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THE WEIRDED

By
Rosalynn Stovall

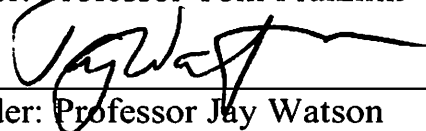
A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of
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Approved by



Advisor: Professor Tom Franklin



Reader: Professor Jay Watson



Reader: Professor Ben McClelland

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Make Pocket (F/Plates)

Rosalynn Stovall
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Special thanks to my grandmother, my mother, and family
for always supporting my creative endeavors.

Special thanks to my advisor Tom Franklin
for his understanding and constructive feedback.

ABSTRACT

ROSALYNN STOVALL: *The Weirded*, a collection of short fiction
(Under the direction of Tom Franklin)

The Weirded is a collection of short fiction and illustrations that explores the writing process and the use of symbols and imagery in the art of storytelling through organization and the juxtaposition of short stories, vignettes, and collages.

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Introduction

I derived the title of my thesis from the word *weird*, which was chosen both for its colloquial use – that is, “of a strikingly odd or unusual character” – and for connotations gleaned from its etymology. According to The American Heritage Dictionary of English Language, the Modern English *weird* evolved from the Old English *wyrd*, meaning fate, and like the word from which it is derived, it is sometimes associated with things that are mysterious and strange. Besides the eccentricities of the characters presented in my stories, The Weirded refers to the curiosities in the writing process.

Writing is an odd practice marked by wax and wane. Good writing days are ones of intrusive thoughts that make my pen run across the page and my fingers, over the keyboard, causing a single image to turn into a phrase that grows into a setting and character with a problem. On bad days, I spend my time searching my notebook in the hope of finding anything on which I can build something. In these moments, I paste words and phrases together, drawing on any correlation that they may have to one another, whether it is an obvious, universal one or one that stems from my personal ideas.

Within my thesis, I represented this tendency of the writing process to be multifaceted and inconstant by using multiple formats. The three forms of storytelling presented within my thesis are the traditional short story, illustrations of these stories, and vignettes—all of which utilize metaphor and imagery. The vignettes consist of prose poetry, flash fiction, and character sketches. There are a total of twenty-four of them, which are placed in sets of two or three in nine groups. In these groups they act as

disjointed stories, while simultaneously setting the mood for the short story they precede and/or expanding upon an idea presented in the story they follow.

The stories are subtle explorations of the “weird” concepts of isolation, alienation, denial, reversal of roles, loss of control, lack of communication, and absurdity that appear within the vignettes. These things present themselves through realistic characters, who teeter between normalcy and strangeness. All my protagonists are outsiders in the position in-between loser and hero looking for a way to define themselves.

Each of the five illustrations to the stories is a collage that represents individual motifs found within a particular story, while simultaneously showing how these motifs work with one another, albeit, in an striking new way. They are not depictions of a single scene or character, but rather are a rendering of the story as a whole. The collages, moreover, act as an illusionary, conceptual bridge between the short story’s use of motifs and the disjointedness of the vignette collections. On a visual plane, the process of creating a collage is similar to that of grouping vignettes—as each image used in the creation of the collage fits together to create a larger composition, while retaining its originality. Because I used the imagery presented in the traditional stories, I am able to retell it in another way, as each piece must be read and placed within context of the entire image, similar to the way they must be read in the story forms.

My thesis is an exploration in the art of storytelling through the use of metaphor, imagery, and form. In the vignettes, the meanings of words must be taken in their context; each paints a concise picture of an idea that becomes a disjointed tale when placed together. The short stories are composed of multiple phrases and objects that reoccur until they become symbols within the stories. Their respective illustrations are

visual representations of said symbols, as well as, conceptual representations of the stories as fully developed and rounded vignette collections. The vignettes and short stories themselves, moreover, are stand-ins for the ebb and flow of writing, respectively. That, however, is not so say that the vignettes did not originate from moments of creative overflow or the stories from those of stagnation. In The Weirded, everything means something in context to the work as a whole, and the work itself is a symbol that has become “weirded.” Individually, each story focuses on a central character, but the formats and arrangements of the collection becomes important when considering the entire work, because the organization of the stories, vignettes, and illustrations affects how the characters and themes within each compliment and juxtapose one another.

--Rosalynn Stovall

PART I

The Rhetoric Series

Juxta

If you tell me about ennui, I'll tell you about acedia. I don't guarantee any sort of recognition, but we can certainly complete the action, because we are post-post-postmodernists. We remix the redux of the remix before we extend it. They call it Synonym – similar but not the same as the original or the facsimile. We call it Vice Versa – the other way around but not all the way around. That's how we complete ourselves: Repeat ourselves to satisfaction.

Verbatim

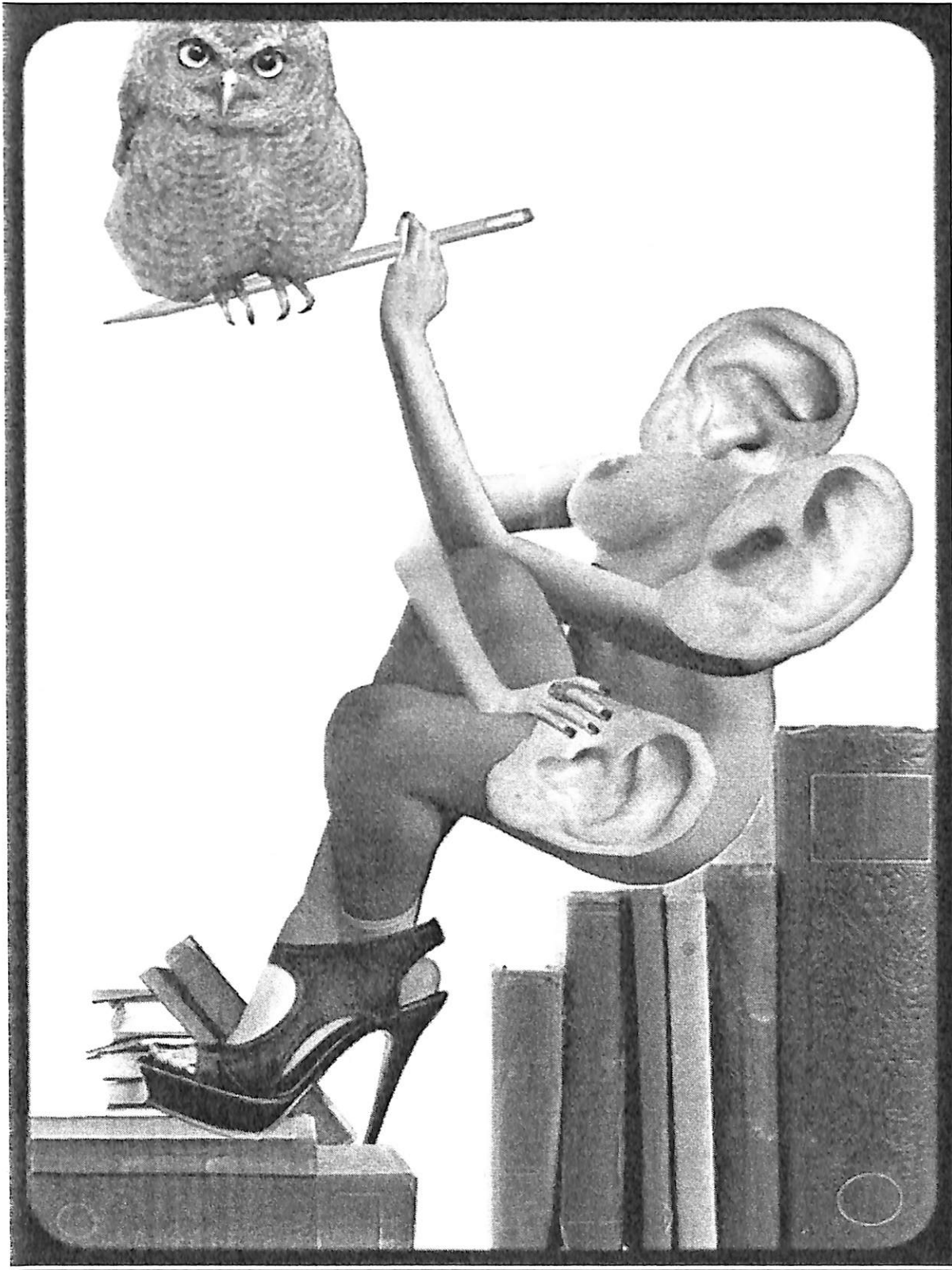
She took everything at its denotation, and for that reason, she liked the idea of people better when they were on paper, because you can really tell what kind of stock someone is from when you believe each character of their personality is represented by a few words.

Word Lovers

There was this guy I knew. He was a damn good poet. All his references were deferred. He loved to play with words. He lived in a place where malapropisms and neologisms met, and danced in time to a beat of dum-de-dum or de-de-dum. Sometimes he got off meter (I just wanted to get off), but he just keep talking and slipping, sliding down jargon slopes. Whenever I spoke I bit my tongue and thankfully it was before I

could cut enough rope. I hung myself on words instead; I choked. Our conversations often went to hell. But we couldn't help talking. I explained the classics colloquially. He argued philosophy logically. We loved to hear ourselves speak, voices rising and falling in heat. I told him he was a very cunning linguist. He said, "You're a cunt."

Listening, the redux



SEE PLATE I

Listening

I hated BookEnds Used and New Books: The black polo shirts and khaki slacks. The plastic name tags. The stock image logo of neon, anthropomorphic books. The smell of coffee and tea that permeated my clothes and hair. Eleanor Edward's fudge and hazelnut brownies. Her nephew Edgar. The old ladies who asked for cookbooks about decorating bundt cakes. The pretentious college sophomores who requested Nietzsche's Thus Spoke Zarathustra in German.

I even began to hate the books, books that reminded me that I would forever be an author of children's stories, not a serious novelist. I didn't have the life experiences. I wasn't tough or deep. And people could tell, if not by the cute animals in my stories, then by their regurgitated morals and life lessons. "Never give up." "Nothing is impossible." The usual advice and deception spoon fed to children as hope. I was sick of hope.

I worked there because needed the money to pay for my messy two bedroom apartment. I also needed some experience or reference to experience and some human interaction. So I did the natural thing. I surrounded myself with books and the people who wrote them, which was both torture and inspiration because they already had what I wanted.

The only things worthwhile about BookEnds was Saturday Night Red Light and the works of authors that were the avante guard mash-up of haute literature and erotica. Smutty good. Highbrow porn. Intellectual and blue. I wanted what they had. They said "fuck" and "pussy" without shame. They compared women's nipples to the sun and orgasms to supernovas and the births of black holes. All while providing an antithesis to

the dichotomous nature of gender roles—the men were sluts and choir boys, and the women were afraid of losing their machismo.

That's why I stayed. I wanted to be cynical like them. Cynical and sexy and brilliant. So I listened every Saturday night at nine, and by ten the whole thing was over and I walked home without introducing myself even though I had practiced in the bathroom mirror.

"Umm, hello. My name is Mionne Gerro." Reach for a handshake. "You may know my name if you have children" Point to self. "I wrote and illustrated the popular children's book What the Owls Do." Smile. "Well, I'm writing a novel now... for adults." Exchange contact information. "Maybe we can have coffee sometime..."

It was too rehearsed, and besides that, it was a lie. Writing a novel? I had a few ideas and a page of misplaced sentences. There were no characters. Some novel that was going to be.

I watched Edgar as he waited for each author to step down from the podium on the makeshift stage. He shook their hands and introduced himself. I noticed that he looked them in the eyes.

Edgar ran the readings on Saturday. He wanted to be a writer, too, and he carried a copy of his manuscript with him to work and revised it on lunch break. He never looked me in the eye, even when we spoke. And he never remembered to lock the back door. But I never told his aunt Eleanor.

Eleanor was the owner of Bookends, which she had acquired from her late husband. Her hair was permed into tight curls dyed a shade of beauty-school-dropout pink. She always wore a leather jacket and too much jewelry. Since her husband died,

she had started going to church every Sunday and had developed a hatred of words like “dick” and “suck”. Even still, she never stopped the Red Light readings because she understood they were as good for business as our Sunday Morning Children’s Corner of which I was in charge.

~

You should stick to owls, I thought in May. I couldn’t sleep. In the room above mine, the pink cheeked girl and the blue-balled boy had gone to bed early, but didn’t go to sleep. I could hear that rhythmic creaking. They fucked.

I remembered seeing them a few weeks before when they were moving into the building. I had three shopping bags and was forced to take the elevator which always bypasses my floor. Their door was wide open, and I could see that although they were unpacking, she was wearing a pinstriped pencil skirt and a silk blouse. Her short blonde hair framed her round face. He had dark hair and a square chin. Before the doors closed, I heard him say, “Do you want to make love?”

They were the amorous sort. The type of people who have Sunday morning breakfast in bed and go on romantic afternoon walks. The type that say things like “make love,” when what they did wasn’t anything even close to that phrase. It wasn’t just sex either--too loud, too long.

“Stick to owls,” I said aloud, trying to convince myself that I was content with my life in that tiny room listening to the climax of a couple I barely knew. Tomorrow perhaps I’ll take the elevator and maybe I’ll see them and give them a nod or a wink, and perhaps he’ll smile, and she’ll raise her eyebrows to let me know that they know that I know.

~

The first thing I did when I woke the next morning was call BookEnds. “Hello, Eleanor, I won’t be able to do the Sunday reading today.”

“Mionne, is that you?”

“Yes, ma’am. Did you hear me? I won’t be doing the reading this morning. And I need the next few weeks off.”

“I heard. The kids are going to miss you. May I ask why?”

“I’m starting research on my novel.”

“Novel. For kids?” she said. I rolled my eyes.

“No ma’am. For adults. Like the stuff we hear on Saturday.”

“That smut. I can’t believe you like that sort of stuff, Mionne. You seem too respectable.”

“Ma’am...”

“If it didn’t draw such a large crowd, I wouldn’t put up with it.”

“Eleanor, don’t you think that that’s a bit...”

“I mean, you’re so cute and dainty, you know. Not the type at all.”

“Eleanor, I have to go.”

“But I suppose you know what you want to do.”

“Yes.”

“Well, good luck, dear. I’ll tell Edgar you said hello.”

“Good bye.” I hung up the phone and went back to bed, where besides the sound of their footsteps, it was silent.

Monday morning I woke up early and waited in the cold stairwell. Because their apartment was in the same position as mine, I knew that I would have a clear view from the window of the metal door. They left together at seven. If they worked nearby, that would allow enough time to eat breakfast and take a taxi to work. An eight hour day would mean that they would return around four or five in the evening.

I went back to my apartment and spent the day eating peanut butter crackers, drinking Two Clover wine, and watching reruns of The Golden Girls wishing I had moxy like Blanche. I pondered washing the dishes, picking up my papers, and taking out the trash, but decided that I had all week and the next.

At four, I returned to my stairwell position and waited an hour and a half. They came back together, holding hands. They kissed as they unlocked their door. I got the same results on Tuesday and Wednesday. They left for work around 7:00 and returned around 5:30. I spent Thursday convincing myself that my plan would work.

It was simple. Tomorrow, I would go grocery shopping and arrive at the building before them to ensure that we would take the elevator together. I would introduce myself as Dion. Clumsy-me would drop the groceries and they would help me pick them up. We would joke and laugh and exchange numbers and so forth. We'd become friends. One night—soon I hoped—after a few drinks at the bar, we'd become lovers.

~

I was uncomfortable in Feldman's Grocery: The click, click, click of my strappy stilettos on the linoleum tiles. The form fitting tapered pants. The tight low-cut blouse that accentuated my breasts. My nipples erect from the cold of the ice cream and popsicle aisle. The looks from the stay-at-home fathers holding crying toddlers whose mothers

were no doubt dowdy teachers, nurses, and secretaries... or corporate, ball-buster intellectuals.

My name is Dion, I told myself as I paid the checkout girl thirty-five dollars and sixty-four cents for cereal, soup, tuna, bread, bananas, pastrami, oranges, and milk. *I like the attention.*

It took me longer than I expected to walk the block to my apartment in five inch heels with a paper bag filled with groceries. I arrived at 5:40 not 5:25. *It probably wouldn't have worked anyway*, I told myself as I pressed the up button. *It was a stupid idea*, I told myself as I stepped inside.

“Hold the elevator please,” I heard a woman’s voice say.

“No problem,” I said as I placed the bag on my hip, stuck my hand into the doorway, and looked up to see the couple – my couple – rushing for the door in mid-argument.

“Well, where else is she suppose to go, Peter? She’s my niece for chrissake.”

“Your mom’s”

“Mom’s sick. You know that.”

“Thanks,” they said in unison. I smiled at them and stepped into the back of the lift. They were older than I remembered. Not much older, but older. Ten years at least... Thirty-five.

“What floor?” he asked.

“What?”

“You didn’t press your floor.”

“Sorry. Eleven.” I said, stepping forward, reaching for the control panel. As I did, the bag of oranges fell out of the bag and rolled to the floor.

“Let me get those,” he said, picking them up before I had time to think about kismet and coincidences.

“Sorry,” I said relieved that I didn’t have to bend over to get them. I moved the bag from my hip to in front of my chest.

“You’re on Eleven?” she said pressing the buttons for Eleven and Twelve

“Yeah. 1101”

“Wow. We’re in 1201. We’re right above you.”

He looked up at her with one eyebrow raised and a half smile, then stood up and placed the oranges back into my bag.

“Peter, there’s nothing wrong with being neighborly.” She punched his arm in jest.

He looked at me. “Do you need some help with this?”

“No,” I said, “I’ll be fine.

She turned to me. “We just moved in a few weeks ago.”

“Oh.” I felt silly.

“Yeah. We don’t know many people in this building.” She held on to his arm.

“I don’t either.”

“How long have you lived here?”

“Gloria?” He sighed.

“Oh, it’s okay.” I said to him before answering her question. “I’ve lived here for the past two years.”

“I guess the people aren’t really friendly?”

“Friendly, enough.”

If you say so. You’re the first person in the building who I’ve had a conversation with.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Say! Do you want to have drinks with us next weekend. On the 24th. We don’t know anyone in the city. You can invite someone if you would like.”

I felt myself squinting.

Her eyes opened a little. “I’m sorry. I hope I’m not being forward.”

“No, no. It’s fine.” I heard the elevator ding, but it did not stop. “I’d love to come. I guess I’m not accustomed to friendly neighbors either.”

She looked up then smiled. “Uh, oh!”

“What?”

“We passed your floor,” he said.

“Don’t worry. It happens all the time. That’s why I take the stairs.”

“Wow. The stairs. That’s impressive. No wonder we haven’t seen you before.”

She reached into her purse for her wallet and pulled out a cream colored card and placed it between two bananas. I read the inscription. Mathis Architecture and Landscaping. Gloria Mathis. “My private number is on the back,” she said as the elevator dinged and the doors opened.

“I’m Peter by the way,” he said stepping off the elevator after her. “Are you certain you don’t need any help with those bags?”

“No,” I said, “I’ll be fine. Nice to meet you both, Gloria. Peter. Oh, and I’m Mionne Gerro. Mionne Gerro in 1101. Right under you.”

“Nice meeting you, Mionne,” Peter said, waving goodbye.

“Next Saturday. The 24th. House warming. Don’t forget.” Gloria smiled and the elevator doors closed. I felt awful.

~

I counted myself lucky that the couple would probably never suspect anything from my actions on the elevator. I was clumsy and shy. My name was not Dion. Besides, they probably weren’t into that sort of thing. Hell, I didn’t even know if I was into that sort of thing.

~

The next week, I went back to BookEnds and tried to forget about the oranges and elevator and the Mathises by taking Eleanor’s advice. I was locked in the stock room scanning barcodes into our computer inventory when Edgar walked with his manuscript and a stack of hardbounds tucked under his right arm. “Hey,” I said. He waved, then he began to stack and sort them. We worked side by side in silence for thirty minutes until he brushed against me and was forced to apologize. “Sorry,” he said. It was in that moment that I decided to ask him.

“Edgar?”

“Yes?”

“Do you want to go to a get together with me? I don’t really know the couple. Met them in the elevator of my building, and...”

“Yeah,” he said quickly. His voice rose an octave, then he looked down. “When is it?”

I looked at him and raised my eyebrows.

“It’s not like I’m ever busy or anything,” he said.

“No?”

“No. I’m sure I won’t be busy. I just want to know when it’s going to be.”

“It’s Saturday.”

“What time?”

“Seven. I think. I don’t know. Dinner time. That’s seven, right?”

“Yeah.” He picked up a book and flipped through the pages. I noticed it was Nietzsche.

“Okay. Cool.” I took out a piece of paper. “Do you have a pen?”

“What?” He was still looking in the book.

“A pen? So I can write down my address. It’s not far from here. Two or three blocks west. You’re really doing me a huge favor. Are you sure you can make it?”

“Naw. No. It’s no problem at all.”

“I would go alone, but I don’t want to seem like a complete loser.”

“You’re not a loser,” he said.

I spent most of Saturday afternoon rifling through my closet and cursing myself for wearing my best outfit for the elevator ordeal. Nothing seemed to fit right or was too dressy or was dirty. I finally decided on a cotton blouse, a pair of high-waisted black shorts, and my favorite black and white oxford heels. I looked like the very adult version

of myself in preschool, except back then, my shorts went to my knees and my oxfords were flat. It was strange. I hadn't grown up. I had grown linear.

Edgar knocked on my door at 6:45. I was surprised that he had put in an effort. He was usually wearing baggy cargos. He looked nice in his wrinkled suit and five o'clock shadow. Disheveled, but nice.

I opened the door. "Hello," I said stepping into the hallway before he could step forward.

"I was going to bring flowers," he said, "but I forgot."

"No need for flowers."

"Yeah," he said looking me in the eyes for the first time since we had worked together, "but they would have been nice."

I noticed that he had nice eyes. "Yeah. I suppose."

"But I didn't forget this." He held up a bottle of Two Clover. "Too cheap?"

"No. That's my favorite." I pressed the elevator panel's up button.

"Really?"

"Yeah. I drink it all the time."

We rode the elevator up, and I knocked on the Mathis's door. Gloria greeted us with a smile. "Hiya!"

"Good evening."

"I'm so excited that you made it. Come on in."

I noticed that their apartment was nicer than mine; everything was shiny, even the wood was polished. There were no books or papers scattered on the floor. "I hope you don't mind. I bought a guest. This is Edgar."

“No. No problem. Good thing you did or it would have just been you, Peter, and me. Is this your boyfriend?”

“We’re not dating,” I said.

“We just work together.” Edgar added.

“Really? Y’all would make a cute couple. You can take a seat anywhere.”

“Yeah?” I felt Edgar looking at me.

“Gloria?” I heard Peter’s voice come into the room.

“Hey, honey. Mionne showed up and she bought a guest. This is...”

Edgar stuck out his hand and introduced himself. I watched Gloria disappear into the kitchen.

“Nice to meet you, Edgar. Have a seat,” he said as he sat in a wooden armchair.

Edgar and I sat on an oversized leather sofa, and from the kitchen I heard Gloria say, “They’re not dating.”

“Oh, really? So, how do y’all know each other?”

“We work together,” I said.

“Where at?”

“Bookends.”

“Bookends?” I saw him scan his memory. “Bookends. That’s that bookstore with the racy Saturday night readings, isn’t it.”

“Yeah,” said Edgar, “among other things.”

“I heard about the type of people they attract. Real freaks.”

Edgar looked at me.

“Not all of them are,” I said. “I usually go every Saturday. It doesn’t start until nine. Maybe we can go after dinner.”

Gloria returned to the room. “No thanks,” she said. She was holding a plate of crackers and cheese. “Dinner’s going to take a few moments. We’re having roasted duck in orange sauce, mixed vegetables, and for dessert... cheesecake.” She squealed a little.

“I bought some wine,” Edgar said holding up the bottle.

Peter took it and read the label. “Two Clover. I’ve never had any of this before. Let’s hope it doesn’t fall two clovers too short. Honey, go get us some glasses.”

“It’s pretty decent,” I said as Gloria returned to the kitchen.

Edgar attempted to restart the conversation. “Mionne is also a writer.”

“Really?” Peter leaned forward. “So, what do you write about?”

“Owls,” I said. “I also illustrate.”

“Owls? Are you some kind of scientist?”

“No. Children’s books.”

“That’s interesting.”

“She’s really good,” Edgar said. “All the kids love her.”

Gloria returned with the glasses. “Kids? You’re good with kids?”

“Yeah. I guess.”

“We’re trying to have a kid.”

“Maybe you’ve heard us,” Peter said. “I suspect all the neighbors hate us. That’s probably the reason no one has showed. We’ve been getting complaints.”

Gloria looked embarrassed. “Pete?”

“What? Don’t be such a prude. These guys know about sex. They work at Bookends.” He turned to us. “They’re all jealous.”

“Pete, stop it.”

“Oh, all right.” He stood and disappeared into the kitchen.

“Sorry about him,” Gloria said to me. “Hey, I just got a wild idea. My niece is suppose to come stay with us. We’re trying to fix up her room.”

“Yeah?”

“You say you draw, right?”

“Yeah.” I heard the cork to the wine bottle pop.

“Maybe you can help paint her room. Design us some stuff? We’ll pay you.”

I looked at Edgar for help, but he was looking at his feet. “I don’t know,” I said, “I’ve been sort of busy. I’m trying to write a novel.”

“A novel?” said Peter returning. “What about?” He poured wine into our glasses.

“I don’t know yet.”

“You should write a novel about owls. Except make it adult themed. Sex and death.”

“I’m sick of owls. I want to grow away from them. Owls are...”

Gloria stopped me. “Why did you even want to write about owls in the first place? They don’t seem like friendly animals. They give me willies.”

Peter drank from his glass and scowled as I attempted to explain. “When I was little, they were always outside of my window. I listened to them so much that I wanted to become one of them. I was an only child. I got lonely.”

“That’s odd. And you made a children's book out of that? I’ve never wanted to be anyone else.”

Peter gave her a look. “Gloria.”

“No,” I said picking up my glass. “It’s alright.” I couldn’t believe I wanted to fuck these people.

“Honey, come help me.” Gloria said taking her husband’s hand before she led him to the kitchen.

“We’ll be right back, guys. Ya’ll are in for a treat. Her duck is best.”

“I bet it is.” I rolled my eyes as I watched him follow her into the kitchen.

After a few minutes, Edgar said, “I know what you mean.” He looked at me. “I understand that. I’m an owl, too. It’s just like in your book. Owls are always asking, ‘Who?’”

“Yeah. Who? Who, indeed.” I heard someone in the kitchen open the silverware drawer.

“I just don’t want to work in a bookstore for the rest of my life. Networking with those who have made it, reading their books and wondering if anything I write will be good enough. I wish I was one of those guys. I want to be like them.”

“Me too,” I said.

“You wanna get outta here?” He stood up and walked toward the door.

I followed him. When I passed the kitchen, I heard a pan clatter to the floor. It was followed by a shrieking Gloria. “What did you do?!” I smiled, knowing it was the duck.

Another Kind of Romance

Novelty

Atomic and automatic, she has a big box of novelty; all the toys are wind and crank. They make for hours of play, and although the pieces don't quite belong, she makes them snap into place... easily. These plastic playthings were molded in the Valley of the Strange as perfect prototypes of human form without sapience or sentience – just for her. And just like her, they are twenty-first century artifacts. I call her the Lonely Autosex.

Reverie

It started with a crescendo... so quiet, almost silent. Slow and steady, slow and steady until it reached a consistent rhythm. And then it gained speed and kept going until there was enough vibration to sustain its existence in sound and in form. The continuous hum, that constant buzzing, shaped itself organic, into a bulbous mass of circles, ovals, crescents, spheres, rings—variations on a theme that shrank and expanded. Yellow-pink fat, brown of marrow, white of bone. All in and out, up and down, up... faster, faster, faster, until... zenith, then down vocalized by a trill. A trill traced around the edges with blood and flesh. Flesh, carved. Steady breathing. Every now and again, now and then, a grunted thrust. Satisfied.

PART II

The Misandric Complex

Real Flesh Eaters

You had better stay in at night. There are cannibals out there, real flesh eaters. And they'd do all types of nasty things. That tight little body of yours is begging for it, to be used and eaten. I bet they lick their lips in the daylight. Well, nighttime is when they bear their teeth and sharpen knives. The other girls have been poked and prodded already, but not you. You're whole and wholesome. Those emaciated bitches are nothing but bones. You're flesh. You're ripe, so you better stay in.

Bitches

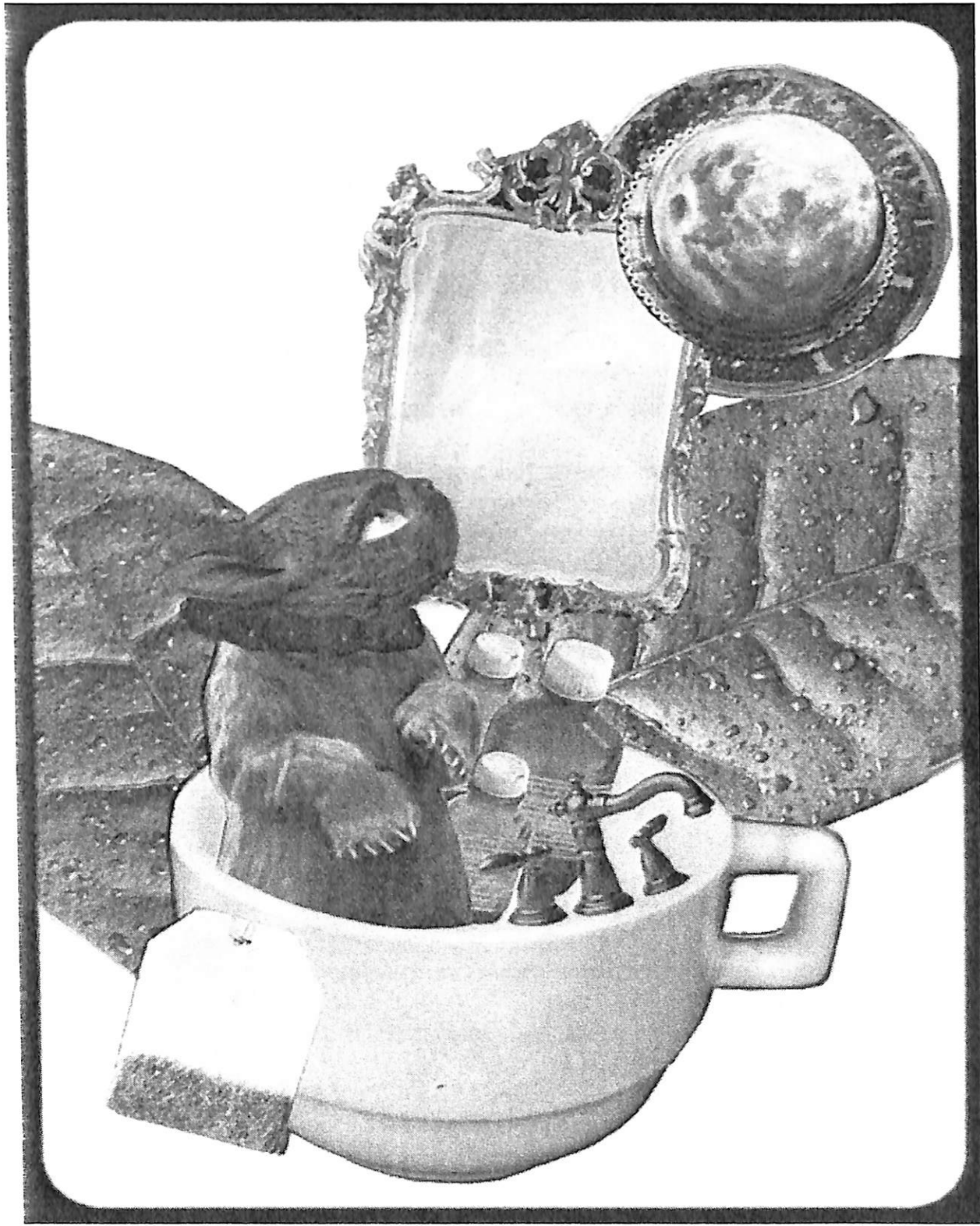
I know about the starry-eyed girls who cry about the moon. It's true that they are all virgins who wait in the gardens with legs spread and who turn themselves in circles before they lie in their beds. But there is good reason that they are left lonely and left to themselves; the boys are afraid that they'll bite, because when they spread their lips and say, "Yes, no, maybe... Please," you can sometimes see fangs.

Kinda Strange

There is something strange about Richard. He told me that every girl deep down inside wants to be used, even if it's just a little... like being taken for their money or tricked out of their love. He said I was the type of girl that wanted to be used in the most

horrible way, the best way. I don't. But I think that Richard is the type of guy that wants to be used... in the most horrible way, in the best way. I just smiled at him, because it'll happen soon enough. I guess I'm kinda strange, too.

La Luna, the redux



SEE PLATE II

La Luna

The house that Capaitha Moore shared with her grandparents sat on half an acre of land and was surrounded by thick woods that ignored the rotting split-rail fence used to mark property lines and encroached into the yard by distributing vines of kudzu, honeysuckle, and blackberry that never seemed to die—not even in the frost. It seemed to Capaitha that the forest plotted against them and crept toward the house during the night. One morning after her uncle had chopped and burned the undergrowth back, she noticed five or six small vines had twisted their way out of the ashes and into the rosebushes where they wrapped themselves up the base and around several thorny branches.

That winter, the flowerbeds in the front lawn were naked except for those rosebushes, which only produced a one or two blooms at a time, and for the ever-dying bases of the bulb flowering plants that would not revive themselves and bloom until the middle of the coming spring. The plastic neon dragonflies and hummingbirds that twirled their wings click-tick-click-click-click in the winter wind tried in vain to escape the dead stalks of daylilies, pale pink roses, and approaching weeds.

During the spring and summer months when the garden was in bloom, one hardly noticed that the screen of the wrap-around porch was riddled with small tears repaired with duct tape. Or that the red brick chimney sat askewed on the rusty tin roof. Or that the tacked on tiles of faux brick siding had begun to rot. But the whole property was defiled by the winter season, which accentuated every inadequacy of the house while erasing the charm of the front lawn.

Three or four piles of decaying acorn and sweet gum leaves rested near a spot used to burn trash, the springs of an old mattress still visible. A dusty white picnic bench and three wrought iron chairs painted green and brown to mimic the patina of copper sat near the muddy patch used for her grandmother's vegetable garden.

Her grandfather had laid pieces of broken stone slabs into an unrefined walkway that lead straight from the end of the gravel paved road to the door of the house. Like imitation gargoyles, a dirty ceramic gnome and chipped porcelain cat sat on either side of the concrete steps welcoming visitors inside the modest two bedroom, one bath.

Few visitors ever came, on purpose or by accident. Her uncle. An aunt. Someone from town trying to find a short cut to the interstate. Sometimes Capaitha thought she could hear a car honk its horn or the sound of a large truck as it groaned down the highway. But mostly she could only hear wind that seemed even more destructive than the winter because it was louder and more frightening than the woods because it was invisible. The wind worked against the house, too, mostly by ripping down the white lattice of the porch and throwing it into the grass and mud. It had fallen so many times, it was stained a grayish blue-green.

Variants of the same dingy color found their way inside the house. It was the natural color of the unpainted wicker love seat that decorated the front porch and the color of the old wool couch that sagged in front of the television in the living room. When the sunlight hit the windows at a particular angle in the morning, it was the color of the blue and white delftware china that sat in her grandmother's cupboard. The black paint on most of the figurines in the hallway had faded to the same color, so that the spotted cow knick-knacks looked to be covered with moss. It was the color of the water

spots on the ceiling of the bathroom where Capaitha had blindly made her way that morning.

Holding the right side of her head, hesitant to look into the mirror, Capaitha focused her attention on the white porcelain sink. She stared at the tarnished brass faucet before she turned the nozzle and watched it spit hot water and steam into the drain. She placed her hand underneath, withdrew it, and adjusted the temperature. The water was still too hot, but she closed her eyes, and splashed it on her face, where it stung her dingy skin. She scrubbed her face with her hands, and with her finger tips poked the area around her left eye, feeling to see if there was some discernable difference in the size or position of her features. There wasn't.

Still unsure, she turned the water off, lifted her head, and opened her eyes. She expected to see herself as some sort of monster, some beast whose appearance manifested the effects of the pain she felt. Pain like that didn't manifest itself without physical proof; it meant that some change in form was being made, that things were being rearranged. It didn't come without bleeding. But there was nothing significant; just her own puffy, red eyed reflection staring back at her. "Not the best look," she said, turning off the water.

She could not tell where it originated from, only that it was there—deep and throbbing. It cloaked the area on the right side of her head from her temple to her neck. It felt that someone had beaten her in the face, that something was trying to eat through her eardrum into her brain. She thought she tasted something metallic. She opened her mouth, rotated her jaw, and felt three consecutive pops that made her cry out.

Capaitha clenched her jaw and ran her tongue over her teeth, feeling their glossiness. She smacked her lips at the bitterness of the morning and reached for her

toothbrush. She grabbed it by the head and stroked the bristles with her thumb. She looked at it and put it back in its stand.

She turned on the cold water and cupped her hands under the faucet. She sipped the water, gargled, rubbed her index finger against her teeth, and spit the water into the sink. She repeated the action, this time swallowing. She coughed and it felt as if there were fire in her ears; she held them until the burning sensation passed, and the only the throbbing pain in her forehead remained.

“Stop it,” she said, closing her eyes. “Stop it. Stop it.” She pressed her fingers to her temple and twisted them into her head. She took a deep breath, and considered going into the kitchen for a knife to cut the pain out. She balled her hands into fists and sat them on either side of the sink. She stared at the mirror. “So old,” she said, “you look so old.”

Capaitha leaned forward until she felt the edge of the counter press into her stomach. She touched the mirror to wipe the reflection away, only to touch palms with it. She leaned back; the reflection did the same.

She smiled, and watched herself massage the apples of her cheeks. She tapped them with her fingertips. When they were red, she let her hands fall down to her neck. She grabbed her clavicle and pulled hard. Feeling a small amount of relief, she pulled again, but this time, the pain only seemed to increase. She groaned and scratched down her chest, almost ripping the red buttons from her grandmother’s oversized flannel nightgown.

Her reflection looked sad. “I don’t hate you,” she said, closing her eyes. She wished she were a monster. She wiggled her nose. If she were a monster, then she would

have a snout. She pursed her lips; she would have fangs and horns sprouting from the crown of her head like a young buck. In her dreams she was always a monster, one with coarse hair that covered her face and legs. She had horns that grew out of her temples and curved themselves upwards, into crescents; they were brown and rough like bark. Last night they were different; they grew downwards and twisted themselves around her neck, plunged themselves into her chest.

If she were a monster like that, then she could show people how she felt; they would have to believe her then, instead of trying to convince her she was okay. She was not alright, and she wanted physical proof. A river of bloody earwax. A pulsating bump on her temples. A sunken face. A swollen neck. But it was always just her plain ole' self, alone in the house with no one to help. Maybe she didn't want any, didn't need any.

Some people said that if you lost all hope you would die. She wondered if she had reached that point. She put her hand over her heart. No. Still alive. Maybe she was going to be all right. "Capaitha," she said, "you're crazy. No one loves you. No one will. Why? Because you're crazy. The people that did love you didn't understand. Now they're gone. Now you're alone. You'll never make it, because you're crazy."

Feeling tears well up in her eyes, she balled up a fist. "See," she said, hitting herself in the chest, "Crazy. Only crazy people want to hurt themselves. Only crazy people want to be freaks." She hit herself, again. "Don't cry. Don't cry, you big baby." She lowered the tone of her voice until it was deep like her grandfather's, "Baby Bear, don't you cry, now. You can take care of yourself. Everything will be just fine."

She smiled again. "Yep, Grandpa. Everything will be just right." She laughed as she considered the possibility that her body was ignoring her death, the same way it

ignored a manifestation of physical deformity. If so, maybe she would go on living forever; her body not understanding, never growing old, and never giving out. Her mind would shut down and she would die, but not her body. After all, she thought, you could keep something alive after the brain died—with machines—if the body was intact. Like the coma that her grandmother had slipped into after her grandfather's death.

It was strange that people could actually die of heartbreak and that being sad could weaken the heart muscles so that baking holiday cookies could stress someone into a heart attack. Last night, Capaitha had dreamt about her, too. Her grandmother had stood catatonic in her green gingham dress and blue apron holding a batch of gingerbread men.

“Grandma,” she said. When she got no response, she shouted her name.

“Grandma! Grandma! Grandma, I just...”

“Shhh.” Her grandmother moved. “Grandpa's sleeping,” she said as she stepped towards the door to the living room.

Even her grandmother had wanted her to shut up.

“You're crazy,” Capaitha said again, feeling nauseous. She stumbled to the toilet, bent down, and waited. Her stomach was empty, and nothing came up. She closed the lid and sat down. She yawned and felt the pressure grow in her ears. “It'll pass,” she said, “It always passes.” She closed her eyes and felt the room spin.

Oh, god, she thought as she slunk to the floor and curled into the fetal position. She turned her head toward the door and felt the room rush in on itself. She closed her eyes again and rolled onto her back and concentrated on the sounds of the moaning wind

and the scratching of the trees against the roof, which reminded her of her dream the night before.

~

In her dream, she was in the woods and she couldn't move her arms and she felt strange. Every surface was covered with white frost, and it was unbearably cold, as if someone had rubbed her body with ice. Below her feet were two strange dogs. One had long pointy ears that dragged the ground; the other, buck teeth. They limped closer, until they were able to nuzzle her feet. They rubbed their muzzles on her calves and licked the backs of her knees. Then they jumped on her attempting to tear away her clothes. Their claws scratched her as they lost their grip. When they slid down, they drug her body with them, until her feet were plunged into the earth.

Giving up, they lay beneath her, rubbing their paws against their noses. She felt the wind shake the tree and heard it whistle. The dog with the large teeth lifted his head up. Capaitha expected him to howl, but instead he lowered his head and coughed, shaking his teeth out. He looked up to her and grinned, showing her the blackness of his gum. The dog with the long ears covered his eyes with his paws. From him, Capaitha heard the muffled laughter of a child.

She opened her mouth to scream, and a long green vine twisted itself out of her throat down to her feet; it stopped a few feet from the edge of a pond. She smelled iron and tasted metal in her mouth. Blood ran down the length of the vine. When it reached the tip, it exploded into a blossom that unfolded its petals, revealing a teddy bear with human hands. Multiple black stitches across its limbs and belly were still visible, and cotton sprang from a gape in its stomach. She looked into his large, red eyes as he flailed

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his arms around his head. Her reflection in them was normal. Then he clapped his hands together and vibrated. “Beep,” he said, robotic and shrill, “Beep. Beep. Beep.”

Capaitha threw the covers off her body and felt the chill of the day through her grandmother’s nightgown. As she lay on her side, she adjusted her head on the pillow and looked at the buzzing alarm clock. It blinked 12:35PM. She was grateful that she had missed the morning. Mornings always lasted too long, and there wasn’t much she could do or would do or had to do.

She rolled onto her back and pulled the comforter over her head. As Capaitha lay there she noticed the dull throbbing on the right side of her face. “Not again,” she said, aloud, rolling over. She pressed her face into the oversized pillow and inhaled a faint musty scent. She took another breath and smelled rosewater perfume. Another breath revealed menthol. Her fingers traced the pink embroidered flowers on the pillowslip.

She rolled onto her back and stretched her arms over her head, grabbed the two of the cold popper posts, and pulled herself toward the headboard. Then she rolled up and out of bed, feeling the coolness of the hardwood through the worn bottoms of her grandfather’s wool socks as she made her way into the bathroom.

~

The pain finally subsided, but she didn’t want to take any chances. She bent down to open the cabinet and stared at the supplies of shampoo, soap, lotion, and perfume. She reached inside and pulled out a pink and yellow straw basket that contained old medicine, grateful that her grandmother never threw anything away. “You never know when you’re going to get sick.”

Capaitha sat in front of the cabinet, crossed her legs, and scanned the labels of the green and orange translucent bottles. Plaquenil for rheumatoid arthritis. Sulfonylurea and insulin for diabetes. Hypovase and atenolol for high blood pressure. She found a bottle of cough syrup, opened it, and drank straight from the bottle. Gagging at the taste, she rubbed her tongue on the sleeve of the nightgown. Thick cherry flavored alcohol and Red Dye No. 5.

She rattled through the basket once more until she found a bottle of Vicodin. She bit her lower lip and read the medicine bottle out loud in her best doctor's voice. "750 mg acetaminophen. 7.5 mg hydrocodone. Blah. Blah. For back pain; take one tablet as needed; max of four tablets daily. Blah. May be taken with food. Do not exceed recommended dose. Non refillable. Blah. Blah. Blah..." She opened the bottle and pouted, disappointed to find only three pills.

"This will have to do," she said, emptying the contents of the bottle into her hand. She twirled the tiny pellets in her fingers before she stood up and placed them in her pocket. She took a final look at herself in the mirror and stepped into the hallway.

As she walked toward the kitchen, she stroked the walls. Pretending her hand was a racecar, she drove her fingers under the picture frames in an imaginary path. She paused when she reached her bedroom and touched the doorknob. She let go, not wanting to see the clothes and books thrown on the floor or the trunk and suitcase that should have been packed two days before.

I can't go back, she thought. It's not as if it mattered anyway. She wasn't invested; no one took interest in her; she made acquaintances, not friends. She always imagined them judging her.

She walked past her door and continued along her imaginary path by walking her fingers in between the dingy collection of farm animal figurines. When she reached the kitchen, she told herself not to step on the light linoleum tiles. "That's the water," she said, reviving another childhood game. She skipped along the dark tiles until she reached the sink.

She took the pills from her pocket, placed them on the counter, and reached for a black coffee cup and the triangular canister decorated with a green and gold paisley pattern. Capaitha pressed the rusty area on top of the can where the enamel had fallen off and it popped open. She took out a few bags of store brand black tea, closed the can, and uncovered the sugar bowl. After placing two spoonfuls of sugar into the cup, she licked the residual granules off the spoon, smacked her lips at the sweetness, and placed it back into the bowl for another spoonful. She smiled; her grandmother would have scoffed at that.

Capaitha filled the coffee pot with water, turned it on. She imagined her grandmother saying, "There's no reason for a dark kitchen." Listening to the slow gurgle of heating water, she opened the blinds to the window over the sink and stared into the back yard. She held her head down and closed her eyes as light rushed into the room. After a few moments she lifted her head up and squinted, adjusting her eyes to the brightness.

She pursed her lips and turned her head to the side in surprise of the snow. The whiteness of it seemed to illuminate everything. She felt the cold air radiating off the window pane as she gazed towards the edge of the property watching the makeshift rabbit pen for any sign of movement. The two-by-four structure rocked as something furry came

into view through the chicken wire. They're probably cold, she thought, I'll bring them in tonight. Then she wondered what her grandmother would have to say about that. She didn't care.

When she was in the fourth grade, she remembered that all the girls in her class had gotten china dolls and lace dresses for their birthdays, while she had to make do with hand-me-down teddy bears and secondhand cotton frocks. Except for the bunnies everything she owned had been used, was already old. "Baby bear," her grandpa had said, "these are for you. One from me and one from grandma." But that had been over ten years prior. She had long since stopped petting them and only ventured to their pen for feedings which had begun to burden her.

Unlike the stuff animals and dresses, she couldn't dispose of the rabbits after she outgrew them. Once or twice she thought of letting them starve, but every other day she had gone out to make sure they were okay. And they always were because they were like her that way: "Always okay."

Content that the rabbits were fine, Capaitha looked beyond them. Although the sky was blue, it was cloudy. She could tell it was windy by how the trees swayed in the distance. They seemed to be waving at her with their spindly fingers... hands with fingers sprouting fingers, and those fingers growing fingers up and out until they branched together, clapping. Sometimes, so hard they snapped their tips off.

She wondered what great celebration to which they were looking forward. Perhaps they rejoiced the coming of an imperceptible storm. "They stir the clouds in the sky," she said, pretending to be an accomplished poet, "as they try to stretch themselves from the cold ground." Then she frowned. She was afraid that they would succeed. She

imagined them walking on their roots, advancing toward the house. They would overtake the clearing and crush the rabbit pen as they stomped forward.

The coffee pot stopped. A dark kitchen, she thought, closing the blinds. She poured water into her cup and in it placed three bags of tea. After she stirred, she held the spoon to her lips and tasted the brew. Not sweet enough. She reached for the sugar bowl and felt the familiar pressure above her right brow.

Capaitha selected two pills from the counter, took them, and placed the third into the pocket of the nightgown. Then she picked up her cup and sugar bowl, and made her way into the dining room, where she sat at the table. She adjusted herself to her seat, scooted her chair forward, and poured even more sugar into her cup.

She felt around her pocket until she found the last pill, which she rolled between her fingers. “And this little pill,” she said before placing it on her tongue. She took another sip of tea, and twirled the spoon in the cup. She sat there for a while, stirring and sipping until one of the tea bags broke open. She thought about the time her grandmother had tried to teach her how to read tea leaves, insisting that something was wolf and another thing was a calf. Everything had looked the same to her.

She watched as flakes of tea floated on the surface of the water making the drink nothing more than a soupy mess. She wondered what it could mean as she removed the bags. “Waste not, want not” she said, lifting the cup to her lips and swallowed the saccharine grit. It scratched her throat, and she coughed. She wiped her arm on the sleeve of the gown, leaving a crimson impression of her lips on the cloth. As she leaned her chair back on its hind legs, she placed the two remaining bags over her eyes. She

balanced herself that way for what seemed like hours, waiting for the deep sleep that Vicodin and cough syrup was known to bring.

Soon she heard the familiar sound of a car door in the front yard. She rocked the chair forward, pushed the chair back, and stood up. "Not today," Capaitha said, already knowing that it was her Uncle Henry coming for his one of his weekly visits that were meant to prove to her that people still cared. "Not yet," she said rushing into the living room. Every visit meant that she would have to leave, and leaving meant the phantom smell of antiseptic cleanliness and wax paper skin and steady breathing supplied by the accordion pump of a machine they would eventually make her shut down.

She opened a tiny slit in the venetian blinds and saw the shiny blue 1950's pick-up with mud-splattered chrome hubcaps. The door opened and a large pair of black boot swung out. The cab rocked as her uncle slid out the door, the edges of his tan overcoat touched the snow covered ground as he made his way to the porch. She let the blinds snap together and sank to the floor.

She heard the screen door squeak, and felt the vibrations from his footsteps as he moved toward the door. Then came the trademark *bang, bang, bang* of her uncle's continuous knock.

"Capaitha!" he said. "Girl, you in there?"

Where else could she be? She held her knees to her chest, and leaned her head against the base of the window.

"Capaitha! It's your Uncle Henry. Open the door, baby bear." He continued knocking on the door.

She rolled herself onto her knees and peaked out the window.

“Must be sleep,” she heard her uncle say as he searched his pockets for paper and a pen.

He began to scrawl a note, and Capaitha let the slats fall back into place. “Hurry up,” she said, “Just go away.”

Soon she heard footsteps, followed by an opening door, and car engine. She waited until she was sure he was gone before she opened the door. The cold cut through the baggy flannel nightgown as the wind blew. She grabbed the note from the wicker patio seat and went back inside. The note read, “Will come by tomorrow. Be ready to visit grandma. Keep warm. Love, Uncle Henry.”

Yeah, she thought, tomorrow. “Just another day,” she said, walking down the hallway. She yawned and stopped in front of the shelf of woodland knick-knacks and pulled the plaid flannel dress over her head; the cool hair hardened her nipples. She let the gown fall to the floor and stared at the ceramic farmers before she stepped over it. She walked a few paces towards the bathroom and turned around, expecting the stone eyes to have followed her, but they hadn’t. She shrugged, turned, and walked into the bathroom.

When she looked in the mirror, she noticed that although her eyes felt heavy, they looked better. Sighed and said, “Capaitha, girl, you’re a mess. A mess of a mess.” Then she smiled, bearing her teeth. She kept her face that way and took note of their yellowing. She stuck out her tongue and saw that a thin brown layer had formed on its surface. She rolled it and sucked in air.

“Nasty,” she said reaching up to take the rubber band from her ponytail. She shook her head, and then mussed her hair with her fingers until it framed her head like a crown. She looked wild. And excited. With both hands she stroked her hair back and let

her fingers slide over her face and around to the back of her neck. She massaged the area before continuing downward. She stroked her prominent clavicle with her left hand, and pinched her nipples with her right. After a few moments, she let both hands fall to her side and stared at the small frame in the bathroom mirror.

She scowled at herself. Then she sucked in her stomach, admiring how far it sunk in and how her ribcage left a visible impression on her skin. She took her fingers and stroked them. "One, two, three, six. Four, five, six, twelve." she said before she lost her place. In annoyance, grabbed them and pulled hard in an attempt to break herself. "Look at you," Capaitha said. She let her voice fall into a whisper. "Nobody would want you like this."

She let go. That won't do, she thought as leaned over the sink and pressed her soft lips against the reflective glass. Then she bent over and opened the cabinet for bubble bath. She carried it to the tub, kneeled down, closed the drain, and poured half the bottle into the tub. She turned on the water and watched as the bubbles expanded until they reached the faucet. Capaitha turned off the water, stood, and sat on the edge of the tub. She turned around and sank her feet into the foam.

She stared at the soft black hair on her thighs. "You could at least shave them," she said.

"Why?" she responded to herself.

"Why not? Don't you want to feel pretty?"

"What's the point?" she said and stomped her feet in the tub, splashing water onto the floor. She yawned. Her jaw popped. "I don't even feel like being clean."

She got out of the tub, grabbed a towel and dried her legs. She went to the mirror to look at her reflection again, but it had steamed over. She pursed her lips, and blinked hard two times before opening her eyes wide. She yawned again and walked into the hallway.

She started to touch the walls, but she didn't feel like raising her arms. She went into the living room and sat on the sofa in front of the TV. She looked strange in the black reflection of the screen with her legs open. And the way she sat made rolls in her otherwise flat stomach. "Disgusting," she said. The wool couch made her back itch.

She adjusted herself and watched the VCR's clock turn 2:01. Another minute, she thought, another minute gone. In a few seconds, another minute until it reached an entire wasted hour, day week, and so on. They would probably find her sitting there in some cartoonish catatonic state: her eyes displaying the broken analog clock. Or maybe she would be dead. She considered writing a letter, but she didn't have anything to say. Beside she would have to move to get paper and a pen. Her arms and legs felt heavy. No. Better stay.

"A proper eulogy for me would read something like this," she said, smiling. She sank into the sofa and closed her eyes. They would find her there, her skin fused to the scratchy wool, her hair braided into the fiber. She imagined her uncle knocking on the door. "Capaitha!" He would have to break it down with a log: "Heave Ho!" It would take him a few moments, then he would see her. He would take his axe and "Chop! Chop!" Maybe his aim would be off... When she opened her eyes, it was 3:04.

"Another minute and then some," she said scooting off the couch. She stood up. Still sleepy, she swayed. "A proper eulogy for me," she said and closed her eyes.

She took a few steps forward, opened them, and walked to her grandparent's room. "An unmade bed," she said, thinking of her grandma and straightening the bed covers. Then, she crouched in front of the old cedar chest that sat at its foot and opened it. The hinges squeaked. She inhaled the spicy aroma, as she dug through the white linens, towels, and her grandfather's toy collection. She sighed when she reached the stack of yellowing papers in hopes of finding the program to her grandfather's funeral; she removed them and sat them in her lap. As she shuffled through the funeral programs, the monochromatic faces of aunts and uncles that she never knew grinned at her from pre-mortem glamour shots, most taken before they reached old age.

It wasn't there. It should have been; her grandmother collected everything. She began to search for the death certificate. In vain she removed one priceless, useless knick-knack after another—a box of bottle caps, a harmonica, a bag of fake spiders and snakes, and three or four pieces of wooden dollhouse furniture—until she reached something soft at the bottom of the chest. She let her finger stroke it before she lifted up her grandfather's black bear pelt.

She smiled as she hugged it and held it to her nose half-expecting to smell her grandfather and not cedar. The taxidermied head hung over her shoulder. She stroked it and stood up, walked back into the living room, and sat in her grandfather's favorite leather chair. The leather felt cool and soft against her skin.

She covered her body with the pelt and stared into the eyes of the bear. "She stroked its muzzle, tracing a path between his eyes that frayed his fur. Then she formed her hand into a gun, and pointed it in between his eyes. "Bang, bang," she said. "You're dead. You're dead aren't you big guy? Look at you."

Capaitha yawned and reached for his paws and rubbed his sharp claws. She lifted them up, and shook them. “Arrrrg,” she said, “they call me baby bear. They call me baby bear and everything is just right. Everything is alright.” She giggled and tried to blink the heaviness from her eyes.

The soft suede-like interior of the bear was warm against her skin. She wrapped her legs around it. “You’re a handsome fella. You shouldn’t make such an ugly face.” She stared at his pink and black gums, the yellow teeth, and kissed him.

~

Capaitha woke at 9:16 to the smell of cedar and sweat. When she moved, the back of her legs stuck to the chair. So, she lay there, sticky and stinking. She thought she heard a crash coming from the backyard, but couldn’t be sure because of the ringing in her ears. Her stomach churned and she groaned. She rolled to her side and waited for the nauseous feeling to pass. The furious eyes of the bear stared into her own, and he snarled. She pushed him off of her and ran into the darkness of the hallway.

He lay crumpled on the floor as she bumped into the shelf. A porcelain woodsman tumbled onto the floor, bounced in front of her, and broke into two pieces. She stumbled over them and made her way into the bathroom, switching on the light.

She walked toward the toilet and was lifting its lid when she first vomited. It missed the bowl and splashed onto the seat and the floor. Her throat burned as she slumped to the floor, closed her eyes, and heaved until it felt as if she were going to expel her stomach.

When she was finished, she lay beside the putrid liquid. The bathroom floor was cool against her cheek. Little comfort to her feverish body. Her right nipple grazed the

floor and hardened as she tasted the bitter grit in her mouth. When she felt something on her hands, she opened her eyes.

The vomit had run off the gray tile and into the grout where it traveled down, forming a green pool around her fingers. She tapped them and watched tiny ripples coarsen through it. She lifted herself up for a better look. Brown grainy flecks and red spots swirled around a white frothy spot. The foam shaped itself as the rest of the liquid spread out. She read the slow, osmotic movement as the wind howled and a figure of a rabbit leaped across the floor. She remembered the crash, the howling wind, the cold, the cage at the base of thick woods.

“They’re old,” she said, thinking of the bunnies. She stumbled to her feet. In the hallway, she grabbed for the walls and knocked down family photos as she staggered. When she made it to the living room door, she hesitated before she opened it. The wind stung her naked flesh. She looked back, grabbed the bear pelt, and draped it around her head and body as she stepped onto the porch.

She noticed it was raining when she reached the front steps. “They’re so old,” she said, “You have to go.” She walked past the gnome and cat, into the melting snow. She couldn’t see, but she knew the land well enough to make it pass the flower bed to her grandmother garden. She stepped into the bare plot, feeling the mud slide between her toes.

From here, she fumbled to the rotting fence and followed it to the spot where the rabbit cage should have been. She imagined that there was something lurking behind the trees. She stopped and looked around; her eyes adjusted to the dark. She stepped forward a few feet and her foot hit something hard.

The smell of cedar chips and rabbit excrement were unmistakable. She walked around the cage that lay on its side with its door open. Wrapped in a section of chicken wire that had come unhinged was a rabbit, its dark fur speckled with bright red dots. Capaitha touched it wanting to feel the familiar vibration of breathing. It didn't move. Despite this, she attempted to undo the wire.

“Impossible.”

She looked around and saw the second rabbit huddled in the corner on the opposite side. It wiggled its nose. Capaitha reached for it and lifted it by its forelegs with her right hand. It shrieked. She stroked his fur and felt the warm stickiness of clotting blood. The gash on its belly was large. She stuck a finger inside and the rabbit's shrill cry was carried away as the wind began to blow harder. Capaitha removed her finger and covered the wound with her hands as she embraced the bunny.

“You're okay,” she said, holding him to her chest. “You're going to be all right. Just a few scratches.” The rabbit shivered against her as she kissed his forehead. “Don't be afraid. I won't eat you.” She made her way back to the house, adjusting the bear pelt that slipped from her shoulder.

An Exquisite Corpse

Her Considerations

They talked about pity and respect as if they are the same. Their beautiful, smiling lips, pink and perfect move up and down, speaking of things that have no real consequence to anyone, not even themselves. Only the rich can afford to be anything worthwhile and only the beautiful are truly respected. Intelligence can only get you so far, especially if the body is lazy and the mind, fragile.

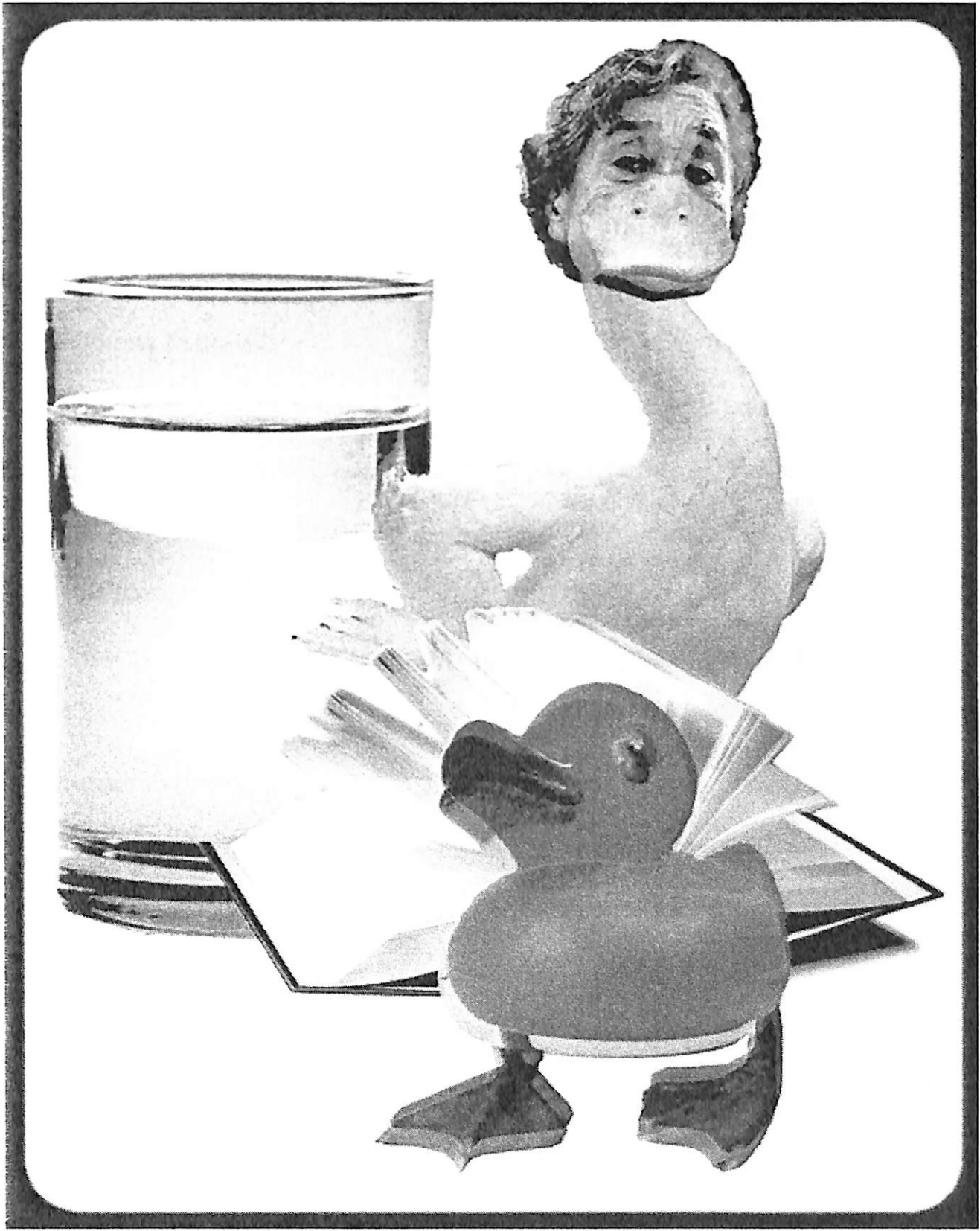
She had been sick for quite a long time, but no one spoke of it. They had suspected, but were too afraid of the truth to confirm their suspicions. So while they speculated about her failing health, she was quietly dying, and while she died she watched them chatter and gossip like little hens. Their chit-chat was a constant annoyance, but she couldn't do anything about shutting them up. Since they thought she was crazy, any outburst on her part would end with her being locked up somewhere in a padded room. Permanent hug. She choose to keep what little dignity she was afforded. Looking and listening, quietly waiting to die.

Deferred

It was strange how everyone at the service talked about how special she was, how she was going places, and how they loved her. The same people who had never spoken to her, had stopped talking to her, and had lost touch. Their condolences were not appreciated. The dead cannot appreciate.

The dead can do nothing but lie in wait. Death is an eternity of patience that can never be fulfilled in action. She was a body of potential energy and ambitions stored in a box six feet underneath their feet. They stood on her dreams... sunned them with fake smiles, watered them with tears. And they grew until the wood began to rot and the worms crept in.

The Swan Misconception, the redux



SEE PLATE III

The Swan Misconception

Dorothea could see the damage from the doorway of the bedroom. The right side of her mother's face was crooked and her ashen lips hung open allowing spittle to run from the corner of her mouth onto the brownish-yellow pillowcase. The sound of her mother's heavy breathing was masked by the rumbling of the air conditioner that produced more noise than cold and the heat of the room caused the pungent smell of illness to hang in the air.

"I should have gotten here sooner," she said as she sat in the chair opposite the oak bed. She leaned forward, hunched her shoulders, and waited. For an hour her hands gripped the oversized black purse that spread itself over her lap causing the top of her thighs to sweat.

She had never felt pretty enough or poised enough to be her mother's child. She didn't know her father but her own complexion and countenance told her that he was a dark skinned man with a strong chin. Quiet and studious. He was squat but not fat, sturdy. Creative, stubborn. His nose was bulbous and his eyes were hazel. His hair, coarse. It was the same kind of coarse hair that she spent all afternoon straightening with a hot comb, an effort being undone by the damp heat of the room.

She stood and walked to the vanity. The mirror revealed her face shiny, slick with makeup and sweat; too much eye shadow; lips too red. Her dress was ruined, too. Sweat stains bled through the blouse and appeared under the arms of the yellow jacket. "It's too hot." Dorothea sighed and walked to the air conditioner. She stood there fanning the tepid air into her face and was reminded of the ladies in library 30 years before.

~

Screaming children ran around the punch stained paper table cloth and cookie crumbed floor. Her mother had pushed her forward and saying, "Go play with the other kids, Dorothea. Have some fun for once in your life." Then she went to sit with the other mothers, the other pretty women in pastel sundresses, who talked about the accomplishments of their children while fanning themselves because the air in the library had been out for weeks and the county supervisor had yet to approve the budget for amenities. Their red finger tips pointed and their red lipsticked lips formed perfect roses as they "oohed" and "ahhed" about how Johnny was the MVP of the little league team or how Patty got straight A's or how Darrel had the opening lines in the kindergarten play. They talked about Jenny too. They didn't just point at Jenny. They called her over to them. Delicate, bouncy Jenny. Little Jenny. Little Jenny in her lilac dress and unscoffed white patent leather Mary Janes. She was special even amongst the special, because she had just been crowned Little Miss in the Sumpton County Little Miss Pageant.

She sat behind her mother, hunched over in the middle of an aisle, and peered over the pages of human and animal anatomy drawings and watched her mother stroke the girl's hair. She waited for her mother to turn around and point to her in her blue jeans and dusty grey tennis shoes. She imagined the things that she did well of which her mother would be proud. "Dorothea brought me flowers. Dorothea drew my portrait the other day. Dorothea wrote me a poem."

Her mother didn't even glance her way. Instead she turned to Jenny's mother and said, "I'm glad she likes the dress. Dorothea doesn't like dresses. She's not a swan like Jenny. She's like the duck in the story. She'll have to grow into herself. Fingers crossed."

Afterwards she asked, "Am I pretty, Momma?" And was met with a "Sometimes" that caused her to cast her eyes down where they stayed until she was scrutinized for looking at her feet. "Sit up straight, Dorothea. Look at people when they talk to you. These folks gone think something's wrong with you." So she looked up and after awhile her mother whispered, "Don't look so scared and crazy. Fix your face, child." But she never could.

~

"Garegha," said a voice behind Dorothea, "Garegha ith at oo?" It sounded like someone drowning. She turned and faced her mother.

"Momma. I'm here."

"Agga. Agga."

"Water? You want some water, Momma?" she said, already reaching for the plastic pitcher on the nightstand.

Her mother's head lolled to the left, lifted up and fell down, lifted up, fell down. "Gges"

"You don't have to talk, Momma. Don't stress yourself. Everything is going to be okay," she said as she pouring water into a paper cup. She turned her mother's head, put the cup to her lips and gently tilted it. Dorothea watched the muscles of her spotted neck as she swallowed and continued to pour until she heard her mother choke. Dorothea

removed the cup from her lips and watched as she coughed thick mucus onto the yellow bed spread.

“Sorry, Momma,” she said reaching for a tissue on the nightstand.

“Ank oou.”

“I told you not to talk,” she said wiping her mother’s mouth. After she was finished she stepped back “So,” she said, “Do you like my outfit?” Her mother stared at her. Her jaundiced eyes moved from Dorothea’s unkempt hair and the face smeared with makeup, down to her solid body, then to her stocky legs and cankles where they rested on her orange leather flats. Once there, they traveled back upwards and meet Dorothea’s own eyes.

She plucked her nightgown, rolled her head to the left, back to the right, and grunted. Then she looked downwards at the shoes and repeated the motion. “No.” Her mouth opened into a smile.

“I know,” said Dorothea, “I know the shoes don’t match the outfit. But the suit is new. I bought it special. For my visit today.” She hunched her shoulders. “I was going to wear my black shoes but I... but I always wore those to school and they’re all scuffed up from running around those kids.”

Her mother raised her eyebrows and Dorothea lowered her head. “And I know I probably look dirty now, but it’s so hot in this room. I’m sweating so bad. That’s why the suit looks awful. I sweated out my hair, too. It was fixed nice for you.”

She looked up at the frowning face, and decided to change the subject. “The nurse taking care of you? I gave her the day off.”

Her mother grunted a yes.

“Well, it doesn’t look like it. Why is it so hot in this room? That’s why I look so bad. And you’re all dirty. You don’t look good either.”

“Onk ooh ink ah no atch.”

Dorothea reached inside her purse for a pocket mirror and opened it in front of her mother. “See. You look bad, too.”

Her mother closed her eyes at her reflection. “Guut ah ooh doing?”

“Momma, please don’t talk,” she said reaching into her purse and taking out a thin black folder. “You remember how I use to write for you and draw for you? Well, my students heard how bad you were doing...”

Her mother grunted and turned her head.

“Please don’t turn away from me. It’s a card, Momma. And each child signed it. Don’t you want to see it?”

Her mother grunted again.

“Okay. Okay.” Dorothea sighed. “I understand that you’re tired. I’m going to let you get your rest, but first I’m going to show you this here card. I made it myself, just like I use to do, but all my students signed it.” She opened the folder and looked up for her mother’s approval.

“Aug kay,” she said looking at her daughter.

“See,” Dorothea said, “It’s a card, and it has a little duck holding an umbrella.” She smiled and lifted it up. “On the front it says, ‘Feeling under the weather...’” She opened the card to an image of a swan. “‘Get better.’”

Her mother turned her head.

“I guess were all ducks at least once in our lives, huh? Do you want some more water?”

PART III

Transfiguration-Migration

Zombie Chic

There are only three steps to becoming voodoo fabulous. They are as follows: 1. Get your mojo working, 2. Reanimate a corpse, 3. Exchange heads, trade bodies.

Gravity Seekers

They set high goals. They seek high places... a rooftop, an upper story window, a bridge. They make plans, gain courage. Some take a running leap; others simply tumble off. They welcome the descent. You see, it wasn't about the climb, the altitude, the height or even the destination of below. It's about the free fall. Whoosh, pushed downwards. They are forced to scream.

Le Mat

The people that live in the town below call me a fool, but you can call me Prometheus Contemporarily because you understand that immortality is when the dead are able to think. And I know they whisper about me, but I do not think I care. Public opinion is never personified; it's only talked about. Besides, I do not care that I've misplaced my soul; I have lost things, but found many more. So what that my head does not quite fit my body anymore? Inside the head, brains. Inside the body are heart and lungs. I made sure I did not lose those, and there is still push and pull and flow. Enough

for me to say misery with a smile and get catharsis when I can; I am confident that I'll reach apotheosis next year.

But in truth, I have fallen far. Standing on the tip, I once saw in all directions. I should have never leapt from this mountainside. I went spinning downward until I felt talons pulling me up. I thought I had reached heaven, but you see... it only meant that I now belong to the corporeal bunch, the reanimated and as penitence for my sin, I live again. But sometimes stepping backwards is the forward move. So here I am. At the beginning. The same place I was before. And I wonder if there is still a spectacular view, because now I stand like Le Mat over the crevice—blind.

About the Steampunk Hero

Being Brave

It was a curious thing indeed. No one could deny that. Very, very strange. But what was it, this anomaly that had presented itself to us unashamed and unafraid? How dare it! How dare it say, "This is what I am. I cannot be anything else. I refuse to change." How dare it! Why are we not so brave?

Discontent

He was into Loki cacophony and basic discord. You know the type. He was one of the unfortunates who lived in the rotten underbelly part of town, and he did small things to show his disregard for the public leadership squad. Nothing too hard, hardcore – stuff like spraying graffiti and making bombs from the paint cans. You know: Art. And he was real funny, too. Do you know what he said when he hurled them through the windows of the zeitgeist that demanded the brand new? It was "More!" That was the motto of the time. But of course he said it with a smirk at the collective consciousness which was dying from the overload.

It shouldn't be a surprise that he survived that dystopia with a certain amount of ease. And in this new world where state-of-the-art meant repurposing old things, he collected parts of the brain, heart, and lungs from the previous system to assemble them into a better machine. People took notice, and soon he was considered king. He like the

reverie because he had never heard one sung for him before. Soon he demanded his own personal leadership squad.

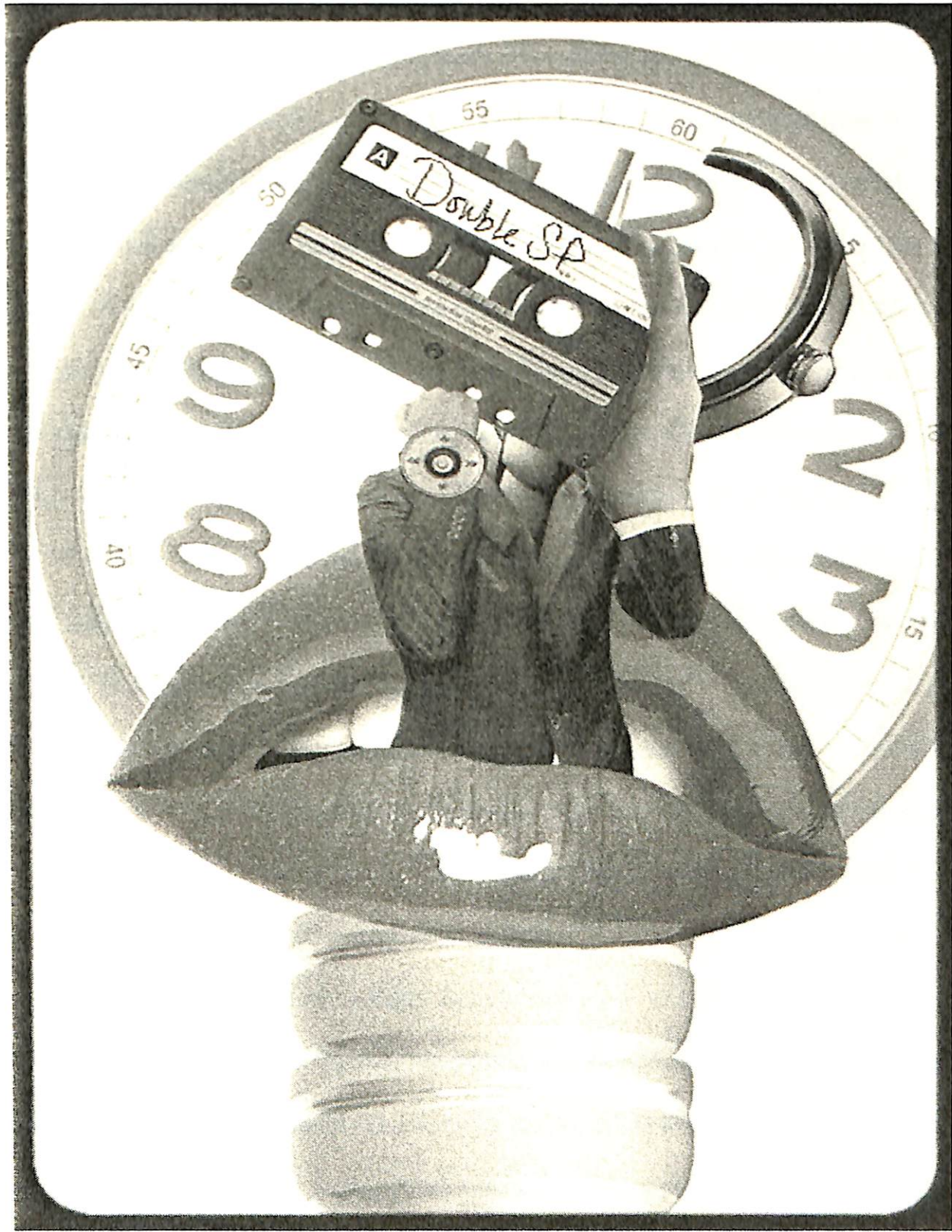
He might have lasted, but it's really too bad that there was someone else who knew about Loki cacophony. You know his kind. One of the ones living in the scummy crevices of his society's fat rolls. One the boys who is known for his jokes. The type of fella who's good at art.

Rat King

Everything was so damn organized. He was a mouse trapped in some giant maze, but there was no end to the maze, no promise of cheese, nothing to learn. A mouse. A rat.

The only thing he could do was scurry along the city streets. The government office buildings surrounded him like giant walls. Building of Communication, of Agriculture, of Education. Science and Medicine, Business and Economy, of Government and Law. Building of Culture and History. They were so tall, so big and tall that he couldn't even see the sky.

Mr. Chromeo, the redux



SEE PLATE IV

Mr. Chromeo

While looking at the clock on the screen of my MP3 player, I turned the volume down before I pressed paused and did math surrounding my life. Everything came out square. It added up to twenty-seven years, five months, and a minutia of minutes assembled into wasted days. Men like me were not supposed to sit around watching clocks. I stroked the letters embossed on the side of a cassette tape and waited for Cassandra. It had taken me three weeks to synthesize a symphony for her. I had been a DJ, but the music thing didn't work out. I suppose I didn't have enough patience or enough skill or enough balls, and like most people, I settled into the mundane groove of corporate America when I should have been spinning records. I had changed.

When my uncle gave me the job, he had warned me. "Just fill out the paperwork and don't make trouble. Sometimes, these offices will seem a little strange, but you got to understand that an office is a family, and you're just visiting." I nodded my head. As if a bunch of white collars could compare to the club kids; I had lived in the Valley of the Strange. "They," he said pointing up, "only want to know if people are abusing supplies and company time. Anything else..." He shook his head. "Well, people can file individual reports, and we take care of it easily."

My official title at Dolce Party Supply Company was "Office Management Specialist for the Northwest Sector," and every six months I rotated between the two offices in that region so I could take notes on their performance and work ethic, which is a fancy way of saying that I jotted down whether employees used too much printer ink, played solitaire all day, or if on occasion they took three hour lunch breaks. Usually, it

was worse, but I did as I was told and ignore the comment section and just checked the boxes and only fill in the blanks with the appropriate topics: “twenty-five cartridges per week,” “fifteen hours surfing the internet,” and “did not return after lunch.” That’s what management meant.

So, I ignored the babushkas and Methuselahs that always smelled like raw peanuts and tuna. If an office is a family, I was their grandson. Besides, it’s not like I could report that the women’s hair was somehow the same yellow as their teeth, the same yellow as the permanent mustard stains on the white flowers printed on their muumuus. Or how they called me “honey” and rubbed too close to me in the break room. Or how the men always had pee stains on the front of their pants, and that they never felt unwelcome to drop by my cubicle to tell me about Vietnam; their smoky breath seemed to burn the back of my neck whenever I turned to check my email.

At least they were nice. The younger employees treated me like the annoying cousin that visited every summer. They gave me dirty looks when they passed my desk that sat beside the noisy water cooler. They carpooled. They went to lunch without me. Invited one another for drinks after work. That was okay, because when they were late, I put a mark by their names. I was Mr. Chromeo, Master of Dolce’s Permanent Record.

I was still playing with the cassette when a stack of papers in a manila folder dropped on my desk. I looked at them, sat the tape to the side, and then looked up and into the carbuncular face of Mac Michaels, who wasn’t much older than me and was already going bald. “Hey,” he said, “I need you to do me a favor.” I pretended not to hear him. He motioned for me to take off my headphones. He thought he was my daddy.

“What,” I said loudly pointing at my headphones. I hoped he would go away, but he motioned again. I mouthed the words “stop fucking around.” He still didn’t go away.

I lifted the headphone from my right ear. “Dude, can I help you?” Something slimy was glossed into his moustache, and I watched him wax it down, smack his lips, and grin.

“I need you to enter these products into the system,” he said.

“What are they?”

“I don’t know. Party hats. Whistles. Some other shit. What the fuck does it matter?”

“What about Fisher and Henry?” Unreliable. Homophobic, xenophobic, and misogynistic. Best friends who seemed to hold a degree in scatology, they were the type of guys that still farted on people for laughs.

“I didn’t ask them.”

“Where are they, anyhow?”

“Where else? On Break.” That meant they were in the bathroom. I had always suspected some kinkiness in that, but whenever I went to pee they were always leaning against one of the stalls talking about how Lisa and Betty didn’t wear bras.

“At 10 in the morning? What about the interns?” Lisa and Betty were part-time coffee runners and fulltime students who always wore white sneakers, khakis, and the company polo.

“I don’t know. They have class. And everyone else is late today.” He pointed to Cassandra’s empty chair.

“Well, I’m not doing this.”

Mac shrugged. “That’s your job, isn’t it?”

“No, no. It’s not.” I lifted my nameplate and pointed out each word as I said them. “Office Management Specialist – Northwest Sector.”

“What?”

“The Raytown office, Mac,” I said pointing to the ground, “is in the northwest sector.”

“It’s Mr. Michaels. And I don’t know what you’re talking ‘bout.” He turned and began walking towards Shirley Mox, who had taken her place in front of the water cooler. She was the office manager and a cougar, but that doesn’t seem like the right word. Shirley was leonine in her exploits. Rubenesque. Statuesque. She was always posted beside my desk making conversation about the latest sitcom or complaining about the villainess in her favorite soap opera. She always wore a pastel dress suit. The skirt too short, the buttons undone. Her pushup bra and garter belt held everything in proportion. She kept her balance well for a fifty year old in four inch heels.

“Hey!” I called after Mac. “Dude, come back here.” I lifted the folder and waved it over my head and added “You’re not my boss, duckweed,” as he grabbed her from behind and held her. I watched him grind his crotch on her back.

“The handbook said no hanky-panky.” She squealed and looked over her shoulder. Past Mac. At me. I wondered if there was any correlation between hot flashes and estrus.

“Too late for that,” Mac said. I felt sorry for him. He had to fuck her and manage the office for her and still only got paid minimum wage. I pushed the papers off my desk

and watched them fall into the waste basket. “Those two,” I heard a voice say, “are just plain nasty.”

I turned and looked up into the face of Cassandra. She was perfect. Hard to believe that she was related to Shirley. I mean, you could tell. They looked similar, but Cassandra was different, and not just because she was younger. She was better.

“You made it.”

“Yeah. My alarm clock is fucked.” She took off her jacket. “I’ve been entertaining some old friends and we stay up pretty late.”

“Yeah?”

“You know how it is, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Hey. I’ll be right back.”

“Okay.” I watched her walk away and reached for the tape. I thought about our conversation at the Valentine’s party three weeks prior. I traced the words with my fingers again as I read them: Mr. Chromeo’s Mix Tape.

~

Three weeks ago she had been alone in the lobby, perched on the sofa that was placed against the windowed walls of the office. Inside, behind her, I could see decorations of palm trees and pineapples – overstocked products from the Hawaiian summer season – and employees crowded around a bowl of what Fisher and Henry called their Double SP. They sipped and winced, sipped and winced. It was pretty good. Others walked around holding melting plates of ice cream cake. Elevator muzak was played for entertainment.

I was going to walk away, but she looked up.

“Hey.”

“It’s pretty messed up in there, right?” she said holding up a plastic cup. “Come sit with me.”

“Okay.”

“I hate these things. These aren’t exactly the people I want to hang around.”

“Where’s your boyfriend?”

“You mean Dan? From Christmas?” She looked down. “He couldn’t make it.”

She looked up again before saying, “In fact. We kinda broke up. What about you Ben? You have a date?”

“Nope.”

“Didn’t have one Christmas either, did you?” She took a sip from her cup.

“Nope. Or Thanksgiving or Halloween...”

“I guess it’s just you and me, huh?”

“What?”

“Lonely.”

“This music is terrible.”

“You like music?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry that was a dumb question.”

“No that’s alright.”

“I mean I know you must. You always have on your headphones.”

“Yeah.”

“Doesn’t seem like you want to be bothered.”

“No, no.”

“Especially at lunchtime. You never come out with us.”

“Because of Fisher and Henry.”

“Ben Chromeo,” she said, “Mr. Chromeo. Your name sounds familiar.”

“Yeah?” I waited for her to realize that I was once a DJ, but she changed the subject. Too bad. I knew she was a club girl. She would have known about me... probably.

She finished her drink. “Dan’s such a prick. I had to break it off. I heard he fucked some girl in the bathroom at the club. That’s so foul.” A prudish club girl.

“Yeah.”

“You know what I want?”

“Nope.”

“No one has ever made a mix tape for me.”

“Huh?”

“I know, right? I think I deserve a mix tape. Don’t you?”

“What?”

“Think I’m worthy of a mixtape?”

“Completely.”

“Exactly.” She turned around. “Oh, my god,” she said. “She’s so embarrassing. I can’t believe she’s my aunt.”

“What.” I turned to see Shirley grinding on Mac. “Isn’t she going with Stephen? That guy from accounting? With the desk across from her office?”

“Well... I guess this means that Stephen doesn't work for us anymore.”

“What do you mean?”

“You'll learn. I've got to go get her.”

“Wait,” I said. I started to follow her, but didn't. I watched her wrestle with her aunt from our seat for a while before giving up. Then she walked under the plastic pavilion and sat in a beanbag chair. When Fisher and Henry came with their grass skirts, she left.

~

When she came back to her desk, her aunt had gone to her office and Mac was at his desk. “Ugh,” she said, “My dad says all the women on his side are like that. I hope not.” She sat down without looking at me and without seeing the tape. I held it out to her back. “Hey...”

“Cassandra. I bought you some coffee.” It was Fisher.

“We bought you coffee.” And Henry.

“Hey, you two.”

“It's your favorite.”

“Yeah. Caramel Mocha chino with extra foam,” said Henry.

“Thanks.”

“Yeah. we got you.”

She raised her eyebrows. “There wouldn't be any Double-SP in this would there?”

“Naw,” they said in unison.

“Okay. I believe y’all.” She sat the cup on her desk. We both waited for them to leave.

“You like music right?” said Fisher.

“Of course.”

“And you like to party, right?”

“Yes.”

“And I’m pretty cool. No?”

“You’re alright.”

“I’m awesome, right?” said Henry.

“Yeah. You’re something alright.”

“Well, why don’t you go to a party with us?”

“What kind of party?”

“It’s one of those barnyard raves. This really great DJ is suppose to be playing.”

“Oh, yeah. Who?”

“I don’t know.” He looked at Fisher who shrugged. “Just this guy who’s suppose to be really awesome.”

“Okay.” She rolled her eyes.

“My cousin works the door,” Fisher said, “He told me that the place is totally banging every night.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. But they’re moving operations back to the meatpacking district after this weekend. The old dude that owns the farm started complaining after he found three naked kids on his porch.”

“Oh, wow.”

“I know. So, you want to go?”

“Sure.”

“Okay. Should we pick you up? Should we all meet?”

“Well I’m having dinner with a few friends at Marcell’s tonight. We stay out pretty late. I’ll call you. You can pick me up there. You know where it is?” Cassandra stood up. I noticed she was holding a piece of paper with a baby blue floral print and some script.”

“Marcell’s?” Henry frowned.

“Yeah. Yeah,” said Fisher, “Cool. Good time, right?”

“Yeah,” she said, “right.” Then she turned to me. “I’m going to make a few illegal copies of this. My bestfriend is getting married. Don’t go writing me up.”

We watched her walk into the copy room.

“Fuck yeah,” said Henry.

“Dude, I told you. I told you, man.”

I waited until she had gotten on the elevator before I said, “She’s not going to call.”

What do you mean?” said Henry.

“She. Does. Not. Like. You. Like. That.”

“Dude,” said Fisher frowning, “shut the fuck up.”

“Ole pretty boy.” Henry made smooching noises at me. “Jealous.”

“Can y’all get away from my desk?”

“Yeah, we’ll see you around, Ben.” They walked toward the elevator. Lunch time.

“Mister,” I said. “Mr. Chromeo to you.” I watched them get onto the elevator before I put the tape on Cassandra’s desk. I passed Shirley’s office on my way to the bathroom. The door was open; I waved and smiled. “Those guys are dicks,” she said.

I was still thinking about them as I stood in front of the urinal, so when someone touched me, I was sure it was them. “Look, assholes, I don’t want any trouble.”

I was surprised to hear the voice of a woman. “Ain’t no trouble here.” Then I saw the red fingernails attached to hands with skin so paper-thin that I could see the veins. I knew it was Shirley.

I turned around. “No,” I said.

“You know you want to.”

“No.”

“Yes,” she said.

“Are you crazy?”

“What are you going to do? Write me up?” She smiled.

“It’s not my job to report matters on office relationships, but I can fill out a complaint form like everyone else. Human resources would be very interested to know how you conduct this office,” I said zipping up my pants.

Her white teeth glistened, and she ran her tongue over them and step forward. “You’re so uptight. You should relax a little.”

“I’m not uptight.”

“Yes you are.”

“Listen,” I said trying to step around her, “I’m not going to have this conversation with you.”

“Oh, get off your high horse. She’s not going to fuck you either,” she said as she grabbed my chin and turned my face straight ahead until I was staring into her eyes. They were jaundiced the same mustard yellow as the teeth of the other old women in the office.

I crossed my arms so that there was something between us. “Look, I don’t know what your problem is but you’re wasting company time. I can write you up for that.”

“Fine”

“Please. Leave.”

“You just missed out on the best blowjob of your life.” When she spoke, I noticed a thin mustache and some fine lines. She kissed me on my lips and walked out of the bathroom. I wiped my mouth on the sleeve of my jacket, washed my hands, and did the arithmetic. Six months here and I was completely square. A year ago, I would have let her... Hell, a year ago I would have been burning CDs and spinning records. Instead, I was making mix tapes. I hoped it wasn’t all for nothing. I hoped that the slut gene was recessive and that Cassandra wouldn’t call Fisher and Henry. Let them take her in the bathroom.

When I walked into the office area, Shirley was sitting on the edge of Cassandra’s desk. She looked up at me and smiled. Then she leaned in and said something to Cassandra. Her niece crossed her arms and shook her head. I saw my cassette in her hand; she was stroking the embossing. Shirley stood up, and I read the lie come from her lips.

“Yes.”

On Wunderkinds, Wannabes, and Whatnot Kids

Admiration

He stared at the young man from the rearview mirror. Watched him light a cigarette. Watched him close his eyes. He looked tired, this scraggly, dirty, dog-eared kid. The so-called revolutionary. The self-proclaimed outcast, an enfant terrible. He had beaten up motherfuckers like this in high school every day. He stopped the car, got out, and opened the door. "Sir, before you go to your room... Do you think I could have your autograph? My wife is a huge fan."

What His Hero Said

"Listen, kid. Here you are with your shit grin on the front of the local newspaper, holding your award like you're somebody's goddamn hero. What? You think you're a star now just because someone other than Mommy told you that you're special? I guess that plastic trophy didn't come with any common sense. They rarely do, because in the next town over, there's another kid just like you. Just as talented, maybe a little more. Now tell your mother to get a scrapbook. When you get old and realize that you're worthless you'll want to remember a time when you 'could have made it.'"

The Misogynic Complex

Pliable Words

He told me that he had a thing for "fat chicks" because he thought their faces were better and everything about them was soft, even their personalities... well, at least when younger. Older, they became hardened and bitter, massive like boulders and un-giving. Younger, they were pliable and open to each of his advances... very willing to do what he pleased. Pretty words like "beautiful" and "love" would get him kisses. Kisses led to things that kept him up all night and maybe into the next morning.

Upon Further Review

He had often wondered about the girls that wore the pink lip gloss and the natural make-up, the girls with perfect hair, the ones who wore stylish clothes.

He had wondered about their flirty ways. Who, if anyone at all, had taught them? Their mothers? Surely, that is where they learned. His thoughts of their mothers led him to think of their fathers. Their poor fathers! He did not envy them. Living amongst women like that, women who chatted and planned their days around society whims, women who spent fortunes on clothing and looking like plastic dolls. All to make men look and sigh, and, indeed, the men did look and sigh.

He himself had often looked. Once or twice, he took them home, and immediately after making love to them, he kindly asked them to leave. They were always upset, sitting there on his bed, naked and bruised, filled with his seed...often, they were confused and some even cried. He was cruel to them because he could not bear to hear them speak;

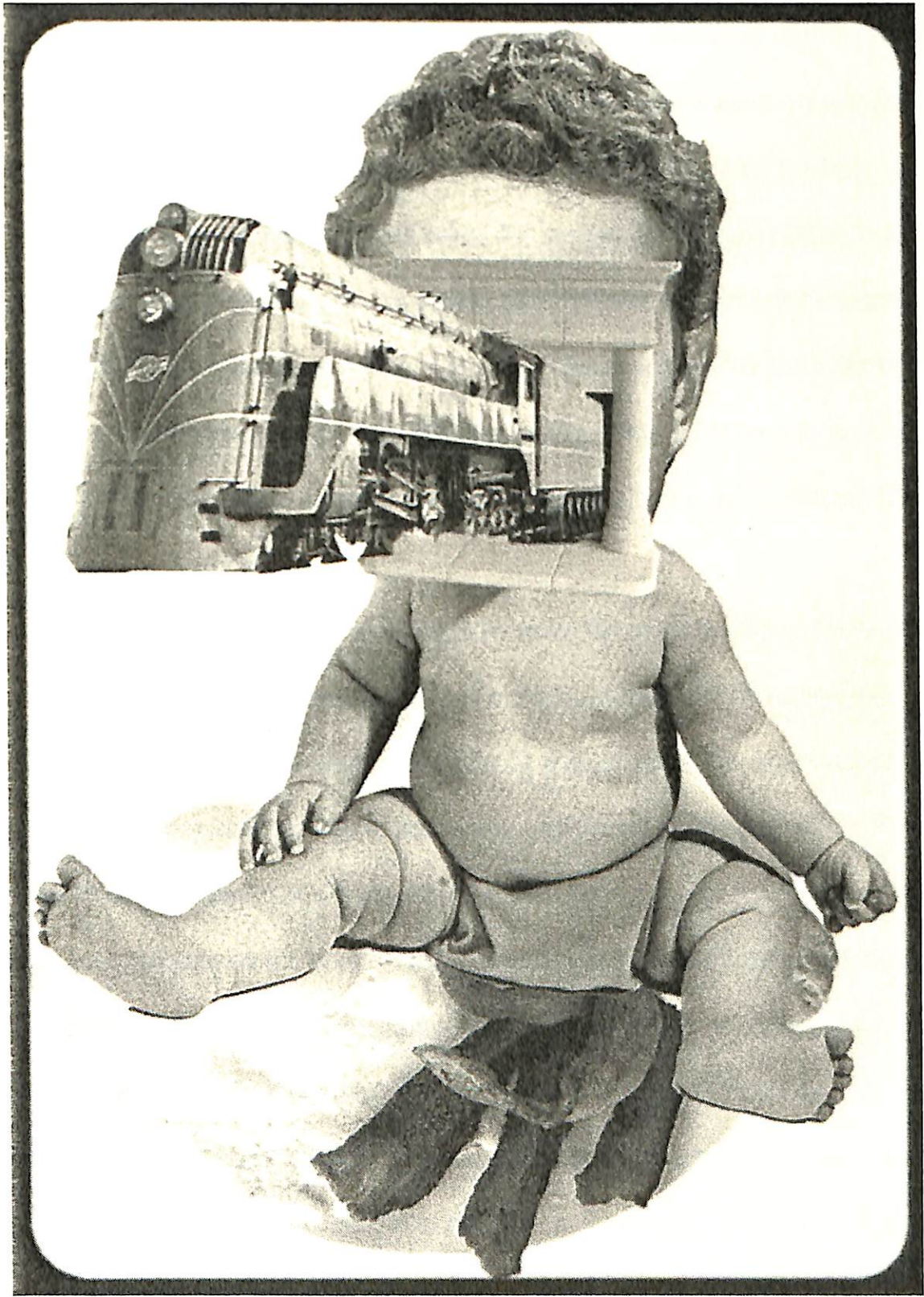
when they spoke, their perfect lips moved up and down and up and down and their beautiful voices came out, but the words were all wrong. They were always about how "Mrs. White embarrassed herself at dinner by drinking too much champagne" or how this too-expensive boutique received a shipment of some overly celebrated designer's handbags.

No, he did not envy the fathers.

House of Douglas

Douglas had not forgotten Deirdre, but for good reason he tried not keep his memories on display. Some mementos were placed under cabinets; others were locked in the basement or attic. He had even buried some and planted her favorite flower. Those were the dirty things. The dusty ones were stored in undeveloped, disposable cameras. The sweet ones, the letters, were shoved in the same black box that held the gun. He had moved all her dresses to the closet of the hallway. Those were the trivial things. She was on his bookshelf too, in the album marked "March through June 2002." It was the one that sat between "January, February '01" and "August through November '99." But those were books of different girls whose names he had forgotten and whose things he had thrown away. He could never throw anything of Deirdre's away.

Engine, the redux



SEE PLATE V

Engine

He was going to tell her about herself, sit her down and explain all the little things that had been eating at him for months. The way she was. Like at the firm's annual harvest picnic when she insisted on fixing his plate for him. "You don't need any barbeque, John. Baby, have a piece of baked fish instead. You've been putting on a little weight." Or at Thanksgiving with his mother and Christmas with her parents when she prompted all his conversations. "John, why don't you tell your mother about that new building you're working on. Did you tell them that Mr. Peters gave you a promotion?" Or when she hosted New Year's dinner and invited only her friends and coworkers. "This is my boyfriend—John Davids."

She had already gone to work when he woke that morning smiling. The night before they made love, odd because she had never wanted sex. His first assumption was that it was a pre-anniversary surprise but now he realized that it must have been a trick, some passive-aggressive attempt to sedate him. And for the most part it worked. That morning he didn't mind that she planned his outfit. He even smiled when he saw the garment bag hanging on the hook outside the bathroom door. White dress shirt, navy slacks, cream sweater, cord blazer along with a white undershirt and boxers, black dress socks, and a brown belt. Pinned to his jacket was a note that said, "Wear the brown shoes, the ones that I bought you for your birthday. They should be in the closet. If not, they're in the cubby under the bed. Breakfast is in the oven. Love, Jean." While he showered he thought he was lucky to have found such a nice girl.

After he got dressed, he found the brown shoes in the closet, carried them into the living room and placed them beside the front door. On the coffee table next to his winter gloves and a hat with ear warmers was a note that said, "It's cold today. Bundle up." He chuckled as he walked into the kitchen thinking about how last week he was going to break off the relationship.

Pretty lucky, he thought opening the oven to a large plate of scrambled eggs, toast, sausage, and bacon. A yellow note card taped to the cellophane wrap said, "I made a fire this morning, when you leave close the screen."

"Yes ma'am," he said before biting into a piece of bacon. He walked into the living room and leaned down to shut the fireplace screen. He was still chewing when he realized that his father's model train was missing from the mantel. John stood there for a moment, his head cocked to the side with an open mouth still filled with bacon and a confused frown; he stared at the blank spot where the wooden 810-ST TransRailAmerica model engine once sat.

He swallowed. "She didn't," he said walking back into the kitchen. He opened the cabinet under the sink. The last time she moved the train, it was here. The time before that, it was in the linen closet. This time, it wasn't in either of those places; nor was it in the pantry, the bedroom closet, under the bed, or behind the couch. He even looked in the china cabinet, thinking that in preparation for the dinner, Jean had hidden it there. But it was gone.

Just when he thought things were working out, she had to go and do something like this. It was his only rule, a boundary he set after he found it wrapped in an old curtain on the

top shelf of the linen closet. "Do not touch my father's train. Please, Jean. Just don't bother it again."

"I don't like that thing on the mantel. All those people." She shook her head. "Your father."

He stared at her.

"Don't look at me like that. It makes me feel awful." She pursed her lips before saying, "But maybe if you got it cleaned it wouldn't be so bad."

"You know how I feel about that."

She rolled her eyes. "You could at least put it in a display case."

"Those things are too expensive."

"Oh, really," she said, smiling. "I didn't think it was possible for anything to be too expensive for your precious train."

"Just don't touch it," he said kissing her on her forehead. "Okay?"

She had said, "Okay," but it was obvious to him that she hadn't meant it. That train was the only thing he owned of his father's. It didn't bother him that it was covered with a sticky film of dust that held what was left of the flaking black paint in place and filled the crevices marking the design details. It was a tribute to his father's brilliance. John didn't have it cleaned because it didn't need to be cleaned. I would never be perfect.

John Sr. had been commissioned by TransRailAmerica to design the engines for a fleet of luxury passenger cars. In an attempt to remodel itself as fine travel for both upper-middle class businessmen and lower-middle class families, the trains would have private cars, a nursery, an entertainment lounge, and a dining cart that sold everything from caviar and champagne to roast beef and root beer.

The last in the series was the 8-10ST whose wheels were not properly aligned, a miscalculation in measurement one tenth of a degree off that caused the axles to snap and the train to derail. 241 injured people and 35 dead. His father's mistake.

A coworker had found him in the office. The tip of his right sock caught on the trigger of the shot gun. His lips sealed around the barrel. Blood and brains splattered on the pegboard holding the t-squares and protractors. His hands, gripping the model engine. After the wake, John had found it in a box, wrapped in black on his bed.

His mother had maintained her composure until the day of the funeral. He had heard her crying that night. "Coward. You impatient, ambitious, coward of a man." The next day she burned all his things. Papers, design sketches, business suits, even the sheets from their bed. John had hid the train in his toy box and didn't tell her about it until years later.

Now it was gone, and Jean took it. All that babying and doting and loving and suffocating him... Tricking him, lulling him, fucking him into submission. She moved fast, the way she made him love her and need her. How after a year she was a permanent fixture in his life. She made the transition from lover to wife-mother seamless. Before John knew what was happening she had moved into his house, cooked his food, bought his clothes.

He sat in a chair, bent over to put on his shoes, heard a seam ripping somewhere on the brown cord blazer. "It's just as well," he said, standing up. He opened the door and walked into the cold, leaving the hat and gloves on the table.

He arrived at Glenn Peters Design an hour late and was greeted by Ted as soon as he stepped into the office. "You missed this morning's meeting."

"Anything serious?"

"Mr. Peters wants those sketches on his desk by the end of today.

"He'll get 'em."

"What's happened to your collar, kid. Jean is really letting you fall apart, ey? Or did you dress yourself this morning?"

"Go fuck yourself, Ted."

"Woah, woah, woah." Ted feigned hurt by touching his hands to his chest. "No harm. I was only joking around. What's wrong, son? Why so touchy? Did Mommy forget to make you breakfast?"

~

"At least she fucked you before she fucked you over." Ted slurped his root beer while John waited for his roast beef on rye.

"Could you stop that?"

"Sorry," he said before taking the last sip. "So, what are you going to do? Tell her to move out? Break up with her?"

"It's our anniversary."

"So?"

"You can't break up with someone on your anniversary."

"Whatever."

"I'm just going to have to talk to her."

"Just talk?" Ted raised his eyebrows.

“Yeah. She needs to know how I feel.”

“Maybe you should switch it up. Change roles.”

“What do you mean?”

“Show her who’s Daddy. Put her over your knee.” Ted winked at him. “Are you sure it’s gone?”

“I looked all over. Last time it was on the top shelf of the closet.”

“Maybe she found another hiding place.”

“Nope.” He shook his head. “Not in the kitchen, the bedroom, or the living room. I even checked the bathroom. Nothing.”

“She could have put it in the trash or sold it. Maybe given it to one of those rich clients of hers.”

“No. I don’t think...”

“She could have burned it.” Ted slapped his shoulder and laughed. “Oh, man! I bet she burned that bitch. I bet she did. I’ll put fifty dollars on it.”

Oh, my god, John thought as he remembered closing the fireplace screen. The red embers. He watched Ted motion “poof” with his hands and thought, *the ashes*. “I’m going to have to go, dude. Cover for me.” He stood up.

“What about Mr. Peters?”

“I think you’re right.”

“What?”

“About the fire.”

“Okay...” Ted rolled his eyes.

“I’ve got to go talk to her.”

“Dude, seriously. It’s just a train.”

“It’s not just a train. I told her before. I told her.”

“I think you need to calm down, man.”

“I just want my train back,” John said walking off. I just want my life back, he thought.

~

When he walked into the house, Jean was sitting on the couch watching television. She looked up at him. “I didn’t know you were coming home for lunch. Want me to make you a sandwich or a salad or something?”

“No,” John said, walking over to the fireplace.

“You forgot your hat and gloves this morning.” She focused her attention on the TV, where a chef organized caviar hors d’œuvres on a silver platter.

“I know.” He bent and pulled back the screen.

“I’m going to make this for our next party. Remind me to go to her website.”

“Whatever,” he said, searching the ashes.

She looked at him. “John, what are you doing? You’re getting soot everywhere. Stop it. I just had those carpets cleaned. And isn’t that jacket dry clean only?”

“Shut up.”

“Excuse me.”

He turned to face her. “You heard me. Shut up. All you do is talk and boss me around. You aren’t my mother.”

“Okay. Looks like someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed.”

“Don’t fucking patronize me.”

“Is this about the train?”

“Damn right it’s about the train.” He stood. “You know it’s about the train.”

“I don’t think you understand.”

“No,” he said, putting his finger in her face. “I don’t think that you understand. I mean, who do you think you are? What gives you the right anyway to take away my train? You have a lot of nerve coming into my life, making yourself at home, rearranging everything, trying to fix me. I asked you to do one thing. One simple thing and you ignore me. I’m sick of you and your constant mothering. I’m not your baby, for chrissake. I’m your boyfriend. I’m a man.”

She didn’t say anything at first. Just watched him glare at her. “You could have fooled me,” she said walking out of the room.

“Oh, yeah,” he said, “Well... you’re a passive-aggressive bitch.” He stood and walked to the couch, kicking it before he sat. He watched Jean walk into the room carrying a black box. She placed it on the coffee table. “I’m going to my place,” she said, “Happy anniversary. There’s champagne in the fridge.” She was gone an hour before he opened it.

The note taped to the top of the box said, “I hope you don’t mind that I had it clean and repainted (by a professional). You can really see all the details now. – Love, Jean” Inside was a glass case that held a black TransRailAmerica model 810-ST engine detailed in cherry red. He opened the case and picked up the train, felt the slick paint, the weight of the wood. There were 28 tiny windows, and when he looked inside, he could see the engine room. It was perfect. He placed it on the edge of the table and watched it roll off.

Another Relationship

The Man and His Lady

Everyone thought he was a real ace. It's true. Ask around. Nine-out-of-ten teenyboppers will agree that the boy had something special. Tailored. Refined. Dignified. A white collar, blue blooded, bourgeoisie work of art.

Nobody liked her, however. She put on so many airs. Sheesh! Trying to be chic. She was just cheap (not to mention trashy). Eww! Neavou riche kitsch.

Inadequate

"Do you want to make love?" He always asked that question, and she never knew why. Make love? Ha! That was the biggest joke since the aristocrats. "Do you want to have sex with me, woman?" That would have been a more appropriate question. But certainly not "make love." And definitely not "fuck," because she was sure he couldn't do that either.

The Argument

She took a bath before she went to bed. But there's cake in the toilet and blood in her nose. All the dishes are broken, and the lights are not on. She called him every hour, but he wouldn't come home. The pillbox is empty; the Valium, gone.