?"

The woman seemed miffed at having to share her moniker. I was not enjoying this conversation, but I tried to be polite. She went on, oblivious to my feelings. I began to dislike her.

I don't like cats.

Not one bit.

I don't like this story.

Not one bit.

What?

"Oh. No. No. No pets. I don't think so. I just have the boys."

can't

"Me neither. I don't want to be tied down, need my freedom, you know? Pets are too damn much work."

She looks beautiful in that gown. Would I have looked like that if I hadn't had Ford? I could not figure out how she didn't get the rheumatoid arthritis. My doctor said it was genetic. Don't we have the same genes? So what am I supposed to do now? Go to the doctor and tell him the other me stands straight and tall? He'd have me locked up! I bet Ford gave me the disease when he killed that girl. My poor son will be remembered as a monster. Oh my, she is so beautiful. People used to think I was beautiful.

"You know, I was in a beauty contest. Have I told you about this? Anyway, it was fourth of July. Just like today, and all the girls in the county came into town—Harriman's the county seat, you know—for the annual beauty pageant. It wasn't like, "Miss Idaho" or anything, just a county pageant for youngsters. Back in those days as soon as I turned thirteen, every girl I knew had anything going for her. I was planning on being in the beauty pageant. Of course, there was preliminary judging, and a lot of girls were eliminated then: the fat ones, the really plain ones and the ones who couldn't string three words together. They'd be told, 'Thank you very

The old woman was quiet for a long time

for her, anyway.

Blessed silence for me.

But I started to worry about the boys. With mother gone, father has been a bit of a recluse and I was afraid they might bother him; make him angry. Then just when I was getting ready to leave, she launched into another one of her tales.

I want to go home to my darling boys. They will grow up to be very strong and so devoted to their mother. Me. Very very devoted to me.

come up

much.' and then they'd nurse that disappointment for the rest of their lives. Ha! I couldn't wait to turn thirteen so I could be in the pageant. I wanted to be a beauty queen.

"Well, you know, mother wasn't keen on all that. She said I shouldn't be parading around in front of everyone in a mini-skirt. You know, that's when they first came out and mother was a little bit of a prude. Good cook, but a little bit of a prude.

"Anyway, I made it through the preliminaries and one of the judges said I had really nice legs. You wouldn't know it now, eh? But back then I had really nice legs, shapely, you know? Kind of like yours. Anyway, he said I had really nice legs so I decided I'd wear the shortest mini-skirt I could get my hands on. It was pink with polka dots and I swear it barely covered my bottom. Mother was shocked. My father said, 'Oh, let the girls have a little fun. Get it out of her system.' So I got up on that stage and we all sat in a row in these rattan chairs and you know my skirt really was the shortest. When I sat down I had to tug it down and hold my knees together.

One day, when I am travelling to a festival not unlike this Fourth of July, a festival in honor of Hera., my oxen will be delayed in traffic and I will be unable to attend the festival and so my precious boys, young men by then, will volunteer. They will pull my cart all the way to the festival. And as a reward for their devotion, they will die in their skip and be worshipped as heroes.

But who will throw wooden hoops through the air when my golden-haired boys are gone? Who will worship me? Who will be strong for me when they are gone?

My name is not Louise. My name is Cydippe. My home is Athens. My mother is Hegetoria. My husband is Acontius. My name is not Louise. My name is Cydippe. My home is Argos. My name is not Louise. My name is Cydippe. My home is Rhodes. My mother is Hegetoria. My husband is Acontius. My name is not Louise. My name is Cydippe. My home is Argos. My name is not Louise. My name is Cydippe. My home is Athens. My

the word escapes

My last name then was Wilson, so I sat for a really long time, waiting for my turn to be interviewed. When it was finally my turn, I did my little spin and walked up to the microphone and everybody laughed. I got through my interview I couldn't pay attention so distracted by them laughing I had to keep saying, 'Would you please repeat the question?' I sounded like an idiot. Turns out the back of my thighs were imprinted with lines from that damn rattan chair. I looked like a goon. Mother wasn't mad though. She figured I'd been punished enough. I never did enter another beauty contest. Miss Idaho Rattan. Ha! That's me. Miss Idaho Rattan. "

"You ever been in a beauty pageant?"

"Well, you look like you could be in a beauty pageant."

"You've got the clothes, the posture, the face. You could be a real beauty!"

"What's wrong, sweetie? Why are you so absent? You have everything going for you!"

mother is Hegetoria. My name is not Louise. My name is Cydippe. My home is Rhodes. My mother is Hegetoria. My husband is Acontius. My name is not Louise. My name is Cydippe. My home is Athens. My mother is Hegetoria. My husband is Acontius. My name is not Louise. My name is Cydippe. My home is Argos. My name is not Louise. My name is Cydippe. My home is Rhodes. My mother is Hegetoria. My husband is Acontius. My name is not Louise. My name is Cydippe. My home is Athens. My mother is Hegetoria. My husband is Acontius. My name is not Louise. My name is Cydippe. My home is Rhodes. My mother is Hegetoria. My husband is Acontius. My name is not Louise. My name is Cydippe. My home is Argos. My name is not Louise. My name is Cydippe. My home is Rhodes. My mother is Hegetoria. My husband is Acontius. My name is not Louise. My name is Cydippe. My home is Argos. My name is not Louise. My name is Cydippe. My home is Rhodes. My mother is Hegetoria. My husband is Acontius. My name is not Louise.

"What?"

"Why?"

"No. I. No. I. I. I."

"Everything?"

wait

“Sure!. Look at me! I’m an old purple-haired freak in a wheelchair. Look at you. . . so beautiful. It just isn’t fair.”

“Isn’t fair? I don’t understand. I need to go home. Don’t cry! Don’t cry! You’re beautiful in your own way. You’re unique. Really.”

“Not so unique. Not really. It’s just . . . this wheelchair. You never asked me a thing about the wheelchair, did you?”

“Well, I do wonder what you named her.”

I’ll be damned. How did she know my wheelchair was a her? This woman was hiding something.

“Here I’ve been going on and on about myself. That’s awful rude, isn’t it? Why don’t you tell me a little bit about you?”

“Me? Like what?”

“Yeah, you. Like, where do you live?”

“I live far away, in the capitol.”

“Washington, DC. Wow! I’ve never been there. What’s it like?”

“Oh, it has four seasons, and a lot of people of different colors and different languages. There is a lot of coming and going and puffing up and putting down. The capital is, well you know, quite beautiful. The streets are wide and curving and there are monuments—marble monuments; some art and artifacts.”

I know.

“That sounds nice. Do you enjoy living there?”

“Oh, honey. I must have summoned you. I’m so sorry.

“So, tell me about your husband. What does he do?”

The boys, oh, tell me about the boys. Are they very good? Do they look like their father? Are they smart?”

“Oh, it sounds wonderful. I’m so glad things worked out this way.”

“Father? Have you seen father?”

“Oh. That’s probably good because he’s not himself these days.”

“Oh yes, I am blissfully happy there. I’m not even sure why I came here, to tell you the truth. The capitol is so much more . . .”

“The fireworks at the capitol are spectacular. And I ride in my horse-drawn chariot in parades with my handsome husband and the two perfect boys. Yes, it’s very lovely.”

“Oh, the tasks of royalty never end. He goes racing from place to place. He eats with people and talks. All day long. Then he . . . Then he comes home and plays with the boys until it’s time for dinner. They all love to play.”

“Oh yes, they are very good. Very strong. Like their father, I guess.”

“Oh yes, me too. But I really need to go home now. The boys will be wondering, and father. . . “

“Why, yes. I mean no. No. I haven’t actually seen him.”

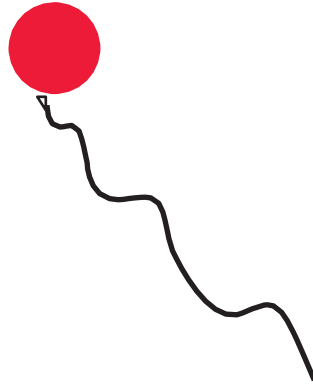
“Oh my. That is too bad.”

Hyacinths

“Well, his self wasn’t all that great to begin with.”

“Oh my. That is too bad.”

“Say, I do have one question for you. How did you know my wheelchair was a she? Who told you?”



She was about to answer when you came strolling around the bend. You were behind her, and you had on those shorts you like so much, and a t-shirt. You were holding onto a red balloon that bobbed along above your head. You paused and looked straight at us, and when I waved at you the red balloon flew up into the blue sky. And I wondered, when it popped would there be a flash of purple? When I looked back, she was gone.

THE TRUE SHAPE OF RAINDROPS



Raindrops are not shaped like tears. They start off perfectly round, their molecules hovering around tiny kernels of something else—dust or smoke—all nestled in the cloud.

Come on! We'll go together. It'll be fun. Alanna was cutting watermelon for a fruit salad. Her tummy strained against the t-shirt fabric, its belly button an unambiguous outie. As I reached for a banana she went on about kids we knew in high school, *and I wonder whether Larry Winesap ever married . . . What was her name?*

Debby. Debby. Debby. Debby Tripenny. Yeah, she had that long blond hair.

The boys were so hot for her.

Not my lanky old Brad. He had no time for Debby. He was too busy figuring things out. Brad hadn't changed in the fifteen years since high school. He still looked like Ichabod Crane and he was still driven, still loyal. I was lucky. So was Alanna. Dave had a good job at the lumber mill. Of course we would go to the reunion. We had to show off, especially Professor Brad, Community College, but still. Better than the rest of those shit kickers.

I complained that night, twiddling his thin blond hair, *Whoopee, I get to watch Alanna be pregnant.*

You could learn something from her. Brad sometimes wished aloud that I was more like Alanna. I did too, but never aloud.

So the next Saturday she and I went to the mall. I bought a little black tank dress. No point trying to accentuate curves I didn't have. She chose a maternity frock with black and gold stripes. *You look like bumblebee!* I teased. She did—with her big round eyes, her short brown hair, and her bulging tummy.

Motown roared through the Elks lodge that night, greeting the Roseville High School Class of 1969. Alanna blazed the way, stabbing her fist in the air. *Let's party!*

Let's party! Dave's curly red hair bounced above the crowd as he made his way to the dance floor. *I hope he'll play the Roll- ing Stones. They are awesome!* He would always love the Rolling Stones.

I turned up pregnant a month after Alanna gave birth to Kenny. She came to the hospital within hours of my daughter's birth, with a bunch of sunflowers nodding over an old glass milk jar. She balanced the flowers on the window sill then turned to ease Anna out of Brad's arms. She danced the baby around the room, *Aren't you the bestest, most boote- ous baby ever? Sandy, you are so lucky to have a girl, and look, she has her father's eyes.* Brad had to explain that babies always have blue eyes.

I sighed at him and worried, *I don't think I have any milk. How am I going to breast feed her?*

Don't be silly. Of course you have milk! I'll show you. Alanna reached under the hospital gown and squeezed my nipple. *See?*



When raindrops fall, the surface tension on the bottom of each drop is weakened by rushing air. They lose their perfect round shapes and look like hamburger buns.

While she waited for the bone marrow transplant, Alanna told me she was writing cards for each of Kenny's birthdays. Each one would have advice appropriate to the age, from two ("Be nice to Daddy") to twenty-one ("Don't drink and drive"). She would leave them in the safe deposit box, and he'd have a card on his birthday *no matter what*. We agreed that she'd be opening the cards with him and laughing at her own advice.

We remembered the backpacking trip the four of us took before we had kids. *Going up Glen Pass with those huge packs. You and Dave looked like playing cards with legs.*

She groaned, *Oh God! That was so steep! You guys were so skinny you just looked like sticks way up ahead of us. The weather was perfect.*

Yeah, but it rained the next day. We played cards in the tent, and Dave pitched a fit cuz he wanted to get going.

You always think of the things that go wrong.

Ouch!

We planned trips. Alanna clapped her hands, *I know! Let's take the whole summer and hike the Muir trail, then I want to go to Alaska.*

Let's go to Antarctica. I want to see the penguins.

We talked about the transplant, how dangerous it was, but without it there was no hope. *I need hope*, Alanna said.

The day before she went into the hospital, I complained that I had huge bags under my eyes because Anna was up all night teething. Alanna laughed and said, *They'll go away.*

When they told her she was dying, she said, *I guess this means you'll go backpacking without me.*

Dave crumpled onto the bed. *I can't do anything without you.*



Falling to earth, they sometimes collide with other raindrops. When this happens, they either join to become one big drop or, if they're already too big, they break apart into smaller drops.

After we decided to get married, Brad took me to the high Sierra for my first backpacking trip. The first day was a tough uphill slog on a dusty trail. A few sorry pine trees punctured the granite slopes. Independence Creek rushed alongside. We dunked bandanas and tied them around our necks, water dripping down our t-shirts. Red-tailed hawks circled,

their cries slitting the quiet breeze.

Brad taught me his uphill song: *The noble Duke of York, he had 10,000 men. He marched them up the hill one day then he marched them down again.* It didn't help. My calves burned. I blamed that man walking ahead of me. *And when they were up were up were up and when they were down were down.* Going in from the East was his idea, *It's steeper, but we'll get to the high Sierra faster.* Did he have to go so fast? How could I marry this guy? I quit trying to keep up. Still, we huffed out the song, *When they were only halfway up they were neither up nor down.*

The sun was low when we summited Kearsarge Pass on blistering feet. For eons, rain clouds blowing in from the Pacific have dropped their moisture on the gentle western slope of the Sierra Nevada. We looked down on rolling wild-flower meadows with clusters of pine trees and creeks rushing to fill the scattered lakes. We tramped down slowly, breathing the moist cool air. At the first lake we chose a camp site in a stand of pines. Relieved of its forty-pound pack, my body felt buoyant. Before soreness could set in, we loped down to the inlet to bathe our faces and splash each other with sparkling drops. Sun warmed my back, and I thought I could stay with Brad forever.

We talked about hanging the food. In bear country it is standard procedure to toss a rope over a high branch and use it to suspend a bag holding anything a bear might find attractive (food, tooth paste, lotion). The bear might be able to climb the tree trunk, so the trick is to get the food far out on a branch that won't hold his weight. Eventually we'd be experts at hanging food, but that night we were too tired. So Brad put some of the food in my pack and draped our dirty socks over it, assuring me that *bears don't like the smell of humans.*

I woke in deepest night to a black bear snuffling outside our tent. When I elbowed Brad, he just groaned, *Go back to sleep*. The next morning we found my new backpack a few yards away. Ignoring our stinky socks, the bear had shredded the pack and smeared what food he didn't eat all over my clothes. My pack reeked of bear breath. Brad's pack was untouched. I have a photo of him sunbathing naked on a granite slab overlooking the lake, his backpack leaning against a boulder, and a huge smile on his face. That must have been after the make-up sex.



Our collection of backpacking stories grew over the years, and we shared most with Dave. Finally, without mentioning her name, the three of us decided to launch the adventure Alanna had dreamed up when we thought we had plenty of time. Alaska. We would raft down the Koyukuk River through the Gates of the Arctic.

I have a picture of us loading 2400 pounds of gear into the plane. There's Dave in his flannel shirt, hauling the big grey inflatable raft; Brad, with a few splayed out paddles; Anna, with a heavy bucket of breakfast makings, and there's me, lugging the small red raft. Kenny's not in the picture. He was probably in the back seat of the pickup listening to his iPod.

Our first stop was National Park Headquarters for training with Ranger Seth. The greatest risk would be, not bears, but hypothermia. Warning us that *sleep is death*, Seth advised that in the worst case we take off our clothes and snuggle with someone else in a sleeping bag. This sounded fine to me, but it brought giggles from Kenny and Anna. Ignoring

the teenagers, Seth droned on. *Running water is stronger than you are.* If we found ourselves in the river we should remember: *Stay calm, feet down, swim at 45 degrees to the current.* We must avoid sweepers and strainers—trees dangling from the river bank or heaving up in the middle of a stream. They make for unfriendly hydraulics.

Accustomed to the gentle black bears of the Sierra, we were nervous about grizzlies. Dave launched his favorite joke: *Hey, Brad, do you know how to tell a grizzly from a black bear? You know how when you go into the wilderness you're advised to take mace and wear little bells on your ankles so the bears will know you're coming? Well, when you find black bear scat, it smells like berries and has little nuts in it. When you find grizzly bear scat, it smells like mace and has little bells in it.* Seth assured us there was only one bear per five hundred square miles. He explained how to handle the grizzly, *Speak in a firm voice. Make yourself look big. Let him know this is your territory.*

I raised my hand, *But I thought bears didn't like the smell of humans.* Our teenagers chuckled. They knew that story by heart.

Brad was not amused: *Seth is dead wrong. You may be able to ward off a black bear with that territorial threat, but with a grizzly your only hope is to curl up and play dead. You remember that, OK? This is no joking matter, Sandra.*

Still, Dave and I rehearsed unlikely speeches to “Mr. Bear,” *Alaska belongs to me and you'd better just boogey on out of here, Mr. Bear. Mr. Black Bear, for you Brad.* It was always “Mr.” The prospect of a “Mrs.” Was too scary to contemplate. Even a fire-arm would be no use with a raging she-bear, especially one with cubs. Mothers will do anything to protect our young. We entered the wilderness from Bettles, Alaska. Population forty-three, the guide book explained, and “perched near the former Hickel Highway that now connects to the Dalton

Highway as a winter ice road only.” In summer the only way in is on little planes that land, when weather permits, on a 5190 ft. gravel airstrip built by the military. No paved roads. Just dirt and gravel. A tiny post office painted in a red and green Christmas motif and log cabins with sled dogs tied out back and interiors that feature fur, wood, and animal skulls. We slept in a one-room plywood shed with a moose skull over the door. The sink drained into a bucket, and the bathhouse had composting toilets. Kenny thought up an ad for the place, *A gentle breeze to caress your bum...* We always get giddy before we go in.

The next morning, we ate all the cholesterol Bettles Lodge had to offer: eggs, sausages, biscuits with gravy. While others lingered over “the last breakfast,” I wandered down a muddy track to fetch my dry bag from the cabin. It was early summer and bits of melting snow huddled in the shade of evergreens. Bird calls sweetened the quiet. Lost in reflection, I nearly ran into Harvey, a large Inuit man who worked for our outfitter. He offered to carry my dry bag back to the lodge. *Thanks. No. I need to carry my own bag.*

Then we waited for the bush pilot—and waited—and waited.

During our weeks of planning we only spoke with Don once. His advice: *Bring gloves, be prepared for mosquitoes, and carry a firearm.* Mostly we talked with his wife, Sophie. A few days before we left she told us about the father and son who went in before us.

Look, they went in too early. There was heavy runoff, and the river was just too fast. Then, they took the wrong fork and slipped under an ice float. After drifting under the ice for a really long ways they found an air hole and crawled out. They lost everything: boats, cameras, food—everything. Luckily, the father smoked, so he had a butane lighter in his fanny pack. With it, they kept a fire going for five days. Finally a bush pilot spotted them and organized a rescue. I tossed and turned for a few

nights, then went out and bought butane lighters and fanny packs for everyone. With a lighter and a Swiss army knife I could handle anything.

Brad decided to rent a satellite phone, just as a precaution.

Sophie assured us that the bush pilot would come. *But it's impossible to say when.* The sun doesn't set that time of year. Without darkness things can go on and on. Who knew? That pilot could be organizing a rescue, or having a beer, or taking a nap.

When we finally heard the distant hum Sophie revved the pickup, we jumped in the back, and we all roared off to the airstrip. The plane was a Beaver, which meant something to Dave, *Hardy little planes!* He gushed. Little was right. It took two flights to get us in. Brad, Kenny, and Anna went on the first flight and I was on the second with Dave. Bouncing in that little plane reminded me of riding a motorcycle with my old boyfriend.

After showing us how to work the earphones, the pilot said his name was Bob, and we felt more secure knowing we were in Bob's hands. He didn't care to know our names. Dave elbowed me and asked Bob, *When will cocktails be served?*

Bob told us to study the river. From the sky the Koyukuk was a braided strand winding along a bed of sand. There was no sign of humans: no roads, no wires, no trails. Just rolling evergreens. Near the horizon, a thin line of grey smoke drifted up to the clouds. *Lightening fire*, Bob explained. *It's so wet it'll go out on its own.* Near the end of the flight he pointed to the river, *That's a dangerous place. See that sweeper? What sweeper?* All I saw was cloud. Then Bob steered the plane into a breath-taking swoop before landing on a gravel bar. The clouds withdrew to reveal two steep granite peaks in the distance: Gates of the Arctic.

We watched Bob fly away and found ourselves alone. Brad whispered "eight

million acres of pure wilderness.” I patted his head, *So how many bears does that hold?*

The river was higher and colder than we had expected, and the sky looked like rain. With a deep breath we turned to setting up camp: pitching tents, filtering water, assembling the stove. Dinner was chili-dogs. Brad worried about indigestion, but Dave loved them, *These are the best chili-dogs I have ever eaten. Mmmm hmmm.* Next morning we breakfasted on eggs, then inflated and loaded the boats. Dave, Brad and Anna took the big gray raft with most of the gear, and Kenny and I set out in the little red inflatable canoe.



Dave and Kenny were at our house the day Alanna was diagnosed. Kenny and Anna splashed in the kiddie pool while Dave and Bob pored over trail maps for the summer trip. Alanna was supposed to come over later for barbecue and a movie if we could get the kids to settle down. But she didn't come. Instead, she called and told Dave to come home right away. He didn't say anything. He just asked us to look after Kenny and left. I worried all night. The next morning he called. Leukemia.

Alanna's boy was five when his mother died. The day after her memorial, Dave brought him round to our house. Kenny was a different child. He moved like he was 100 years old, and there were black circles around his eyes. He told me, *Mommy has died.*

I twirled his hair, noticing that it was a shade darker than hers. *I know, Kenny, and I am so sorry. Do you want some maca-roni and cheese?* Those may have been the last words we spoke about his mom. I kept meaning to bring her up, but talking about her made Dave so angry.

He took to carrying a flask on the trail, and decades later her name could still make him wince and reach for a scotch. So I learned to talk to Alanna in private.

I was glad to hop in the red canoe behind Kenny. Maybe we'd have a chance to really talk. He could tell me about the new girlfriend whose picture he carried and his job in a skateboard shop. I could tell him about his mom. I could ask whether Dave ever gave him those cards she'd left. But the rain-swollen river demanded my attention, and Kenny couldn't seem to do anything but whine, *We aren't going to make it!* Mostly, he was afraid of the sweepers. It was hard to steer around them, but when collision was inevitable I'd put out my feet in their high rubber boots and fend us off.

Kenny, it's going to be OK, but I need you to help row.



Down drafts can increase the speed of a rain drop.

Finally, I gave up. Kenny wanted the comfort and stability of the big grey raft, and I wanted some distance from him. With all that whining and fear, Kenny was no help. He wasn't the son Alanna would have raised. So Anna joined me in the canoe. My daughter knew how to row and with her on board the trip downstream was easy. We had a little more control, I felt a little more confident. The sun came out. The Koyukuk sparkled. Ducks! She spotted a pair of black-headed loons gliding on the river's surface; stillness above, churning

below. We weren't worried when I lifted my feet to fend off from a sweeper. But as we'd moved downstream the week's heavy rain had gushed into the river, giving it momentous speed. When we hit that sweeper the canoe didn't pause. It just flipped.

Life jackets hauled us to the surface and we watched as the red canoe and our scattered gear bobbed away. Anna was thrown to the middle of the river. She looked three years old and very scared. *Swim to me, Sweetheart.* I just wanted her in my arms. Boots dragging, we held hands and kicked "at 45 degrees to the current." When we reached the shore we turned around and I whispered, *Oh my God.*

Lodged against the sweeper, the raft was sinking as water surged over its sides. Kenny and Dave were in front, clinging to the tree and Brad was perched in the back. Yelling at Anna to take off her wet clothes, I ran to the tree and climbed on, thinking I'd pull out some gear and kick the raft free. With river snarling in my ears I began tossing things to shore: a sleeping bag, a tent, an oar. Then the raft shifted and Dave yelled at Kenny to let go. The raft and the two of them disappeared under the tree, leaving Brad half-swimming, half-crawling in the shallow eddy upstream.

I eased towards him with my back braced against the tree. With each step I buried my feet in the river bottom. No way was I going under that water. Brad grabbed my hand and clambered around me to shore. Then I slipped and found myself clinging to the tree while rushing water filled my ears and my boots dragged me down. One moment I was telling myself to let go, and the next, Dave was pulling me up onto the tree.

Anna and Kenny were shivering. Kenny huddled on the beached raft and my baby, wearing only her underwear, had buried herself in the warm mud. *Oh honey, what a great idea!* But Brad was shaking uncontrollably. His lips were turning blue. I found a rain suit in the stranded gear and he held onto my shoulder as I pulled the sticky rubber pants over his trembling legs.

We went into a couple-huddle. We had landed on an island with river on both sides. The grey raft was torn up and only the small red canoe was still floating. Brad wanted to camp on the island, *Come on, nobody wants to get back in the river.*

I can't sleep here. This place gives me the creeps. The ground was muddy and willows blocked the breezes. It looked like mosquito heaven to me and I didn't like the idea of camping on that soft mud. *I'm afraid we'll sink into the mud in our sleep.*

With a deep sigh, Brad agreed to camp on higher ground. But he was tired, so Dave and I ferried everyone to the other shore, and set out to retrieve what food and gear had landed on shore. Fog blew in and time paused while we stomped through mud and sand. Our breaths mingled. Mosquitoes hovered, but they couldn't bite through the mud layer coating our arms and legs. We wandered into a meadow full of moose pellets. I reminded Dave that you could start a fire with dry moose poop. *That could come in handy, but where there's poop there's moose, and you know moose can be more dangerous than bear.*

Thanks, that helps not at all, I grinned as we shoulder-bumped.

The mud turned to quick sand and I remembered something else, *So, did you hear about the tourist who roamed onto a soft beach in Alaska?*

No, what happened?

He got stuck in the mud. When the tide came up he drowned. Thanks babe. That helps not at all. I'm staying behind you.

Babe.

He put a hand on my shoulder, *Lead on, Macduff!* I picked up a walking stick to probe the ground ahead.

We didn't lose much, really. The grey raft was useless. The gas stove and frying pan were gone, along with plates and silverware. But we retrieved a lot of food. Then Anna spotted the satellite phone, its rugged yellow case snagged on a bush a few yards into the flooded river. When Dave waded out and snagged it with my walking stick we all cheered.

That night Dave lit a fire with my butane lighter. Anna and I cut up some of the chicken Sophie had packed and we cooked chicken-fajita-bobs on sticks over the fire. We ate the burned meat on tortillas with cheddar cheese. Dave said, *This has got to be the best chicken fajita I have ever eaten!*

When the clouds parted we realized the Koyukuk had planted us right between the Gates of the Arctic. Their peaks soared above us. *No wonder they named the park after them,* Dave whispered.

No wonder! Alanna's voice echoed from the other shore. Get over here woman. I need help. I can't do all this cooking alone and your husband just called me babe. Willows rustled in the breeze.

The hard part was deciding what to do. We hovered around the satellite phone and Brad studied the instructions until Dave told him to *Just order up a rescue!*

Would you like some pepperoni with your rescue? Or will that be vegetarian? Brad's first

attempts brought nothing but static. Eventually he got through to Sophie and calmly explained that we'd lost a boat and could use some help. She thought maybe Don could come get us and told Brad to call back later. Later we would learn that Don wanted to bring a motorboat in, drop off a raft, then motor back to Bettles. But Harvey mentioned the plan to Seth, who vetoed it. He wanted to bring in a helicopter. When Brad called back Sophie told us to choose between Seth's helicopter and Don's raft. We wrangled:

I don't ever want to go near that river again.

I never want to see Kenny go underwater again. If we lighten the gear we can just keep going.

Look, I'm the one who went under that tree!

I want to go home and I want go to summer school. But you hate summerschool.

I want to go to bed.

We don't have any beds. I'm still hungry.

Would everyone PLEASE shut up!!

Unwilling to stomach the humiliation of a helicopter rescue, Brad told Sophie to send Don with: *a new raft, a stove, and some plates; no onions please.*

We retreated to our tents and our wet sleeping bags. Pulling off my socks, I realized that my feet had been sanded down by the grit in my boot. They were baby smooth, but very cold. As I rubbed them Alanna's voice came from behind, *Would you look at that! Soft as a baby's butt.* She chuckled and I growled.

The sun grazed the horizon. Eventually Brad and Anna slept.

Lanna, I can't do this.

Oh yes you can. We'll be together. It'll be fun!

The wind blew hard all night and the tent strained at its pegs. Sand rattled against its sides.



Surface tension is the skin that holds rain drops together. It is made of weak hydrogen bonds. Smaller drops have stronger surface tension than larger drops because less air flows around them.

I woke first the next day and snuck out of the tent to explore. A squirrel peeked out from a dried out log and scurried away. A wood chuck stood his ground and sounded warnings. Willows rustled. The river cavorted. Gates of the Arctic kept watch. Then I heard Kenny shout inside their tent, *Shit! Shit! Shit! My iPod's dead!*

Dave murmured, *Battery's probably dead.*

No. It must have gotten wet. It's ruined!

Kenny, it's just a toy.

It is NOT a toy! He burst out of the tent and caught me listening. Sheesh! He stomped into the trees. By the time he got back the rest of us were draping wet clothes and sleeping bags over willows and boulders to dry.

As evening drew near Anna dug through a bucket and found some steaks. Our mouths watered as we cooked them on a driftwood grill over an open fire. When the grill finally burned up and collapsed the steaks fell in the coals. It felt like such defeat after all our

work, but Dave gushed *This has to be the best steak I have ever eaten!*

I grinned, *Man, I do enjoy cooking for you!*

Huddled in our less-damp sleeping bags, Brad worried that Don might not show up for days. What if we ran out of food? Should we begin hiking downstream? But Don flew in that very night. He inflated his huge raft (later christened the “mother ship”), rowed down to our campsite, climbed into his little tube-tent and went to sleep. When I stepped out of our tent he was building a fire. To his cheery, *Good morning!* all I could come up with was *I haven't brushed my teeth.* Then that stringy mountain man with his raggedy ponytail said, *You look good.* A salvaged mirror revealed baggy eyes, matted hair, dried blood and a fair amount of mud. *You look good.* Later he took to giving me wildflowers. Brad took an instant dislike to the man, *Talk about creepy.*

But Alanna approved, *I think he's sweet.*

After breakfast we bustled around folding tents, rolling up sleeping bags, stashing gear and tying it down. The mother ship was a huge inflatable, but it had oarlocks, which improved steering. With Don rowing, it was a perfect haven for worn out rafters. As youngest, Anna took the first turn in the mother ship with Don. But Kenny soon tired of rowing and insisted on trading places with her. I fumed as she took up her paddles, *So much for chivalry.*

The rain held off and as the river slowed its wildlife came out. Don taught the kids to do bird calls and fed us moose pepperoni he'd dried himself. I carried snacks in my backpack and passed them out whenever we took a break.

We camped that night on a sandbank dotted with willows. Anna and I walked a

ways off to bathe in a clear stream. We sat on rocks in our swimsuits, dipped body parts in the cold water, then soaped in the less-cold air before a quick rinse. Then we waded in knee-deep to shampoo our hair. After that shock we pranced back to the firechanting *Clean! Clean! Clean!* Alanna laughed.

Next morning we launched into a sunny day. Curious beavers swam toward the boats then slapped their tails and dove. We spent happy hours scanning the river and shouting, *Beaver!* when a nose broke the surface. We followed groups of baby geese while their parents honked from shore. Anna wondered, *Why don't the parents just come get them?*

The parents can't fly. They're molting, Don explained.

Wow. They must be so worried.

Kenny spotted the hind ends of a moose and her calf. But we didn't see a single bear. Rain threatened, so Don had us pitch tents in the shelter of an aspen grove. Seagulls begged for leftover macaroni and cheese while we sat in a circle and told tales. The kids recited the entire plot of Pan's Labyrinth and Don told us about shooting moose. We remarked on the perversity of mosquitoes that devoured Don and Anna and ignored the rest of us. We compared the merits of boiled and filtered drinking water. Anna and Kenny ran barefoot in the warm sand circling tighter and tighter until they collapsed on their sides giggling.

We woke to what Don called, *More of an August rain,* cold and relentless.

While I paddled hard to stay warm Alanna reminded me, *We're going South. It has to get warmer.*

Still, cold water kept trickling down my back. By mid-afternoon, Brad's lips were turning blue and the rest of us were shivering. Don said he would build a fire to warm us up. I was skeptical. *But it's raining. How are you going to get dry wood?*

You'll see.

Don had us collect branches with pine needles and pile them up three feet high. Then we added logs and sticks to make an 8-foot pile of damp wood. He lit his Coleman stove and gently slid it underneath. In time the wood around the stove dried and caught. Don pulled out the stove and the smoky little flames grew into a raging bonfire. "Woo hoo!" We stood in a circle around the blaze, raincoats open to soak in heat like cormorants drying their wings in the sun. Steam drifted from our bodies. *Ahhhhhh*. We basked until the fire died. Then we launched our rafts. As we rowed, we treasured the lingering warmth. That night we lit another bonfire around the base of a dead tree and it shot up into the sky. Don said, *See, in this wilderness what pleasures you get you have to earn.*

On our last night in the wilderness my hands wouldn't work. Knives kept slipping and I dropped food in the sand. Watching, Kenny said, *Hey, I'll row all day tomorrow if that's what it takes to get some good food!*

I erupted, *Yeah! I want to see YOU row all day!* I withdrew to the tent to nurse my frustration.

Brad came in to chew me out. *Kenny was traumatized when he and I went underwater. You need to cut him some slack. But he has done nothing but piss and moan!*

Sandra, you are the adult here. Or at least you're supposed to be.

I wondered why my sympathy for Kenny had evaporated. That night as I wallowed in shame Alanna kept saying,

They'll go away. They'll all go away.

The tree held some of our fire in its roots so Don piled new wood on top for a morning

bonfire. Brad fixed oatmeal and for once Kenny helped load the boats. The rain turned gentle and the river turned wide and slow. We quit rowing and drew our boats close, holding the ropes so we could lounge and gossip as we floated along. Don told us about his failed bid to be mayor of Bettles. We told every walks-in-a-bar joke we knew. From time to time someone declared a race. We'd pick a goal and paddle like hell until we were breathless.

Don offered to teach Anna to row the mother ship. I watched my little girl perched up on top of that pile of gear, her back straight, her sleeves rolled up, pushing those long oars. Kenny began to chant, *Are we there yet? Are we there yet?*

Don said the river was so high nothing looked familiar. Kenny asked again. Don peered at his watch and said, *We'll be there at 2:24 pm and 15 seconds*. It became a game. Kenny would ask and Don would invent a new arrival time. Then Don saw a landmark and said we were closer than he'd thought. There was only an hour left before Bettles. The teenagers rejoiced and I had an odd sinking feeling.

A man sitting on the bank asked Don how we were (as if we couldn't hear). *Just tired*, he said. Sophie met us at the beach in her big truck. We loaded rafts and gear in the back and rode into town triumphant on top of the pile. We ate chicken noodle soup and watched *The Bourne Conspiracy* on Sophie's TV. Kenny entertained us with movie plots and production details. Turns out he wanted to make films when he grew up. Turns out he could be charming when he wanted to. Alanna's son grew up without her.



Once a raindrop loses its surface tension it breaks into smaller drops.

I was on my own for the next week. Brad left for a conference and Anna went to a summer program in Denver. I took my water-logged camera to a photo shop and the man at the counter said they'd retrieve what they could. A small package of wavy images came back, vague faces in front of blurred rivers, mountains and sky—none of the times I most treasured, but I kept them. That afternoon I called Dave. He couldn't come over for dinner, but we compared notes on the weather and he ranted about what *those damned Republicans* had been up to while we were away. We talked about our next great adventure and knew without saying that it had to be something Alanna would love.

In the early days of Spanish exploration, it was the custom to name occurrences for the saint on whose day the event took place . . . I believe that the first Santa Ana must have been experienced on July 26th, Saint Anne's day, and was named for her.

(Lt. Comdr. O. H. Holtman, United States Naval Institute Proceedings, 1933)

DEVIL WIND

Santana. First, low thumping and a weird squeal. Then dry leaves chatter at my window. Rose petals flicker in the yard. Bushes tangle in barbed wire fences. Cows shelter in the canyon, eyes downwind. You don't close drapes against a Santana. Better to watch the desert unhinged while fingers of dust sneak under the door.

When I was four, I longed to chase tumbleweeds and waltz across the sand. But mama moaned and covered her face, curled up in bed. "The wind makes her *loco*," Pappa explained. "not her fault, not her choice."

Morning brought silence, and air so clear that the mountains drew close. Santana left my little mare's eyes swollen shut, leaking sludge. She couldn't see the stiff black birds scattered across Pappa's fields.

I reject the claim that the name Santana originates with the Indian word for devil wind. .that the wind is named for the Santa Ana Canyon, in which it originates. Pronunciation as Santana is a colloquial elision of the unaccented a.
(Bertram B. Moore, San Diego Historical Quarterly, 1958)

. . . you are too young to remember. Dr. George Fischbeck was one of the first and most popular weatherman around Southern California in the 1970s. He used "Santana Winds" widely, and this indeed was based on the Vientos de Satanas, or devil's breath.

(Perspectiff, 2008)

EVERYONE IS SINGULAR

Dunedin, 2007

Someone stumbles. I stumble on a crack in the wee hour sidewalk. A gallant punctures my whiskey fog. Windmill arms and very tall, but he rights himself to wonder am I OK? I wonder is he OK? We each reassure the other then part, as a fresh northerly sends the maple leaves off.

Wind at his back
Wind in my teeth

Sunny morning smells of drying wool. Three-Day-Unshaved swaggers along with a girl on his once-windmill arm. See how they whisper, foreheads bumping? She lies back on the bricks while he traces her outline in chalk. She giggles and curls.

A far away man made me giggle and curl.

Fog rides the southerly. Three-Day-Unshaved brought fruit to the train station, standing guard over a heavy wood table, bending, reaching, changing money, bagging apples for his crowd. I might have bought one.

Were you so tall last summer? (I might have said.)
Were you so short? (He might have grinned.)

Rushing, Apple Bagger trips on the rainy sidewalk, windmill arms again.

Not rushing now, lounging – lounging in a café, jealous elbow on the new girl's chair. All black, no giggles, no whispers – watch out Apple Bagger, she's Loaded.

Loaded-for-Bear stalks the gallery in black, spots her prey, darts in, eases back, tips her head, finger to lip, sighs, then speeds around a corner,

Dead paintings by dead men. (She might have grumbled.)
With you on that. (I might have sighed.)

Vast airport, glass windows, coffee smells, and No One's crowd flows past the art critic. Did he see her tangled face; her leaking eyes; her paisley scarf? Regardless, No One is leaving.

St. Clair beach and shag calls pierce the impossible lull. Apple Bagger and Sad Bear picnic with Someone, the blanket scattered with olives, cheese, bread, and wine. Then Giggling Girl rises from the sea to drip salt water and scatter the sand. Apple Bagger tosses a scrap of cheese and the gulls descend.

Sand lends crunch to the silken brie,
and the gulls want more.

Someone nestles under an umbrella. On a wood bench, she reads a very old book while Everyone passes by. Everyone's feet get wet in the puddle, while chalk messages fade on the sidewalk.

"C me o Yog C ass T m rr 9 " Gulls patrol but there is no cheese, just a cup of coffee in Someone's hand.

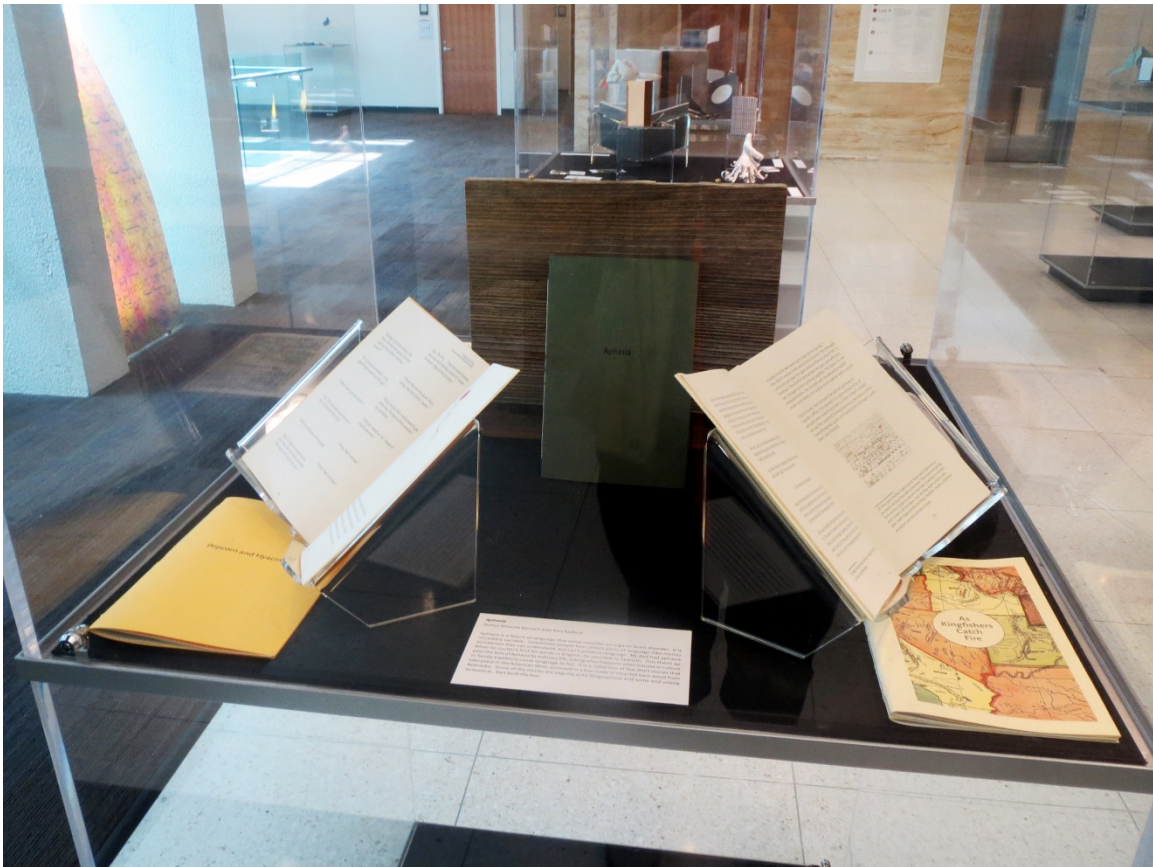
APPENDIX

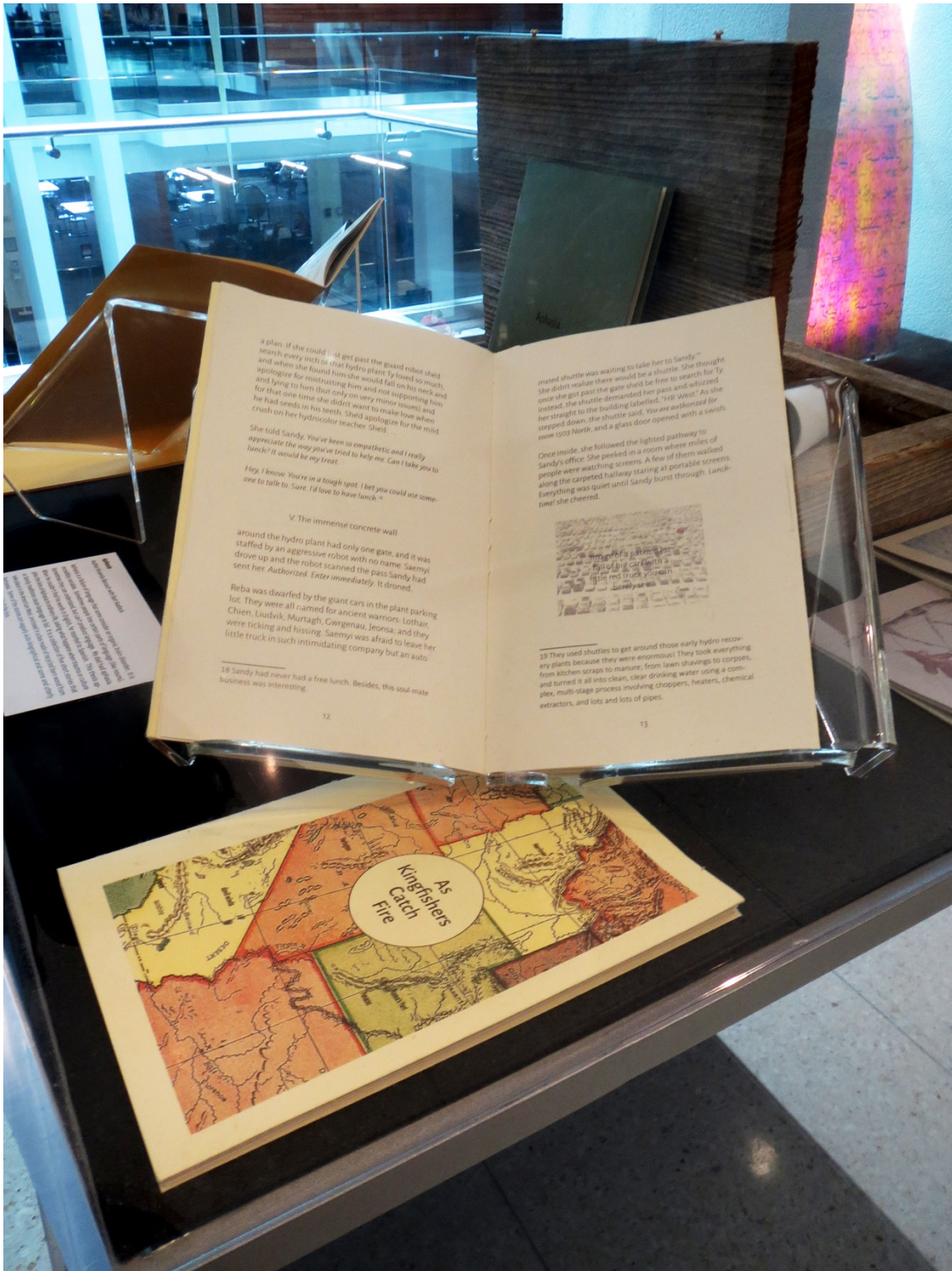
PHOTOS OF ARTIST BOOK

BOOKING A BROUHAHA EXHIBIT

J. WILLARD MARRIOTT LIBRARY

MAY 2015





a plan. If she could, it get past the guard robot shield search every inch of that hydro plant Ty loved so much and when she found him she would fall on his neck and apologize for mistreating him and not supporting him and lying to him but only on very minor issues and for that one time she didn't want to make love when he had seeds in his teeth. She'd apologize for the mild crush on her hydrologic teacher. She'd

She told Sandy. You've been so empathetic and I really appreciate the way you've tried to help me. Can I take you to lunch? It would be my treat.

Hey, I know. You're in a tough spot. I bet you could use some one to talk to. Sure. I'd love to have lunch."

V. The immense concrete wall

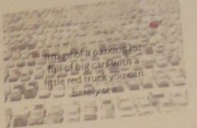
around the hydro plant had only one gate, and it was staffed by an aggressive robot with no name. Saemyi sent her. Authorized. Enter immediately. It droned.

Reba was dazzled by the giant cars in the plant parking lot. They were all named for ancient warriors: Lothar, Chien, Ludvik, Murtigh, Gargenau, Jeonsa, and they were ticking and hissing. Saemyi was afraid to leave her little truck in such intimidating company but an auto

18 Sandy had never had a free lunch. Besides, this soul-mate business was interesting.

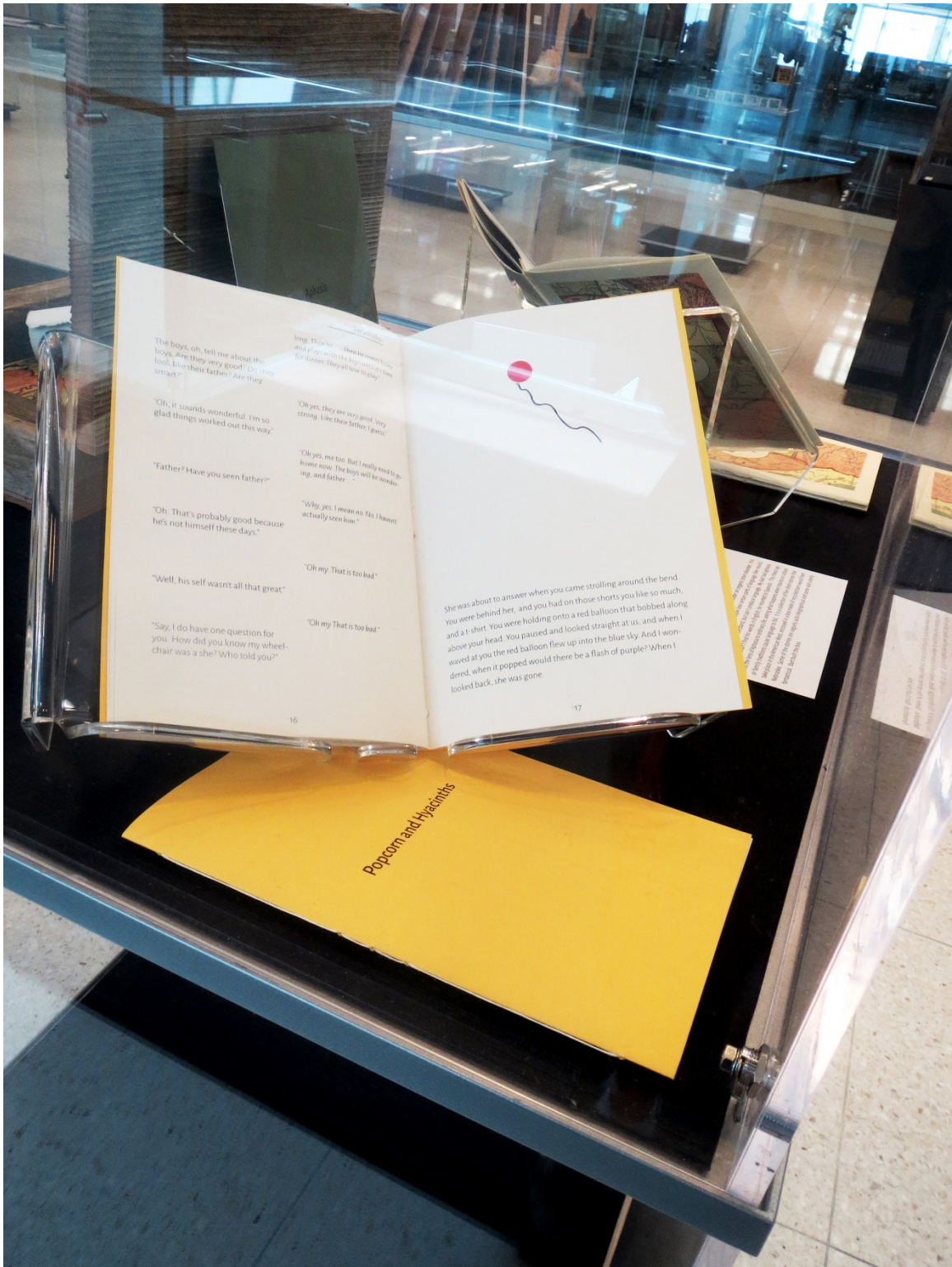
mated shuttle was waiting to take her to Sandy." She didn't realize there would be a shuttle. She thought she'd get past the gate shield for free to search for Ty. Instead, the shuttle demanded her pass and whizzed her straight to the building labelled, "Hi! Welcome! As she stepped down, the shuttle said, You are authorized for room 1002 North, and a glass door opened with a swish.

Once inside, she followed the lighted pathway to Sandy's office. She peeked in a room where miles of people were watching screens. A few of them walked along the carpeted hallway staring at portable screens. Everything was quiet until Sandy burst through. Lunch, bye!" she cheered.



19 They used shuttles to get around those early hydro recovery plants because they were enormous! They took everything from kitchen scraps to manure, from lawn shavings to compost, and turned it all into clean, clear drinking water using a complex, multi-stage process involving choppers, heaters, chemical extractors, and lots and lots of pipes.





The boys, oh, tell me about the boys. Are they very good? Do they look like their father? Are they smart?"

"Oh, it sounds wonderful. I'm so glad things worked out this way."

"Father? Have you seen father?"

"Oh. That's probably good because he's not himself these days."

"Well, his self wasn't all that great."

"Say, I do have one question for you. How did you know my wheelchair was a she? Who told you?"

long. These boys... these boys were... and I got with the boys and it was for longer. They all know to play."

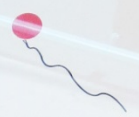
"Oh yes, they are very good. Very strong. Like their father. I guess."

"Oh yes, me too. But I really need to go home now. The boys will be wondering, and father..."

"Why yes, I mean no. No, I haven't actually seen him."

"Oh my. That is too bad."

"Oh my. That is too bad."



She was about to answer when you came strolling around the bend. You were behind her, and you had on those shorts you like so much, and a t-shirt. You were holding onto a red balloon that bobbed along above your head. You paused and looked straight at us, and when I waved at you the red balloon flew up into the blue sky. And I wondered, when it popped would there be a flash of purple? When I looked back, she was gone.

Popcorn and Hyacinths



DETAILS OF ARTIST BOOK



