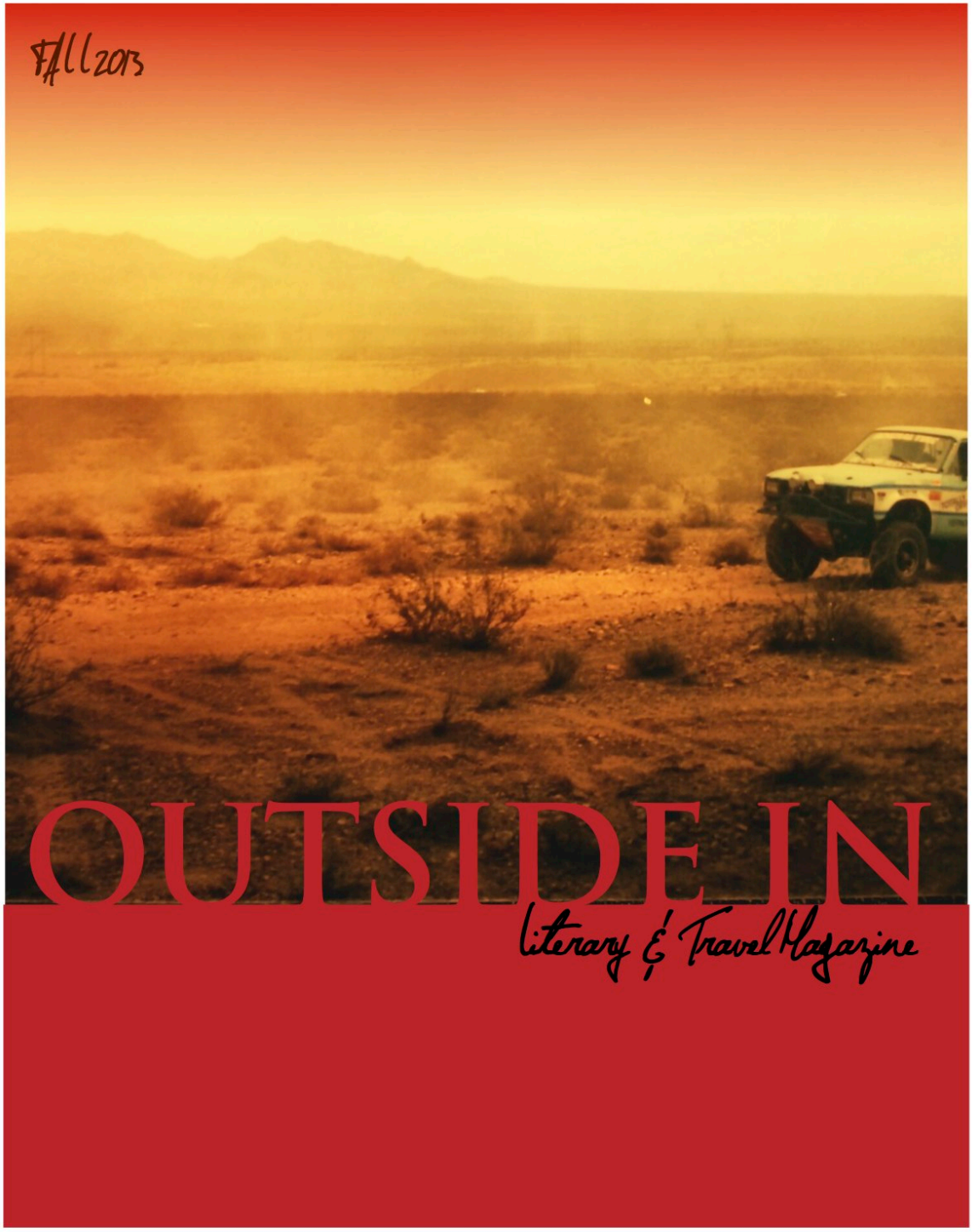

Editor's Note | Fall 2013

Dear Readers,

Much has happened since we decided, this summer, to switch to quarterly publication, and we could not be more excited to announce that our first anthology of nonfiction, Whereabouts: Stepping Out of Place, was released by 2Leaf Press, New York yesterday. We are fiercely proud of our contributors and their journeys, and have been receiving humbling feedback, such as this:

"We think of travel and life abroad as pivoting on geographic place, but it's shaped just as much by the minds and bodies we bring with us. The voices in Whereabouts offer a completely fresh approach to travel and life "out of place." Compellingly narrative and, at times, dazzlingly lyrical, we hear and feel the uncensored inside stories — both cerebral and sensual — of people settling in or on the move all over our bright world." Henry Hughes, Harvard Review

And this:

"These essays are on the move. To rum distilleries, ox carts, war zones, falafel stands, and daydreams where we meet versions of ourselves. The writers of this collection stand as capable and intrepid "purveyors of the connections the rest of us don't see."They are also connoisseurs of longing, adventure, and openness. Most marvelous is that whether the authors hold crowbars, bouzoukis, or babies, the complex truths of their essays give sturdy shelter to the many foreign selves we harbor." Jennifer Boyden, author of The Mouths of Grazing Things and The Declarable Future

The collection can be found on Amazon.com by searching for *Whereabouts: Stepping Out of Place*, or by clicking http://www.amazon.com/Whereabouts-Stepping-Literary-Magazine-Anthology/dp/0988476363/.

In other exciting news, we are very happy to congratulate Outside In contributor Daniel Gabriel, as his fantastic story, featured in Issue Fourteen of Outside In, of a youth spent hitchhiking the world (way more than Jack Kerouac) was picked up by Matador Network. If you missed it in Issue Fourteen, check it out on Matador by clicking http://matadornetwork.com/notebook/notes-on-20-years-as-a-hitchhiking-couple/.

There have been two fantastic additions to our editorial team as well: Rosa Lia has joined us as Assistant Nonfiction Editor and Shenan Prestwich has come on board as Assistant Poetry Editor. Our Microjourneys man, Ope Olum'degun, has also taken on an additional role as Assistant Fiction Editor. If you would like to get involved with the team, reach out to me at editor@outsideinmagazine.com and we can discuss what opportunities may be available.

There are other exciting projects in the works, but we're so happy about our submissions for this, our first quarterly issue, that we simply can't wait any longer to let you dig in.

In our fiction section, Khanh Ha brings us a story of prostitution and photography in Vietnam, André M. Zucker guides us through a strange encounter in a Manhattan bar, Sam Tranum tells us about an unemployed journalist at a Kolkata book fair and Xenia Taiga creates a culture clash in China. We also have stories of madness and music, suicide and soy beans, from Africa, Asia, Oceania, North America and

Europe.

This quarter's poems lead us from the small -- a toilet in South Korea in "Not Exactly What You Were Looking For," or a pair of shoelaces in "Laces" -- to the broad landscape of Seville or a village on Sulawesi Island in Indonesia.

Nonfiction takes us to Dharamasala with Madeline Chu, to his grandfather's Morocco with Robert Boucheron, and to Turkey with Holly Morse-Ellington, among a dozen other places and authors. And, of course, the Microjourneys in this issue flash us, quickly, into tiny spots around the world.

We hope you enjoy these journeys as much as we do.

Happiest reading,

Brandi Dawn Henderson
Editor in Chief

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I Can't Believe it's Butter Tea | Madeline Chu

The only place to sit was on the grate ventilating the bathrooms below. The bathrooms consisted of a hole in the ground and Buddha-willing, enough toilet paper left on the roll. For the first time, I was grateful for the limb-numbing February weather in the Himalayas. I didn't want to imagine how the smell from the bathroom would multiply if it was summer.

Yes, I was also grateful for this rare opportunity to visit Dharamasala, the home of the Dalai Lama and other Tibetans in exile. His Holiness gives a teaching every Tibetan new year, and Tibetans, Mongolians, Burmese, Chinese, Vietnamese, Europeans, and Americans like me travel to this mountain to hear his enlightened words. But it was the fifth day of the teachings, and every time one of the bathroom doors swung open to release a waft of stinking molecules into my nostrils, all the spoiled ungrateful thoughts would stomp angrily on the grateful thoughts.

I didn't want to admit it, but I had set myself up. I'd always been addicted to the euphoria of travel and romanticized the Frommers and Rick Steve ideal. I still reminisced about the month I backpacked through Europe, riding on overnight trains and subsisting on crusty baguettes and buttery croissants. What I didn't understand was that Europe≠India.

When my husband J and I found out we would be able to join a group of students to India, we figured it was perfect timing since we were still young and didn't have kids yet. We began packing immediately. But I also packed along my European croissant fantasies and brought them all the way to Dharmasala, where it was 30 degree Fahrenheit at best and many of the people who lived there only had one sweater for their entire lives.

I needed a cold slap in the face. His Holiness and Dharmasala knew this because that's what they gave me. I guess you could say it was fitting. Buddha means "awake" in Sanskrit, and although I'm still far from a fully awakened and enlightened being, when I was huddled under my wool shawl and snarking on my fellow Dharma brothers, I undoubtedly deserved a wakeup call from the selfish cloud of expectations.

Among my luggage was a list of things I wanted to do and try in Dharmasala. Obviously, seeing the Dalai Lama, learning more about the foundations of Buddhism, and all that wonderful karmic stuff, etc. were near the top. But my remedial mind also veered towards the buttery croissant and crusty baguette venues. I couldn't wait for thrilling new experiences overflowing with Tibetan food and culture—i.e. I intended to eat

lots of momos and drink gallons of butter tea.

Ah, momos. The name alone made it extremely desirable even though they were really just dumplings. Being Chinese, I'd consumed quite a sizable amount of dumplings in my lifetime. But these Tibetan dumplings were adorably plump packages with a doughy swirl on top. Like most dumplings of the Asian origin, there were steamed momos, pan fried momos, and momos to be put in an assortment of noodle soups. I imagined piles of crisp, tender, and soupy momos just waiting to visit my stomach. And being able to say momo and eat a momo at the same time was an experience I deemed a high priority when going to Dharmasala.

Then there was Tibetan butter tea. Butter tea is a staple in the Tibetan diet. Hot tea mixed with yak butter and salt provides warm nourishment in the cold windy plateaus. A friend once told me he had butter tea at a Tibetan-style restaurant and he raved about its amazingly deliciousness. "It tastes like salty buttery popcorn. I had three cups with my dinner!"

I love salt, I love butter, and I love popcorn. Tibetans make it into a tea and you don't even have to chew. I couldn't wait to grab a mug of butter tea between my greedy little hands and slurp away.

My traveling companions and the people I was bound to meet were afterthoughts to me. Momos and butter tea had taken precedence over real live human interaction. And then there was receiving wisdom from the Dalai Lama. Obviously this was a rare and awesome opportunity, but that's exactly what I thought of it as —a very cool experience to share stories about when we returned home. I was just begging to be cold-slapped.

So J and I were in Dharmasala. Our group had arrived the night before after an 18-hour bus ride from New Delhi. In a nutshell, the 18-hour experience was: entirely packed, passengers vomiting, no bathrooms, no air conditioning, no suspension but lots of unpaved roads with large stones and huge ditches. Don't worry though, I was still riding on images of European croissants, so I was able to shake off the bus ride. I was more focused on my first cup of butter.

J, however, hadn't been too lucky. He'd already been hit by what they call "New Delhi Dumps." This, of course, was to be expected. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of Indian bacteria our American stomachs have never met. There was inevitably going to be a fight over territory. So J was, shall we say, not very keen on the idea of butter tea.

The teachings weren't going to start until the next day, so J and I ventured to Dharmasala's marketplace to prepare. We wanted to buy soft square cushions to protects our butts while sitting on the cold cement of the monastery, as well as two metal thermoses. Hot tea was supposed be served at both morning and afternoon sessions. "Oh yeah," I grinned to myself, "I'm getting my butter tea fix at least twice a day."

In the market area, people milled around the street hawkers who were selling trinkets and souvenirs. Monastics mingled together with the laypeople in front of the stores and inside the restaurants. From the color of their robes, I could tell who was Vietnamese (grey), Tibetan (maroon and gold), and Mongolian (dark burgundy). A Mongolian monk bumped into me and then only gave me a dark glare as if I were the one who pushed him aside.

"You okay?" J asked with his hand on my side. "Don't worry, they're the descendants from Genghis Khan,

they're supposed to be kinda brusque."

Before I could respond, the heavy scent of cooked beef distracted my attention. Just a few yards away were steaming baskets crowded with hot momos. This was the momo moment I'd been waiting for!

From a row of food stalls, meat smoke rose into the Himalayan air. While J stood back from the smell, I hovered over the hot meat baskets, trying to decide which momo street hawker would introduce me to the wonder of momos. Oh, the choices! Momos bursting with lamb, momos nestling tender chicken bits, and momos packed with ground beef and chives.

"Which kind do you want?" I asked J.

He shook his head.

I shrugged, "You're going to miss out."

Now, the beef and chive momo I selected was delicious. Not a mind-blowing taste explosion, but how can you go wrong with seasoned beef tucked inside a fresh steamed dumpling? The wrong is what happened later.

That itty bitty momo opened the floodgates for a intestinal tsunami that evening. I will leave the rest to your imagination, but suffice to say, diarrhea is not and never will be a pleasant experience.

The next morning I woke up feeling like I hadn't slept in three days. I prayed that wherever we sat for the teachings would be near the bathrooms in case of further momo aftermath.

Throngs of monks and hundreds of laypeople filled the monastery. I followed J through the crowds as he headed toward where our group was sitting. Leanne, the head of our group, had found a much-coveted spot by the wall of the monastery shaded from the sun.

"Good morning!" Leanne said to us, her face aglow with anticipation for the teachings. "Good morning," I smiled back weakly. We pulled our new cushions from our backpacks and began to arrange them next to the wall. I plopped my ass down onto my cushion, not paying attention to Leanne as she bustled around us getting our group settled.

But then I noticed Leanne standing over us. "I know you guys won't mind giving your seats to Bob and Laura, right?" she smiled expectantly.

We looked over at Bob and Laura, a wizened little couple with hopeful faces and big childlike eyes.

"They'll be more comfortable here, especially with these cushions!" Leanne gestured to the new cushions under our butts.

What else could aspiring Buddhists do but force a grin, get up, and find another open place to sit? The only other open spot being where no one else wanted to sit, cushion-less on the grates above the bathrooms. My prayers had come true. Because yes, the bathrooms were even closer than I had expected.

Have I mentioned limb-numbing cold in the Himalayas? Without our cushions to block the cold smelly air from below, I began to shiver even though I was still fighting off my momo-induced fever. I couldn't tell if I was pissed because of the smell, the cold, or being shunted for my seat. Probably all of the above. I barely noticed when His Holiness arrived and began the Heart Sutra prayer.

But I did break out of my fuming to notice the monks carrying huge buckets through the thousands of seated students. Whorls of steam rose every time the monks dipped a ladle into a bucket. When they lifted it up, the ladle's bowl cradled hot milky butter tea.

"Yes!" my desperate mind cried out. "Butter tea would redeem this so-far disastrous India experience!"

I clutched my shiny new thermos and held it out as a monk came near. He poured a river of tea into our bottles until the hot liquid lapped over the rims. I grasped the thermos between my freezing-cold hands. I blew the surface and watched the ripples of butter fat glisten like a mini sun. I took a long slow sip.

Remember what my friend said about drinking buttered popcorn?

Lies. Complete lies!

This tea did not taste like fresh kernels popped in hot shimmering butter, leaving a delicate sheen of salty goodness on your lips. This tasted like someone took a lump of butter, melted it in hot water with some milk, and added a handful of salt. That's not a typo. I literally mean a handful. I forced myself to swallow my mouthful of salt butter water. I felt horrible being repulsed by an ancient tradition that a whole society subsisted on for a big part of their nutrition. But the truth was that I didn't grow up drinking Tibetan tea. Tall glasses of milk filled with half a canister of Nesquik chocolate powder, yes. Huge mugs of thick melted butter, no.

While it appeared that everyone else guzzled their liquefied butter down to the last slick drop, J and I couldn't finish our tea so we left it to cool in our thermoses. The first day of teaching ended with me in a foggy stupor of numb fingers and toes, and an empty aching belly.

When we returned to our hotel room that evening, the butter tea had separated into a milk-water liquid sloshing at the bottom and a thick ring of butter congealed on the top and sides. No matter how hard we tried, we couldn't seem to wash off the butter's oily residue.

So here I was on the fifth day of the teaching waiting for His Holiness to start the morning session. I scowled under my woolen shawl and threw dagger thoughts at everything around me. His Holiness was going to continue his discussion on Avalokiteshvara and the essence of being a Bodhisattva, the embodiment of infinite compassion. Popcorn was to butter tea like my scowl was to compassion.

Commotion rose up next to us. A group of Mongolian monks had just arrived for the teachings and were

trying to squeeze into our “bathroom-grate” section. J moved our bags aside and I shifted over begrudgingly to allow them to sit down. They just looked at us with their dark gazes and made no expression when we moved over.

“So much for a thank you,” I thought.

We all huddled together, so close I could feel the rough fabric of one of the monk’s wool robe again my hand. Neither of us looked at one another.

The monastery monks began their familiar bustle of bringing out the morning tea, but I kept my head down trying to conserve the warmth from my breath. Cups, bowls, and mugs raised up to be filled as the butter tea buckets wove through the crowd.

As one bucket came near us, the rough wool against my hand began to flap around frantically. I looked next to me to see the monk searching through his bag. He had forgotten his cup. His shoulders drooped and he gazed forlornly at his fellow monks who held out their own cups to be filled.

I quickly rummaged inside my backpack until I found my thermos. Just as the butter tea was being ladled to everyone around us, I offered it to the monk.

The grin that transformed his face inspired a grin to flood my own face.

He nodded his head up and down thankfully while I nodded my head with mirrored enthusiasm. The monks, J, and I grinned at one another, all of us nodding gleefully at this interchange. The thermos was filled and I lowered my head back down with a smile as the monk slurped happily at his butter tea.

The next morning, instead of awkwardly avoiding eye contact, we and the Mongolia monks greeted each other with huge toothy grins while nodding vigorous hellos. We all shifted within our little spots on the grate to make room for one other. When our previously cupless monk brought out his own bowl, we all laughed heartedly.

The rest of the day consisted of pointing, enthusiastic smiling, questions in English (us) or Mongolian (the monks), to which the opposite party understood nothing, then shoulder shrugging, and more laughing, smiling, and vigorous nodding of heads. It didn’t matter that we had no clue what the other person was saying, we’d become friends. We shared our orange and strawberry Mentos with our new monk friends, and we sampled their brightly wrapped candies of unknown flavors with little cartoons printed on the wrapping. They drank butter tea in the mornings while J and I laughed and shook our heads no thank you.

Aside from hanging out with our Mongolian pals, I also began to listen to His Holiness’ words. Supposedly, even if you don’t absorb or comprehend the teachings, being in the presence of great wisdom still earns you a bit of merit. Of course I’m not sure how much I was earning with all the negative karma I racked up with my snarking and selfishness. But the cold slap in my face had woken me up and I began to muse about the idea of being a Bodhisattva and how my actions could benefit others instead of just myself.

The last day of teaching felt bittersweet. The weather had warmed up so much that we wore short sleeve

shirts to the teachings and left our wool shawls back at the hotel.

The morning session finished, and everyone left the monastery for a lunch break. J and I browsed the souvenirs tables on the side streets until we came to the food stalls.

I turned to J and asked, “Do you want to try a momo?”

“Nope,” he said.

We both laughed. I would always be able to describe momos as tasty little meat packages. Eating momos in the middle of a street in India on the other hand–not so tasty an experience afterwards.

Just then, the Mongolian monks came around the corner in front of us. We all lit up. Hellos, Hi’s, waving, and enthusiastic head-nodding ensued as we grinned at each other like long lost friends. Then they started saying, “Bye” and “Goodbye,” while bowing towards me and J.

I didn’t understand why they were saying goodbye now until I realized they were leaving Dharmasala and not attending the afternoon session of teaching. This was the last time we would see each other. We bowed back and said goodbye and I wished them a safe journey back to Mongolia. They didn’t understand what I said but I knew they understood what I meant.

We waved and watched them walk away until they blended into the crowd of other monks and laypeople on the street.

I wasn’t going to adore momos or be able to brag about my awesome Dalai Lama experience. Nor was I going to savor butter tea like it was delicious nectar. But like the Buddha, that salty mouthful of tea had woken me up to the present instead of keeping me trapped in my assumptions. Without my disdain for the tea, I never would have befriended the Mongolians and learned to see people in all their imperfect glory. I finally dropped my expectations to appreciate the crisp, cold beauty of the Himalayas for what it was. I would leave Dharmasala with a dose of reality and a seed of possibility — one day, if not in this lifetime, then perhaps the next, maybe I could be a butter-tea-drinking Bodhisattva. Buddha-willing, of course.

Madeline used to write stories about riding spaceships through outer space and flying to exotic worlds. She's not sure she'll be able to do the outer space part in this lifetime, but she still plans to explore the unknown on this planet and see what mysterious lessons await her. In the meantime, home is in Southern California where she lives, laughs, and loves with her husband J.

Medium Turkish Mochas | Holly Morse-Ellington

A Turkish cycling guide taught me the power of expectations. Ali, handsome, if not intimidating, had a tan, bald head and a brown Fu Manchu mustache tipped with gray. On first impression, he wouldn't have been the man I stopped to ask for directions or for help patching a flat bike tire. But when I introduced myself, his dark eyes softened. We exchanged laughs over the amount of luggage I'd saddled my husband with. Ali's laugh swelled from stomach to mouth until it resounded across the Mediterranean. His humor and local knowledge would lead my husband and I, along with a dozen other cycling enthusiasts, on an 8-day course from Marmaris, Turkey to Kalkan and back. We'd sleep aboard the Bahriyeli, a boat with a four-man crew that would meet us and anchor in each new bay for the night.

It was October 2012 and violence was heating up the Turkey-Syria border. American news reported of warring Islamic sects, mortar attacks, and both countries' militaries shooting down planes alleged to violate the other's airspace. Families rendered homeless after bombing shelled out their houses sought refuge in neighborhoods more removed from the border. Just how much bombing, how many people affected, and to what consequence for us, if any, wasn't clear.

The plan was to surround ourselves with Turkish history and culture by cycling off the beaten path through south central villages. Friends and family had suggested that my husband and I cancel, but I'd already risked missing the trip because of a personal emergency. A cosmetic surgery had collapsed my right lung and caused both a bacteria and a MRSA superbug in my nose. After a lifetime of teasing, the nose I'd wished to make smaller had blown up with antibiotic-resistant infection that weakened me from head to foot. Four months later, driven by stubborn resolve more than physical strength, I flew off to cycle the hills that outlined the Lycian Coast.

When we arrived at the port of Marmaris, Ali was tuning up trekking bikes, a type of bicycle that is heavier than the usual bike designed for roads, but sturdier on mixed terrains of gravel and sand. Elvis, a younger man who'd survived the war in Bosnia as a child, assisted Ali with checking us travellers onto the three-masted, wooden boat. We mingled on the teak sundeck in the dry heat of the pastirma yazi, or Indian summer that takes its name from the pastrami-like sausage cured in this climate. Most members of our group were American or Canadian and used to crisper fall temperatures. Ours was Ali's last trip of the season. And by then, he'd perfected his art of keeping company happy.

We stayed docked in Marmaris that night. Falling asleep under the trance-like doot doot beat from the nightclubs. Awaking in the morning to Ali ringing the ship's bell to call us together for breakfast and the day's itinerary.

"Good morning, guests," Ali greeted us as we spooned local yogurt and honey into bowls. "How is everyone doing? Ready for warm-up ride today?"

Elvis distributed maps highlighted with a winding route.

"We wizit Dalaman for lunch and stop in Sarsala," Ali explained. Despite Ali's limited English vocabulary, he'd chosen the more thoughtful words, visit instead of tour and guests instead of customers.

My fellow cyclists jumped in with the standard concerns. "How far is it, Ali?" and "Is it very hilly?"

"About 40 kilometers, undulating," Ali replied. He and Elvis snaked their hands in unison to demonstrate rolling hills.

"Easy peezy," Elvis reiterated.

It became obvious early on that the ride was more challenging than they'd indicated. For one, my definition of undulating provided for ups and downs. For the first hour we committed to the up without relief from a down. I can't speak Turkish, but the street signs with vertical arrows labeled 10% grade—warnings about exertion to cars with engines—were self-explanatory. I saw these signs every five kilometers where a turn or switchback offered false hope that a descent was just around the corner. I struggled for air, which was funny considering a forest of liquid amber trees surrounded us.

"They use in pharmacy," Ali had told us about the tree leaves.

One of those pharmaceutical uses is to treat asthma. But complications from my surgery, not asthma,

contributed to my huffing on the bike. My right side pinched as my weakened lung worked to keep up with my body. I couldn't breathe in through my nose, which was still swollen from the infection. Breathing through my mouth helped until the motorcycles, or mosquitos as Ali called them, buzzed by and blew exhaust in my face.

"How far?" I asked my husband for an update in breathless shorthand. He looked at the GPS system clipped to his handlebars, additional proof that our guides were fudging numbers. For every kilometer Ali and Elvis quoted us, we'd cycled two. My face dropped with my morale. I stared at the road directly in front of me instead of the mountainous scenery. Sweat and sunblock seeped into my eyes as my legs pushed and pulled on the pedals. Clanking noises in the distance grabbed my attention. A herd of goats necklaced with bells occupied the entire road. Everyone hopped off their bikes to take pictures as a man shepherded the scattering animals to one side. I welcomed the moment as an excuse to walk my bike.

The second break came when we stopped for lunch. Ali recommended a variety of mezze for the table. We snacked on small plates of grilled eggplant, lamb, and flatbreads with dipping sauces until our meal arrived. And even though we'd been hot all morning, Ali imparted a tradition of following each meal with coffee.

"Turkish mocha?" Ali came around to each of us and asked. "With sugar?"

"I'll take mine with lots of sugar, Ali," said one cyclist. "Just a little bit for me," said another. "Black for me," I said, "I never take sugar."

Ali wrote down each specific order and translated them for the waiter. The waiter returned with a tray of small cups and saucers. Ali read from his list. "Sugars for Bruce and Eddie, little bit for Carol and Joe here, with out for Holly." He continued this way until we each had the coffee we'd requested.

"How does everyone enjoy the Turkish mochas?" Ali asked.

The responses came at once: "Great," "Perfect," and "Just what I needed."

The mud-thick coffee provided enough caffeine to propel me up the remaining hills. Ali motioned for us to stop along a ledge for our reward at the final peak.

"Here's your panorama," he said, mimicking like he was clicking a camera.

We overlooked rocky cliffs lush with trees and bushes. Midnight blue water pooled in the half moon

shape of the harbor below. Only a handful of boats anchored in the undeveloped oasis that awaited us. After two minutes of the long-anticipated down, we reached the beach and our pit stop. We dove into the cool water in our cycling clothes and let the salt soothe our muscles.

That night aboard the boat a couple of us star gazed and refueled on raki, a licorice-tasting alcohol the Turks nicknamed "White Lion" for its strength. I asked Ali, "You call today a warm-up? Why did you lie about the route?"

"Everyting's here," Ali said, gesturing to his mind. "If I tell you fifty kilometers, you say 'fifty kilometers is so far, I will never do it.'"

Elvis nodded. "You think about how far am I going and not what's happening."

Over the following days I exercised this philosophy as if it were a muscle I wanted to tone. The less attention I paid to my aches, the more I felt cheered on by our environment. Children playing in their yards alongside the roaming chickens waved and yelled "mer'ba," the casual pronunciation of merhaba, or hello. Several boys riding their bikes toward me extended their hands. We high-fived and giggled as we passed. Farmers plucked pomegranates from the trees bordering the narrow road and gave us handfuls of the fruit. Beekeepers offered honey from the comb. Women wearing floral-print headscarves chatted and ate the çitlenbik they'd picked along their stroll. They smiled and opened their palms to us. We chewed on the bitter, nut-like berries before taking off again. In between our interactions, I eased into a comfortable pace set to the rhythm of the bells clanking from the goats grazing the hillsides.

During portions of the days, when the sun scorched down and my out-of-shape calves burned, what wasn't happening around us preoccupied my thoughts. On one stretch of undulating hills there were no trees, only miles of farmland. Minarets rose like grain towers off in the distance. I'd been listening to our chains shifting gears and the occasional tractor clambering past, hauling flatbed trailers stacked high with the day's pomegranate harvest. Then the azaan, or call to prayer, played across the countryside. Multiple calls from the three mosques on the horizon overlapped. A medley of meditation that functioned more like a work whistle to signal another day drawing to its end. Men and women bailed their last rows of hay into tepee shapes. More trucks carting pomegranates rattled by. A girl in a pink Cinderella dress twirled in her gravel driveway. "Mer'ba," we yelled to each other. I pedaled past one of the mosques I'd seen. Its parking lot was

empty. Only the dogs heeded the call, bowing down on the side of the road for a nap on the warm pavement.

That night, barefoot aboard the Bahriyeli with glasses of cloudy white raki, some of us asked Ali to clarify the role of religion in Turkey.

"We are first Turks, then Muslim," Ali said.

He would repeat this concept in later conversations. It was the perfect definition for the lifestyles I felt in some small way a part of, if even at the distance of a hello or gratitude for the zing of fruit on my taste buds.

Ali's statement made me consider the importance of how I defined myself—athletic and energetic. Moments when I pressed on despite the discomfort or my helmet heating like an oven on my head made me feel more like my old self. In fact, overcoming the physical demands made our visits to villages like Saklikent, or the "Hidden City," more rewarding. Saklikent was created around one of the deepest canyons in the world, which meant relief from cooler temperatures while we ate lunch at the outdoor café. Located at the base of the gorge, the café invited patrons to relax in one of their hammocks swinging among the sweet scent of red and pink flowers. We kicked off our shoes and slid into one of the low-lying tables with seats covered in brightly-patterned kilim cushions. We dipped our sweaty legs into the icy stream that flowed from the canyon through the aisle between tables. My heart skipped from the shock of the cold burn.

Like before, Ali helped the waiter take our afternoon coffee orders.

"Everyone enjoying the Turkish mochas?" Ali asked.

"Yes!" We thanked Ali for the treat we looked forward to during every day's halfway point.

One day, however, we deviated from our coffee ritual by stopping at a traditional teahouse in Palamut. The teahouse was located at the top of a hill on a side street with closely-packed houses and markets. Everyone saw, if not smelled, us coming. We entered the men-only space wearing sweaty lycra bike shorts and tank tops. A few of the women in our group joked that at least their bandanas provided some form of appropriate coverage. The men at the teahouse, lounging in khakis and shirts with collars, paused from their game of okey to observe as we joined them on the porch. They chuckled when we groaned up the steps.

"They want to know why you doing this," Ali explained. "They say there are easier ways of getting

where you are going."

We shared their laughter. They weren't the first, and won't be the last, to be curious about why we cycle for fun.

Grapevines wove an awning above our heads. A waiter stood on a ladder to cut several bunches of grapes from this natural ceiling to give our table, compliments of the house. The men resumed their normal conversation and round of okey as Ali translated our tea orders.

During our farewell dinner aboard the boat Ali revealed news of a little game he'd been playing all week. He confirmed one last time that we'd enjoyed our tea and Turkish mochas. We cheered this special treatment.

Then he confessed, "I order all mediums."

"What?" we asked.

"I order them same, medium," Ali said. "Everybody get medium, one sugar." Ali held up his index finger for emphasis.

He chuckled as he performed a skit of himself taking our orders.

"You ask, 'little sweet,' or 'not too strong,' and I say, 'okay.'" Ali pretended to scribble orders on his palm. He turned to the side as if handing our orders to a waiter. He faced front again and read from his fake list.

"Mocha little sweet for you," he said, leaning forward as if serving. "Mocha not too strong for you," he continued.

We glanced around at each other, jaws dropping and tears of laughter running down our bronzed faces.

"And every time I ask I get answer, 'Ali, it's better than I make at home,'" he concluded as our whoops and applause rang out along the Marmaris coastline

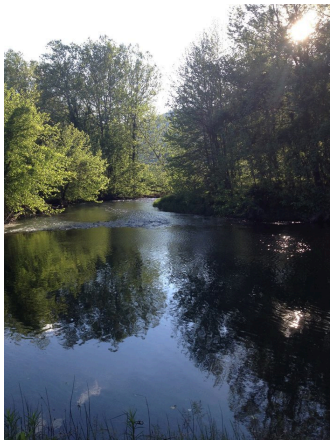
Ali had tried all week long to protect us from what we wished for. He'd known that come Day 8 we'd be sad that the answer to "How far, Ali?" was, "No farther." That we'd recount our experiences, not the kilometers. That Turkish coffee with a lot of sugar wasn't the Turkish coffee experience. And that no one in her right mind would drink Turkish coffee black.

In my Ali state of mind—strong and beautiful—I questioned whether I would have wanted my surgery.A headline one morning before my husband and I'd flown to Turkey read: Turkey on brink of war. I'd been too busy packing to notice. Too interested in distracting myself from hospital beds and IV drips with a change of scenery to care. But no amount of news or planning could have prepared me for the personal connection I'd develop one pedal stroke at a time up and over the countryside.

Headlines a year later make me worry for the people whose smiles are so vivid in my mind, but I know they keep their spirits up. They're Turks.

Holly Morse-Ellington is a writer living in the Baltimore area. She travels with her husband, a ukulele, and friends they pick up along the way.

Europe, by Way of Reston | Robyn Goodwin



Unlike other people, whom admittedly I'm insanely jealous of, as a divorced woman and mother of two children, I have to "find" myself in Reston, Virginia, of all places, and it has taken me more than a year. Maybe forty-three. It possibly hasn't happened yet, but I'm getting closer. If I were anywhere but Reston, I'd be self-actualized by now. If I were in Sardinia, the Fjords, or Budapest the revelations would be accumulating on me like dust on a ceiling fan. If only I could have found a way to get a publisher to send me, my two boys, my boyfriend, and my dog to Stockholm, I could write a monthly installment from small fishing villages chock full of cleaning tips. Everyone knows the Swedes know how to keep house; they're up there with the Germans. This hasn't happened; God likes to keep me guessing, lest I become what I'm naturally suited for—leisure.

Reston, Virginia is a model in its own right. I live in the older section referred to as "old Reston," which is the best-known planned community in the nation. Developed in 1965, by a visionary named Robert E. Simon, this city's population has grown to roughly sixty thousand people. Simon's idea was to develop several town centers that mimicked little downtowns where people could live, shop and gather. Everything is on a walking scale. There are miles of wooded paths, farmer's markets and town hall meetings. For some reason it was deemed that the houses should be brooding and dark, contemporary floor plans that were unsightly from the road, but imaginative and light-filled on the inside. Brown is big in Reston. Concrete is big in Reston. Feet are big in Reston. Birkenstock isn't just a shoe, but a preventative measure to a foot disorder. Old Reston is a model of how life should be—a place that would never refer to "The Grateful Dead" as "The Grateful Dead," but as how the *real* fans knew them, "The Warlocks." And then new Reston came along.

New Reston has five fake lakes, fifteen swimming pools and over fifty-five miles of paved trails, but even on its best day it doesn't resemble an ashram and lacks the authenticity of a real city. The newer section has a glut of fabulous grocery stores, plenty of shade and swimming pools on every corner. A swimming pool is no substitute for the seashore; nobody's writing their story about how a summer at the swim club shed light on their personal struggles. New Reston is homogenized, sanitized and resembles a square state. The town center is filled with chain restaurants and well-known stores. High-rise condo buildings line the main street like sentries. There's an ice rink, a fountain and those Campari sun umbrellas twisted into tables outside recognizable cafes. I liked it better when everything didn't match and the Christmas decorations were a little bit more garish, like they are in second-rate London hotels. I like a few stray dogs.

Still Reston is the place I've chosen to raise my kids. It is part of my story because it's the first chapter of my life as Paul's wife and the first chapter of my life as a divorced mother of two. It's where I took off my training wheels and crashed my bike against a soft furry hill that doubles as James. Reston lacks glamour and has a shortage of sexy accents but it has an advantage that other places don't have—it's where I live. That counts for something.

When James and I first started dating, we attended a black tie event in Washington, DC, at the Folger Shakespeare Theater. He was on the board of directors, so he was required to sit with the other board members and I was put at a table that had an open seat. I'm typically social, but something happens to me in these literary crowds, despite an MFA in Fiction—I get stupid. The only meaningful conversations I have take place in the ladies' room, usually with the attendant who is handing me a towel. That night my tablemates were an eclectic group—big supporters of the arts, i.e. people with serious money. I'm not one to think much about money except when I don't have it, but I recognized I was in a different league. Across from me sat a major radio personality; lovely with her perfectly coiffed head of hair, ability to remember everyone's name, and her birdlike appetite. She left untouched on her plate an entire king salmon, that I found myself conversing with after a few glasses of wine. On my left, was a prominent lawyer somehow affiliated with tobacco that sung the praises of Roald Dahl whose books I've always adored. How I won the lottery on that seat placement I'll never know. By the end of the evening though, I'd exhausted my memory of "James and the Giant Peach." On my right, there was a gossip columnist for a Washington newspaper, a pale, thin wisp of a man with an affected accent and literally brimming with wit. I was savvy enough to be terrified of him, if for no other reason than he took an unusual interest in me.

"I don't believe we've met," he said, putting his hand on my shoulder. "Why don't I know you?" I could see the Rolodex of his mind flipping wildly to all the latest charity events.

"Robyn," I said. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Should I know you?"

"No one knows me."

"Where are you from?" he said, taking a sip of red wine. "You look familiar. Are you affiliated with the Washington Ballet?"

"Reston," I said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Reston," I said again.

"Reston, Virginia?"

I nod.

"My God, someone from Reston! I've been to London more times than I've been to Reston."

In this crowd, you might as well have said that you lived in Nebraska--once you'd crossed over the Key Bridge into Virginia it was all just a matter of frequent flyer miles. But his reaction was liberating, begging for a follow-up. If he found it astonishing that I lived in the most famous planned community, just wait until he heard what I did for a living. I timed it perfectly—right before he took another well-deserved sip of wine, and I had consumed close to twenty.

"Yeah, Reston, and I clean houses."

James used to get annoyed when I talked about cleaning houses at these functions. He's not a snob, but he thought I underplayed my role in my own company.

"You *own* the business, Robyn," he said. "You do more than clean. Not everybody can do what you do. And you're a writer."

Oh the naïveté! Didn't he understand that *everyone* could do what I did? I *was* a writer, but was afraid to claim it, as I'd only published in literary journals. Now I just say I'm a cleaner, who happens to be writing a novel. This is my revelation. This is my truth. This is my Reston. I am a cleaning lady in Northern Virginia. There is honor in my work. I use my hands--this is a wonderful thing, to use your hands and to be physically tired after a day's work. There is something honest in exhaustion. My job has a beginning and an end. There is always a tangible result for my efforts. I've learned that my work is not a little dream, but a simple one. There's a big difference. The mundane task of washing a floor when done with a giving heart is a love offering. I can commit to this.

This is what I respond to when James and I go to fancy parties downtown. This is why I feel something well up inside me when I see the humblest of jobs being performed with dignity. I haven't succeeded in rising to the level of having chauffeurs and cooks. If I throw a dinner party, it's me who serves drinks and grills steaks. On the occasions that I attend a catered meal in Washington, I'm drawn to the help so much so, that James has said, *you know some of the guests have interesting stories too*. But I've learned what every kid has learned who has graduated from the kid table to the grown-up table on Thanksgiving—it's a hell of a lot more fun at the kid's table.

"What country are you from?" I ask, as the appetizer tray floats by; that simple question opens the door to so many adventures. I end up talking shop with the waiters, cooks and an honest-to-God butler. I scribble notes in the bathroom for my book. The help balks when I try to clean the buffet, but I feel at home stirring soup, dispensing cocktail napkins and taking coats. By the end of the night I know some of their heartaches. Most have families they are supporting in their own countries. A lot have come here illegally. They tell me this in wait of judgment, but all I feel is sadness. The issue of immigration is something far more complicated than Minute Men, fences, and closed borders. And though I don't pretend to know anything about immigration policies and what's best for the American economy, I do consider myself an expert on the human heart. When you have no opportunity, no chance to feed your child, you will swim any ocean, cross

any desert, die in any trunk of a car. This is the nature of love.

I've asked my employees whether they would have tried to re-enter the States if they had been caught at the border all those years ago. There wasn't one that said no. Nothing was a deterrent—not deportation, starvation, snakebite or heatstroke. A chance, an opportunity should be one of the fundamentals of life. Without that, there is nothing. I am lucky, unbelievably lucky. I've seen America through the immigrant's eyes—it's a place where you find $10 bills on the streets, where if you work hard, you can get ahead and maybe own a home. There is food for the poor and medicine for the sick. It is enormously large and generous. America is one big Texas. We are cowboys and oil and J.R. Ewing and straight teeth and eighty different kinds of cereal. We have too many choices, too many brands of jeans, too many ideas of what we deserve in the face of such need. This is my birthright. This is my privilege. America is a limited resource but until we help other nations discover theirs we will always be the destination. We are the great magicians —putting rabbits in hats and pulling out ponies.

When I was a girl my father traveled around the world, bringing me home dolls from every country he visited —each of them clad in their traditional costumes. Holland wore clogs and a smart white kerchief; Peru had big feet and intricately woven sandals; China was a sad face with perfectly red lips. But my favorite was Mexico with her looped braids and basket of fruit. Each doll felt like a mystery—like opening a jewelry box and finding the dancing ballerina inside. Airports, train stations, letters on flimsy paper became associated with something elusive and wonderful; there was a world out there I didn't know about, but in time would invent. These dolls were the first foreigners to cross my borders. I loved them because they weren't Barbie's —they were more industrious, more earnest, they had to work for a living. Barbie just caroused around in her convertible in Malibu and went home to her luxury townhouse. Rosa from Chile had a different story to tell and all these years later she's still telling it.

I don't want to ever lose touch with the person who pushes a broom. I don't want to forget what it's like to chop my own onions. I don't want to live in a world that forgets the real stories are happening at the minimum wage level. They are better than stories. They are the truth. They are soaked in bacon fat, cleaning solvents and turpentine. They almost always tell a tale of sacrifice, loss and babies. My life is peppered with immigrants. Their stories have become my own. I have navigated Social services with a pregnant thirteen-year-old, prayed for guidance, begged for a miracle, hired lawyers, celebrated births and mourned deaths. I have scrubbed a floor next to a woman who hadn't seen her daughter in twelve years--a woman who, after her rent is paid and money sent home, has $85 to live on. She is El Salvador—dark-eyed and chaffed skinned. I have developed relationships with employees from places I've never seen nor probably will. When I go to parties' downtown and meet the butler, the cook, and coat taker, we discuss Manila as if it were my own hometown. I didn't get to go to Santiago or Lima or Rio to find myself, but these cities have come to me. I'm very lucky. I've been all around the world, and the world has made me a writer.

Robyn Goodwin received her MFA from George Mason University where she was recipient of the Heritage Writing Award. Her story "Watershed" was selected by Sherman Alexie to appear in Scribner's, The Best of the Writing Workshops*. Other works have appeared in various literary journals. She's currently finishing her memoir,* Sweeping Beauty, Cleaning Messes, Marriages and Me*. She's the mother of two delicious boys, and lives in Manassas, VA*.

Since Biblical times, shepherds throughout the Mediterranean basin have herded their flocks from winter grazing areas in the lowlands to summer pastures in the mountains and back again in a millenia-old practice known in French as the “transhumance,” literally “across the ground.”

The weather report has promised sunny weather and high winds. But as we drive up the sinuous road from our village to the Croix de Bauzon, a 4200-foot high plateau in the Ardèche, a department in southeastern France, the sky becomes increasingly menacing and the temperature drops from 55 degrees to just above freezing. The rising sun outlines the pink and lavender clouds in gold. When we get to the top of the Tanargue Mountain, named after the Celtic name for Thor, the thunder god, we are above the tree line. After passing a shuttered ski resort, we drive over a rutted road along the desolate plateau to the “parc” where the summer shepherd has brought the four flocks he has been tending since mid-June.

Being a summer shepherd is a lonely job. He or she lives alone high in the mountains in a rudimentary cabin without electricity for three months, bearing sole responsibility for hundreds of sheep. One year the four shepherds hired a summer shepherd who unbeknownst to them spent his evenings drinking in a café halfway down the mountain. They got a frantic call reporting that the sheep had migrated down the mountain en masse and were devouring the surrounding gardens and vineyards.

My friend Jean Marc and the other three shepherds divide up their herds by running the sheep one by one through a chute and pulling those bearing their brand into a separate pen. Clouds conceal the nearby mountain peaks as a thick fog sweeps over the ridge. The wind howls--I have on four layers of clothing and I’m still freezing. I plunge my hands into the pocket of my raincoat, wishing I’d brought gloves.

When Jean Marc has assembled his 70 sheep we set off along a deep track formed by the pounding of ovine hooves, water erosion, and more recently, SUVs. As we walk along the rocky track we can see for miles in all directions--to the volcanic plugs of the Puy de Dome to the north, to the Pre-Alpes to the east, and to Mont Ventoux, about 75 miles to the southeast. Tiny villages we passed through on the trip up the mountain nestle in the valleys, surrounded by verdant pines. The bells on the lead sheep clang, creating a constant dissonant din with a humming overtone, like a chorus of tone deaf Buddhist monks intoning Om.

Jean Marc’s son Blaise and his girlfriend Camille, now in their mid-twenties, are trying out the pastoral life—they’ve agreed to work with Blaise’s parents for a year. I try to imagine what it would be like to work day in and day out with your boyfriend and your “in-laws,” especially at a job that requires constant cooperation

and direction. I hope Blaise and Camille will decide to stay on after their one-year trial period is over; they seem to love what they're doing, and having three shepherds instead of one means that Jean Marc and Edith, his wife, can have a bit of free time—she's learning to play the flute and spends the winter months painting portraits.

Jean Marc, who, with his full beard and long hair, looks like a portly John the Baptist, was one of the many young people--known as marginals or babacool (hippies)--who came from the industrial north of France to the Ardèche in the 1960s, looking for a more authentic rural way of life and cheap housing. Edith, who grew up in the Netherlands, came to the Ardèche on holiday, met Jean Marc and never went home. She once showed me a photo of when they were in their twenties--they look very thin, almost malnourished, and very happy. They started with nothing, living in a relative's unheated stone basement, until they could construct their own house, gradually building a herd, a family and a way of life.

The pastoral life is demanding--someone has to take the animals out twice a day for at least three hours, seven days a week, 365 days a year, rain or shine. If a shepherd wants to go on vacation he or she arranges to trade places with a shepherd from a different region, enjoying a change of scene while they take care of each others' herds—a pastoral variation on the busman's holiday—when a bus driver taking the bus to go on vacation.

By the time we reach our lunch destination, a grassy area at the Croix de Milet, a mountain pass, I'm ready to die. My leg muscles ache--it's odd how strenuous walking downhill can be, especially when you're putting on the brakes. After a leisurely lunch and a sieste on the grass, we start down a dirt road, mercifully rock-free, that winds through a forest of chestnuts. The trees once provided local peasants with a vital source of protein--they ground the dried chestnuts into flour to make bread, ate them in soup and spread the sweet chestnut paste on bread.

When we start up again, Jean Marc walks with us for awhile. He and his friend Jean Claude, a farmhand, discuss an especially plump sheep. Each time they mumble her name they laugh--it starts with a B and ends in "ette." "Do you know what that means?" Jean Marc asks me.

It's one of those situations where you can pretty much guess. But you don't want to say yes, and admit you know a dirty word (or get it wrong). On the other hand you don't want to say "no" and have the meaning explained in graphic detail.
"Yes," I venture.

"I guess it's better to have a fat one than one that's moribund," observes Jean Claude.

Ah, the wonders of the French education system--a farmhand knows the word "moribund," can use it in a sentence, and chooses it to describe a sheep's vagina.

We see Rocher, a village across the valley, its church belfry rising above a cluster of red tile roofs. Soon the path leads past huge stone farmhouses that have been converted into summer homes. The sheep grab frantically for the trumpet vines, passion flowers and kiwis, and the occasional bunch of grapes. I try to shoo them off, tapping them on the back with my baton, before the property owners peer out their windows. A Dutch man wrapped in a towel rushes out of his house to take our picture—I smile as I masquerade as a

native providing local color.

We veer off the main road and enter a small valley where we'll spend the night. Jean Marc assembles a makeshift pen, driving stakes into the ground with a rock and then unwinding white netting around them. He hooks up a battery to the fence and attaches a clamp to a grounding iron. There's a question as to whether the wire netting is taking the charge, so he asks me to touch it. I feel the slightest impulse--will the sheep notice it? Jean Marc and Blaise herd the sheep into the enclosure and tie it shut with a string. Are there still wolves in the Ardèche? I hope not.

We walk up to the clearing and have a cold supper of lentil, tomato, cucumber, pasta and beet salads, as well as paté, hard sausage and cheese. And of course pastis, beer and red, white and rosé wine. Luckily Louise, a retired editor from Paris who prepares the meals and delivers them to us, has asked me to share her tent--otherwise I'd be sleeping on pine needles under the stars, buffeted by the wind. I crawl into bed at 10 o'clock and immediately fall asleep. The wind howls through the pine boughs all night. When I wake up Louise's tiny Scots terrier is nestled at my feet.

We get up at 5 am, have a quick breakfast of tepid coffee and breakfast rolls, and set off with the sheep in the dark to avoid the morning traffic. After a few minutes, nature calls. I drop trou and crouch down on the side of the road. Midstream, a car approaches from behind, it's headlights illuminating my backside. It's Jean Marc. I know he's chuckling to himself--I could care less. For a moment I feel French.

The sheep frantically devour anything in sight--grass, weeds, kiwis, rose and blackberry bushes, scrub oaks, chestnuts and acorns. Their favorite delicacy appears to be grapes, now almost ready for harvest. We turn off the main road to take a path bounded by high stone walls--the countryside is crisscrossed by passages like this, built over the centuries to channel the herds and protect the fields.

Now it is sunny and almost hot. On either side, low walls built of large reddish stones create terraces that stairstep up the hill. When we get to an arched stone footbridge, Blaise tells us not to rush the sheep or they might bunch up and fall off the bridge. Soon, we arrive at an abandoned railway tunnel. Blaise asks us to form a solid line behind the sheep and turn on our flashlights, shining them on the walls of the tunnel--if they get spooked in the dark passage the sheep might stampede. As I shine my flashlight on the tunnel wall, hoping to reassure the sheep, I remember what Churchill said about Clement Attlee, the Labour Party leader who defeated him in 1945--that he was a sheep in sheep's clothing.

We emerge from the tunnel and walk along the disused track. When we cross over a high railroad bridge with flimsy netting that resembles the sheep enclosure, someone speculates that it has been installed to prevent people from jumping off the bridge into the stream far below. I'm reminded of the many people we have lost to suicide in our village--at least five over the 25 years we've been there, out of a population of about 300, including an 85-year-old woman who walked to the middle of the bridge spanning the Ardèche, took off her slippers, hooked her cane to the railing, and jumped off--she didn't want to submit to the hip replacement operation scheduled the next day.

We arrive at our destination at about 11 am. By now it's sunny and hot. After a much-needed cup of coffee, I struggle to the ground--my muscles ache so much it's difficult to sit down. After I'm down it's next to impossible to get up, so I ask someone to fetch me a glass of wine. A fellow from Paris with soulful eyes takes an accordion out of its case, saying his friend recently taught him a few songs. He plays the intricate runs with surprising fluidity, not missing a note. After we finish lunch, Jean Marc regales us with stories of

Balazuc characters--the used car salesman who sold an ox to his uncle. Awhile later, when the ox scratched his head against a tree trunk, his right horn fell off. The uncle picked up the horn and examined it--his nephew had glued the horn on the animal's head with Superglue. The man threw the horn on the ground--there was no way he could sell a one-horned ox at the market. Another involved a man named Fabrigoule who lived in a large stone house some distance from Balazuc on the windy plateau called the gras. He had a grudge against the postman, so he subscribed to the local newspaper, forcing the postman to walk the two miles to his house every day to deliver the paper, knowing full well that Monsieur Fabrigoule couldn't read.

I curl up on a rock and fall asleep. When I wake up, I keep my eyes shut and eavesdrop on the murmured conversations around me.
"Look, there's a wild boar!" someone exclaims. I sit up and look to where she's pointing--high up a steep, barren hill. There he is--a huge boar, barreling across the ridge. He turns and starts coming toward us, his tusks gleaming in the sun. Weighing up to 500 pounds, a boar can gore a person or total a car. The sheep baa plaintively, their bells jangling. The boar has second thoughts and veers in the other direction, disappearing over the ridge.

We scan the hillside for Edith, who's bringing the goats to join us--the two herds haven't been together for three months. A tiny dot appears on the top of the ridge, and then a few horned heads. The sheep stare up at the goats, bleating softly. It occurs to me that both sheep and goats made it into the horoscope hall of fame. Edith and the goats make their way slowly down the steep hillside. The sheep greet them shyly, but do not mingle. Louise's tiny Scots terrier lunges at the goats, barking fiercely, and has to be pulled away more than once.

Earlier in the day I discussed with Suzanne, a woman from Bordeaux, the economics of raising goats versus sheep. Goats provide milk six months of the year, which Edith makes into cheese and sells to local restaurants and a faithful clientele. The sheep are shorn once a year, but the herd is so small it's not worth selling the wool. The male lambs are sold to Muslims from Largentière, where there's a large community of harkis, Algerians who supported France during the Algerian war and were resettled in the region after the war. They will sacrifice the lambs for Eid. But other than that, and a small subsidy from the European Union, the sheep are not a source of income—they're not rentable, as the French would say—cost effective. If Jean Marc and Edith sold off the sheep, they'd cut their work load in half--70 animals to look after instead of 140. I broach this to Suzanne in hushed tones, embarrassed by my Yankee practicality.

"But Edith loves her goats, and Jean Marc his sheep. They argue over their virtues--which animal is dumber, which is more obedient, which has more personality. A chacun sa passion--to each one his passion," she replies with a shrug.

I feel hopelessly American.

Carol Merriman spends her summers in a village in the Ardeche, an arid region in south central France. She is currently working on a novel about three generations of peasant women who raise silkworms. When she's not in France she lives in North Haven, Connecticut and enjoys hiking, writing and playing the piano.

A Left Turn from Albuquerque | Amaris Ketcham

Shortly before I first left Kentucky for New Mexico, my mother told me, “Women are born without histories, so go out and invent yourself.” I was eighteen and ready to “invent myself”; although whatever that meant I didn’t know at the time. I wanted to live in America, but in a place that was wholly different than what I thought of as “American.” I narrowed my choices down to New Mexico and Hawaii and flipped a coin.

I moved without knowing which city hosted the capitol or how to spell the city name where I would be living. I practiced writing it out many times. The trickiest thing about spelling Albuquerque was that so many people pronounced it “Alburquerque,” a surname closer to the original Arabic spelling, meaning a place of apricots. Sure enough, if there wasn’t a late freeze, Albuquerque had an overabundance of apricots.

People from elsewhere often asked about the magic and mystery associated with New Mexico, which really comes from the intense sun, very hot summers, and consistent state of dehydration. During the day, when most people are at the height of rationality, people in the high desert operate under dream logic, seeing faces in cliffs and gods and devils on mesas. It’s a striking and unsettling landscape. In addition to that, New Mexico’s land is remarkably diverse—with over 4,500 species living there, it’s the fourth most diverse state in the union. There are even jaguars still eking out an endangered existence in the south. But it’s also a land that is set aside by the national government to be sacrificed as a violence laboratory: a testing site for atomic bombs and a disposal site for nuclear waste. This contrast is unique and terrifying.

After six years, I missed the rain and green landscapes, so I relocated to Spokane, Washington. When I was there, I started to miss the cultural diversity that New Mexico has. Even though Washington and Kentucky are very similar, very “American,” I think that I actually suffered from culture shock.

Three things I noticed right away: sprinklers were turned on in the middle of the day, during it’s hottest temperature, and often watered more asphalt than greenery, which felt as an affront to all of the water conservation and caution I had known. A Mexican restaurant I dined at was not Mexican at all, but Costa Rican, and as such, the food was not spicy, and a dollop of mayonnaise intruded tacos where sour cream should have been. The third thing I noticed: people of the Inland Northwest were remarkably not diverse.

In Spokane, the people were white. Some were Aryan nation white supremacists, and most were overbearing about proselytizing. This culture was, in essence, my native culture: white and conditioned into

Christianity. However, I'm not Christian. I am a fairly standard atheist, though I don't like that term because it's often pejorative and seems to imply that someone is looking for a fight, and I am not. Nor do I like the term agnostic, because it implies that there is some spiritual search and that at any moment, one may be converted with just the right argument or tragedy. These, at least, appear to be the colloquial understandings, what the folk believe if not a standard *American Heritage* or *OED* definition. I have not found a better word, though.

My relationship with Christianity is complicated and very confusing for other people, Christians and atheists alike, because I am culturally Christian. My mother did her best to understand various other spiritualties, Buddhism and aliens and iris readings and what-have-you New Agery, and tried to instill these in me. However, because of the place I was raised, spirituality became one of those things like how the children of immigrants learn the language of the street in a process of assimilation. On the playground, I was beaten up as a child for talking about how everything, such as the cedars and the field mice and the stones, was alive and we shared the same, one soul. Every childhood friend witnessed me at least once to try to save my soul from the waiting eternity of hellfire and brimstone. I went to churches to maintain friendships; went to church camp because it was the only kind offered aside from conservation camp, which regimented hunting and canoeing but which one was only allowed to attend once in a lifetime. Everything involved prayer—each meeting before work, each team huddle before a game. When I ate with friends, we had to say grace before every meal, and I still pause sometimes before eating, reflexively thinking that someone will say thanks or the Lord's Prayer.

I can use church language because I am accustomed to that set of words. Some words, though, like "joyous," sting me to the core. Another thing that stings is when someone says something about Jesus having given up on him or her. One of the hallmarks of a religion that emphasizes a personal relationship with its deity is that this deity can personally avoid, offend, forsake. Something meant to comfort people, this idea of one-on-one time with Jesus, can just as easily make people feel so abandoned and alone. But on the flip side, it's brilliant—someone else is in control, someone wants to know you intimately, and they are on your side. I force myself to keep quiet because I do not want to disrespect people, ever, by disagreeing with their belief system.

In Spokane, I found staying silent increasingly difficult. One of my first nights there, I went out to a bar with a new friend. A man approached us and sat down without asking if he could join us. He sipped from his beer, making eye contact with me, then said, "You're a dangerous girl, huh?"

I had no idea what he was talking about. I was of average height and weight, fair and freckled, with hazel eyes and long, brown hair. I wore a T-shirt without any symbols on it and off-brand jeans. To my knowledge, nothing was less harmless than a twenty-four year old white girl from the country.

"You've got that wild hair. I bet you don't brush it, huh? Long, hippie hair."

Hippies are, of course, one of the most offensive things a red-county Christian can imagine. They promise marijuana, pixie-like promiscuity, and weird New Age speak about flower remedies and how everything shares the one same soul. While one can get away with that in the high deserts of New Mexico, where everyone is too thirsty and too busy scraping by, profiting a little off Southwestern tourists, who, let's face it, are hippies come to the "Land of Enchantment" to learn about alternate spiritualties, shrink in a sweat lodge,

and hear about how chamomile flowers can help you quit smoking.

I was offended. Not only did I have to brush my hair to keep it from tangling, especially in that drizzly climate. Not only did I recently have cut a necklace out of a dreadlock that formed within four hours. Not only did no one care about my hair in Albuquerque—"That hot?" they'd ask. "I suppose," I'd say, "but it keeps my neck from turning red."—not only all that, but my hair was now a two-pound mane, a sign of sexual selection, an affront to Christian family values, a symbol of returning to the culture war I matured in.

That man—who left our table shortly after accusing me—was only the first blow.

People around me started talking about their churches again. For six years I'd spent Sundays hiking, barbequing, hula-hooping, cleaning, star-gazing, and suddenly I found myself back in pews, gritting my jaws as I attempted to be polite. If you do not join in, or at least pretend, in Kentucky, you are persecuted. They used to mark people in my hometown to drive them out: the police would memorize your car and license plate and pull you over every time you were driving. The cops nearly ran over one "bad seed," pinning a teenager to a brick wall with their squad car, which resulted in him losing both legs. Decent young atheists fled to North Carolina or Florida when we were in high school.

These churches in Spokane were different than Kentucky ones, primarily because they tended to be Lutheran church-planters rather than established Southern Baptists. By church planters, I mean that they would rent an empty space in a strip mall and try to appeal to a certain kind of congregation. It was okay to have tattoos and gauged piercings and wear leather to the strip mall church. Once they brought in enough people, and the congregation grew, they'd train a new pastor, rent a new building, and send half of the congregation to the next strip mall over. In this way, they multiplied and churches were everywhere—I was even invited to one that met in my neighborhood park, though my attention was divided between looking for four-leaf clovers and listening to a young, trying-hard-to-be hip pastor attempt to nail down Ruth's subservience.

One Sunday, a young man who wanted to date—no, marry, according to the plans he set forth on the third date—me insisted that I start going to his strip mall church with him. I walked through the sliding glass doors with reluctance, eyeing the Thai restaurant and gin distillery storefronts on either side, daydreaming of alternatives. The new pastor was working through a series on the Ten Commandments and this week, he fleshed out ideas on what it means to take the Lord's name in vain. He moved away from condemning the congregation on saying goddamn and OMG toward an idea that God is a brand, and when one wears the God brand (or the crucifix logo), one should behave in certain ways. One needs to talk the talk and walk the walk. Otherwise, calling oneself a Christian is a way of breaking this commandment.

I'd never heard anyone contextualize the commandment in this way, and I found it an interesting spin, perhaps something we could discuss over a gin and tonic after we were allowed to spill back into the parking lot. But I looked over and the young man who wanted me to bear him little Lutherans was gone. I waited until everyone took Communion, wondering what had become of my date. College girls were talking about backyard chickens and victory gardens. One guy was soliciting funds for a mission trip to Portland, where he

planned to couchsurf with friends and generally hang without doing any activity that sounded remotely like community service. I felt like I was living a Garrison Keillor nightmare, in a place that time had tried and failed to improve. I edged to the parking lot and waited.

People trickled out and eventually he was among them. He was sorry, he said, he'd grown sleepy and went in some storeroom to nap during the service. I wished I had known of that option. I said I wasn't going to come back to church, that I would be supportive, but Christianity wasn't for me, that to me, it wasn't worth it to believe in something that in spite of being all-powerful and all knowing can't love you as unconditionally as a mother can.

He looked at me as though I were an imposter. "But you talk about God all the time."

It occurred to me that he was right, that while I do not believe in Jesus, I do talk about God. It wasn't really in a Christian sense—I recognize that the New Age people I know, myself included, will talk about the Universe, energies, karma, vibrations, essences, Eastern religions, etc. and the way they talk about them is basically how some talk about God. I just wasn't using that particular noun. When I say something about the Universe, I can often say "God" instead and it means the same thing. Hell, sometimes I even anthropomorphize the Universe, and give it whims. After a couple years in Spokane, I had began speaking about having "good luck" and having "white trash luck," which is pretty much the same thing as saying, "I am blessed" or, "God's plan is mysterious."

And I belt out folk songs with feeling, even though they often contain Christian themes and lyrics.

I had been trying to go unnoticed in Spokane, to avoid strange hair encounters impregnated with meaning and conflict, to avoid talking about the one same soul, my New Mexico New Age fancies on the preciousness of life. I never said I was atheist because I disliked the term, because the two conversations one should avoid are politics and religion, and in places such as Spokane, those are one and the same. I wondered if he was right; if I had misled him. But then he said, "I used to be the same way. Jonah and the whale. All those kids' stories sound pretty silly if you think about them literally. But you'll understand it later; you'll come around."

I knew I wouldn't come around. I was born into someone else's history, plodding along as naked and laughable as when I first arrived with rough-hewn smile and splintered selfhood. "Don't think about the problem," my mother would have said, "think about the solution." Go out and invent yourself.

Amaris Ketcham is a honorary Kentucky Colonel and regular contributor to the arts and literature blog, Bark. She is still inventing herself.

In August 1943, the United States sent my grandfather Pierre Boucheron to Casablanca as the liaison between American forces and the Free French Navy. While in Morocco, he wrote several short nonfiction pieces in French and English. A village with his name existed, he was told. He hired a driver and went to see it. Here is my translation of his "Visit," originally written in French, which includes a document he copied while on his trip.

*

A Visit to Boucheron

By: Pierre Boucheron

Translated by: Robert Boucheron

On Sunday, February 20, 1944, I finally visited my namesake village somewhere in North Africa. It's a place so small, lost in the immensity of the desert, that it appears only on local maps and military plans.

For months, I wanted to visit this place, for reasons more sentimental than otherwise, but obstacles kept falling in my way. First, it was necessary to obtain official permission, a task which could not be done in less than several hours. In fact, it took half a day. Then, once permission was granted, the winter days were too short to make the round trip before dark, even though my Arab driver had discovered a shortcut by which, he assured me, we could save twenty-five kilometers. It was absolutely necessary to travel by broad daylight through the *bled*, the rough back-country.

Lastly, there was the question of lunch. Some weeks ago, I attempted to make this ramble. Lunch at the *Panier Fleuri,* an inn situated halfway, turned into a meal too long and thoroughly wetted to permit our continuing on the uncertain tracks. This time, however, we left early in the morning with no notion of where we would eat. In a pinch, we could sample the local hostelry, if the village had one. We missed a meal, as it

turned out, but this time we saw Boucheron.

It was with the strangest emotions that I traversed the last leg of the journey, along a *route nationale* which was mediocre enough. Every few kilometers my name appeared on little blocks of stone by the side of the road. From time to time, a great concrete signpost at a crossroads announced the name of a distant locality, generally an Arabic name, as well as our destination. Thus I read my name in letters thirty centimeters tall over an arrow pointing straight ahead.

This would hardly matter if I were a Durand or a Dupont, something utterly common. But the name Boucheron turns out to be rare even in France. In the United States, it belongs to none but my immediate family. On several occasions, people have sworn to me that there are Boucherons in New Orleans or Montreal. When I tried to verify these claims, they would invariably deflate to a Bourgeron or Boucher or something approaching it, but never an authentic Boucheron. So, as I say, I experienced a lively satisfaction in seeing my name repeated so many times along the road.

At last, we arrived at the village, or rather hamlet. It had a population of 123 inhabitants, Arabs for the most part, with seven Jews and four Europeans. At the center of the public square, next to a small garden full of flowers, stood a monument dedicated to the memory of Lieutenant Bramaud du Boucheron. He fell on the field of honor on March 29, 1908. He was killed while at the head of a detachment of Spahis, native troops, against the Berbers, during a program of general pacification carried out by France. The monument was a simple column of the white stone of the country, with inscriptions of the high deeds of the lieutenant and their date.

A group of Arabs gathered around me as I took photographs of the monument. They demanded cigarettes and small gifts. I noticed a European face among the crowd. In French, I asked him for information about the village. Apart from the population figures mentioned, he said that the one and only inn, bearing the pompous name of *Hôtel de France* and occupying one side of the square, was closed for lack of guests, provisions and means of transport. The sole means of transport to the nearest town was the coach parked permanently in front of the hotel, its wheels up on jacks, without tires, a tarp covering the motor. It was a melancholy reminder of more prosperous times, rich in tires and gasoline, before the current war.

I asked if there was not another café or boarding house nearby. He directed me to the *bistro* of Madame Laforge. All I could obtain there was some bad wine at five francs a glass. She had no coffee, no bread, absolutely nothing to eat, the hour for meals having passed, she said. I settled for a glass of wine, unquestionably *le vin du pays,* and stepped back outside.

The town hall, here called *Administration Civile No. 14,* was next door, so I ventured in to look at the posters and public notices.

"*Monsieur l'Administrateur* is in the middle of his Sunday afternoon nap," a servant said. "I regret that it is impossible to see him or his elaborate gardens, located behind the governmental edifice."

I left my visiting card with the servant, who was astonished to behold Monsieur Boucheron in flesh and bone, and I promised to return.

As one glass of bad wine was hardly enough to sustain me, I went back for another. Madame Laforge divided her time between serving her customers and giving the breast to a nursing child. An old man sat with two ex-soldiers of middle age, each wearing campaign decorations on the lapel of his jacket. Certainly, I thought, they must be veterans of the First World War who came here as colonists many years ago. The old man introduced himself as Sergeant Cornice.

"It was none other than I who lashed the body of the lieutenant to his horse and brought it back. We buried him in a place four kilometers away."

What a windfall for me to find this first-hand source! I called for a round of drinks and gazed at the old sergeant, who seemed to recover some of his lost vigor. He spoke rapidly in Arabic to one of the half-naked children who pressed around us. Their elders still lounged in the square, perhaps expecting another traveler. The boy ran as if the devil were after him.

"He will fetch a document which might be of interest to you," Cornice explained. While we awaited its arrival, he recounted with tears in his eyes the heroic exploits of his chief thirty-six years ago, and how he buried the remains in the neighborhood.

"Pierre Bramaud du Boucheron, Lieutenant of the Twentieth Dragoons, was originally from Limoges," Cornice said. "Some years after his death, the family had his remains transported to France for burial in his native city. The lieutenant had a brother, a naval officer who died of fever in New Caledonia ten or twelve years before. He had a sister who might still be alive in France."

Did my family name once begin with the particle "du"? Was this lieutenant a cousin of my father? Was it conceivable that my father, who died about 1898, was the naval officer in New Caledonia? I wondered over these interesting facts.

The boy returned with a yellowed paper, carefully folded and tied with a tricolor ribbon. He presented it like a sacred relic, which in fact it was. With scarred fingers, Cornice slowly untied the ribbon. The paper bore the lovely script that all French schoolchildren are taught.

"This is my official report on the death of my commanding officer, written the day after the event," Cornice said.

*

Report on the Circumstances which Surrounded the Death of MonsieurleLieutenant du Boucheron on March 29, 1908

Toward noon, we moved a few hundred meters to the south of the shrine of Sidi Bou Accila. Spread about as skirmishers, we were fighting on foot against some groups of horsemen galloping 1,200 meters from us in the direction of the M Quarto. We fought here for more than two hours, and gradually the Moroccans became more and more numerous. They moved especially to our right, where they counted on the shelter of

a ravine to attack and outflank us.

Monsieur du Boucheron received the order to move to the right, to extend the line of riflemen by making a defensive detour to stop the movement of the enemy. As we arrived at the position of the last two platoons on a slight rise, these fell back before a good many Moroccan horsemen. Monsieur du Boucheron ordered us to dismount and fight on foot at the head of our horses. The enemy cavalry halted for a moment, but as they became more and more numerous, Monsieur du Boucheron ordered me to take half the platoon and quickly fall back 200 meters to fight on foot and support him as he retreated.

When I arrived at the spot indicated, I took up position for combat on foot. Monsieur du Boucheron remounted to retreat. Just then, he saw a large group of Moroccan horsemen, who had slipped into the space left by the departure of the two platoons of riflemen, hurl themselves on a third, which was still fighting on foot on the plateau.

At the head of the dozen men he had with him, Monsieur du Boucheron rode to the aid of the surrounded riflemen. Many of these were unhorsed or wounded. He had them taken on the croup by the Spahis and out of the conflict. His own horse was then killed. The Spahis offered him a horse, but he refused it. Corporal Bensenoussi tried to take him up behind, but his pack got in the way. He slipped over the horse's croup and fell on the other side. He tried to run away on foot, defended by some Spahis who stayed around him.

Up to this time, by a rapid fire, I had held back a number of horsemen who emerged from the ravine on the right. They threatened to completely surround the officer and the few men who remained at his side.

When I saw Monsieur du Boucheron on the point of being surrounded by the Moroccans, I had my men mount their horses, and I rushed with them to his aid. As we came near, I asked him if he was wounded. He replied that he was not. I then had a horse brought up, but as the Spahi Sassi prepared to help him mount, this man was killed and the horseman beside him was mortally wounded. Then, while I was thrusting the bayonet with my men, Corporal Tarris and the Spahis Campana and Abdellouab brought the officer a horse they had taken in the conflict. As he was about to mount it, the saddle turned over. At the same time, Abdellouab's horse was killed, and in falling he threw his comrades into disorder.

At this moment, Monsieur du Boucheron was surrounded by the Moroccans. Three or four of them placed the barrels of their rifles to his back or chest and fired. He sank without uttering a cry. Only four men remained around me. Seeing that Monsieur du Boucheron was dead and that we were trying in vain to approach his corpse, I got out of the conflict and retreated to the squadron of African Rifles. We dismounted near the shrine. Our bullets compelled the Moroccans to retreat. A few minutes later, the infantry arrived and continued the battle.

In this engagement, the conduct of most of the Spahis of the platoon was admirable. Two were killed while trying to mount the officer on a horse. Three were wounded, of which one mortally, in charging or in the conflict. Five had their horses killed from under them. Two corporals and many men fought as long as the officer was alive, and they did not retreat until I gave the order.

Signed: Cornice, Quartermaster of the First Spahis, March 30, 1908

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We drank another round of that wretched wine to the memory of the valiant lieutenant. Made confident by the wine and conversation, one of the French veterans asked if I would take his daughter back with me to the city. She had been sitting for hours in a broken-down jitney a few hundred meters away, waiting for the local Arab mechanic to repair the carburetor, without result. She had to be in town that evening for a family affair.

Marie Blanchard was a pretty and well-bred young person, eighteen years old. She was weighed down by parcels of produce from her father's farm, destined for relatives in town, where rationing was strict. Her father insisted that I return the following Sunday to taste a real country feast of lamb, chicken, fresh butter, goat cheese, good wine, and so on. No such delicacies were to be had in Casablanca, and the farmer of those days was king.

This year even the farmer stood to suffer if the rain did not come soon. It was the rainy season, and the rain was due, but the land was dying for lack of moisture. As we returned by car to the city, I saw that the herds were no more than skin and bone, foraging in almost barren pastures. Fields of wheat, barley and oats were well behind in their growth. The vines fared hardly better. As grain and wine are the basis of the people's diet, a veritable catastrophe loomed in the near future if the harvest, already meager in recent years, were to fail.

Mademoiselle Blanchard said that her father shrugged his shoulders and said in a dramatic tone: "Misery rides in the train of war."

The Arab driver said the same thing in one word, without expression. Translated as "the will of God," he said: "Mektoub!"

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The village is known today as El Gara. The website marocantan.com has picture postcards from the 1907-1908 conflict, also called the Mdakra war from the local tribes. On the map, El Gara is fifty kilometers southeast of Casablanca, or thirty miles. Even on bad roads, it could not have taken more than an hour or two to drive there. Captain Boucheron exaggerates the distance, and he may have embroidered other details. By virtue of his work in advertising, he was a skilled story-teller. With its understated humor, the piece sounds like a tall tale.

Pierre Boucheron was the first advertising manager of the Radio Corporation of America under David Sarnoff in New York City, from 1920 to 1934. Born in Paris, France in 1889, at the age of ten he emigrated with his mother and younger brother Jean to the United States. He attended public school in Philadelphia, started work at age fourteen, learned Morse Code, and became an early radio operator, or "brass pounder" from the brass telegraph key, in New York and on ships in the Atlantic. In World War 1, he joined the United States Naval Reserve. From 1918 to 1938, he published articles on radio, sailing, sales, and travel in magazines such as Esquire, Radio News, The Rudder, and Scientific American.

Early in World War 2, Pierre Boucheron led an expedition to Greenland, where he set up a radio station to protect Allied shipping in the North Atlantic. He wrote a book about this adventure. He then served in

Casablanca, where he reached the rank of Captain, and in Paris after the Allied liberation in 1944. Before and after the war, he was the general sales manager and director of public relations for Farnsworth Television in Fort Wayne, Indiana. He then managed WGL Radio in Fort Wayne for several years. He died there in 1976.

Robert Boucheron is an architect in Charlottesville, Virginia (boucheronarch.com). His stories, essays and book reviews are in Atticus Review, Construction, Cossack Review, Digital Americana, Milo Review, Montreal Review, Mouse Tales Press, New England Review, New Orleans Review, Niche, Poydras Review, Virginia Business*, and other magazines.*

Even if I hadn't been sworn to secrecy I still wouldn't have been able to lead anyone back to the cave. Finding anything in the endless fields of lava in Waikoloa, Hawaii, is an incredible feat. All I could see both ways down the coast was miles and miles of unbroken lava, undulating swells of stone like a dark, frozen mirror of the churning ocean waves breaking on the shore, visible a few miles away. Except for the occasional scrubby bush, puff of brown grass and the white coral chunks arranged to spell things like *Kimo ♥ Kelsey* on the slopes facing the highway, nothing distinguishes one stony slope from another. I couldn't see any difference between the section of road where we had stopped and the miles we'd covered to get there from the hotel, but somehow my uncle could.

After our cars pulled onto the bulldozer-crushed lava lining the highway, Uncle Jon stood with a hand shading his eyes, looking out over the rough, choppy sea of stone between us and the distant ocean. A minute or so later he saw whatever marker or sign he'd been looking for and we were off, the twelve of us picking our way down, up and around the steaming, frozen waves of black stone.

When I first saw the lava tube, I was a bit disappointed. It was small – smaller than my thirteen-year-old imagination had made it the night before when my little brother and I, laying in the stale, uncomfortable hotel bed breathing the stale, air-conditioned air, had listened to my parents as they talked about the last time they'd seen it. It was more of a lava crack than a tube, really – maybe two feet high and six across. It looked like a big, frowning mouth. Not a dangerous mouth – one with teeth that can eat you – this mouth seemed too old, too quiet, and too sad to be of much harm now.

I wasn't afraid of it, though I realized then that I'd expected to be. It was to be my first visit to an ancient Hawaiian burial cave, and while the adults had already given my brother and my cousins and I lectures about being respectful, about remembering who we are and how we got here, and lots of other warnings meant to instill in us a sense of awe, all it had done for me was build up the image of the place. I had been picturing an ominous, fog-filled crevice guarded by fearsome statues, or night walkers – Hawaiian guardian spirits or ghosts. I'd been expecting something out of Indiana Jones. The cave turned out to be set into the wall of a depression just a little ways from the highway, hidden in the folded landscape – much more subtle than I'd imagined.

After climbing down into the depression, we lined up behind Dad and Uncle Jon watching those in front crawl single-file into the lava tube. The small opening expanded quickly into a full-sized cave, so by the time I started crawling through the crack right on my dad's heels, my uncle was already standing, switching on his collection of flashlights. He gave the first one to me, which I passed on to my brother as he finished

squirming through the cave's mouth.

Inside, it was cool, even though the sun baked down on the rocks above us. The rock that made the cave was just as black as it was on the other side. I don't know what I'd been expecting, but somehow I'd wanted the stone to seem different, paler maybe, for the fact that this lava had never seen the sun. The only thing that really seemed different at all underground was the smell. The scents of ocean salt and dry grass that dominated the world above yielded to a deep, musty smell down there – the smells of old wood and emptiness. Besides us, the only living thing in there was a wasp, one of the big, skinny, long-legged kind I've only seen out in the lava fields. It just floated there, its wings giving off a whine I might have only imagined over the many little sounds my family made as they crawled in, dusted themselves off and fussed with their flashlights. The wasp just hovered there and watched. Unafraid, it almost seemed to challenge us.

I was still watching the wasp when my dad called me, pointing with his flashlight towards a corner—if an oblong lava tube could be said to have corners. A narrow wooden box sat on a raised shelf of rock, ancient in the pale, murky beams of our flashlights. I felt that I was in the presence of something older than anything I'd seen before. I stared at it, no longer hearing the mumbling complaints of ten other people crowded into a tight, dark space.

"Here's one," my uncle said, passing me to stand over the box.

"Is that a coffin?" my little brother asked the darkness. No one replied – we didn't have to, since the rough-cut box had no lid, and its occupant was plainly visible.

Inside were bones. I say bones and not a skeleton because I'd always pictured a skeleton looking something like the three-foot-tall plastic figure in Mr. Bibilone's science class. These bones were a pile of lumpy white sticks half-covered with rags – there were what I assumed to be ribs in the middle of the coffin, and the skull was on the opposite side of the little bones sticking out of what must have once been the hem of a long, floral-print dress. But this was no skeleton, no intact remains of a woman – not anymore.

Only her skull made it real for me. I'm not sure what I was expecting, exactly, but I wanted a real human skull to look somehow different from the ones in the movies, from Mr. Bibilone's mold. It didn't. Her skull was lying on one side, like the lady had died watching the cave entrance. The R. L. Stine books I've read always described skulls and skeletons as having gaping eyes, empty and angry-looking. This one didn't fit – her eyes were big, and empty perhaps, but not angry at all. She looked sad more than anything else, with her jawless head cocked off to one side and the rest of her body scattered around the box.

I wasn't scared; I just couldn't stop picturing the scene in *The Wizard of Oz* where Scarecrow got torn up by the Wicked Witch's winged monkeys – *They took out my chest and threw it over there, then they took out my legs and threw them over there*… It almost looked like an animal had gotten in there, I thought— as if there was anything but wasps and donkeys for miles. But if it was a dog or something the coffin would probably have been broken, and the bones would have been scattered around the cave. Besides, there were no bite marks.

"Why's it all mixed up?" my little brother asked, his voice high and sharp in the quiet cave.

“Dogs,” my older cousin answered.

“No,” Uncle Jon said before I could, “not dogs, people. People came and stole.”

“Stole what?” my brother asked.

“They used to bury people with their jewelry – necklaces, wedding rings, stuff like that.” He leaned over the box. “One day, somebody found this place, raided the bugger.”

“Is that why the Hawaiians hid dead people?” my cousin asked.

“Sort of,” my Dad said behind me. “They used to steal bones to get their power.”

“But these guys didn’t take the bones,” my brother pointed out.

“No, they just wanted money,” Uncle Jon said. “Besides, this wasn’t that long ago – last twenty years.”

“How do you know?” I asked.

“Because when I was here twenty years ago she was ok. We had to peek in through the cracks,” he said, lightly touching the rough, unpolished wood with a finger.

“Come on, there’s more back here,” my cousin called, but I was slow to follow.

I couldn’t seem to get rid of an image of the lady, alive and lying there watching the cave entrance, where her robbers had come in. The suspicion I could still see on her skeletal face made me very sad all of a sudden. I tried to picture how she might have looked in that faded yellow dress so many years ago, but I couldn’t imagine her alive, with fingers that were anything other than dry, white tubes, with eyes anything other than gaping holes. Eventually, I turned to follow the rest of my family. I didn’t want to be left behind with just the poor old lady and that wasp, which was still floating in place, watching us.

The lava tube went on for about thirty feet, with a slight downward slope from the entrance. There were four others in there, most of them tucked into the various nooks and crannies the lava had created. Two of the skeletons in the back, next to a wall of broken rock marking an ancient cave-in, weren’t in boxes. Instead, they had been buried in little canoes, just big enough for a body. The canoes looked out of place underground, surrounded by all that dry rock, though somehow, they also seemed a more natural, a more fitting place for the people inside them, even though they’d been looted too. One canoe had been tipped, spilling a few of its bones on the floor. At first, Dad wanted to pick them up, to put them back, but Mom wouldn’t let him touch anything – it would be too much, just too much, she kept saying. So we left them there.

We left after what had seemed like an hour but couldn't have been more than ten minutes. We passed the old lady and that unmoving wasp, crawled out of the cave's mouth and back into the blinding sunlight. From the highway, I turned back, trying to see how far we'd come, but the cave was already hidden from view, invisible in the choppy sea of stone even though I knew where to look. This frustrated me, at first, but by the time I'd climbed back into my dad's truck I was smiling, comforted by the thought that maybe the canoes, the old lady and the wasp would be left alone, now. It would take me a while to understand my own part in all this, but then, as we rolled through miles of empty-looking fields of lava, I wondered how many more of these burial caves had never been found, out in that sea of black rock. I wondered how many other old ladies were left out there – intact, undisturbed old ladies, old ladies who didn't have to lie scattered around and watch out for robbers, tourists and curious little kids.

Even my brother was quiet during the drive back to the King Kamehameha hotel. I'd been looking forward to swimming in their huge saltwater pool all week, but now all I could think about was that lady and the others whose bones had been thrown around. I still swam, of course, and for a while I even managed to forget about the lava tube and all the troubling things it had shown me. My cousins and I spent the afternoon chasing and splashing and half-drowning each other, while our parents sat around the pool talking and drinking the beer and wine they'd smuggled out of our rooms in red and white cups. The little poolside grill only served drinks with fruit in them, as far as I could see.

I was just standing in a towel, lost under my parents' conversation and watching the other hotel guests – tourists from the mainland US, I assumed, even though we must have looked just like them – when suddenly all my thoughts about the cave and that poor old lady came back to me. We must have looked just like whoever had come and robbed that dead old lady, I thought. If you didn't know otherwise, you'd never know we weren't just sightseeing, that we weren't being respectful. We'd have seemed like graverobbers who just got there second.

I wondered what she would have thought if she'd known that one day she'd be lying in a torn-open box with a bunch of white people staring down at her, albeit respectfully. I wondered why Mom and Dad and Uncle Jon had taken us there. It wasn't just to show us something neat, I knew, but the lesson – the lesson hadn't been told, not yet. I thought about where I'd come from in a way I never had before, knowing full well that none of my ancestors could be found in that cave, I thought about all the things that had needed to happen to bring me, of all people, to that point, standing in a hotel towel and hand-me-down swim shorts just hours after crawling into an ancient, sacred place I'd never be able to forget. But mostly, I thought about that poor old lady, and wondered what she would think of it all, what she would think of me. What was the difference, I remember asking myself, between these sunburned, splashing people who knew – or cared – nothing for the old lady and what she'd endured, and myself? Sure, I'd lived on this island all my life, I'd known no other home, and at the time I'd barely seen anything of the world beyond the islands. But what, really, did any of that change, I wondered?

I had a dream a couple months later, after I'd stopped thinking about the cave and that nameless old lady. In it, I was sitting on the rough stone floor of a cave – or I assumed it was a cave, since I was surrounded by nothing but black. Everything was quiet except for the faint, barely-there whine of a wasp's wings. There was no wind, no smell, no sense of anything other than the stone and the wasp's echoing whine, but I knew, with the kind of unquestioning clarity that only comes in dreams, that I was back in the burial cave.

Then I saw the old lady standing in front of me. She had the same dress on, though it was no longer tattered or worn-out, and neither was she. She wasn't dead anymore – she was beautiful. She was very wise and very old, but beautiful in a terrifying way, with her large, sad eyes. She just stood in the dark, absolutely silent

save for the distant, humming wasp. I felt her accusation, her judgment, and I was ashamed.

And even though I've never been back, and I kept my promise to my uncle and to the lady, having never told a soul how to find the cave, at times I can still feel her eyes, open and empty and staring. Her eyes, they know me, I'm sure. Her eyes know that I can't hide behind diplomas and teaching credentials, and that no matter how many Hawaiian words I memorize and how many stories I tell my students about living the Hawaiian ideal of pono – doing what's right or just – and respecting those who've come before us, that no matter how I try to escape the violence of my heritage, her eyes know I am the child of missionaries and plantation managers. I am descended from the whites that destroyed her life or those of her ancestors. They see through me and my pretense of being any different from the robbers, from the tourists by the pool sipping iced drinks with pineapple slices and thinking they've learned something about this ancient, once-sacred place. Sure, I know more than they do, but somehow, her eyes tell me as they say nothing, none of that really changes anything.

Neither me nor any of my family defiled her grave, but I know – I know now – that my blood led to it. I accept that the history that gave rise to me also led to everything else her eyes have been forced to see – even the highway cut across sacred grounds that I used to reach her. It led to institutionalized racism and loss of the Hawaiian language for generations, to guided tours of Iolani Palace, home to the native monarchy before its overthrow, to hundreds of tourists in Waikiki hotels where a thriving farm community once existed. It led to multimillion-dollar beach rentals and vacation houses, to military training grounds on religious sites and harbors dredged to make way for cruise ships…it led to everything good and bad about Hawai'i.

My ancestors came to Hawai'i looking for a better life, and I can't blame them for it – I benefit from it even now, generations after the first plantation workers and missionaries with my blood came to the islands, decades after I toured an ancient, disturbed burial cave. I am invested in her destruction, the lady's eyes say, and I cannot disagree. Her eyes say that perhaps I have played little role myself, but I benefited from it all; I still do. This is the guilt I've learned to carry, the responsibility that comes from understanding what I began to see back in that cave. The only way is forward, but that doesn't mean you can ignore your past, since it isn't only yours. I won't, I want to tell her, but I can't. She watches me, but she can't speak and she can't hear me, because she's dead and nothing I do really matters to her.

Gavin McCall's short stories, essays and one poem have appeared in dozens of of literary magazines, including Eyeshot, Every Day Fiction, Paradigm, Bamboo Ridge*, and* Off Course*. He won* Hawai'i Review*'s first Sudden Fiction Award and a scholarship to attend the Squaw Valley Community of Writers, and has worked for three years as an intern for T*he Normal School Magazine*, and is currently working on the second draft of what will hopefully become his first novel. He earned an MA in Honolulu and an MFA in Fresno, but now he lives and writes on the Big Island of Hawai'i, the first place he called home.*

Our first day in Lisbon dawned clear and bright. My husband and I wandered blinking through sunny Rossio Square, down the grand grid-like avenues (designed by the Marques de Pombal after the devastating 1755 earthquake), and out into a brilliant Praça do Comércio, a wide square that opens to the Tagus River, which sparkled and danced before us.

"Looks like Lisbon has thrown off its melancholy," Marc noted as I rushed toward the water, eager to see the line "where the earth ends and the sea begins." Jose Saramago appropriated this phrase from Portuguese poet Camões to begin his novel, *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*.

I reached the line, marked by two glistening white pillars, and bent down to touch the water. Warm waves lapped invitingly at my fingertips. Giddy with the movement of the tide, with the thrill of seeing a place I had only read about, I straightened and looked out to the horizon.

I expected to think of distant lands, but was distracted by the immense red suspension bridge to my right, a twin to San Francisco's Golden Gate and designed by the same architect. But this wasn't sunny California. When Saramago's character Ricardo Reis reached these shores from Brazil, it was raining. He was lonely and searching, though he was not sure for what. He knew only that the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa had just died.

I had a copy of Pessoa's *Book of Disquiet* in my pack. But I didn't feel the disquiet that I had expected to descend upon my arrival, and I couldn't sense the strain of sorrow that runs through almost every book I have ever read set in the city of Lisbon, from Saramago and Pessoa to John Berger's *Here is Where We Meet* and Dutch author Cees Nooteboom's *The Following Story*. In all of these books the boundaries between life and death blur like the constant flux of the Tagus on riverbank, and everyone yearns for something they cannot have.

"It's the Portuguese *saudade* that you're after," our host at the Lisbon Story Guesthouse, Bruno, explained when I told him I didn't feel the same way in the real Lisbon as I did in the imagined. *Saudade*. I first heard the word while reading Berger, who defines it as: "the feeling of fury at having to hear the words too late pronounced too calmly."

"*Saudade* is a word that has no definition," Bruno told us. "The closest I can tell you is that it is a longing for

something that can never happen." He described a Brazilian musician who conceived of the idea as a mother continually unmaking and remaking the bed of her dead child.

I looked at Bruno. "I guess if I was after that, I shouldn't have come to Lisbon on my honeymoon. I should have waited for some heartache."

He nodded. "You cannot help but be a tourist now. But when you live here day to day, you begin to see it. The Portuguese are a sad people, for many reasons."

But slowly, Lisbon revealed its story to us. We had to travel outside the tourist track, beyond the popular sites like the Castle of São Jorge and Se Cathedral, to lesser known neighborhoods. On our hilly walk to the house of Fernando Pessoa and on a particularly long pilgrimage to a bookstore in Alcântara, we stumbled across neighborhoods so poor no guidebook would mention them, and into pubs where no one spoke English, yet nevertheless served us feasts. I begin to look beyond the camera-toting foreigners at the Praça do Comércio and spotted a local man staring over the water, loss in his eyes. And when we went to hear the city's music, *fado*, one evening, there was no mistaking the passionate yearning in the refrains: *saudade*.

And then, finally, because no one can avoid it, heartache came. While I was away, my grandmother, the best person on earth, was diagnosed with cancer. I walked down to the water's edge one evening after the news had reached me. The pillars seemed paler in the half moon light, and the lights on the opposite bank were distant. Why had I been drawn to this city in the first place, I wondered. Who goes looking for melancholy on their honeymoon?

Perhaps it's that we all have the sorrow of the Portuguese, I thought, remembering my grandmother. But after centuries of losing loved ones to explorations and to the sea, to wars, and to a monstrous earthquake, the Portuguese have found a way to express the depths of life so beautifully that when I read the literature, listened to *fado*, or strolled the less-trodden streets of Lisbon, I began to feel a longing for longing itself, until the city became a place where even melancholy took on a charm. While my heartache from home was difficult to bear, it also sharpened my sense of beauty, and on the high *miradouros*, or viewpoints, of Lisbon's seven hills I often felt that I was experiencing the heights of life, a delicious vertigo I could not have known if I had not also tasted its sorrows.

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"Of course, I understand that you can't make it," my friend Ian said to me, over the scratchy cell phone line. "Just think of us on Monday at 4 p.m. – 8 a.m. your time."

His longtime partner, and dear friend of mine, had just passed away, in Paris, sort of unexpectedly. She'd been diagnosed with cancer 18 months earlier and had been living in India, with her daughter and mother, treating herself with ayurvedic medicine. But in the end it wasn't the cancer that got her. On the plane, en route to a week's vacation with Ian, she got a blood clot in her leg, which traveled to her brain. She died in the hospital, in a coma, peacefully, with Ian holding her hand.

I hung up, feeling sorry for myself that I couldn't be there. I thought back to the eighties and early nineties when we, a group of young (well, young at the time) women living in Paris called ourselves the *La Bande des Cinq*. The Gang of Five. A group made up of me, an expat American; Martine, a French woman; an Australian named Sue; Lisa, who grew up all over the world but was most recently Irish; and the one who had just passed, an exotic, passionate Indian woman, improbably named Sputnik. (She was born on October 4, 1957. Family lore has it that her uncle walked into the room and declared "Our own baby Sputnik" and that was it, that became her name.) I started searching flights, unconvinced that I'd find something affordable, but determined nevertheless to give it a try. After a bit of searching I found a flight that was outrageously expensive, but what the hell? When else would I see all of these people, all of her friends, her family, in one place, together, again? How could I *not* be there? I booked the flight.

I arrived on Sunday morning, Bastille Day. Traffic near the parade was somewhat interrupted (I'd planned breakfast with my friend Betty, who lives near the Champs Elyséees) but otherwise, it was a fine, festive day to be in Paris. I met Martine for lunch at 12 at Bofinger, the large, famous brasserie just off the Place de la Bastille. We ordered a bottle of champagne, Sputnik's favorite drink.

"Do you remember the last time we were all here, the *Bande des Cinq*?" Martine asked me as we took our seats. "It was just before Lisa left for Dublin, before her kids were born." (Her oldest is now 21. You do the math.) "We met at noon," Martine reminded me, "and one after another, we each paid for a bottle of champagne." By 5:30, she said, and five bottles of Ruinart later, the management was so impressed that they offered a sixth bottle on the house.

I didn't remember – it may have been all that champagne! – but it seemed fitting to be there that day, drinking together. Martine and I ate well – sautéed foie gras and oysters and some cheese and salad for

dessert. We cried a little, we laughed a little, but mostly we celebrated. We celebrated friendship, we celebrated the past, we celebrated the passage of time, and we celebrated the sadness of growing older, of which death – and loss – are increasingly a part.

The cremation ceremony was at 4 p.m. the next day. I'd arranged to meet my friend Beatrix, who was not attending the funeral, for lunch, at a small restaurant just outside the gates of Père Lachaise, on the Gambetta side. I got there a few minutes early and stood at the zinc bar of a nearby café, and ordered a coffee. Next to me, a man – who'd obviously been drinking something stronger than espresso – was showing the woman behind the bar a photograph. "And this is another one of my wife. Isn't she lovely?" I had no idea whether he'd just buried his wife that morning, or if this was a recurring theme, if he was a regular. I looked at the barista and thought, I bet she gets that a lot.

I met Beatrix at the restaurant next door, a cheery place with good hearty food, filled – I guessed – half with mourning families and half with tourists – the cemetery is, after all, a major tourist attraction – with a sprinkling of locals for whom this was just their neighborhood bistro.

As I approached the crematorium, just after 3, I began to recognize a lot of familiar faces, people I hadn't seen for years, decades even, including Sputnik's daughter, who'd flown in from India, and Ian's son, who'd been working in Haiti. I introduced myself to an English woman I didn't know, who said she'd worked with Sputnik over the past few years, putting together independent radio programs, mostly in Africa. "You might say we were fellow travelers," she said. I smiled and said what a fitting expression that was. She looked at me, puzzled.

"You do know that the Russian word Sputnik means 'fellow travelers'?" I asked her, amazed that she'd chosen those words randomly.

The ceremony, in English, lasted less than an hour. They read from letters and tributes that had come in, played Sputnik's favorite music – including some Keith Jarrett and some classical piano – and recited from her favorite Rumi poem, Only Breath, one that she herself had posted on her Facebook page only recently:

I belong to the beloved, have seen the two

worlds as one and that one call to and know,

first, last, outer, inner, only that

breath – breathing human being.

When it was over, Sue and Martine, and I made our way to the same restaurant where I'd had lunch, to digest the afternoon's events and to say a last goodbye in the only way we knew. Sitting outside, in the sun, we ordered *trois coupes de champagne*.

We talked about our old friend, her strong opinions – we used to call her La Pasionaria (as if she needed

another, amusing nickname), her difficult but feisty personality, and her fierce sense of loyalty to friends. We admitted that Sputnik could be, at times, hard to take. Her recent Facebook postings – rants, for sure – often made me want to scream. I recounted the last time I'd seen her, when she visited Washington (where I am now living) about seven years ago. I felt guilty, because I didn't feel like I'd been very inviting, very hospitable. For one thing, it annoyed me that she insisted on smoking in her non-smoking hotel room. "Well, they promised me a smoking room," she'd said defiantly, as smoke blew out of her nose.

"That's why events like these are important," I said. "It's a chance to get these things off my chest and clear the air."

"Oh," said Sue, suddenly breaking into a laugh. "So it's all about you. I'm glad we've made that clear!"

"Of course it's all about me!" I laughed back. "Isn't everything?"

We parted soon after, having turned our tears and sadness into laughter and hugs. We were still, and would always be, a gang of five.

When it comes time for me to go, I hope that I am considerate enough to do it on a glorious summer's day in a place at least half as beautiful as Paris. I urge Martine to have a generous helping of *foie gras* the day before my funeral, and I invite Sue to reveal all the things that have annoyed her about me over the years. I hope Lisa will turn up and remind everyone of the time I showed up at her house in Tobago and had to borrow a hundred bucks from her and her husband just to get home. I urge everyone to drink champagne, lots of it.

Because it will be all about them. I'll just be providing the excuse.

A native New Yorker, Laurie Lesser went to Paris "for six months" after graduating college – and stayed more than 25 years. Back in the States, she now lives in Washington DC, where she works as a writer/editor for a government contractor on international development projects. She has traveled extensively throughout Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean. Laurie is finishing up her MA in Writing at Johns Hopkins University. She writes mostly non-fiction – personal essay, memoir – but is increasingly tempted to play around with the facts through fiction and screenwriting.

I try to fit myself into the places her poetry comes from: the roads

walked by the lost children of the Sudan. Beneath their faces, other

faces, as lost to them as their homes.

her face:

dark as eggplant,

her gaze:

unpinnable, untraceable

There is more:

Once inside the body, does war move up or down?

Adrie Kusserow, anthropologist, poet from Vermont, asks that

question in her new book, Refuge (Boa Editions Ltd.) There should

be awards given for asking certain questions. Do we care how a war moves in a young girl's body? Imagine stopping to consider a young body in which a war is moving.

That stopping, that considering, is the poet's work. I read that line and I too stop, consider. I also remember. Not a furnace like the Sudan. But yes, a furnace. A furnace in the frost. The mining town of Siglo Veinte, Bolivia, in the cold of July many years ago.

An Indian woman hands me a soft, scrubbed blue jersey with a neat and precise hole in the back made by a soldier's bullet. The soldiers were after revolutionaries. Her son was a student. That was close enough.

How does a war move through a young mother's body?

Despite everything,

the land mines, skull trees, splayed carcasses of rusted jeeps,

there you are again.

deep in the humid thighs of July,

propagating Eden, little by little,

as you walk, regal and measured

Kusserow's traveling is a kind of witness walking. Returning home to

Vermont, she teaches this. Can it be taught?

I like how she catches herself when her teaching morphs into

preaching with her little daughter. I had the nasty habit of always

pistol whipping people with my causes. I'd defend Palestinian non-

nonviolence with the linguistic delicacy of Mussolini.

Kusserow writes:

Remember the slaves, Ana? They get less food than this.

She looks at me irritably, my East and her West grating.

So I sit with her and chatter,

luring her back in with an offer

of mac and cheese.

Our paths could have crossed in Dharamsala, Goa, Calcutta. I am

almost glad they didn't. In meeting her, and The Sudan through her, in

her poetry, I feel I am meeting the essence of both.

Robert Hirschfield is a freelance writer and photographer whose work appears in Ode Magazine, The National Catholic Reporter, Outlook *(the Indian newsweekly), and the* London Jewish Chronicle, *among other publications. He has travelled most recently to north and south India, and to Israel and the West Bank.*

I was standing with a stranger by the side of the road. Or maybe it was the other way round; maybe she was the one standing with the stranger.

The bus drove off and the road was quiet. The Nicaraguan sky was losing its blue, turning darker as the sun set. I followed the stranger up a track to what looked like an old barn with trees on all sides.

The stranger's name was Maria. She was a 16 year old with long hair tied back. She was rescuing a lost *gringa* who'd taken the wrong bus and had gotten lost with nowhere to stay.

A woman sat at a wooden table in front of the wooden building; she was large and wearing a loose black dress, thin straps slightly falling off her shoulders, her hair flicked with grey. She squinted at me as Maria introduced us. Then she offered me a plastic tub of small red fruit called *jocote*.

"Thank you." I said, taking the fruit.

I bit into the *jocote*, finding it softer than I remembered, sweeter. I decided it tasted like a plum, even though really, it was a flavour I didn't know, and might not taste again.

Once it was dark, the only light was a single bulb inside. I sat on a plastic chair. There were a few piles of paper and books on the table; the floor was dirt; the walls were pieces of wood nailed together, not reaching the ceiling, material hung in place of doors – one was a blanket with a Disney Cinderella.

The mother asked, "Do you mind if I sleep here?" gesturing to a denim hammock behind me.

“Of course not.” I said, trying to figure out why I would mind.

Maria’s sister came out from one of the rooms, with a round face and shoulder length hair tied up. No one wore their hair down. On her hip was a small girl with unbrushed hair, dirt on her cheeks, and wide brown eyes. Cristina smiled at me and brought me a metal cup full of cold Coca-Cola.

Maria brought plates of rice and beans with chicken and bread rolls. We took them outside and ate in the dark, their dogs waiting at our feet. After we’d eaten, me and Maria sat in string hammocks and looked at stars like white Sacuanjoche flowers in the sky, their scent most powerful at night.

“Do you always want to live in Nicaragua?” I asked.

“I would like to travel. Most of my brothers and sisters left.”

“Where are they?”

“I have a brother in the US, a sister in Panama and another in Costa Rica. Cristina is the only one here.”

I got out my camera and showed her photos of Costa Rica, feeling like my stories were a small return for her kindness. She asked me about England, and I asked her about Nicaragua; both of us got glimpses.

Maria had school the next day, so we went back inside. She showed me where I was sleeping – a double bed in my own room. I thanked her, as I slipped past her mother in the hammock. Was I taking her bed?

I lifted the wool blankets over me. I woke up a few times, looking for the strange wailing sound I’d heard, only to see puppies jumping on the bed.

When I woke up at around 6:30, everyone was awake. Maria was brushing her dark wet curls in front of the mirror on a cupboard. She was wearing a red dress and had feather earrings, my elegant saviour.

The mother gestured for me to go outside, where she had a plate of scrambled eggs, kidney beans, fried plantain, some stewed *jocote* with honey and a drink made from oats. It almost made me feel guilty how generous she was being, but guilt wasn’t what she wanted me to feel. So I let her know the food was delicious and tried to take the dishes when I’d finished, but she wouldn’t let me.

Maria and her mother said I could stay longer, but I wanted to make it to a small town called Potosí, where I was planning on taking a boat to El Salvador. So I went back into my room, and packed my bag, thinking about how much I had even in this small rucksack that they didn’t. There had to be something I could leave, and money seemed too crude.

Walking back out with my bag on my back, I said goodbye to the mother, to Cristina, to the little girl with big

eyes, and to Maria, thanking them all, hugging them one by one. Maria walked back down the track with me and stopped the bus – an old American school bus with ripped seats that stuck to sweaty legs. I got on.

Today I would leave Nicaragua, after 5 months in the country. The bus went slowly over the dry, stony roads, bachata playing, as I hoped that Maria had found the note and bracelet I'd left on the bed.

I would soon discover that there were no boats to El Salvador that day, and I would have to turn back to go by land, through Honduras. It's hard to tell where your path is leading sometimes, but I was glad mine had taken me by that small house at the side of the road.

The landscape looked dry and golden. We passed a tree with strange green leaves and I remembered what a trekking guide had told me – that because of the shape of the leaves, they called it the ears of God. But as I sat on the bus looking at that tree, it wasn't God that I wanted to hear me.

"Thank you." I whispered, thinking of Maria, and would say again to countless other people who helped, who heard me even when I wasn't asking. "Thank you for opening your door."

Rosa Lia has written for Huffington Post, National Geographic's Intelligent Travel *and* Matador Network*. She plans on hitting the road again soon and dreams of one day being a sailor... or a captain.*

Photo Credit: Kyl Timmer

Paharganj, Delhi, 2011

The very first thing that happened: a wave of panic struck and for an hour I was convinced that I'd been going slowly and progressively blind for years, but so imperceptibly that I had only become aware of it now. What a disaster, what a tragedy: to dream of Delhi for so many years, only to arrive blind!

I felt as though my eyes were two pinpricks, through which I could see only one small thing at a time – and here I was in the Main Bazaar, life racing around me at every distance, from the rat scrambling over my boot to the minaret calling out in the distance.

In Tokyo, where I'd spent the previous decade sequestered, motion was uniform and predictable. I knew that if I walked out the door at 6:54, I would catch the train at 7:01 and, keeping the same pace, performing my tasks in order, I would be returned home again at 9:47 as perfectly and uniformly exhausted as a tree from which all fruit has been plucked.

In Tokyo blindness was no hindrance. Whereas here in the Main Bazaar everything was every which way and all at once, and I was certain that I would be run over. Admittedly I have been sure I would be run over all my life. I am bound to be proven correct sooner or later. I am terrified of cars and have never attempted to drive so much as a bicycle. Even at crossing the street I am spectacularly inept.

Frankly speaking, I am someone who ought to be accompanied, at all times, by a licensed and experienced nurse. It is much to be regretted that, considering the sorry state of American health care, this is not feasible. Therefore I am wandering around by myself, unsupervised and unattended -- in India no less! This is a situation from which no end of trouble is bound to ensue.

I am here in Paharganj or “the Main Bazaar”, as it is mistakenly and inexplicably referred to by the travel guides. What can be said of it? Lists of India, as travel writers love to spin—saffron elephants lepers goddesses dung -- seem to me showy and at the same time dull. Suffice it to say that everything on Earth is found here, and everything is just trying to escape having its toes smashed by the cycle rickshaws. Everything is here. No, don’t let me exaggerate. There are no camels. Not during the day. Camels only at night.

There are also no elephants, unlike twenty years ago, and no leper band dressed in red, banging percussion and bawling on brass. These have been replaced by men and women yammering into cell phones, which, while not nearly so colorful, are even more hazardous. At least the lepers and the elephants were paying attention.

Paharganj is a legendary place where for generations foreigners have come to stay in cheap hotels and be unhappy. The hotels are not even so cheap anymore, but the unhappiness persists. Continuously frustrated, frequently cheated, commonly enraged or nauseated or depressed, foreigners scurry around Paharganj, buying drugs and losing weight precipitously.

Speaking of drugs, I suspect that the pharmacist, despite his workaday appearance, is actually a billionaire. Doling out Valiums and pills to stop the shits with such frequency that he’s got to have trucks out back, and be constantly hauling in crates of the stuff.

Paharganj plays a memory trick on all but its sanest visitors – who flee immediately – so that it becomes, somehow, in retrospect, real life. “Hell yeah, we were living then! All that life, out in the street! All that color!” And the traveler dreams of nothing so ardently as to return.

Upon returning of course they remember the actual misery. By then they are shitting through the eye of a needle and must stay a week at least.

Therefore, even to be seen smiling in Paharganj is considered to be in bad taste. One is assumed to be on drugs. Even though the people on drugs are generally significantly more miserable than those experiencing intermittent periods of sobriety. To smile is considered showy and offensive and I myself often receive dirty looks and even actual jeers because I am smiling, perhaps even grinning broadly.

As I have said, I ought to have a licensed and experienced nurse with me at all times to help me to cross the street and also to coach me in appropriate behavior. Regrettably, this is not possible.

Why am I smiling?

Not only do I love India, and Delhi and Paharganj, I also have (as an added bonus) non-stop, 24 hour a day, 7 day a week access to: my own imaginary world! In which, as you can imagine, I feature prominently.

The first day I could hardly stop announcing to myself how utterly I belonged in India. After all, many of my more peculiar characteristics can be traced to India, or at least are less out of place here: the figure-8 head shake, the little bow, the over-formal address, the over-eager awkwardness.

When I came here first, twenty years ago, I was an eighteen year old young man. But I set records for immaturity. I was, in fact, a teenager. A child really. A baby. A fetus, actually. I was born in India.

I’ve gotten as far as discussing with myself the fact that I could never be President of the United States of America because of my ultimate allegiance to India.

I've overlooked other obstacles to my presidency, or even my candidacy, such as my conviction that the nation ought to be entirely devoted to ecology, reforested, and returned to the direction of its indigenous people. That, and my tendency to insert into even the most standard and decent conversations, my enthusiasm, and reverence for, the act of fellatio.

The night after this first triumphalist day I spent shitting through the eye of a needle, trying to sleep with my asshole clenched, and feeling intensely sorry for myself, as if I were the first person to whom this had ever occurred, despite the nearly continuous testimony of toilets heard through the thin walls of my Paharganj hotel.

Even on the following day, dog-sick, there were consolations. Because the New Book Depot is still in business at Connaught Place

, still run by the same spectacularly haughty queen who was there in 1991, before he had a belly or gray hair. This infinitely disdainful man must now be considered a hero to literature for keeping Borges, Cicero, Updike, Chaucer, Morrison, Homer and Zola on the shelves, along with Indian writers writing in English.

I chose the Selected Essays of Montaigne, Garcia Marquez' Complete Stories and the new volume of Proust translated by Lydia Davis. One of my compulsions, you see, is that I must always submit myself to be disdained, dismissed and looked down upon by gay men who consider themselves superior. Happily they are always ready to oblige.

When it was my turn at the register I tried, by the off-hand way I passed the books, to give the impression, not wholly untrue, that these were familiar works, with which I was merely reacquainting myself. I willed my stubble to appear professorial.

The manager did not begin at once to ring up the books, but merely looked at each in turn. He then briefly but audibly exhaled.

Even though it contradicts my own recent statements and, indeed, the very ground of my identity, I should admit that this exhalation may have actually been an expression of approval. I believe this gentleman disapproves primarily by means of inhalation.

Thus I spent the afternoon blitzed on literature, feeling entirely on the wavelength with "To Philosophize is to Learn to Die." Or, as Montaigne says (and I reverently copied onto a notecard): "We ought not plan anything on so large a scale – at least, not if we are going to get all worked up if we cannot see it through to the end."

Resigned to death, I found that I was feeling better. Never do I cease to be astonished by the rapidity with which this hurtling mass of vanities, fantasies and big ideas is reduced to mess, and then, by means of Immodium and rehydration salts, reverts again to carnival.

Back on the street, perched on a red metal stool with a tall glass of chai, I'm reading "That it is madness to judge the true or the false from our own capabilities". Before me is the proof; the Main Bazaar; beside me an elderly (Swiss?) Buddhist nun who declares, "Practice like your head is on fire!" and, when asked the time, cackles, "Honey, I've got the time, I just don't have the energy!" supporting my deep-seated belief that only nuns with a saucy sense of humor are to be trusted.

Meanwhile a young Scottsman has arrived, and announces he has been robbed of everything. He does not appear in the least perturbed.

"How'd it happen?" I ask.

“Dey droogged me!” He shrugs. “But, den again, I droog myself all de time. . .”

The thieves took his money and his passport too, but he doesn’t seem concerned about that either. He is a creature of pure charisma, chatting me up in Scottish brogue, speaking fluent Hindi out the other side of his mouth to the chaiwallah, an old friend, it appears.

“Worse tings ‘av ‘appened to betta’ people so fuckit,” he announces. I resolve to have this tattooed on my body some place where I will always see it.

There is, however, a problem. The bastards took his chessboard, which had been signed by everyone who ever played him on it. (He’s such a gentleman he doesn’t add the words “and lost”.) He shows me a color print which promises a 5000 rupee reward, which seems exceedingly generous, considering he only has 160 rupees to his name at the moment.

I would have talked to him all day (he was beautiful besides) but he sprinted off to be replaced, in less than a page of Montaigne (“Not to believe to rashly: not to disbelieve too easily.”) by a Brazilian Hare Krishna who arrived to remind me, yet again, that everything I need to know is contained within the Vedas.

Delighted to learn that I’m from Boston, the devotee revealed Boston was where he was driving, chanting the mahamantra, when he noticed that one of his wheels had flown off to Heaven without him. Happily Krishna appeared just then and flew his car several hundred meters to safety.

I love Hare Krishnas. Even though Srila Prahupad said homosexuals like myself are nothing short of demonic, if you’re ever broke and homeless, go to Krishna. The Episcopalians will toss you a bologna sandwich; the Krishnas will feed you a feast. Keep it in mind.

The whole time the devotee talked to me he was holding sparkly Krishna decals and I’m still a little bit miffed that, even though I listened to the whole spiel, he left without giving me one. But by then it was time to listen to a giant craggy Australian who writes song lyrics in a little notebook and reckons he could be the next Bob Dylan but in the meantime he’s in Delhi to oversee the creation of nearly ten thousand pairs of boxer shorts.

“But not just ordinary boxer shorts,” he reveals. “We’ve add pockets! And a zipper! Hard thing to put a price on, innit?”

After all this excitement I’m attempting to settle myself down with a metal cup full of hot milk, when the drunk Indian man next to me says he is the father of four, says he is 54 years old, says he looks very young. Then he says, “Tell me why I look young!”

I excuse myself: it’s getting dark. The day is nearly over. It’s time for arati, worship with light, at the Ramakrishna Mandir. I sit and watch the swami swing the lamp, the fan and the feather duster over the images of Thakur, Ma, and Swamiji, to whom I apologize for the umpteenth time: I will never be a decent devotee. I love the world too much.

This, for now, is all of what my days consist. Walks punctuated by beverages, supplemented by books, interrupted by monologues, peppered with lust and wonder. I am a fool, of course, but at least I am back in India, the place where I was born.

Raised on a family apple farm in NH, Jonathan Mack has spend most of his adult life in Asia. Stories and

Essays have appeared in Epiphany, Gargoyle, The Tokyo Advocate, Quarter After Eight, Quick Fiction, Flash, Mary, Japanzine *and elsewhere. His blog is Guttersnipe Das. He lives in Tokyo now, but his heart belongs to India.*

Poetry

Laces | Shenan Prestwich

My clay-caked cords, my fraying friend,
I rub you between my forefinger and thumb
as I thread you through a different pair
of eyes: my single set of safety lines to tie together
all my shoes, my loose ends.
I can trace my history in you, recall the sound
of my own footsteps, with you twisting and curling
like paths and rivers snaking over
a map that keeps unfolding inch by inch.

I can share anything with myself,
like a double shot, or a double cheeseburger,
or a one-way ticket. I don't own
a pair of cowboy boots, so this morning
I'll arrive in Texas with two Doc Martins
shared between my feet, and between you,
my tightly-coiled cotton serpents
stitching together the elephant tarsals
molded around my heels in comfortable folds,
an armored tank upon my toes no spear can pierce,
at home anywhere
because home is where you can't be crushed
by falling bowling balls or boulders or toppling
amplifiers in a honky-tonk.

Somewhere
there are always twisted legs entwining
like tree roots, milky tides of cotton rising,
half-carafes of Montepulciano
left out on the table.
But you were not made to linger
in these places infinitely.
We were always meant to be
two trusted travelers, confederates,
sheltering each other's rib and bearing
one another faithfully, not knowing

which town would be the one
each of us would call our last.

I hope that when I lose you, it will be in a city
far from the center of the world,
far from soft loves and warm wine,
far away from radios playing:
a bar at the edge of town, light
and heat draining in the indigo hour,
where I'll leave a tip and slip away
from my socks and leave them by the road
I'll walk barefoot, before morning,
ears ringing, backed by low percussion
from night insects rubbing legs together
as my pink cutlet feet scrape the asphalt,
breathing something I share
with myself, or someone I'd been,
or someone else.

Shenan Prestwich is a Washington, DC-based poet, editor, serial hobby collector, and over-confident dancer. Her poems have been published in a wide variety of venues both online and in print, and she co-edits Prompt & Circumstance*, a monthly prompt-centric source of creative literary kick-starting, along with it's corresponding quarterly journal,* Promptly*. In addition to her literary pursuits, she enjoys long drives, fast bluegrass, old scotch, excessive hospitality, the great outdoors, good people, and bad karaoke. You can follow her adventures in all these things and more at http://shenanprestwich.com.*

(Seoul Public Toilets)

The air comes on hard
like a soldier in Itaewon—
heavy with urgent bioligies,
not at all shy
about the facts of life
that it makes no effort to mask
with perfumed niceties.
If you need to bad enough,
who are you to complain.
Afterwards, only a splash
of cold water, no towel offered
and out you go,
relieved and uncertain.

Christopher Hornbacker is a PhD student at The University of Southern Mississippi studying creative writing in the Center for Writers. He is currently a reader for the online journal Memorious*. From 2005-09 he called Seoul, South Korea home.*

Embodiment | Jean Sotos

Do I look different to you, now that I have been to Paris?
Does my tongue taste like a languinous Louvre
disintegrating madly into the poetic mouth ?

I ask you this because
you have been all through my little folk art gallery.
The snare drum of my stomach –
struck by calfskin into crescendoed Sousa march.
The stiff portraits of my ancestors' still-beating apartheid hearts.
Even the lonely trifecta -
writing desk, leathery notebook, and wax seal (lest anything of worth ever come out of it)

I ask you this as a peaking journeyman,
remembering the girl making love for the first time.
Searching stoically in the mirror for what she'd gained,
and finding the necessary loss.

I ask you this now because I have just been to Paris,
and no matter how much I pleaded –
it simply would not come back with me.

Jean Sotos is a proud native of Chicago. She has had previous poetry acceptances in After Hours Press *and* Dark Matter Journal.

Caught Fast | Jill Gerard

Haskell stands in tea-stained water,
the whole world brown and rust and olive,
throwing out his line, moving forward and back,
skiff still at anchor, battered, oars protruding
worn and dark where his hands have marked years,
bow deep and pointed. His line knits him to the sea.

I remember pulling a fish from still water,
scales bright in the early morning sun,
hook buried deep in the gut.
How we take things from the world matters.

Today, he will hold the fish
firm against worn boards,
and scales will jump, leaping in the air,
blood pooling. Flesh parting, white and firm.
Later, fish heads fill the crab trap, and Haskell,
this old man, gives thanks.

The sun cuts a path over the water,
clear as a marking on the map.

Jill Gerard lives and works in Wilmington, North Carolina, finding inspiration in the land, the places where one world bumps into another. In addition to her work as writer, she teaches (both young writers enrolled in the Center for Talented Youth at Johns Hopkins University and at the University of North Carolina Wilmington) and co-edits Chautauqua*, a literary journal. Her poems have appeared in* Eclipse, Sojourn, Comstock Review, Hawaii Pacific Review, Ars Medica*, and other journals. Finishing Line Press published a chapbook of her poems,* Something Yet Unseen.

Life at the Water's Edge
is not as sharp and fast
as a knife edge but,
like a blade the lake
shines flat and deadly.

Water won’t draw blood
but goes about the tranquil business
of claiming lives, the whittling
of families, the shortening of things
much like a knife might
severe damaged limbs.

Naked infants smile
through storm-lashed lullabies,
wet seasons high on promise.
Then come the cloudless days
the ebbing away, scavenging
black fish from muddy pools
the suffocated trees emerging,
homes left high and dry.

It’s the little things: a tender
tiny peck, the kiss of death;
a whining in the night;
a fever; nothing much to eat
or one unguarded moment
at the water's edge.

Clare Kirwan is co-founder of Poetry24 *'where news is the muse.' She has been placed in various national and international competitions and her work appears in a wide range of journals and anthologies including* The Found Poetry Review; Binnacle; Grasslimb Journal; Prole; Orbis *and* MsLexia*. Her first collection:* The Silence Museum *is published this year. www.clarekirwan.co.uk.*

Photo Credit: Noval Suling

Noval and the cicadas tune their instruments
by the fire at AlTo camp
as a giant orange sherbet sun melts slowly
on the horizon painting everything
golden, even our faces.

Marcy walks over with 'that smile'
the secret one I know
and leads me down the beach.
"Look!" Wait!" the magic words–
I don't ask what miracle is coming
as she points to a small, plain tree
barely visible in the darkness.
One small intermittent glow appears
then another, and another
in the space of a minute
to the beat of my heart
until the tree is transformed
into a pulsing sphere of light–
a nebula of fireflies!
Then one by one they all fly up
into a sea of stars
as if to take their rightful places.

We stroll back up the beach
while she explains synchronic flashing
of Southeast Asian fireflies
and I feel just like Lois Lane with Superman
walking home after a flight over Metropolis
as he explains how gravity works–

just not on him.

Sandra Noel's published poetry includes; *Heart of Darkness*, a narrative poem published in In the Mist, *Imagining Babylon* in *Paradigm, Imagine, Night visitor, Impossible* and *Albatross* in Barnwood International Poetry Magazine, *Blessed and May Day in Seattle* in ProtestPoems, All for Marilyn, Tree Tonglin and and Heron in Buddhist Poetry Review and *Stone and Bone*, *Reefnet Summer* and *Sweetgrass harvest* in Elohi Gadugi Journal.

Dear Mike, Everything
here is in the past tense and comes
in small doses, a place where all things new,
present or large are considered quaint
curiosities for the old to stare at while making
their morning rounds down forlorn streets,
wishing things could go back, would go back,
back to the past, the way things were.
In a time when none of us knows anymore
what greatness means, or honor, and we stand
toe to toe with idiots like ourselves, maybe
the past is the best way to go – safety in false
memory and nostalgia. I remembered on the drive
through the mountains how good it was to be twenty,
the leap between stones and over boulders with pines
dancing in the wind, the rush of air spooling
off the mountain, and the urgency of the Colorado
coursing past our house. The river left us
lithic, washed-against. On the way out
to Mankota, I didn't detour to Pony after all,
the town I've dreamed of for years now,
because Hugo loved it, but I can't go there,
not now, there's nothing left but the silt
of Hugo's dream, the dust of dead streets.
Every street here is a dream. Nine dreams
you can walk down freely, forgetting things
like sidewalks, intersections or stoplights. I sit drinking
coffee to the sunrise and the dew on my feet
knowing what every fool knows – nothing's
as good as you thought it would be,
and greater than it first appears. Here I sit
where I longed to be – in the middle of a town
that can no longer breathe and wishing I was out on the hill.
Give my best to Sarah and hold on
to everything. Love, Greg

Gregory Stapp is a graduate of the University of Oklahoma, where he worked for the Carl Albert Center Congressional Archives, was a Puterbaugh Fellow in World Literature, and won the Tomas Rivera Student Writing prize in Short Fiction. His poems have appeared in World Literature Today II, qarrtsiluni, Cuento Magazine*, and* Eunoia Review*. He lives in Oklahoma and pines for Colorado.*

Twilight returns to its holy scar.

Locomotive pulling north to where
a glacier recedes over shale,

delicate starlight strung forest
to field behind open boxcars.

Animal eyes ember near
this passage of iron, moon

planting quivers of blue silver inside forest.

*
Veteran on the small platform facing north,
swearing his oaths, breath fogs

into a gray scarf taken by a breeze.
Adjusting his top coat, ready to parade,

he's surviving another memory
as snowfall's white silence dissolves

the sharp notes of an inhaled pace.
The hidden moon sends envoys

carrying white feathers, conditional

easements granted inside the shadow

of promise as winter digs into his lungs.

Born and raised in Charleston, S.C., moved to Chicago, and educated at red-bricked universities and on city streets, Charles Thielman has enjoyed working as a truck driver, city bus driver and enthused bookstore clerk.

Married on a Kauai beach in 2011, a loving Grandfather for five free spirits, his work as Poet, Artiste and shareholder in an independent Bookstore's collective continues!

*And not a few of Charles' poems have been accepted by literary journals, such as T*he Pedestal, Poetry365, The Criterion *[India],* Poetry Salzburg *[Austria],* The Oyez Review, Battered Suitcase, Poetry Kanto *[Japan],* Open Road *[Planet Earth],* Tiger's Eye *and* Rusty Nail*.*

Sevillan Summer Day | Kayla Desroches

Wake up, Sevilla
It's the pre-sun morning
The 80 before the 90 degree calor
A worker crouches on a roof singing himself a folk song
voice already dry on hot air
I mumble a morning "buenos días"

Sevilla travels like a neighborhood in Brooklyn
it's a biking, walking city
A dark-eyed tío in a Yankees baseball cap
"Hey, you ever been to Nueva York?"
"Maybe one day."
You eye Sevilla and it eyes you
butt-hugging shorts in green, red, neon yellow
and a loose t-shirt: red, white, and blue America

No metal on metal skyscrapers
Orange buildings sit low down to the ground
Overseen by the Giralda
The bell-tower, the Moroccan beauty with Lady Faith
On her roundly layered perch, strong face, long arms, flowing cloth
And she reminds of another copper lady
Who stands in the Hudson River

She'll do just fine, until I see the other again

Kayla Desroches is a senior at Barnard College in New York City and has lived in Brooklyn her whole life. She

spent her spring semester abroad in Seville, Spain and discovered espressos, iberian ham (or jamón ibérico), and too many sights to name.

Portioned | Andrew Jarvis

Someone has shot an elk,
its warm body riddled
along the river bank.

It has started to rot,
its skin alive with worms
and crawling legs of ants.

The crows have perched on top,
the fur feeding them lunch
along with mammal wine.

The meat has been removed,
leaving the drips of blood
washing away in rain.

Its hooves have been stolen
to use for new weapons
to kill its young brother.

And then there are the bones,
broken as if beaten
by some hungry sea giant.

God must have wanted this,
each one of us eating
our portions of the world.

Andrew Jarvis is the author of Sound Points (*Red Bird Chapbooks, 2013), and he has published poems in* Stylus *at the University of Maryland,* PennUnion *at Johns Hopkins University, and* The Federal Poet*. He is a professional writer and editor, and he holds an M.A. in Writing (Poetry) from Johns Hopkins University. He has*

been an adjunct professor of English at the University of the District of Columbia. Andrew was born and raised in Seattle, Washington, and he now makes Arlington, Virginia, his home.

To Grasmere Then, Part II | Allison Thorpe

"Grasmere looked so beautiful that my heart was almost melted away." (Dorothy Wordsworth, The Grasmere Journals)

To Grasmere Then, Part II

Although the train
blurs scenery,
it is too slow
for this rash soul.
The industry of Manchester
makes way for field and climb,
sheep browsing wherever
the eye turns,
landscape trading
drab for delight.

Winding the thin
curves by bus,
we steam windows
with lakeside visions,
nature's wardrobe
flirting sun and shade,
glittered suggestions
that devour thought,
inching the strange
yet familiar geography.

Surrounded by great
hills, we take to foot,
threading honeysuckle,
chattering scobby,
moss-bathed rock
to that source,
that haunt

that remembered hunger.

Allison Thorpe feels that England is her spiritual home. She is the author of one book of poetry and one chapbook. Her work has appeared in a variety of journals and anthologies, some of which include Wind, Poem, Juggler's World, Damaged Wine, Dead Flowers, Connecticut River Review, The Milo Review, Cold Mountain Review, ELF, Vine Leaves Literary Journal, Pegasus*, and* Red Mountain Rendezvous*.*

(a UNESCO designated nature park)

Slim, tall and sedate

In the fluffiest garments

Of no human design

Each hill stands like a female model

Trying to display her charm and dignity

As if in a grand fashion show or

Like a fairy maiden at a casual party

Lost in a game unknown to passers-by

Amidst the morning mists

Flirtatious expressions of summer hills

I indulge myself in fits of a lover's impulses

To give every protruding rock a dry kiss

And every slender tree a huge hug

I cannot help feeling deeply embarrassed
When my Allen asks: who are they, dad?

—

Changming Yuan, 5-time Pushcart nominee and author of *Chansons of a Chinaman* (2009) and *Landscaping* (2013), grew up in rural China and currently works as an English tutor in Vancouver, where he co-edits *Poetry Pacific* with Allen Qing Yuan (Poetry subs welcome at editors.pp@gmail.com). Recently interviewed by *PANK*, Yuan has poetry appear in *Barrow Street, Best Canadian Poetry, London Magazine, BestNewPoemsOnline, Taj Mahal Review, Threepenny Review* and 700 others across 27 countries.

Fiction

She gets served in the traditional fashion; two half pint glass mugs filled to the top with the amber beer. The young bartender takes her cash off the 160-year-old wooden bar and gives her a smile. The glass is slightly chipped and beer foam pours onto the counter. She turns, leans the small of her back against the bar and watches the crowd of late night drinkers.

"Type of girl I'd like to talk to," flashes in my head. She is only a few feet away, but in these tiny Manhattan bars that is an eternity. Drinking people fill the space between us. She places the glass against her lips catches me in the periphery and we exchange an extended micro-moment of eye contact. A pay phone starts ringing and the lights around us flicker.

McSorley's Old Fashioned Ale House has been serving double mugs of beer for eternity, a practice that is seldom questioned. Upon the rarity that someone dares to contemplate the two-mug practice, the only explanation given is: "Tradition's important." People gather around large wooden tables. The bar is packed tonight, there's little space to occupy. It's almost 2am and McSorley's will be open through the night. The pay phone rings one more time, an empty glass mug slams on the bar.

"Time is very slow for those who wait!" I hear someone in a conversation say.

Her eyes peek over black-rimmed glasses at me. I see her trying to avoid a smile. Her hair is black. I am hoping for some accident, some occurrence that will get me to talk to her. Her eyes dart away, the moment is over and she picks up the antique pay phone. Her nails painted maroon.

"Hello?" she says into he phone. I see how her dark green dress moves around her body as she reaches to pick up the phone. "Yeah… this is McSorley's… I don't know… I'll ask." She looks at me as if to say, "watch the phone."

The lights fade like a blackout is coming but return with a new orange hue. She pauses to look at the lights and immediately goes back to her task at hand. Everyone else is too drunk or uninterested to notice the bar's lighting.

She asks the person next to me "Are you Havel?"

"Havel? Another man downing his drink replies, "That's not Hyppolyte Havel! That's Joe Gould!"

To this Mr. Gould makes a seagull-like noise.

She looks over the crowded pub and realizes she can't ask everyone who they are. She elongates her neck and at the top of her lungs screams, "Havel! Hippolyte Havel! Who is Hippolyte Havel?" I notice a dark read birthmark on her collarbone peaking through her dress.

A hand rises from the back.

“You're Havel?” She asks.

He nods.

“You got a phone call.”

He walks from his booth and thanks her as he picks up the phone. “When was the last time someone received a call from a pay phone?” She starts drinking from her second glass mug.

“Time is very fast for those who are scared,” Havel says into the phone. He holds a fedora in his right hand and wears a tweed jacket with elbow patches.

“Why am I not talking to her?” I ask myself while my feet cement into the floor. This fear has always plagued me. I am the only force stopping an introduction, killing all my chances to meet someone. It has always been my fears, my stupidity, my apprehension and nothing else holds me in place. “Do I fear her or fear what I want?” passes through my mind. Every piece of energy in the universe has brought the two of us to this spot at this moment and I cannot manage to take three steps and form words to talk to this beautiful woman. She sips her beer again and looks at Havel.

The wooden bar doors swing open letting in a gust of fresh air. A bagpiper dressed in a kilt, button down shirt and tie and hard-soled black shoes enters. The bagpipe is under his right arm and the mouthpiece sits up to his lips, but he is not playing.

People cheer his entrance forming a clear circle around the piper. She looks at me with an amused smile hoping for an explanation. I wonder if my hair is in place, if my shoulders are sitting straight or any other flaw she could have caught in that glance. I give her a smile and a shrug. She laughs and turns back around. I see an empty millimeter of space closer to her and fill it. I can tell she is wearing light perfume.

The door swings closed and pushes in a second gust of which the lights react to. Shadows move around the walls with the wind. I stop to see the lights flickering flames and the dancing shadows on the walls. Confused I approach and realize that these were not the same lights as when I walked in. They have become old gaslights. There are real red-orange flames inside that are reacting to the breath and movements of McSorley’s.

“What’s going on?” She mouths to me beneath the noise of the bar.

“The lights… I don’t… I don’t get it.”

A man screams to the bagpiper, "We that are true lovers run into strange capers."

To which Joe Gould replies, “Squaaak.”

People are raising glasses to toast the bagpipe player, as he stands statuesque in the center of the bar. They beg him to play, but his silence is a refusal.

She looks back at me and asks, “So is he going to play or what?”

“Time is very long for those who lament and very short for those who celebrate.” A voice yells at the bagpiper.

She looks back at the lights, takes a step closer and says, “What is… what’s…” Her sentence dissolves.

“Come on Old John, empty the keg!” someone in the corner screams. I look at the bartender behind me who is stone-faced at the requests of the drunks. He is an old man who has New York City history stamped on his face. He wears a white oxford shirt with a black rubber apron; he looks like a combination of a bartender and butcher.

“Yeah! Old John! Empty the keg!” Joe Gould says in a birdlike voice.

“Keep dreaming!” the old bartender’s Irish accent yells back.

A man gets on top of his chair and yells to the bar, “Invisible sprit of wine, if thou hast no name to be known by, let us call thee Devil!” He comes back to the floor and bangs on the table yelling, “Empty the keg! Empty the keg!” Immediately others join in the chanting.

The air feels different now. There is more sawdust on the floor, more flavors in the beer. A very real change in the bar has happened and is visible on the faces of its patrons. She remains the same, fully integrated into the atmosphere, like she has always been here waiting for me.

“Where are we?” she asks. “This is someone else’s past.” She just stares at me. I do not feel shy; I do not avert my eyes. Her beauty is classic. We neither speak nor acknowledge that we were staring at each other but rather revel in the moment. A man on my left lights a cigarette. I smile when my self-consciousness swoops in to remind me that I am staring at a person I do not know. She starts to laugh and somehow moves a little closer to me.

“Come on I want music… empty the keg!” another voice says loudly.

I open my mouth to say something and nothing comes out. No need to try to figure out why we are looking at each other, no need for analysis or control. She has a scratch next to her nose. I give myself to this

crescendo and let the ambiance tell me what to do. There are no questions to ask. I feel only this. I lean in closer.

She turns towards the crowd, throws her fist in the air and screams, “Empty the keg!”

The bagpiper stands still.

“Come on! Music!”

“Empty the keg!” She yells again.

“Music for the soul!” Hypolite Havel screams.

Lights flicker, boots stamp the ground, the door swings open, people yell for music.

I touch the tip of her smallest finger. She lets me. Her hand moves closer to mine. I feel her index and ring fingers. Then our thumbs touch. She has no sharp nails or rings. “Empty the keg!” we holler in unison. Our palms touch and fingers interlock. I squeeze her hand and look at her flame-lit face. The cherubs in the bar push our bodies together and our lips connect.

The bar explodes in cheers as we kiss. People still yell, “Empty the Keg!” but much louder. People slam on the tables harder than before.

“Fine!” Old John screams. “Empty the keg!” he says in biting voice.

People start cheering. Some volunteer assistants come behind the bar and lay every glass mug on the counter. Each is filled to the rim with every last drop of beer in the keg. We still kiss.

“From now till closing all beer is on the house!” Old John says.

The bagpiper looks to the heavens and yells, “For those who love time is eternal” and immediately plays. Everyone cheers. All these people, from the fringes of history are finally getting a free round. They stamp the ground to provide rhythm. We kiss as the characters in the bar brush by us each grabbing a mug. Joseph Mitchell is in the corner writing this all down.

“You’re amazing,” I say. “What’s your name?”

A stranger hands us each a beer.

“Parker,” she responds banging her glass into mine.

“Isaac,” I say back. “I’m Isaac… and you’re Parker. Nice to meet you.” Silence, “So… what brings you to McSorley’s tonight?” I ask.

Parker stops and looks almost confused then suddenly laughs to herself. “Isaac?” She looks back at me and kisses me. “It all comes together.” She laughs again. “It’s all made…?”

“I don’t get it.”

“You don’t have to.” She’s smiling. Thoughts go through her mind about this night that just makes her keep laughing. “I can’t even begin to describe it.” She smiles and kisses me again. “Isaac?”

“Yeah.”

“I promise this will all make sense… just give me some time.” She looks at the bagpiper still playing near the door.

I look down and see she is barefoot. “Your shoes are missing.”

“I know… it’s all part of it.” She kisses me again. “It was all made…”

André M. Zucker was born in the Bronx. His works have appeared in And/or, The Associative Press, Blaze Vox, Danse Macabre, South Jersey Underground, Structo *and many others.*

Xiaoli's hands are sweating. "Yes? You wanted me?"

Her supervisor looks up briefly at her and then back to the newspaper. "The new foreign teachers are coming in tomorrow. Pick them up."

"Me?" she asks, smiling. "You want me to meet them?"

He shakes the newspaper and folds it up. He opens a drawer to pull out a cigarette. "You pick them up and take them to Hongshanglu."

"Hongshanglu? Not the university?"

"We don't have space. All the rooms are filled. Anyway, my uncle has a free flat. He says we can use it and I can pay him under the table."

"What about the neighbors?"

"What about the neighbors."

"Should we be concerned about them? Will it cause any trouble?"

"I don't care about the neighbors. Just pick them up and take them there."

"Shouldn't we get them a gift? For them coming?"

The supervisor inhales his cigarette, shakes his head.

"No?"

The supervisor closes his eyes and exhales.

"I think it would be kind."

He looks at her. For several moments nobody speaks. "Fine, get them a gift," he says.

“And the university will pay me back?”

He stubs his cigarette in the ash tray and then picks up the phone. “I have a phone call to make,” he says, waving her off.

She nods, her face burning brightly. She heads down the stairs and leaves the campus to go outside to the small row of shops that cater to the students. One of the stores has items standing on shelves facing the window: assorted coffee mugs, picture frames and small knickknacks. She strolls down the aisles, trying to decide what to buy. And then she comes across what she is looking for: a 3D panda picture frame.

She ends up buying two 3D picture frames; one with pandas and the other one with dragons decorating the frames. The total cost is eighty RMB. She asks for a receipt.

“You want a receipt?”

“Yes.”

The middle aged woman takes a deep sigh and underneath the cluttered desk, pulls out a big wad of receipts. She’s filling out the date, price and the items bought when Xiaoli’s phone rings. It’s her mother.

“Did you eat?”

“No—”

“No? You should eat. Why haven’t you eaten?”

“I’m shopping. I’ll eat later. I’m buying a gift for the foreigners that I have to pick up. They’re supposed to come tomorrow.”

“Foreigners? Tomorrow?” she can hear her mother explaining the situation to her father.

“Make good friends. Your father says to be sure to make good friends. If you make good friends, maybe one day you can go to America.”

Her father’s yelling in the background. “Are they American? Of course, they’re American! Every foreigner is American.”

“No, they’re not American,” Xiaoli says. “One is from Canada and the other is from Russia.”

“What a shame not from America,” her mother says, full of sadness.

“But they lived in America.”

“She says they lived in America.”

“Oh, wait, Mom. I could be wrong. Maybe they are Americans and they lived before in Canada and Russia.”

“I told you,” her father can be heard saying. “Everyone’s from America.”

“Your father says to be sure to take them out for dinner. Or buy them a gift.”

In the airport, she waits eagerly in the arrivals lounge. She presses her new slacks down and pats her newly cut bobbed hair. When the sliding door opens and people stride through, she holds up the sign with the foreigners’ names across it very high up in the air.

After ten minutes, a middle aged foreign couple walks through the door. She waves her sign, hoping that it is them. They pause just outside the sliding door and the woman looks through her bag. The man looks up and around and sees the moving sign Xiaoli is holding. He elbows the woman, who quickly looks up, blowing her nose into a Kleenex. They walk toward her.

“Hello and please welcome to China,” Xiaoli says.

“Oh, god, what an awful trip,” the woman begins. “It was just so much turbulence.”

“I need a drink,” the husband says.

“This way please,” she says, escorting them to the waiting van outside the airport terminal. They settle in.

“How long is it till we get to our place?”

“We’re on our way now,” she says, smiling.

“No,” the woman says, waving her hand. “How much time will it take?”

“What she means is,” says her husband. “How long will it take to get to our apartment?”

“Oh. Not long. Should be about twenty minutes.”

The woman groans. “Twenty minutes?”

“Don’t worry. It’ll be fast. Twenty minutes flies by fast and then we can lie down for a while and relax.” The man is patting her as he’s saying this and then looks at Xiaoli. “We had a very awful flight. Very noisy. It was very long.”

“Oh,” says Xiaoli. “I’m sorry about that.”

The van pulls into a large apartment complex and parks in front one of the buildings. The couple gets out and looks up at the old depilated building.

“Does this have an elevator?”

“No,” says Xiaoli.

“What floor is our apartment on?”

“The sixth floor.”

The couple looks at each other and raises their eyebrows. “Six floors? And no elevator?”

Inside the flat, Xiaoli and the driver wait for them to catch their breath. Once their faces are no longer red, Xiaoli shows them the place. As she’s showing them the place, their complaints increase.

“The bed’s hard as a rock.”

“There are dead cockroaches in the refrigerator.”

The woman looks out of the windows into the facing building. “The neighbors are looking at us. Why is everyone looking at us? Was there a local announcement about us coming?”

“It’s too dark here,” the husband says. “I get depressed when it’s too dark.”

The first week the calls are daily.

“The washing machine is not working.”

“Where is the store to buy things?”

“Aren’t we supposed to get a free lunch card?”

“Where are the other foreigners? I thought they would be more foreigners.”

“Where’s the mall?”

“Is there anything else besides KFC?”

The second week the Xiaoli is called up to her supervisor’s office again. He tells her to take them down to the visa office.

“Which car do I use?” she asks.

“Car? What car? There is no car. You use the bus.”

“What about a taxi?”

“Taxi?” He shakes his head violently. “No, use the bus.”

“Taxi?” they ask her.

“There was no car available. We can take a bus and besides it’s not too far,” explains Xiaoli. “It’s very close.”

“How close?” they ask.

“Fifteen minutes.”

It takes more than fifteen minute to reach the bus station, because they walk too slow. The wife keeps stopping to look into her bag to see if she has everything. They also stop every now and then to look up into the sky and point around. At what? Xiaoli doesn’t know. As they get closer to the bus stop, the sidewalk becomes more congested. Xiaoli then has to stop to wait for the couple, because every time someone bumps into them, the couple make a short cry and turn around to look at the offending person who rudely bumped into them; staring at the backs of their heads until they disappear into the crowds.

When they finally arrive to the bus stop, Xiaoli tells them to stop and wait. The woman digs into her bag for a fan and begins to fan herself. She puts the fan back into the bag and pulls out a water bottle. Xiaoli sees out of the corner of her eye a beggar working his way through the crowd. The beggar's eyes get big when he sees the foreigners and immediately comes toward them, shaking his tin can.

"No money," the man tells him in English. He turns to Xiaoli, "I just got here. And I got to give him money?"

"He doesn't know that." She tries to tell the beggar to go away, that there is nothing for him. The beggar then looks at the woman who's clutching her water bottle against her chest. His hands reach out toward her.

"What the hell?" the woman says.

"What is he doing?" the man demands.

"He just wants the water bottle."

"I still got water in it," the woman says, shaking the half empty water bottle. "Can't he see that? He's not blind."

"He just wants it, because he can recycle it for the money."

The beggar grabs the bottle.

"What the—"

Several buses come screeching up to the curb.

"Oh, the bus," Xiaoli says. "This is the bus."

She runs off and then turns around to the couple calling them to run faster. They reach the bus's door and people from all sides push and shove.

"What the—"

"Please hurry, get on the bus."

"Doesn't anyone around here know about basic courtesy?"

They manage to get on the bus. There is no place to sit and barely any space to hold on to the rails. The bus pulls off and their hands frantically grope the people around them, trying to hold onto something. They violently swing forward and backwards every time the bus stops and takes off. Fifteen minutes later they arrive at their destination.

It is almost 12:00.

“Please hurry up,” she tells the couple and they enter the visa office. They wait at first in the wrong line and then after asking questions, Xiaoli takes them to the appropriate office. But when they arrive, the woman sitting behind the desk puts up a sign that says: Back in twenty minutes.

“Oh,” Xiaoli says.

“What are they, imbeciles?” asks the man.

“Didn’t you know about this?” the woman asks her. “Why didn’t you know about this?”

“I’m sorry. We can just have a nice lunch—”

“Well, what if I don’t want a nice lunch?”

“What if we’re tired? Have you ever heard of jet lag?”

They go down the stairs and wait outside the building. As Xiaoli is scanning the street for possible restaurants to eat at another beggar comes up to them, slowly walking up to them; leaning on his walking stick and clanking his tin can. The foreigners see him.

“Not again,” says the man.

Xiaoli’s can feel her face burning. She reaches into her purse and gives him a mao. The beggar shakes his head, takes his stick and pounds his stick on her shoes. She quickly moves out of the way latching her hand onto the woman’s arm.

“Oh my god!” screams the woman. “Did you see that?”

“Please, let’s have some lunch over there,” she says, pulling her away.

“That guy just hit you in the foot!”

“Is it a Chinese place?” asks the husband. “Because I can’t have MSG. I’m severely allergic to MSG.”

One month later, they still call her. The problem now has to do with the trash. The woman tells her about the neighbors and beggars wading through their trash.

“It’s for recycling,” explains Xiaoli. ”You can get money for the--”

“And what about the smell? It’s just disgusting and rude,” says the woman.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s like I’m hunted for my trash. As soon as I run outside, the neighbors chase me down the stairs and after my trash. It’s degrading. I’m scared. I don’t feel so safe here.”

“No, no please don’t worry. There is nothing to worry. China is very safe.”

“Well, I don’t know about that…”

Two months later, Xioali meets the woman in the hallway and out of politeness she asks about the problem of the trash. She explains to the woman that she had already talked to the baoan about the problem.

“Baoan?”

“The security guards.”

“Them? Why did you talk to them? They do nothing but play games all day long. They’re just as guilty you know. I see them digging through the trash. We threw away two frames. Ghastly frames. There were pandas in 3D. What the hell are we supposed to do with 3D pandas?”

Xiaoli blinks.

The woman continues, “They have those 3D pandas sitting in their office window. You can see it. Go there and see it for yourself. It’s like they have nothing to hide. It’s like they’re proud of what they find in the trash. Who’d be proud of trash?”

“I hope the trash is no problem for you anymore.”

“The trash? Oh, the trash doesn’t bother me anymore. I just toss it out the window like everyone else.”

In the third month it is the husband who calls her. He complains to her about their sex life, their lack of sex life. Xiaoli doesn’t feel comfortable, but she doesn’t know how to explain to the man that he needs to stop calling. She dreads meeting the woman in the hallways. The woman has not been so friendly to her lately. She is afraid that the woman suspects her and her husband are having an affair.

Xiaoli has taken to memorizing the foreign couple’ work schedule, making special arrangements so as not to cross their paths. She has also has become more adept at typing English messages to the husband: “I’m so sorry,” “I’m busy right now,” or “I’m in class” and in last desperation she has even referred her supervisor’s phone number to him for future problems.

After Christmas, things are quiet until New Year’s Day when the police call her supervisor who then calls Xiaoli. “They have a problem with the new laowais,” he says. “Fix it.”

It is her day off, ten thirty in the morning. Nevertheless she gets up, gets dressed and goes to the foreigners’ place. When she walks to their apartment, she sees the police car waiting outside and several neighbors standing around looking up. She looks up and sees the sixth floor, the foreigners’ flat. The kitchen window is cracked and broken. A microwave hangs dangerously halfway out of the broken window. Her shoes step on broken beer glass bottles and notices more things of the apartment are lying on the ground shattered: a rice cooker, an iron, assorted silverware, a basket and other odds and ends.

The neighbors recognize her.

“There she is!”

“You’re from the university, right?”

She nods her head, looking at the policemen.

“Tell your laoban, we don’t want no more laowai here anymore. Do you hear that? No more laowai!”

She follows the policemen up the stairs to the foreigners’ flat. The neighbors on each floor stick their heads out to look at her.

“They had a fight,” the policemen tell her. “They threw things out of the window.”

They pass by open doors on their way to the sixth floor. “They were running around naked,” says one old lady, her head peering out of her doorway.

“Up and down the stairs naked,” adds another. “All naked!”

“We could hear them screaming your name,” says another neighbor. “Your name is Xiaoli, right? Yeah, well they were screaming your name. Throwing stuff out and running up and down the stairs naked.”

The policemen stop and look at Xiaoli. “Are you having an affair with the husband?”

She shakes her head no. The policemen look at each other and continue walking up the stairs. They finally arrive at their apartment. The door is open and Xiaoli can see them. The neighbors behind them push them in the entrance room and they all spill into the entrance room staring at the foreigners. The foreigners stand there covered in towels, shivering.

“Tell them we’re sorry,” says the woman. “We just got carried away.”

“Yes,” says the husband. He gives a shy smile and then looks her up and down. “You look nice today, Xiaoli. That color looks good on you.”

The woman looks at her husband, closes her eyes and inhales deeply, then walks away to the living room.

“What?” asks the husband, following her. “I can’t say anything nice about another woman? Come on, you know I love you. Didn’t we just have the most amazing sex ever?”

The woman turns around to face him, smiles and begins laughing. “Yes, we did.” He puts his arms around her and they begin making out, kissing and groaning. The towels drop, exposing their nakedness.

The policemen look at Xiaoli. “Could you tell them to cut it out?”

But Xiaoli doesn’t move. She’s paralyzed, watching them. They moan some more and stumble backwards into the wall. The woman yelps. The man digs at her neck. They slide down from the wall to the floor. They’re both yelping now.

One of the neighbors, an old lady, shakes her head and leaves. She comes back in, struggling to carry a large red bucket full of grease and rice—the community’s left overs bucket that is to be given to the farmers when they come by later.

The thick sludge in the bucket swishes back and forth, spilling on the floor. The old lady manages to lift up the bucket and pours it over the naked couple. They scream and stand up, covered in slime and fish heads with empty eye sockets.

“What the—”

“You’ll be hearing about this from my lawyers!” the man screams, pointing at Xiaoli. The policemen arrest them and lead them outside, naked and stinky, into the waiting van.

The foreigners are deported. Their visas cancelled. Barred from China indefinitely. It is later found out that they had the same problem in Beijing.

Xiaoli’s phone rings. It’s her mom. “How is everything, dear?”

“I just took them to the airport.”

“The airport?”

“Did you get their phone number?” her dad yells.

“Your father wants to know if you got their phone number.”

“No, I didn’t…”

“Well, how about their QQ. Did you get their QQ?”

“They don’t have QQ, mom.”

“Email. Your father’s asking about their email. Did you get their--”

“No, I don’t have anything—“

“You don’t have anything? Well, then how are you supposed to go to America?”

“I’m not going, mom.”

“Not going? Well, then how are you going to—”

“Mom, I don’t care about America. I really don’t.”

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A grey fedora rests on Corm's piano, as he plays Einaudi's 'Monday' and hopes it doesn't rain. Women and children and men, all strangers, pass before him, dropping coins into the hat. Metal clinks on metal, and he thinks that maybe once in twenty times they make a note that nearly fits.

Statues aglow like paper lanterns sit lazily on columns arranged throughout the square. Some of the wandering crowd glance up at them, stare, noting how they stand out bold and near-surreal against the squid-ink dark. Some of those looking up take out their cameras, snap away. Rattle of fish biting.

He notices all this in between tunes. Likes to think that, amongst the crowd, there might be other people catching themselves imagining how it would be if those statues were alive, looking back. Reprimanding themselves quietly for such stupid, childish thoughts, but not being able to stop thinking them. Realising that being childish maybe isn't so bad. Realising that being childish is just something you get accused of if you're not pulling your full-grown weight, the few times that it's really needed. That it doesn't matter, not really, the rest of the time.

Sometimes, if he spots a face in the crowd he recalls from a previous night, he might try to talk to them during those short between-song breaks. A few nights back, he'd even managed to convince one of them to go and fetch him some food – a kebab, tucked inside a pitta bread with fries and oily salad and salt and onions and garlic mayonnaise. Paid for with money from the fedora. But there are no return visitors tonight.

Corm finds himself looking beyond the immediate gathering – who always seem to congregate in semi-circular formation, two or three rows deep – towards the stream of people on the main strip bisecting the square, as demarcated by the columns and the not-really-watching blue and yellow and pink and green statues that occupy the plinths set out on top. Finds himself scanning for the bare ankles and calves and thighs of Nice's nice young women, the most beautiful he's ever known anywhere, and wondering how it would be if he didn't have to spend most of his nights playing piano, and could spend time instead trying to win one or two or more of them over; charm them, somehow, into feeling they were falling in love.

The sharp hush that follows the close of the applause for the previous tune, or the clinking of coins – unaccompanied now – usually shakes him out of such reveries. That, or the sound of footsteps peeling away from the crescent that hangs almost airborne just a few metres away.

He starts up 'Moonlight Sonata', just like he does at least once every week.

The crowd responds well – no more Dopplering shoe sounds – as they tend to do to the better-known pieces. He has about a handful, just over, of similar popular tunes that he likes to pull out from time to time, in the hope of bringing in a few more coins, perhaps a note or two, from sentimental members who associate the given composition with happier times in haze of youth, when they listened to classical music so much more often. Probably because their parents didn't really get rock 'n' roll.

For Corm, it had been the other way around. His parents didn't really get music like this. Sat around when he was younger playing old vinyls by Elvis and Buddy Holly and Chuck Berry and Jerry Lee Lewis, and some country stuff like Hank Williams. This was all music that he came to later, when he'd grown older by a few

years and started piano lessons under the half-belief that he wanted to play rocking boogie numbers and the occasional big bluesy ballad. His first hearing of Beethoven turned him, sent him spinning off on a different route.

Every few minutes he glances up beyond the statues at the sky, tries to pick out clouds that harbour any hints of downpour. It would take him nearly three minutes to close everything up and to push the piano to the nearest sheltered space, a concrete overhang, jutting upper lip at the corner of a building, leading into the doorway, the mouth. In the daytime, he'd block the way into the shop the building housed, but no such worries were on him at night. Because he doesn't like his piano getting wet, because there are small holes in the top through which water could leak, because he doesn't like cleaning the internal mechanism all that much, he prefers to get a head start if he feels a storm coming. But tonight the air is simply black and warm and dry and still. End of summer/early autumn evening air.

So Corm stays sitting down on his second-hand stool and looks back at the crowd and looks at his sheaf of loose sheet music, and then *Eeny, meeny, miney, mo…* he thinks, and plucks a piece from near the back.

Then *Fuck…* he thinks.

Rachmaninov.

Green crosses hang lit-up outside pharmacies, dotted throughout the night in a way that calls to mind those arcade shoot-em-ups he used to throw his pocket money at. Every time he moves beneath one, he feels the urge to jump and grab for it, hear the congratulatory sound-effect, feel better. His whole body feels lightweight enough to make the leap, relieved as it is of the burden of piano. But feels tired along with it. He'd had to push it for five minutes towards the storage space he rents from a local artist. Can always, after that journey, sense the locking and knotting of shoulder-blade muscles, inching towards invisible hump he perceives at the base of his neck.

His fingers have started to creak and mumble with air or whatever it is in the joints. They do this if he's stayed out too long too many times in a row. He bunches them around the mostly-clean tissues he keeps in his pockets in case his hay fever acts up. Likes doing that. Likes to ball them up and remember a habit, a game he'd formed when he was a kid, taking sheets of toilet roll and scrunching them – bound with soap and water – into clumps – pulping them, weighing them out – before winging them at the bathroom tiles, or the mirror, or the back of the bathroom door. Watching them ooze clumsily down whichever surface he'd chosen, laughing and making more mess until he was caught. He'd been six, then. Six or seven. Two years before his first piano lesson. Five years before his first kiss.

A sallow absence in his gut, it feels like, every morning that he wakes without her, and every night she isn't by his side before he sleeps. Sometimes, this rotting, sick sensation is augmented by alcohol, but most times these days not. Sometimes, when he lies there thinking about her, pre-sleep or post-waking, he gets a hard-on, though lately he's more likely to get worried, to talk himself to sleep or out of bed with wonderings about

whether all of this is worth it anymore.

She is in London, miles away. Many miles. So many miles he can't count, and doesn't like to try. Exact numbers won't help. He sees her once a month, occasionally twice, if she can get the time off work, or if he had a good run of it out on the square. He always tells her that he loves her, every time before they part. Sometimes, it stills feels like she means it when she says it back.

Today, he's worked out, leaves him with only one more day after this before she comes here again – by plane, because the tickets tend to be cheaper that way. Until then, there are two more phone calls to have, whilst she takes her lunch and he drinks a mocha in the café at the end of the road. Two more opportunities to try and laugh, to not talk about the things that still turn him on or worry him.

Although, he might tell her, today, that he wants to get drunk and dance with her beneath those lazy light-up gods. Like last time and the time before. Re-enact it like a war, and then retreat to his apartment and compare battle scars and stay awake until the dizzy dry-mouthed hangovers kick in and eyes-closed on their pillows seems the safest place to be.

Strokes the inner side of his left forearm in the shower, wondering at its sensitivity that it should miss the weight of her the way it does. Presses the heel of his right hand against the mostly hairless part just below the elbow's crook, trying to simulate the heaviness of her reclining head.

Pisses down the plughole as he washes his hair.

He likes to wear a different shirt each day. Always a proper button-up shirt, never a T-shirt, or a vest top, or anything like that. Always does *Eeny, meeny, miney, mo* to choose which one. Something leftover from childhood, like eating sugary cereal for breakfast and walking the edge of the kerb like a tightrope when he thinks nobody's watching. Used to do that all the time, and make believe the street was flooded up with shark-filled waters. Hadn't done that last part for years.

His finger lands on his blue&green checked shirt – long-sleeved – and he pulls it on slowly, taking his time to roll the cuffs up and roll them again and fasten them in place with the sewn-in straps. He wears his oldest jeans. His newest pair have a hole in the knee and another just below the right-hand side back pocket. His feet slip, sockless, into sandals, the ones he's taken to wearing whenever the sky is mostly blue. Notices his toenails could do with cutting. That'll need doing before the weekend. She complains if he scratches her legs with them in the night.

He pulls and smoothes his hazel hair into its parting. Sneezes with the dust in the room.

He wants coffee.

Nice, at 10:30am at this time of the year, means rising sun and late breakfast. He passes the low walls that border the small gardens of the smaller hotels that hunker two streets in from the seafront. Cars pass him. A scooter. A group of cyclists, heading the other way. The rear wheel of the last bike has a reflector strip locked between the spokes, and it catches the sunlight for fractions of seconds each time it reaches the peak of its spin. He turns to watch it once it passes, until they round a corner, heading down the road from which he's come.

Corm is making for a different café today, one that overlooks the beach. It's more expensive, but it has a good view of the students, the lasses he can watch and watch without any desire to get more involved. They're his own age, more or less, and he thinks he recognises one or two, on some visits, from the course he should still be attending. But – and it isn't just because of her – his only intention, his only wanting is to watch. To daydream that they could be his, without complication, without life showing up and thrusting itself in the way. The ultimate cock-blocker. Just to daydream. That's all. One real thing at a time is plenty.

The sun just gets to him that way, makes him hungry, makes him feel that it's alright, that it's moral, in the what-Hemingway-said sense of the word. The sun brings out his freckles and burns at his nose and his neck. The sun makes him enjoy things like walking down streets and eating breakfast outside and wearing cork-soled sandals that make a door-knocking sound on the road. The sun makes him want to compose and perform and hang out at after parties and swap anecdotes with all the other bums who do the same.

He feels his mobile phone buzz in his pocket, doesn't take it out to answer.

It buzzes again, and he finds himself wondering how well it would skim on the water.

Yellow bikini. Yellow with thin white stripes. Can only see the top half of her, the bottom being beneath the rolling waves. Makes him think of mermaids. The croissant crumples on his tongue and he can feel it sticking to his gums and the roof of his mouth. The butter he's allowed to melt on the top is salted, makes him want more.

A couple of flies wrestle at the edge of his table, and he moves his fingers in a walking motion close towards them. They jump slightly with the vibrations but don't move any further than that. He doesn't flick them. They won't trouble his food.

Turning back towards the sea, he can no longer spot the yellow bikini, can no longer see the dark-haired girl it just barely hides. There are others. Blue and white polka dots. Pink. There is the ocean.

He likes it best in the minutes before nightfall, when it goes the colour of his piano, all burnt sienna and

faded-varnish brown. But bright blue, like the eyes of long-lost marbles, that's a good colour too. That goes hand in hand with the sun.

His phone rings again.

He answers it.

The call lasted thirty-four minutes. He checked the screen after pressing end. They hadn't said much. Sometimes, he was content to sit quietly and think about her, or about nothing much at all, reassured and calmed simply by the knowledge she was on the line. Sometimes he sat quietly and worried about the lack of words. As far as he could tell, she always worried. She'd said she missed him this time, though. Said that if she could have taken an extra day off work to get here earlier, she would have done. Cross her heart.

He doesn't really have the money, but he buys another croissant, this one to go, and walks across the street to lean against the railings. A seagull swoops in and perches a metre, less, away. Corm eyeballs it, stares it down. It moves its wings, like shrugging, but doesn't fly off.

Spots the girl in the yellow bikini down below, halfway in the shadow of the seawall, laying on a small rectangle of sand placed seemingly without much consideration in the midst of the bigger rocks and bottle tops and pebbles that make up the rest of the beach. Her boyfriend – or a friend close enough to fill that role – massages suncream between her shoulder blades. Corm lets his gaze linger for a few seconds, then looks out further, noting a large yacht that seems anchored off a promontory down along the coast. Its windows all look dark, like scraps of obsidian, like stuffed-teddy-bear eyes.

He never wants to own anything like that. Is pretty certain he never will.

In the afternoons, he likes to wander the old streets, the ones way back from the seafront. That is his habit. He'll eat, usually at one of the establishments out and away from the main restaurant plaza, and then take his time, dawdling, dragging his feet in the shadow of houses constructed in the classic Mediterranean style, all white-walls and red roofs. Stare at the terracotta of the tiles until they blend together and turn weak salmon-pink in the sun.

The thin streets, the ones winding up the hill, stepped at large intervals, three storey white walls gone grey with the shadows they throw down on each other. He likes those streets the best. They make him think of pictures he used to love, ones painted and sketched out by itinerant artists learning their trade. They make him think of Sophia Loren, Claudia Cardinale, Romeo & Juliet, Brigitte Bardot. Italy and France seem to bleed together along this coastline. Greece too, he guesses. Spain and Portugal from the other direction. This is what Nice does to him, how it gets him. Makes him take everywhere this side of the sea and tie them

together and view them all through the lens of the Niçoise sky. A cabal, a conspiracy of sun drenched joy.

His sandals hit two distinct slapping sounds with each step – the first when his heel hits the ground, the second when his toes follow suit – and with both feet counted he puts out a 4/4 beat as he walks. In these high-walled streets, the acoustics are good. He finds himself finger-clicking with his right hand on occasion, sometimes with the beat, sometimes laying a melody over the top. He doesn't whistle, because he can't. He'd used to be able to, when he'd been much younger, and gap-toothed, but his second set just hadn't been that way inclined. Especially not after the braces.

Another thing about this habit, about this route he finds himself most often taking, is that it doesn't seem to pass by any bars. At least, he's never noticed any. Out here, it can be all too easy to stride into someplace about midday, or simply start drinking with your lunch and then not stop, all because it feels too good to be doing that, under a shade but still under the blue.

Not that he has a problem with that himself, really. But if he doesn't have much money at the end of weeks like this, she wants to know why. And even though she enjoys doing the same kind of thing when she's out here, she doesn't appreciate his desire to do it when she's not around. He can see where she's coming from, mostly, which was how this habit had formed in the first place, but it is still his money to spend. If he wants to spend it on her, he'll spend it on her. Ditto for wheat beer and red wine and mojito cocktails mixed up with dark rum instead of the usual white.

These thoughts make him thirsty, and he half-wants to take his phone from his pocket and call her again. They'd agreed he should, if he ever wanted to spend a day drinking, so as it didn't come as a shock to her later, and spark off an argument that dragged itself across the sparse few hours they had in which to see each other. His fingers tap against the screen for a few seconds and then leave it alone. She's busy this week, made busier still by having to account for this weekend away, and it won't go down well if he calls during work hours. Besides, if he starts drinking now then he won't be in any fit shape to play later, and every day he is given with weather like this wrapped inside it is a day he has to take. The square will be loaded tonight. Congregation full in the church of glow-in-the-dark gods.

The fountain, as well, will draw the crowds.

So many places of that kind around here. So many places he can think about and smile over and stack-up images like postcards he's been strange and lonely and sent to himself. This is how it is now, this is how he feels about this city. Raw and woozy from hitting the big white & pink tangle of here, conglomerate mass that has finally neutered his wanderlust, sated his need to go anyplace else. Raw and woozy and dizzy and sick like he's eaten too much of a good meal, but not sick enough that he'll stop.

This is how it is now – he thinks, as he moves between zebra-crossing stripe patterns of sunlight and shade – but it isn't how it started. Even a couple months back it wasn't like this. He is navigating his way between houses and heading to the gardens cut into the side of the cliff, the ones that hold the waterfall, and the waterfall is what got him thinking that it wasn't always like this. Along with the fountain, these rising-through-old-city hill streets, the square, a few of the other parks, the Orthodox church, along with all those places, the waterfall had made him think about her. Because, even just a few months ago, he found himself constantly judging sites like that, like this – areas of natural beauty, sites of historical interest – by no other criteria save

for how badly he wanted to bring her there sometime and fuck.

To sit her down by the stone horses at the base of the fountain.

To press her against a house wall, leaning into the shade and holding a hand across her mouth so as not to stir the owners into flinging wide their shutters in intrigue and disgust.

To skinny dip in the pool at the foot of the waterfall as the lights came on and the sky dimmed to the same dark blue as the sea. To hold her as she held him and they pressed back into some moss-slicked cavern obscured to tourists left standing on the other side of the liquid screen. All of those daft bastard ideas about fucking that go out of his mind almost immediately as he gets caught up in the act. No time then to daydream it out, worry about how it might look if anyone happens to be watching. Doesn't matter.

Lately, though. Lately it isn't even as if he gets those stupid ideas in his head because of anyone else. It's good enough to see what's there, to look at the place for what it is and what it holds, and not ask why that makes him feel good, just accept that it does. At the beach, it is different – the bikinis see to that – but it is like that here, amongst the houses, and up there, catching the waterfall spray on your bare toes and your shirt and your teeth if you open-mouth smile.

The first few times he'd come here, he'd brought along his camera. The whole city splays out before watchers on this side of the cliff, and trying to figure out new favourite haunts and sites to go see in the future is a game that hasn't yet lost its charm. The Russian minarets of the Orthodox church, turquoise and each topped with a gold-plated cross, are out there somewhere, he knows, though he always has trouble finding it. It shifts through the city at will, he thinks, and he's been telling himself lies like that to cover for gaps in his geographical memory ever since his age was just one number.

It's the sun, he thinks. He's always felt vulnerable to tricks of the light.

He can see the seafront hotels clearly, though. There is no missing them; great pale marble slabs, lined up with scarcely a gap in between – from this perspective – filling up the whole of the mid-stretch of the bay. Taken en masse, they stand as the biggest buildings in the city, and, as such, even though Nice stretches into hill-country from the shoreline, the hotels create at first the impression that it dips down again behind their walls. Like a shallow trench crafted long ago in grim anticipation of an ever-rising tide.

He can see the little match-head specks of sunbathers, settled in for the afternoon's session on the salt-lick grey stones of the beach.

Which ones are women, he wonders, tries to guess, like *Eeny, meeny, miney, mo*. If he gets back down there soon enough, he'll be able to check, to see if he was anywhere even remotely close to right.

During sunlit hours, his hands ease up a little, no matter how much or how hard he's been playing. Whatever it is that brings on the cracking and popping subsides. Holding his hands in the ocean helps too. Helps as well with easing his feet after a long walk.

He's standing in the surf with his jeans rolled up below his knees, but when the large breakers come in and push the tide-line higher, the denim at the bottom still gets wet. Every half-minute or so he'll bend down and reach his hands into the water, hold them there a few seconds and then bring them up holding pebbles, props to make this ritual appear less strange to anyone who might be watching.

Nobody is, though. He knows. A day like this, people are either turned away from the sea with their bare backs getting bronzed, or with eyes closed behind sunglasses facing dead-set into the rays.

Corm likes to throw stones. Not at those sunbathers but out into the sea. Sometimes, he'll make an effort to skim them, watch them pound the surface three, four, maybe five times before hitting a wave or simply losing steam and slipping under. Other times, he'll launch them as far out as he can, watch them splash like gulls harpooning after fish. He does it that way most often. It makes him hungry.

To his left, perhaps thirty feet away, a group of girls – four of them, maybe eighteen or nineteen years old – are sitting on beach towels and rubbing suncream or tanning lotion onto their skin. One of them is topless and he can see her right breast in profile from where he's standing. It makes a change from the older, richer women he often bypasses at the other end of the beach, out in front of the more expensive hotels. The ones who'd been tanning their chests every summer for the past twenty-five years, and had never eaten too much, and had always chain-smoked, and were left with small breasts like pears gone soft and rotten and long out-of-date.

He turns away from watching that girl and dips his knuckles once more in the foam.

His flat is the same colour as the sky outside when he winds up there to change into his shoes. Blue into burnt sienna printed like a previously-undiscovered Rothko onto the smooth, beige-painted wall beside his bed. He kicks his sandals off and they thump against the skirting board. Pulls on some thin socks and slips his feet into his nearly-worn-out leather shoes.

He leaves, then returns to pick up his fedora, then leaves again.

The burnt sienna on the wall is turning purple.

The piano he keeps in the artist's storage room was made in 1934. He's been playing it for four months and he's only just now noticed the date on the brass plaque behind the music shelf. The plaque is the width of the gap between his forefinger and thumb. He sits there with the room's door shut and stares at the date and then looks away and thinks about it for a while.

This is the time he should be spending on warm-up, and so he puts his fingers to the keys whilst he thinks, but doesn't play much in the way of tunes. Runs up and down a couple of scales, knocks out half an Elton John song from the seventies, but not much more. Once knew a guy who told him, drunkly, conspiratorially, on a night out, that he'd like to learn to play so as he could sit in front of any piano and entertain anyone who happened to be sharing the room, just put a smile on their faces or bring tears to their eyes, because who didn't love Elton John? Corm had listened and not laughed, like the guy expected him to, and told him that he'd teach him, if he bought all of Corm's drinks for the rest of the night. It had been half seven, so that would tally up to quite a few. The guy had done that, but the lessons never happened because soon after that the guy's parents separated and he moved away with his mother to somewhere in Wales. They'd never tracked each other down on the internet, and now Corm couldn't remember his name.

He laces his fingers together and cracks them, before running once more through his scales.

If he could sing, he thinks, he'd like to play more songs of that kind as well. If he had confidence in his singing. Too many hours trying to sing in front of the bathroom mirror back home had put paid to that, wincing at the faces he made when reaching for the lower notes, and the noises he made when he reached for the high ones. He still sang in the shower, but was happy for the water to overshadow his sound.

He's stayed in the storage space longer than he should have done, his legs still feeling his earlier hike, harbouring aches that don't usually linger. The road immediately outside this space is quite steep and it takes a lot of energy to get behind the piano and bend his knees and arms and push the thing up the hill, and that's energy he's not sure he has.

Still, if I could do this forever, he thinks. *If I could do this forever and there was nothing outside.*

His first kiss had been with a girl from the street below his, and they'd shared it as they hid behind a shed in her back garden. Her father had died young and they held hands and cried behind that same shed when she came back from his funeral, though they'd never kissed again. He wakes up with that on his mind. Remembers how, as he'd left her garden that day, he'd let his hand run across the pink blossoms of a thorn bush, trapping some between his fingers and wrenching them unintentionally from the branch-tips, rubbing them to wet flakes and staining his skin for a few hours until finally he went inside and washed his hands.

That comes back to him often, most of the time in his sleep, and he'd told his girlfriend about it one morning and ruined the day. She never talks about other men.

His head comes away slowly from the pillow, fabric flypaper-clinging to his cheek and his hair. Drool and sweat from the night. He sits up, checks the weather through the crepe-paper-thin curtains, doesn't see any

clouds.

The fedora rests, half-full, on his bedside table, and he reaches a hand into it, rattles the coins, disappointed with feeling how small most of them are. Disappointed with not feeling even one note. A big crowd, four rows deep, roused and gathered up by the great weather, and yet no notes and hardly any one Euro coins. He picks a few up and lets them drop. Picks a few more up and lets them drop too.

The girl's mother had given him twenty pounds for painting that shed, the summer between his first and second years at Uni. The girl had been in Rome with some girlfriends and he hadn't asked after her. He helped chop down another neighbour's conifer later on that afternoon, but didn't get paid for that except with two burgers from the barbecue they were having whilst he worked.

He loves it here. Even though he's spent most of the bursary, and has to play piano until his fingers go stiff every night of the week, he loves it here. Perhaps because of that. He doesn't feel that he's wasted any of the money that he's spent. He wakes up every morning missing her and not missing home and not even thinking about it some days, unless he's dreamed about it, and hoping he never grows old and goes away from here, and even, so as to stop that ever happening, that he dies young and arranges for his remains to be sunk into the sea. Weight him down with a chunk of rock from up by the waterfall, or a roof tile, or with a lead anvil, something else cartoonish like that.

Blue and white stripes like a circus tent. This is the shirt that *mo*'s landed on today. It's short-sleeved and he can't remember how he'd ended up buying it, but he puts it on anyway, after rolling deodorant under his arms. Some brand advertising its fragrance as *sportif*. He's never understood how any scent can be sporty besides sweat itself. Perspiration, sweet and cheesy, the hallmark of exercise and playing games outside in fields. She always liked to cover it up immediately after hockey matches, keeping some spray in a small bag at the side of the pitch, but occasionally, if she'd scored with a good shot, she'd come over to where he was standing and hug him and he'd smell it then. He doesn't mind. In fact, he likes it. He likes it when she doesn't try so hard.

Distance makes them both try harder, though. A few bad phone conversations in a row and they'd have to try harder still. It's more than full-time. It's extra-time too.

He checks his clock. Still forty-five minutes until he'll have to call, or she'll call him. Probably his turn.

Picking up the list of all the sheet music he stores with the piano, he makes a mental note of some kind of running order for tonight. Liszt might make the cut, first time in three weeks.

There's a 10am lecture he should have been attending, had he kept on with the masters he'd enrolled in out here. Some days he'll walk as far over as the lecture hall, listen to the voices through the windows, which will

be open, invariably, until the mistral rolls in. Not today, he doesn't take that walk.

He's just left a tabac carrying a packet of cigarettes – he allows himself one a month – and there was a fellow student he'd recognised in the cramped confines of the store. Doesn't know his name because Corm hadn't really stayed around long enough for that, but they'd paused for enough seconds for the other guy to have time to form a question. Corm snapped back into action at that point, left before that question could be asked.

Halfway down the road before he realises that guy clearly isn't attending the lecture either. Looks back over his shoulder but doesn't see anyone leaving the shop. Lights a cigarette. He'd never smoked much before he travelled out here, maybe one or two on random nights out, but no more than that. Now, he finds that they help with the tension, add to the effect this place has upon his nerves. Calm him when he starts thinking things like he isn't sure he wants to see her this weekend. Calm him before he starts thinking he doesn't want to see her again.

He never smokes inside. Never in his room. Always and only by the sea. The breeze keeps the smell from clinging to his clothes, his shirt especially, and there is a strange fascination for him in watching the gulls toy with the butts that he drops, pulling and knifing with their off-yellow beaks until finally it clicks that the filter-tip isn't good eating.

The lectures were good over here, he thinks, lighting a second. Probably why he still takes the time to pass beneath the windows. And his French is still good enough to get everything he needs out of them, understanding-wise. That isn't why he dropped out.

Neither was it simply to take the bursary money and run.

He spent his undergraduate years pushing hard for the grades. Having fun, but never too much, and certainly never too much with the girls, with the women. He worked hard in sixth form before that, and at high school, and he'd not seen any reason to kick that habit at Uni. It suited him. He enjoyed the grades. Liked the sense of self-worth. Liked the effort, and the ego-boost. As long as that pattern of hard-working and grade-getting continued, he was alright. Satisfied indefinitely. Able to satisfy – his parents, his tutors, his peers, maybe. But then that grade-getting finally reached its zenith point, was pulled together, tallied up. He paid money for the privilege of graduating in a gown and a cap that kept slipping to the side of his head, and was handed a piece of paper. And he hadn't known what to do with that piece of paper, and had finally realised not only that he was in a state of financial and personal debt, but also what that meant, and he hadn't really gone looking for a job, because that was the last thing he wanted after all that work and all that schooling. The last things: a piece of paper and a job.

So, he looked around for postgraduate courses and, after a few months, had discovered this performance masters down in Nice. After two days, he knew it wasn't the same. Kept going at it for three more weeks until the bursary came through and he could see the extra zeros tacked on to his balance, and then he left. Academia is done for him. Had done for him, he thinks, half-bitter, half-guilty at running off with the money like that. At spending most of it quickly.

He turns around and leans his back against the rail. Watches the traffic go by in front of the expensive hotels. Watches the wind shake the thick, waxen, baby-hammock-sized leaves of the palms on the islands in the

middle of the road.

The bright patchwork jazzman statue at the corner of one white building catches his eye, and he tries in vain to hear its trumpet serenading.

An afternoon cluttered with beer glasses and even more money is gone. Even more money and even more braincells and somehow he's gathered dark sickles of grit beneath each of his toenails from where the breeze had swept the dust against him whilst he sat outside the bar.

She hasn't called. It had been his turn to call and he hadn't done it and then neither had she.

He is on his bed now, holding his left foot up, inspecting the grime more closely. Soot-like patches blush around the tendons that rise out of the toes. Rubs them away with the heel of his hand. The knuckles pop as his fingers curl under the sole. No playing tonight. He should go out and get a full hat, he knows, but he knows as well that he's too drunk to play what a crowd would want to hear. Besides, he wants to eat.

Wants to gulp down wine and glut on three courses all on his own, not wait till tomorrow. Seafood starter, wine. Fish main, wine. Dessert of the day, probably. Pastis. He'll vomit in the night, like last time he went down that route. Cake it over his sheets and have to get up early to rush them to the laundrette before her plane comes in. If she smells the heavy night in any nook of his room, she'll ask about it, interrogate. But if she doesn't, he won't mention it. He's avoided such questioning before.

He hates to hide it. Hates it, wants it to be relaxed, unserious, fun, easygoing, cool, effervescent – all those 'good love' PR terms. But he talks to her the most of all the people he knows and she is closest to his worries and problems, and so, somewhere in the process, she's become a repository for them, a holding cell for all the niggles and knuckle-whitening stresses he imposes upon himself whenever he opens his mind up to thoughts beyond music and eating and fucking and wine.

He sits for a while longer, picking at the dirt beneath his nails. They still need cutting.

The taste of her, like lemon sole and salt and ocean. That's what comes back to him now, here, at the restaurant table, only the tented awning between him and the sky. The taste of her and the thinnest of stubble pressed against the edges of his tongue. He remembers. He thinks. He wants.

He wants her to be here, to mount him on this restaurant chair whilst everybody else in Nice looks on, or simply keeps on eating. He wants her to slide and grind herself against him, on him, wants her to catch his semen inside her mouth and on her chin. Wants to suck her nipples until he tastes the start of her milk, and wants to bite at her lips and trade juices and flavours and essence and story of this two-hander play they call

sex. Wants her to call out his name in a riot of joy at both being a woman and being his.

But she isn't here, and even if she were, she wouldn't. She's always kind of quiet when they fuck. She's always kind of quiet when he talks about his music.

The scents all play against his mind and his skin; the scents from nearby tables, the trails of scent drifting on the fine breeze from the open back doors of kitchens, the flecks of scent embedded firmly in the ether of here. He reaches onto the seafood platter that he's ordered, takes a shrimp up in his fingers, snaps it, peels loose its legs and shell. Finishes it in two bites, complete with chews and swallows, then lifts a lemon slice and squeezes it over an oyster. Squeezes it till oyster swims inside the citrus, half-shell interior bleaching even whiter. It's not the quietness in bed that bothers him, he thinks, as he raises the oyster. It's the other quietness. That bothers him more than anything else she ever does.

Sitting there with his knife sliding the oyster loose and thinking *She doesn't care for my poet's soul*, thinking *Not once has she begged me to play for her*. Downing the oyster, the shell catching against his lower lip. Licking the point of impact, checking for blood. Somewhere in his head is the memory of hearing that the shells could be poisonous or have something poisonous on them, but it isn't distinct and so he can't be sure, and, besides, there doesn't seem to be a cut.

He sinks the last of the large glass of white he's been drinking, and its flavour runs into the seafood and the sex dreams, and he closes his eyes just trying to get a clear image of her into his head. No dice. No good trying when he's this drunk and on his way to being even more so. It has started to settle like sediment at the lower reaches of his brain, all this booze, and it's getting difficult to keep his head straight upright. The faster the main course shows up, the better. The faster the monkfish falls under his knife.

On the tables around him, it seems there are mainly locals tonight. The talk is French and fast and the meals seem to be taking a long time to be eaten. No-one in any particular hurry to do anything more with their evening, not at this hour, only halfway past nine. An older couple sitting two tables over look his way, and then again a few minutes later, and the way they talk after those glances makes it clear they're talking about him. Thinking he's been stood up or something. Talking with pity about how he must have asked out some fine Niçoise lady, even managed to convince her to agree to a date, somehow, only to face this final embarrassment. Only to have her not arrive. And there were little sparks of laughter from each of them then. Pity and laughter are all that he hears and he can't seem to stop himself watching their lips.

He wants to hear his keys instead. The middle C for starters – the old warm-up routine, the one he'd had since day one, since the day the small piano was delivered to his parents' house, a whole week before a family friend came round to deliver a lesson. Can remember playing the middle C, right index finger plinking it down, too gently at first and then too hard. Can recall that but not the song that was taught in that lesson. Not exactly. 'London Bridge,' possibly, or 'Frere Jacques,' something simple like that. Or 'Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star', perhaps. Probably. Yeah…

It's only when the waiter comes over to ask if he's finished with the seafood platter that he realises he's humming the tune quite loudly to himself. The man has a tattoo of a woman sitting on top of a skull, just beneath the left sleeve of a white T-shirt that sticks to his skin. There are words underneath it, but Corm can't make them out. The waiter is walking off with the silver platter by the time he gets it in his head that he can

ask.

A hand lays a glossy business card down on the table. More just a poster in miniature, really. On it is a woman on a darkly-lit stage, wearing a sparkling thong, matching tassels captured in full spinning motion, the blur covering most of her breasts. He leaves it untouched on the table, looks to his right and sees the two girls who must have dropped it, dissolving into the mid-evening crowd until all Corm can see is their five-inch high heels and tight dresses. One dress black, one more of an aquamarine. A slit up the side of that one, he thinks, but from this distance he can't tell where her leg begins and where those of the other female incidentals in this street-scene end.

Still the clatter of eating on every table nearby. Still the smell of food and dirty thoughts. He'd been without something in his glass for twenty minutes, and is contemplating asking for a bottle of wine, the same white he had earlier. Doesn't feel quite like mixing drinks now. Earlier, yes. Later, maybe. Not now.

The tattoo flashes by his eye line again, the waiter placing his food on the table. Him saying thank you in French. The waiter managing a smile, then reaching down to tap the shiny little poster. Saying *Don't bother with that place. It's for the tourists. Only tourists go there – they don't give you sex.* Smiling again, pleased to be of further service – above and beyond the call of duty, his one good deed for the day… Corm wonders if he'll head on back to the kitchen and spit in someone's soup, just to re-level that out. Wonders that, then feels guilty for doing so, for judging the man who's just brought him his food. Sits back in his chair and realises he's neglected once more to ask about the writing on the man's arm. And about the wine.

Picks up his knife and his fork.

The top left corner of the square is empty tonight, seems especially empty to him. Half-past twelve and still, the weather being as it is, he would have been out there and playing. Should have been. Should be. Part of him wants to wander over to the storage space now and coax his muscles into sufficient cohesion, enough to push his piano up that sloping street. But when he looks down at his hands they look back all blurry, throwing out weak strands of light from the edges. Laurel and Hardy misadventures cloud rest of his sight.

Looking up, the sitting-down statues are shaky as well. Chalky street art echoes of themselves, scuffed and smudged at their outlines, either by the wind, of by soft inconsiderate shoes. He leans against one of the pillars, struggling to steady his feet enough that he can start dancing. His shinbones feel funny. The backs of his knees have pins and needles, or are numb, he isn't sure which. No dancing. Just leaning and trying to recapture his balance. Elusive prey.

Looks up again. Beyond the statues and past those grubby wisps of cloud, stars are streaked, and all appear joined to a duplicate, the bonds in-between the same as trails they leave when they begin the business of falling to earth. Watching them, the simple melody comes back to him, rises out once again as a humming, humming it and pushing away from the pillar, standing upright and swaying in time. Keeps on with that for what must be minutes, before the fatigue part of his drinking properly knocks, walks in without wiping

its feet, and he thinks *I am so very tired*, just like Frankenstein, and he doesn't know why but that's the only book he can source in his mind right now the knowledge of ever having read, and he doesn't read anywhere near as often as he should, as he feels he should, and that's what his sister will tell him whenever they next meet, but what does that matter, he thinks, what does that matter when he has his music? He doesn't need any more stories, any more plots and voices, needs to live a story, doesn't like to give his time away to someone else's. And, besides, it does his head good to spend time without words.

She calls him at seven-oh-three in the morning, and he wakes up to find fries on his pillow and half a kebab in his moneybox-hat. She calls him and tells him she is angry. Tells him she is angry and that she thinks she loves him, but that he's made her miss two parties this week to save up for the trip. That she loves him but he can't keep doing this to her, and it's like she smells the musty liquor on his breath. She doesn't ask if he's been out, doesn't mention the two missed calls he must have had from her at some point in the evening. She doesn't say anything about anything related to his drinking at all. But all evidence in her tone tells him she knows. She raises her voice throughout the call, upping the volume, pushing into higher registers, making his ears want to wax over for good. He can't move his head, or his mouth much to talk back, in case things begin spinning and he does something untakebackable, like retching into the mic. It sounds as though she is taking his silence for guilt, but also for his being ashamed, reading into that shame a willingness to make amends. She volunteers him to pay for most of their meals. That will be his contrition.

Bits of fried potato are stuck squashed in his stubble, and, when the call ends, all he can think is that he needs a shave.

He likes to shave to the rhythm of 'Ode to Joy'. Since probably the third time he'd shaved, he'd done that. Must have had it on his mind, been learning it, or listening to it a lot. Couldn't say for sure. Just kept coming back to Beethoven. He doesn't shave to that rhythm all over, only on his chin after he's pulled his lower lip inwards and tightened and straightened the skin. That is the worst place for cuts on his face, always has been, and thinking about that rhythm distracts him from that, at the same time as it makes him focus in more, keeps his downstrokes regular and neat. Of course, sometimes he still cuts himself, most times in fact, and today hasn't really bucked the trend. When he splashes warm water on to clear the excess foam, the blood blossoms outwards, finds the minute lines in his skin and tracks them, like rainwater hitting wild on parched ground.

After his shower, he stays mostly naked whilst he attempts to tidy his room. Not easy when trying to keep his head upright, even when scooping things up from the floor. Too much movement and he might vomit, which would only worsen the mess.

With the carpet mostly clear, and the bed, he chooses a shirt, a white one made from a thin, crinkly fabric. Buttons just the dull side of silver, just the small side of five pence pieces. He leaves the top two undone.

He makes himself a cup of tea, a relative novelty in these coffee-heavy days. He follows it, duly, with sachet of cheap, over spiced cappuccino mix, though neither seems to be having the desired effect.

Two and a half hours before the plane is due to arrive. Thereabouts. He should order a taxi soon.

Walking over to the window, he opens the curtains, slowly squints up at the sky. It is bright and he shuts his eyes fully, but the light still shines through, pink and orange and spotted with green. He rubs at the lids with the knuckles of his thumbs. Opens his eyes, looks once more back at the sky. There are clouds, he can tell now, but none of them too dark. They'll clear soon. With any luck.

When he locks up and walks to the taxi, the kebab is still tilting out of his hat.

The sky is even brighter when he arrives at the airport, and he hasn't travelled well. Twice, he found himself swallowing acid and other things back down his throat. He'd been close to telling the driver to pull over, but hadn't.

A flight has just landed when he enters the terminal. He watches the plane slow to a stop and hears the quiet come in when the engine blades finally quit spinning round. A set of portable steps are pushed across the tarmac towards the plane's sizeable flank. A pause of a few seconds before the doors open and everything connects up.

Lots of people crossing the asphalt, coming up the tunnel. Lots of people all scrambling towards the conveyor belts and their orange-labelled cases.

Not her.

Not yet.

He retraces his steps a little way and finds himself a seat in the bar. The one this side of the check-in point is probably cheaper, but not by much. There are two people working it, a man and a woman. They look like twins, though that may just be the matching uniforms and same-length hair. Hers is more feathered, and she's wearing more green eyeliner and rouge, or whatever they're calling it now. Probably still rouge, over here, he thinks.

Orders a beer; nothing stronger until later, until they've made the trip back into town. Needs something to balance him out, though, to maybe calm his gut, to ease off the oppression in his head.

He squints, tries to read the time on the TV behind the bar. Looks like eleven:fifteen. Twenty-five minutes or

so before the flight down from London should land.

He'll be going three nights without playing, he thinks, as he sits back down. There is money he could be making. Albeit probably still less than he'll spend if he carries on living like this. But, beyond that, there are pieces he could be playing, at least. He's been thinking for a while about playing a set which is only early rock 'n' roll stuff, all the things he'd grown up hearing in his parents' house.

Playing Grieg would help either. Grieg's 'Concerto in A Minor'. Grieg, composing for piano in the key that Corm loves maybe the most, that sad bastard, lonely, searching, weary, vicious, probing little key. He has a copy of that, all dog-eared, and he tries now to visualise all the notes on the first page of that copy, the way he's found he can sometimes, he's looked at it that often and that hard. All the notes and all the changes in the paper's shade behind them from the drinks he's spilled, and simply from its age and exposure to the air.

He gives up, lapses back in his sofa seat, hogging a corner table, watching the people. Men's legs in denim and out of denim – in shorts – and then women's legs, all out of denim. All shaved. All smooth and on their way to being tanned, or being burnt, so that they'd ask their man to apply some aftersun, or ask a friend to do it, or do it themselves after showering, feeling lonesome, not horny, just wanting someone beside them to hold for a while.

Moving up from their legs, he notices faces – not on the men, not now, on the women – and the ones wearing sunglasses indoors are ones he overlooks. The others, he watches them more closely, his fingers cooling in the condensation either side of his glass. He watches the different hair, pink and hazel and dark chocolate and sandstone and rooftile-terracotta and auburn and mauve. Watches the variation in the bounce of different breasts. Watches the lack of smiles, despite the better weather, and he watches out for a kind of hungry sadness in the eyes.

Then *Eeny, meeny, miney, mo* he thinks, then *Fuck* he thinks, then turns back towards the windows and watches for her plane.

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I was down to Florida on a surgery vacation—pre-op, lounging poolside at a hotel on South Beach, a boutique place opposite the ocean. Ubiquitous electronic bass popped and bellowed from invisible speakers mounted to nooks and crannies. I had gone down because it was worse than disgust: I could no longer tolerate my reflection.

It started, this problem, while I was in a department store buying a suit for a summer wedding. The room was set up like a funhouse, with several mirrors angled toward each other, and in the forward one, I could see myself in the rest. At a particular angle, from the side but not in profile, I looked apish. My nose: bulbous and swollen. My chin: doubled and buttery.

I glanced away and tried to concentrate on the shoulders of the suit jacket, the cut of the pants, but I returned to that reflection, and suddenly, I could not take my eyes away. I stared at myself from this new angle, and anxiety rose up so greatly that I called out to the attendant, a young woman half my age, "There are too many mirrors!"

I had tried to sound lighthearted, but the thought compelled a certain dread in my voice. She knocked, "Are you okay, hon?"

I scoffed that I was fine, and stripped. There I was, naked, with this lovely young woman standing just outside the door, imagining how I would look to her: the tan I wore, burned sienna, the color of downed pine needles; my stubbornly sagging ass, where cellulite rolled over itself like melting marshmallow; the gaining pudge in a U at my mid-section. I felt impotent, and I understood, suddenly, a woman's fright at menopause. I left the dressing room dazed, wanting to disappear rather than face the girl outside.

Whatever was in her eyes, it flashed in order to sell me the suit.

So I went to the wedding, date-less, bloated and silly in my bone-colored suit, which spotlighted every misplaced, gravity-yanked lump and bump. There I was without a date, hoping to impress a pretty babe or handsome fool, shaking hands with everyone who said nothing about my appearance, which I took to mean I did not look wonderful and spectacular, even with my practiced lean-against-a-support-beam, my hand tucked into the front pocket of my new jacket as I held champagne like a dandy. And I sweated! So badly I had to use my handkerchief!

I went to the bathroom and used the hand dryer on my handkerchief. I studied, in the mirror, my Roman nose, my Incan cheekbones, and my tired eyes the dull brown of a dead stick, while joyous music and raucous laughter rumbled outside.

I said, "You cannot feel this way."

I left the reception early, barely able to face the youthful bride. At home, I slept terribly. The next morning, I called my surgeon in Florida, who until then had done only minor work under the hood of my body, a kind of mileage-based maintenance. I bought my ticket. We set up the consult and surgery for the same day, time

being of the essence.

I flew down, checked in, and killed time out at the pool, which in the summer was dominated by Europeans, women in tiny suits, children with queer accents splattering practiced English, men in Speedos, sporting stuffing for cocks.

I had brought my e-reader like a good New Yorker and was reading the *New Yorker* absent New Yorkers when a very curious horse appeared in the corner near the D.J. stand.

The curious horse was Dada, a carousel relic repainted by an artist named Flashdance, a tiny white girl with the word LESBIAN tattooed below her slender collarbone, with dreadlocked hair and an African nose, whose black and white publicity poster rested on a tripod beside the art. The life-size rendering, titled only "Horse," sported blue and white candy-striped legs and hoofs. Its wide ass was a dreary, Gotham gray, but it's body dazzled in pink and blue, and two eye patches had been placed above its snout where its eyes would have been, though the eyes themselves had been yanked and moved to the flanks like a mutant fish. Several baffled, boisterous attendants had wheeled the horse across the pool deck on a wagon under the manic Spanish of their manager. As the artwork was set near the D.J. stand and the attendants put up a temporary fence that bore the sign *ART: Please Do Not Touch*, this manager studied the lunatic piece, moved to tears.

One of the attendants slapped him on the shoulder. "Come inside. Let's have eggs and a beer."

The manager nodded mechanically. "It reminds me of my childhood, in Peru. Racehorses are beautiful in my country. I feel the artist embarrassed it."

I watched all this, and an emotion swept over me, as though this man could have been my father. I wanted to comfort him. But his coworker, young enough to be his son, led him away as he sobbed.

For a while, I lounged. But the sun wasn't much with all the foliage around the pool and buildings over the foliage. I was getting restless because I couldn't eat pre-op, so I got up and jumped in the water. I must have splashed too close to some little girl, because she started shrieking. Her mother snapped at her to be more polite, I thanked the mother, and the mother huffed, while the father was off flirting with a younger woman.

So I looked at the girl. She stuck her tongue out at me, and to look away, I glanced over her head at the horse.

I started across the pool. I climbed the stairs on the low end and foot-slapped across the deck to the D.J. booth, against which I leaned like a dandy. I stared at the artwork, with its pink and blue body and gray ass and those eyes glued to its flanks so that the near eye stared cycloptically at me.

Suddenly, the artist appeared. Flashdance. She came out from the cargo bay, up the stony ramp, wearing a

boxer's faux-satin robe, in red. She held in her hand a can of gold spray paint. She crossed the pool deck, the robe down to her bare ankles. She had the stature of a jockey, and glanced at me only briefly to imply I must move back. There was something attractive about her, despite the mole eyes and smooshed nose, and the ratty dreads that needed an astringency. Where the robe opened in front, her tattoo of LESBIAN screamed across her collarbone in the same blue and gray as the horse.

Inside the exhibit, she sprayed the word *Captive* on each flank, in glittering gold.

She came out from behind the short fence, which was like a pen, and I asked her, maybe a little pompously, "But what's the statement?"

She ignored me and started across the pool deck in her robe, *Flashdance* stitched in green-gold across the back—the color of fake jewelry.

My eyes fell upon the little girl, with her European tan and tight one-piece, and her black hair wetted back off her forehead like a horse's mane. The girl stuck her tongue out at me, again, and taunted, "She ignored you," without much of an accent.

I parted my hands. "I'm getting old."

"You *are* old."

Her mother caught up. "Francesca, shush!" Then, to me, over her magazine, "I apologize, really, mister. Is little girl." A deep French to the accent, dominatrix-like, embarrassingly curt.

Apology accepted, I went back to my lounge chair and pretended to read that one author from the *New Yorker* who has since been disgraced, and read him in a studious manner, though it would turn out he was making up what he passed off as truth—all this while that one eye on the near flank stared at me…

Then, a fire alarm! But first, I have to report how I was left in a curious position by the fire alarm.

I had rented a convertible Mustang, and that afternoon I bumped and pounded over to Dr. Beitman's office, for what was to be hours under anesthesia as all sorts of work was done to my face and stomach.

I bumped and pounded meaning I had the bass going in the Mustang. When in Rome. I pulled up to a light on Collins Avenue and other bass overtook my bass, and the rumbling of a chopper whacked my head. I had spread sun block on the balding crown, and when I would get to Beitman's office, dressed in linen like Hemingway, they would have to wash it off. Back at the light, white drips of sweat fell down my cheeks like

peroxide tears, as though I was pussing from an invisible wound.

At Beitman's, I was laid on the slab by a pretty nurse who pretended to admire I was going to such vain lengths. Deftly as a bleached geisha, she scrubbed my bald head.

Sooner or later, for I had fallen asleep (dreaming about that Dada braying at the child in the pool), Beitman entered. "Franny! Tons of work we're doing today! You'll get this over in one visit. Lucky for you! Space in the O.R. is always exciting! You didn't eat, did you?"

"No, doc. I feel like horse shit."

"Well, I'll stencil you for the face lift, show it all to you, then we'll send you out to wait your turn, brother. We're doing your eyes, too, huh?"

"Chin. Lypo on the belly. Nose job."

"Yes, though maybe on the nose job, maybe next time on that. We'll see when I talk to the anesthesiologist. I'm looking at your vitals here. A little worse than last time. Been staying away from cardio? Eating badly? What's your primary say about all that? I don't want to keep you under too long. You know, you *could* die. You won't, but you could. So we'll see. But definitely on the others. And yes, we're bringing you back to your—hmm—thirties, I would say."

Beitman was a small man, and I had seen him enough times to imagine his caffeinated fluttering about, his lab coat like a kind of hero's cape, in and out of room after room as he churned onto the streets of Miami and off to the corners of the globe prettier people than those who came in. Right at that moment, the bass drumming that served as the soundtrack of his waiting room, though the volume was kept at a reasonable level, at least by Miami standards—suddenly, that music ceased, and a dirge came on, full of Roman Catholic awe and solemnity. But then a bass drum started, of course, and soon the dirge and bass were united in unholy matrimony, and surely, if a music video had been playing, it would have started with a nun in full dress, but by now she would have stripped to a tanga and gyrated compulsively.

Beitman got into a chair and scooted over. I kept my eyes closed and heard the wheels roll across the white tile and remembered the screeching of wagon wheels as "Horse" was dragged across the pool deck. My back sweated on that butcher's paper.

He stenciled me with perforated lines as though I was a package, in black marker, the tip of the marker coolly menacing the tender flesh of my aging face. The sensation was not unpleasant, a gentle pressure like a lover's touch. He painted lines across my forehead and chin, down my cheeks to my jaw. He drew something on my nose for the nose job he wasn't entirely sold on. As he stenciled me, he spoke: "You know, Franny, you usually just come in for a nip and tuck, but when someone comes in for a litany of procedures like this, I have to ask, how are you feeling lately? No depression? No suicidal thoughts?"

I shook my head and heard him sigh as he yanked the marker away abruptly.

"How are the kids?"

I felt the marker resettle coolly, reassuringly.

"Grown up."

"Yes, but I mean, but how are they *doing*?"

"They're fine. I spoke with Jack the other day. Last month. Six weeks ago. His birthday. Twenty-eight."

"Keep your jaw still. Okay, good. As long as you're feeling okay. So what prompted the surgery, then? Just age?"

"Yes," I said, becoming impatient. I couldn't have this conversation and keep my jaw still.

"Nothing you can do about that."

When he was done, it was explained I was "second-to-next" in the queue, that it would be a while, but that I couldn't leave because once it was my turn, the anesthesiologist needed me on the bed asap, especially with such borderline numbers.

I went out to the pre-op room. It was me and a gigantic Swedish-looking woman, though when she said hello, it was with a pleasant Southern accent, maybe Virginia, her voice younger than she looked. She kept two cloth bags by her feet, one for her laptop, which rested on her knees, and another that contained toys and animal crackers for a baby, though the baby was not present. But she sneaked an animal cracker every now and again, and I wanted to tell her she was playing with fire, eating prior to the surgeon's scalpel.

Fire all right, because just as she went and lay down, in the private operating room, everything went crazy. I was sitting in the pre-op room, and for a strange instant, just a moment, strange especially when looking back, I thought the fire alarm was part of the music.

There was much fluttering about, and Dr. Beitman swept in with his lab coat like a cape. "Out! Out! Bomb threat!"

"A bomb threat?" I asked, standing calmly—for I decided to remain calm in such circumstances, like the prayer. "At a doctor's office?"

“Who the hell knows? C’mon.”

Beitman led me to the waiting room, turned to his staff, and led them away heroically in his cape-jacket. The Virginian was gone, and before me stood a confused looking older woman in expensive jewelry struggling to identify toward where she should step, the fleeing Beitman, or me.

So I led her out. We were on the sixth floor. In the stairwell, by the time we got to the third floor, the heiress told me she had to pause because of her asthma. She was incredibly wrinkled, with ratty, manic eyes, stringy blonde hair, and a pulled face as though she’d been electrocuted. Earlier, I’d heard her talking in a proprietary way about Channing Tatum.

“I think I’m having an attack.”

“Then we’ve gotta get you downstairs. It’s a medical building. There’ll be doctors outside. C’mon.”

She was gasping for air, her mouth opening and closing like a beached guppy as she remained on the landing, hands on her knees like an infielder. “I don’t want to die in here.”

“Let’s go, then!”

She started moving, and I got the sudden urge to run and couldn’t—I was fearful that the bomb threat was real, forget my prayer, and at any moment the building would explode. I’d been there for 9-11. I’d had nightmares for months about being smooshed like Flashdance’s nose, my body obliterated by the tumbling steel and concrete. All that would be left was the plastic of me, and they would identify my remains by serial number. My children would be horrified—at my death, at the plasticized desperation of my post-divorce life.

I took her hand, scaly and dry. She looked at me with the most grateful eyes. I realized she needed me and couldn’t move after another flight, so I picked her up like a groom. She smelled like the inside of a cast. She tried to kiss my cheek with her dry lips when we got to the exit door, but I told her, “None of that!” and she, there in my arms—having been saved by me—got insulted! Upset!

When I put her on her feet, we were just outside the six-story building on a ramp, facing an empty, squat stucco hut, the sort you find sprinkled about South Miami. Across the street stood a vast luxury apartment complex for university students. I could see Beitman mulling on the sidewalk with many others, near one of the complex’s courtyard entrances.

Sirens came from all over, and bang, they turned down the road just as we were about to cross, so we moved to our right and positioned ourselves in front of the stucco hut, which it turned out was a “gym” about the size of the hotel swimming pool, the cracked lot empty but for one car, a red Fiero, dusty, the back bumper falling off. Taped to the back window of the Fiero, in scribbled handwriting on yellow poster board, was a sign that read, *Workout Place*. It was also scribbled on a sign in the front window of the little building.

All windows were open without screens, and a ratty boom box played within, which I could hear now that the sirens had turned off: generic 70's funk.

I felt a little like Superman. I led the woman across the street. There, many doctors, nurses, and patients waited, engaged in speculative talk regarding the reality and size of the bomb, which led eventually to the question of how long it would take to declare the building safe. The street was cordoned off from both sides, and there was a rumor we would have to move a block away.

I engaged in chatter, but everyone greeted me with strange eyes, and I remembered that Dr. Beitman had stenciled my face. I wandered over and looked at my reflection in a mirror on one of the fire trucks, but one of the firemen, who was not a small human being, growled, "Stay away from that!"

A curious thing, as well, just to report, because it's worth it: The music stopped in the stucco hut, and out of that little building came one man in a terry cloth Marriot bathrobe; one woman with her mascara running, in very short spandex shorts and a pair of high heels; one boom, holding his microphone like a jouster; and one cameraman, who dumped the camera into the back of the Fiero and tried to leave but was blocked by police officers, who ordered him to park his car again, get out, and stand across the street with the rest of us. Shortly thereafter, a midget smoking a cheap cigar and dressed in a pinstripe suit like a Mafioso exited the little building, glanced around perturbed, and went back inside. The officers said nothing to him.

I would find out later Beitman had been trying to close that "gym" since it had opened. It was a place where they shot porn.

Well, the day was blown. By the time they cleared for reentry—the threat was a hoax—it was too late to get on the slab. At the hotel, I intended first to go up to my room, wash off the stenciling, but I decided not to. I left the markings on my face. They were war paint, to fight a certain, middle-aged battle. And I wanted strangers to see me that way. I felt better drawn as I should be, covering who I was—less isolated and clandestine, like when a plagiarist is discovered.

On the way out to the pool, I ordered a glass of cheap champagne from the hotel bar, but there was a back-up, despite that only three customers sat on stools, and I was told a boy would bring my drink to me. I grabbed a towel from the pool attendant, who doubled as the lifeguard, and went over to my former chair on the pool deck.

It was late in the day, and by now a D.J. had arrived and set up a canvas to block the sun. I'd heard the bass drum even inside the hotel, but when I got out onto the pool deck, it was as though an invisible symphony was dedicated to the task of making dreadful monotony using as few synthetic wind instruments as possible, while a manic wingman banged his way toward a Latin-infused hip-hop beat. I despised the rattling of South Beach. I thought of the bomb threat and the heiress with her smell and asthma, who, if there had been a bomb and I had not carried her out, might have died in that building rather than climb down three more flights of stairs.

Beside the D.J. stand stood “Horse.”

The mother and daughter were still out at the pool, though by now both had gained impressive tans and sleepy countenances. The early afternoon featured a blinding sun, which for a while had been directly above the pool. But I was too late given my spot poolside, for the sun had settled down in the sky at such an angle that I was cast into the chilly shadows. The mother stared at me, and I remembered that my face was all stenciled up.

I got up, though I had just lounged. My intention was to walk into the water Christ-like, my chest out proudly. I’d scrub off my face. But I didn’t do that. The first thing I did was stick out my tongue at the little girl, and not in a nice way, either, but like a schoolyard bully, daring her.

“Hey!” she said, where she was posing on the pool stairs. “Mom! Did you see?”

When the mother looked at me, I stuck my tongue out at her, too.

“If I rinsed it off my face,” I said, gesturing at the stenciling, “I’d be crying the tears of a clown.”

For some reason—I guess I know it now, but I didn’t know it then—I said, “My son turned twenty-eight last month.”

I made my way—victorious, in a sense—across the pool deck. Many Latin
Americans had joined the Europeans on the other side of the pool, where, when the wind blew, the sun splattered the deck, and they could pick up a touch of color for tonight, when they would smash around South Beach, glancing and studying, some touching, delicate, if they were good at it, like the stencil.

But I *would* touch! When I got to “Horse,” it was daring me with that flanked eye! We were Dada, me with my stenciled face and “Horse” with its metropolitan candy stripes and blinders.

I read the sign. I knew I was not supposed to do. I did it anyway.

I say this with lust spent and lust felt and lust growing again, the way lust leads to lust. I reached out and touched its flank, right where Flashdance had sprayed the word *Captivity*. I felt electric pulse up my arm. A bass beat! A bomb blast!

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I would have liked to have gotten to know Isabella better. I returned home after the Christmas holidays in low spirits myself, miserable following the completion of a university degree in history, upset that, prior to graduation, I hadn't seized the day with applications to teacher's college at Lakehead University, the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, or even York University, which, after the requisite one year of study, would have earned me a second, more useful university degree to build a career in education. An education degree might have allowed me to put my original university honours bachelor's degree to work, permitting me to obtain a decent job, albeit even if it was only as an educator, since the money, I had heard, wasn't bad. Contrary to popularly held belief, my understanding was that teachers were well paid in the province of Ontario, although then again the hard work and stress surely burned out plenty of teachers.

I learned the news about her fate shortly after I arrived home, to my hometown in Beaverbrook, where my younger brother was in low spirits himself. The gloom about missed chances and botched relationships in youth, lost opportunities, and difficult or wrong decisions, had loomed over us like a dark storm. I didn't think it was a coincidence that Marco experienced this sense of impending doom and this depression soon after Isabella died. I learned the fate of this young woman, which I didn't think should be concealed or covered up, shortly after I arrived home, having taken the transcontinental train for over a day across the Canadian Shield, to Beaverbrook. My brother and I traipsed to the bar, the only nightclub left in town after progressively stricter drunk driving laws and anti-smoking by-laws and home entertainment centres took their toll. There actually existed a time, before drunk driving laws and beefed up police patrols, when the municipality was still something of a boomtown and had a fairly active nightlife, and the armed forces had a radar base on a hillside overlooking the steep spectacular shore on a nearby lake.

"Whatever happened to that girl who, like, actually would perform this amazing dance routine while she was jogging or working out."

After my father died of chronic obstructive pulmonary disorder and heart and kidney failure, complicated by his diabetes, I started visiting the gym and fitness centre regularly and religiously. The routine and rigor of exercise was one of my few consolations and forms of relief and outlets; instead of visiting a counselor or therapist to work through my grief, I visited the gymnasium and fitness centre, which also allowed me to improve my cardiovascular capacity and endurance. After my mother, suffering from a rare blood disorder, which may have been related to leukemia, hemorrhaged after she fell in the basement, and died, I spent even more time at the gymnasium, cycling for up to two hours on the stationary bicycles, even jogging on the treadmill, even though I did not enjoy stationary running. The amount of time I spent on the exercise equipment annoyed the fitness instructors and irked the other patrons working out, but I justified the time I spent there, believing that they might have understood, if I could have somehow communicated how much better it made me feel. Meanwhile, Isabella was the one person who brightened my otherwise grim visits to the gym.

"The Portuguese and Filipino girl?"

"I didn't know she was Portuguese and Filipino."

"Her mother is Filipino and her father is Portuguese."

“I hadn’t realized.”

“She died.”

“What? Come again.”

The shock of the news sent me scrambling for a new course of thought, a change in the direction of the conversation. I had entertained ideas about this young woman before I left town. While I peddled furiously on the exercise bicycle, reading a pocketbook, say, turning the page on a paperback novel, a murder mystery, I had built up a whole systems of beliefs and delusions around her, of a happy relationship, of marriage, of a family life, but that received the most abrupt of shocks.

“You mean Isabella? I think that was her name.”

Marco had described Isabella’s accomplishments as an athlete earlier. She had been overweight before she entered high school, but by her tenth grade she was a track and field star, had broken several records in the sprints and hurtles in college. More recently, she had earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree, having studied modern dance at York University. In fact, after performing in several critically acclaimed dance troupes and modern dances, she had even set a few Ontario and Canadian middle distance records at the university level. I was surprised to learn that she had something in common with us.

“She’s Portuguese,” Marco said.

“I thought we were the only Portuguese in Beaverbrook.”

“What about the Silvas?”

“I forgot about them.”

“Actually, she’s only part Portuguese, if you can conceive of such a thing.”

“Well, that’s what I meant to say. We’re the only full-blooded Portuguese from the Azores in Beaverbrook.”

“But the Silvas also are Portuguese on both sides, and they did immigrate to Canada from the Azores, and their father went to work for the railroad.”

“I knew they were Portuguese.”

“Anyway, Isabella’s Portuguese on her father’s side. Her father is from the island of Sao Miguel in the Azores

archipelago."

I was intrigued that I had partially the same ethnic background as someone I found so desirable. I had never thought I would find a relationship with a young woman who also had a Portuguese background desirable.

After we chatted, I asked, "Well, what happened?"

"She committed suicide."

I was still stunned, shocked, because I didn't conceive of women as committing suicide. I knew that my hometown of Beaverbrook, with its relatively large population of indigenous people, percentage-wise, had an astronomically high rate of suicide—amongst one of the higher rates in the world, statistically speaking. Sometimes the topic dominated the course of conversations in coffee shops and diners; the death of youth and promise forced the topic of conversation upon us. After all, how could you talk about the weather and the long range weather forecast after you learned the daughter of a popular and community-minded individual had just committed suicide. In fact, the plague of self-destruction often affected the town residents emotionally and psychologically. Indeed, in my career as an undergraduate student at York University, which I attended, sometimes hoping in the back of my mind I would meet her, I seemed to have developed an expertise, a technical subspecialty on suicide, writing academic papers on various aspects of suicide for different disciplines—suicide from the perspective of a novelist for an Victorian English novel course, suicide from the perspective of existentialists for a philosophy course, suicide from the perspective of aboriginal youth on First Nations reservation for a sociology course. But I never expected that I would have to deal with the issue so closely, so personally. I hadn't expected that a young woman would commit suicide, one for whom I had nurtured a crush, of sorts, and I told my brother so.

"But she wasn't the first girl to commit suicide this fall in Beaverbrook."

"Wasn't the first…this fall? Well, why didn't you tell me?"

"You never asked. You never even bothered to call."

I had lost touch with my family in Beaverbrook, becoming a virtual recluse as I devoted myself to successfully completing my university studies. "Sorry. You're right. Well, who else killed herself?"

"The Tahi girl."

"The Tahi girl. You mean the other mixed race girl."

"You remember her?"

"The singer and songwriter."

"That's the girl."

"Wow. That girl has talent. I remember going to a live concert at the movie theater after Mom died and listening to her. It was a soothing salve."

"Well, yeah, I'm sure it was. But she's gone now."

I shook my head as I considered yet another tragic loss. There were still so many questions I wanted to ask my brother about Isabella, so much that I wanted to hear. But the pretty daughter of a neighbour came and joined us, and I immediately became distracted. I remembered how much I had desired Isabella, wanted her.

A friend from high school days insisted on seeing me before I returned to Toronto, where I planned on searching for work in a field where I might be able to put my history degree to use. At the time I was thinking of working in a library. Inga and I had sent emails to each other about potentially collaborating on a film project—but she was thinking of self-producing, self-directing, and self-acting in a short film for an arts film festival while I conceived drafting a feature length suspense movie a big Hollywood studio might consider producing. We were both filled with creative ideas, Think Big concepts and wild dreams. I supposed they acted as a protection against the fierceness and bleakness of the Canadian north. We discussed what had transpired, good, bad, and in between, in the past few years in Beaverbrook while I was gone. Then Inga moved to the topic of her current short film. She had been having trouble finding the composure, strength, and wherewithal to continue with the production after her lead actor had died.

"What?"

"Didn't you hear? She committed suicide."

"Your lead actress committed suicide."

I was still having problems wrapping my head around the idea of a young woman committing suicide, particularly a young woman with so much hope and promise in her life, particularly a young woman I had admired as much as Isabella.

"That's what I said. I thought we had finished shooting the film, and then, when I was editing the raw footage, I saw there were a few scenes that could use retakes, but—"

Inga sipped the mug of strong, freshly brewed coffee I had offered her steaming hot black. Out of frugality and laziness, I hadn't bothered to drop by the grocery store or the convenience store to pick up table cream.

“I think through some clever editing I should be able to finish the film.”

Inga suddenly sobbed and blurted Isabella had even warned her she wanted to kill herself. I was a bit nonplussed, surprised that Inga hadn’t gotten the girl help. Intervention was mandatory and prerequisite, I understood, when anybody communicated a self-destructive sort of message to somebody they knew intimately or professionally. My understanding was that it was irresponsible to do otherwise. At least that was what I had learned in college and university. But Inga hadn’t because, as she told me, we all contemplate suicide at one point or another. I couldn’t help but pour her another cup of coffee, java I had brewed strong, because it stimulated me and cleared my mind, and I also couldn’t help acknowledging the truth of that message.

Inga told me that in the months preceding her suicide, Isabella had experienced a number of reversals, which made me inclined to think that, if friends and professionals had counselled and monitored her, her committing suicide might have been prevented. Inga mentioned a number of things that might have made her feel depressed. She said that Angelica had applied to a number of different teaching positions in Beaverbrook but none of her applications had been successful. She was a talented contemporary dancer, and a decorated, winning athlete, but she couldn’t land a job as a dancer instructor at the fitness centre or as a gym teacher because she didn’t have the requisite educational qualifications or credentials, the certifications, and experience. Instead, she had been hired to work as a youth counsellor at an alternative school on the Fort Hope reservation on the shores of the Hudson’s Bay up north, far from home, family, and friend in Beaverbrook. During the long, arduous winters, during which record amounts of snowfall fell and cold weather records were broken some nights, several youths on the reservation committed suicide, which, Inga believed, may have placed Isabella in a mindset where she got some dark ideas.

“And she was having problems with her parents. They demanded much from her.”

Isabella she had hung herself in the basement bedroom she had in her parent’s home. All I could remember was the lithe and grace with which she moved about at the beach and on the oval track and in the gymnasium at the municipal parks and recreation school fitness centre. And I remember that my younger brother had told me that Isabella’s first husband had been the son of Portuguese immigrants living in Toronto. My understanding was that she had eloped with him as an act of rebellion because her parents expected her to marry a professional, a doctor or a lawyer. But the marriage turned out badly, the couple was incompatible, and that was how Isabella had wound up returning to her hometown.

After an argument with her mother over bank overdrafts, credit cards, her credit history, and a large student loan her parents paid, her mother discovered her in the basement bedroom dangling from a cord used to fasten her cross-country skies. A provincial police officer cut her down from the rafter from which she dangled and soon he was joined by a crew of paramedics who also responded to the emergency call her mother made in a panic while she paced the street hysterically outside the house, screaming into a cordless phone. Paramedics rushed her to the local hospital where doctors shook their heads and sent her by air ambulance to the regional hospital in Thunder Bay, where she remained on life support.

Inga had flown to Thunder Bay to visit her in the hospital while she was still alive and while she could still say goodbye. She arrived at the intensive care unit at about three am in the morning. Inga had been hoping and praying for a flicker, an ember of consciousness, for some sentience in her lifeless body attached to the ventilator and life support equipment, the intravenous lines and drips, the electrodes and catheters. She wanted to have the opportunity to speak with her, coach and mentor her, but she realized, as she sobbed, that it was too late. When she realized and accepted the end was near, all she wanted to do was say

goodbye.

“Did you manage to talk to her?”

“Yes, I did.” Inga gasped, taking a deep breath, as she tried to regulate her breathing pattern and return to a normal speaking voice, and wiped her eyes. “But she didn’t respond. She couldn’t. I couldn’t acknowledge it, refused, I suppose, to accept it, but she was a vegetable by then.”

I couldn’t believe what I had observed: One of the toughest women that I ever knew was almost crying.

“But she was brain dead.”

“No electrical activity in the grey matter?”

Inga looked annoyed at me.

“And they were waiting to take her off life support.”

I could only envision the grim scene.

“You did what you could.”

“Her organs were harvested for donations. Her heart, liver, kidneys, and even her lungs and corneas were donated to the terminally ill, patients in need of transplants. A nurse told me her corneas were going to Vancouver, her kidneys to Toronto, her heart to London, and her liver to New York.” Inga explained the young and vigorous athlete had offered gifts of life, which meant that spiritually and psychologically she was reborn. Even though university courses where logic and rational thinking was emphasized and studying empiricists in philosophy courses had made me cynical, I couldn’t help agreeing.

“Reborn?”

“Yes, reborn. Why not?”

I thought her parents had done the right thing in consenting to donate her organs, that it was only fitting that in dying she perpetuated life. But Inga explained the same nurse told her Isabella had insisted in her suicide note on donating whatever vital organs the doctors could use from her corpse. For precisely that reason, the head surgeon at the regional hospital, a conservative Christian, divining a sort of ethical conundrum, was initially reluctant to allow elite doctors at far flung transplant centres use them. Regardless, the organs were moved by helicopter and jet plane out of Thunder Bay Regional Hospital, and so, Inga believed, that Isabella lived not only physically in the bodies of the rejuvenated transplant patients, but she also lived on in the

memories and minds of others.

Inga said she was toning down and editing one version of the film as a living memorial of Isabella for her parents. I thought I could only helplessly mourn the loss of a young woman whose love might have been transforming and liberating, if the opportunity arose, around whom I had started to lay the foundations for some fairly elaborate fantasies and dreams, of becoming her boyfriend, perhaps even her husband, of marriage, childbirth, happiness, a comfortable middle class existence. If I had stayed in the town of Beaverbrook, I wondered, even had I not become her boyfriend, but had just gone on to know her better, might I have prevented her suicide? Might I have been able to show her the empathy that might have led in the direction of life, relieved the pain, offered her some hope, and maybe even fulfilment, instead of the ultimate expression of frustration? I couldn't express any certainty, but I realized my two year absence from Beaverbrook had resulted in me moving on, to think of other women, and I had not experienced the sense of deep loss I might have felt otherwise. Instead, there was pity and remorse, and a sense of what if.

John Tavares has written a large amount of fiction, mostly short stories, but some novellas, since 1986. His previous publications include short stories published in Canadian literary journals: one short fiction published in Blood & Aphorisms*; one in chapbook form by Plowman Press; one in* Green's Magazine*; one in* Filling Station*; one in* Whetstone*; two in* Broken Pencil*; one in* Tessera*; one in* Windsor Review*; three in* Paperplates*, now an online magazine; one in* The Write Place at the Write Time*; one in* The Maple Tree Literary Supplement*. He also had about a dozen short stories as well as several pieces of creative nonfiction published in* The Siren*, then Centennial College's student newspaper. During journalism studies, he had some articles and features published in* East York Observer, East York Times, Beaches Town Crier, Outreach Connection *(the 90's version, to which Robertson Davies contributed),* Our Toronto, *as well as community newspapers such as York University's* Excalibur *and* Hospital News*, where he interned as an editorial assistant. He also broadcast a set of short stories as a community radio broadcaster for CBLS/CBQW in Sioux Lookout one summer in the late eighties and has experimented with self-publication of fiction on the web. He's recently written a novel and is an avid photographer.*

Introduction to a Novel Written by One Quite Gone Mad | Brian Alan Ellis

For Elsie

"An artist always carries death with him, like a good priest his breviary."

—Heinrich Böll, *The Clown*

This whole place stinks. All of it. It stinks of her. It stinks of Elsie. Everywhere I go, with each step taken, I feel her inside me. I feel it—as a cruel wind brushes against me. It feels like her breath—sending me into a dizzying despair, sending Hell straight to me. My entire body, my whole damn being, all of it, starts to burn. It is violent. It rattles and breaks me—which doesn't take much, I'm afraid.

Christ, all that *stink*! I can't even breathe, it is so thick. I keep searching for some kind of air, but the air is all bad. She has polluted me; I am Elsie's waste dump, her trash heap. Even the mention of her name freezes me up, makes the old belly turn and howl. Elsie. Elsie. Elsie….

I've been in this town for only a few months now, and yet already I hate it. Every fiber. I hate it because of her. In fact, I'm led to believe that people are capable of doing only one thing: poisoning one another.

Seriously. You haven't really lived in a town till your heart has been broken in it. That is some sad-honest truth, right there. The street lamps look different. The streets look different. Even the faces—if there are any worth mentioning—look different. Everything different. Everything crummy. A car could run me over right now and it wouldn't make a shred of difference to me. That's how crummy.

The nerve of her! Breaking the heart of an artist like myself? Ha! What a woman! Surely there must be *some* charge I can press against her. No? Well damn. She'll get it all right—oh yes—when they are digging up her grave… in order to mount a statue of myself: Branko Gianni-Sheldon III—only the greatest literary personage of our time. A Mecca!—a glorious statue—for birds to shit on, for angels to piss on. And what flowers! Ho-ho!

My, how lonely it is to dream. Especially when your homecoming consists only of crummy walls—crummy walls you've built round yourself.

Whenever things go bust my first instinct is to run and hide, to flee: a coward's ambition. But I can't do that this time—no—I haven't anywhere to go. The more you run from your past, the less you have of the present. The only place left for me to go to is my new room: a crummy rented room on the same crummy street I've been living on since my cursed arrival—a piss-poor circus.

And so I stagger towards this room—drunk, maddened, crushed like an empty beer can—beneath an orange a.m. glow from the street lamps above. It looks as though you are walking on the backs of wet

reptiles. It is a destination of nothing. An orange nothing.

I know that soon I will bump into Elsie again. Yes, I will. This town is much too small for that *not* to happen. Surely she will be with others—somebody new, perhaps? Christ, the thought! Don't know what I'll say or do if that ever happens. It'll be bad, though. It will be a funeral, a massacre, I promise you. And I dread it worse than death. I do. With all honesty. The thought alone is almost enough to do me in right now—still might.

But I must first find my new room. That I must do, firstly. It is ridiculous to die in the street. For that, you need walls: a sad bastard's tomb.

And I promise never to leave the tomb again, let alone whatever hovel it is I'll be staying in. Not as long as she is still breathing, still capable—quite willingly, in fact—of loving another. The thought of someone touching Elsie in all the places I used to touch her is too much.

Hmm, I wonder where one obtains a gun at this hour….

So here we are, friend—you mind me calling you that?—a new room, like all the others—a second-story room, with four walls I will have to get used to: "Hiya, walls! It's nice to meet you! You'll be seeing a lot of me now, I'm afraid. *Oh*, *don't be so sore about it*…."

What a room: nothing in it. An unfurnished room—for me to die in. As good as any. Oh, look—there's even a window! I can watch the circus from up top, the other busted up idiots walking by—mumbling heartbreak and disparity to themselves, no doubt.

Love it.

It is an empty room, a dying room—a dying, empty room—and in it, I watch the string attached to the ceiling-fan. I watch it for a long time. I study it. It swings back and forth, beautifully, like a golden beaded lasso—a shame there is not enough of it to hang myself with.

Then again, I should have known what was coming; I am, after all, a *prophet* in these matters. Your gutted boy—in the center of some strange-sick room in some sick-strange town he never wanted to be in, in the first place. Some special education: a strange-sick room to die one thousand or more sick-strange deaths—a room where it is always night.

And when I die here—a bitch possibility, yes—they will say things—terrible things, God knows:

"Oh, that Branko—alcoholic, coke head, misogynist…. Well, his poetry was quite strong, and his prose was humorous at best, but other than that…."

Damn them all. Damn them all for being right. It is much kinder to be wrong, I think. But let's clear the air

once and for all, shall we? Let's all clear the stink. Shall we? Friend?

I drink a lot, yes; and my destructive tendency to latch onto other dubious substances is quite evident to those unfortunate enough to know me… *but I do not hate women*! They are wonderful creatures—a bit fickle and short-tempered, yes; but wonderful, just the same. I know and respect a great deal of them, in fact; a lot of my favorite artists, coincidentally, have vaginal parts, so am I really a misogynist for calling out dip-shits regardless of whether they inhabit male or female skin? If I really detested women, how could I've been prone to falling in love with so many, again and again, after most have treated me rather poorly? And *why* must I go explaining myself to those finger-pointing bloodsuckers… those critics… those wanting only to pick fights?

To create art isn't easy. Trust me. There is a hell of a price to pay. To create art is to make yourself an easy target for hypocrites to expel their petty grievances upon you; to create art is to feel the wrath of all the herd-mongers, those too weak to stand on their own principles; to create art is to constantly shrug off the attacks of lazy, hateful critics, those paid to judge others for what they themselves cannot do; to create art is to have to continually explain your art to those who *know nothing about art*! Yes. To create art is to get your ass killed, little by little. But go ahead—kill me; you'd only be doing this artist a noble favor.

I adjust my body to the cold wooden floor. It is all I have, and already I've spilled beer on it. Sad, stupid beer. A holy christening. This is an empty, dying, bed-less, beer-drenched room. But the pillows are soft—a miracle it is to still have pillows. Something to wrap my arms around while dying, I suppose.

Welcome, friend, to *my* world, where scribbling down sorrows will make no difference. My dumb broken world. My dying world. My idiot world. My—pardon—dying idiot world?

Creation is funny like that.

You jot off a poem or a play, a song even, and eventually you look at it as though it were a big pile of turd with tiny pieces of gold in it. And even then the shine never lasts; it all turns to rot. Rot, rot, rot. Yes, that is what creation is. Creation is a person rotting inside four walls, waiting to make the next grand statement; creation is the smile on the dog's face—right before a bus hits it. (Actually, I am not sure whether dogs can smile… I guess you can tell when one is happy, and getting run over by a bus is never a happy thing for a dog; it is not a happy thing for me, either.) Sad. But that is how it works: the orgasm before castration.

At times I, Branko Gianni-Sheldon III, feel as though I am nothing more than a shell of something. That is all a person can really aspire to be: a shell existing solely as some kind of hardened coating for fleshy things to pump blood and expel waste. But, friend, if it were only that simple! In each shell there lies an ambition, a dream, a longing, a weakness, a cross to bear, a memory.

And I must remember.

Yes, I must do that. But what?

Georgia?

Ah, yes! Georgia! Remember wonderful Georgia. Remember the trailer—not even a trailer, but a room *inside* a trailer. Unfurnished? Quite. Then again, it wasn't even Georgia. It was middle-of-nowhere Georgia. The cantankerous, ill-beating heart of Nowhere, GA—land of clay dirt and pine woods.

I definitely must remember Grandma. Oh, lovely Granny… with the thick red hair. Irish. What a lady. She was sick, you know. Alzheimer's. Terrible, terrible thing. I remember her waking me in the middle of the night, every night, to tell me of all the ghosts she had seen in her bedroom. Yes, ghosts. Very scary things, those ghosts…. Remember Mother? Mostly remember her handcuffed to a door handle, after the neighbors, thinking she was out to murder poor Granny, had phoned the police. Can you believe it? Oh, and the tears that Mother wept—real sad ones. Yeesh! I'll never forget it: Mom handcuffed to a police car; the flashing of blue and red in broad Georgia daylight; a long, tear-soaked cigarette quivering from her lips. Looks like you'll be going to jail real quick, Mama! I'll write…. Remember the step-daddy. Can't forget the drunken step-daddy who beat me…. OK, OK, fine—he never *actually* beat me. That was a lie. But I sometimes wish he had beaten me. Not only would my hate be irrefutably justified, but a much better book would have been written because of it: the abuse of genius makes for great copy. But no actual physical violence to speak of, I'm afraid. Yet the things he'd say to poor old Granny and me *were* rather violent, yes. Horrendous things he'd say, none worth repeating, but real ghastly stuff, things that made me want to spit in his ugly face. But I was too cowardly to do that: the three-hundred-pound monster would have surely taken me out with one quick, deadening blow…. Then there was the girl. Remember her? Yes, of course: the girl! Always a girl. The one before Elsie. The one named Marcella. Ah, Marcella! My long-distance lover, the one who stopped answering my phone calls and letters—fell cleanly off the face of this strange earth, that one, without a single trace—far too much woman for this world to handle, I presume…. There was a job, too. Oh yes, the job I remember. The job of selling vacuum cleaners door to door…. No, wait: I quit that one early on. It was the *other* job… the job of having to unload hundred-pound boxes of raw, lifeless flesh off a delivery truck. And once winter came I did the same job in the snow. How nice—snow! Yes, snow *is* rather nice—especially when having to lift, I repeat, 100LBS. BOXES OF RAW, LIFELESS, STINKING FLESH OFF A DELIVERY TRUCK in it! Clearly you *must* remember doing that, you crazy asshole! And why? Oh, yes—no friends, limited job opportunities, bad personality, yes, yes, all of those. Especially no friends…. Remember the camaraderie I'd found amongst all the empty wine and liquor bottles (spirits, they call them), Mama's prescription painkillers, anything to make the razor blade seem as though it were nothing more than a laughing matter—HA HA HA! There were many nights like that—yes—games lonely, deranged people play to help pass time…. Remember, also, those reoccurring nightmares I had—ones of feeling as though I were trapped somewhere, stifled, as if locked inside a coffin. Christ, how bad those dreams were—and so many of them I had! Dreams from Hades, you say? Yes, dreams from Hades, indeed….

Take it all in, friend. Yes, take it *all* in—the passing trains that wobbled and shook the contents of my bedroom; the orange muck caked on the bottoms of my shoes; the flies hovering over the dumpster behind the warehouse on smoke breaks, hovering over my life; the dead animal décor aligning the roads; God's country.

Forget it. I can't remember anymore. I have a headache… and the tears are starting to come….

Yes, this *is* a pity-party. A party for one. A party for Branko. But I invite you. Maybe you can relate. Perhaps not? It's true that I am much better at disgusting people; most critics will tell you that. Hell, one critic wrote that my writing was like me saying, "If you don't read me right now I will climb out of these pages, tear your intestines out with a plastic fork and then hang you with them because *I really hate your fucking guts*…" Isn't that the nicest thing you have ever read, italics and all? But it's not entirely true, no. Granted, I may be a bit of

a morbid ass—real fucked up—but I would never hold a person at gunpoint (forkpoint?), especially if it was just to read *my* nonsense. Really, I'm an easy guy to get along with; and I harbor very little, if any, pretense. It is only I in which any extroverted frustrations are bestowed upon. With all honesty.

So, friend, it's true that I had the title of this book written down before anything else herein. And trust me, this isn't Hemingway or Sedaris or T.S. what's-his-face, but screw it: I never *wanted* to be any of that—never wanted to be anything, really.

This is my life dragged through the mud, left to die alone. And I know that from now on my life will be crummy—till the very end it will be crummy. There is no way around it. Either you are dead—physically, mentally, or emotionally dead—or you are suffering, which is to say you are still alive. Luckily most of us, from the get go, are armed with the knowledge of this grief. And with said knowledge, I prepare myself for death. But first, I must leave a little something behind—for you. (Never let it be said that Branko was a selfish person.) I leave with you my pain—no sense in taking it to the grave with me, now is there?

What's that, friend? Yes, I'd rather you laugh. Go on, don't be shy. It *is* all very comical. But wish to place a safe bet? The gift I leave will never be considered for a Nobel or Pulitzer or Pushcart or Oprah Book Club prize. The gift I leave is a murder trial, for this is a work of sadness—a burning sadness; a black sadness; a white sadness; a red sadness; a purple sadness; a yellow sadness; a goddamn *rainbow* of sadness!

(You know, sadness can be pretty funny if you look at it a certain way… but it can also be quite sad, too.)

Jesus! *Now* look at me: on my knees, hands clasped, praying fervently to no God or Heaven, just a cloudy white ceiling garnished with tiny hooks (???), hoping that the inspiration it takes in writing a book such as this will leave, never to return again.

Oh, but there has and will *always* be books like this. And why shouldn't I, Branko, be the one to author a few? This book is my bullet—and I assume it will reach all potential targets, because as long as there is still poor people, rich people, wars, eviction, rejection, deception, loneliness, bad weather and unfaithful lovers, the world will go on reading about tragedy.

What else is there besides death, really?

Give up?

Complaints!

This is not a "concept" book. Many think that a "concept" anything—be it a book, a record, a movie, what-have-you—serves as some highly masterful undertaking for an artist to achieve. Yet anyone who *really* believes all that is, well, being a foolish oaf!

There is no genius in conceptualization. A "conceptual" artist is, more or less, a lazy artist unable to create outside of his or her own sordid box. I, my friend, am a lazy artist. I am one of the laziest, in fact—and

therefore, one of the best.

With this book I have perfected the art of redundancy. Yes. Yes, I have. This book is lazy and redundant because the person who wrote it is also—coincidence?—quite lazy and redundant.

What I am trying to say—friend, you still with me?—is that writers distort the reality of their own life experiences. (That or we "borrow" the experiences of others.) But tell me, is it really *my* fault that *my* life, that of which belonging to the artist so generously calling out to you now, has been drowned in muck? I merely capture pictures, folks. I'm in the picture-capturing business—truly I am—except circumstance has dealt me, time and time again, the same crummy frames. But as crummy as mine are—and, oh yes, they are damn crummy—I will continue working with them for as long as necessary. And I will whine about it, too. (Oh yes.) And you will hear about it often. And you will *love* it!

Perhaps, by default, this *is* a dreaded "concept" book—an "anti-conceptual" concept book. If that is the case then, please, *tell* people how pretentious and lazy I am for writing it—and then gossip about how much of a no-talent, piece-of-shit hack I am.

Crazy, you say?

Well, congratulations: you have acquired the golden ticket to my art. Just don't ask for your money back—I never got it to begin with.

Please, though, send me stuff. Naked pictures will do; that will prolong my life for at least a couple more days.

Actually, no, scratch that—naked photos will only bore me. Send letters of disgust, instead: I am hungry; I can feed off those awhile. Then again, if my dear old mother no longer writes, why should *you*?

However, there *was* once a letter. A rather nice letter. It came to me from a stranger, in regards to my previous book. I share it with you now, in its entirety:

Dearest Branko,

I liked the overall gloom-and-doom feeling of your book. I gravitate towards things of that nature and many of the entries left me feeling depressed and hopeless. Some of what you wrote was just downright disturbing! I liked it. Anyway, take care and don't go crazy staring at the walls in your room.

Sincerely,

Evelyn

Isn't that nice? Lovely Evelyn. A lovely letter from lovely Evelyn.

I bet you think I had the damn thing framed, don't you?

Well, I didn't. I tossed it to the floor—for that is where anyone whoever feels the need to be a part of my life will end up: on a dirty floor—amongst all the broken bottles and broken lighters and broken manuscripts—a broken Branko—a caricature of my own silly bullshit….

Fitzgerald cracked up when he was, what, thirty- or forty-something years old? By then he was already established as a literary force (farce?). My books have sold barely a lick and already I am smashed like a loony egg!

Then again, Ms. Sylvia Plath wasn't considered a genius till she baked her head in an oven: O Sylvia, you silly bitch! What insane beauty! I would have nibbled on those immortal fingertips of yours, tickled your feet until —finally—you would have had the good sense to laugh right in Death's sniveling face! Ha!

But, yes, friend, it is back to this room, foolishly wanting more than I've been given… my lips touching Utopia that isn't there….

Well, hey, sometimes you need this.

Sometimes you need a good letdown—perhaps several, if you're me—HA!—to really get the juices going. Sometimes you need the person you love (Elsie, in my own sad case) to carry you around as though you were some hurt, half-breathing canary-like thing. Sometimes you need the empty walls to shake you and call out:

"Hey, dip-shit, remember us?"

It is hard, but you *need* this. You need it more than anything: truth snuffing out lies. You need it to remember the importance of unimportance, once all your many vices have left you to die. And it's so simple: trust no one and nothing, copulate with all that is shoving you towards an early madness, and make artifice out of it. May as well create a bigger mess for yourself—call it "wreck-creation."

Ah, Christ! I just got all holy again. Apologies. Let's try again: *Don't* create—don't do any of it. You will only end up like me: a sad prick and his sad little book.

And so I, Branko Gianni-Sheldon III, get up to relieve myself. The toilet clogs. Then I die until morning… as the same old sun will show itself again… and the same old monsters of this world will go on licking themselves lazily—Amen!

Wait.

I can't leave you like this, friend. No, I cannot do that. There has to be *some* sort of light for you to read what lies ahead… something for you to stay afloat, to help buoy you up in this putrid bath of sorrow I've drawn.

So listen, friend. I want you to know something: I want you to know that I am not yet as despondent as I may seem. I know I have painted myself as some heavily disturbed person. (It happens to those who get lost while tracking some form of hidden logic—which is practically impossible to do, for it is like hunting Christ in a shopping mall.) Forgive me. This was, after all, a bad night for me. Yes, it was. And there will be other bad nights. But some of these bad nights end up, in a strange way, as okay nights. Yes, I—and many people for that matter—live in an unfurnished room where it is always night. But it doesn't have to be a bad night all the time, does it?

The vignettes in this book serve as crude snapshots of a particular character—a particular character comprised of many characters, all sharing one important quality: they are different.

These characters have been shoved, either through self-action or circumstantial misfortune, into a world of confusion… a world of madness….

These characters are people. They are people without much of a place outside of their own physical and/or mental walls. Something bad has happened to them, you see—their pasts haunt them, and this continually muddles their present to the point where the future matters very little. Their future is to go underground, back into the earth where they came from and—figuratively speaking, perhaps—where they have always been.

These characters ("Dostoevskian" characters, some critics—or "critter-icks," as I've now thought to call them—might say) are Earth people. They believe in no God or Heaven. They know only the earth—its many beauties, and its many horrors. These characters have sprung from the earth—they've spring like a wild patch of little embryonic pumpkins. The pumpkins, like the characters herein, may be a bit tainted; they do seem rather ugly and unwanted at times, but they still have the potential to grow, to become something more, something great.

Yes, friend, it's true: Halloween *is* only once a year. So be it. This book, then, is their Halloween….

—BRANKO GIANNI-SHELDON III
Fall

BRIAN ALAN ELLIS's fiction has appeared in such publications as Skive, Zygote in my Coffee, Diverse Voices Quarterly, Monkeybicycle, Spittoon, The Big Stupid Review, DOGZPLOT, The Splinter Generation, flashquake, Conte, The Fine Line, Fiction Fix, Covalence, Curbside Quotidian, FLARE: The Flagler Review, Emerge, Asbury Pulp and NAP*, among others. His work was also performed by the "Stories on Stage" theatre program in Denver, Colorado. He lives in Tallahassee, Florida, and is currently compiling a*

collection of stories.

I'm at the Kolkata book fair and it's like a riot in slow motion, 52,347 people pressed into a crumbling, garbage-strewn fairground the size of a city block, my ears crushed by music and voices screaming through screechy loudspeakers.

The sky is as dark as the sky over a city of 14 million can get, a smoggy ceiling glowing dull orange. Hundreds of booksellers' booths are shouting bright yellow streams of light that spill out of their doors onto rivers of people.

An old woman in a green sari shoves me aside without noticing that I am a person, intent on getting to a stand selling soda and fried fish. A young man in an "Only in Tulsa" t-shirt and two friends sit on the edge of a fountain, staring at my incongruously pale face.

I squirm through a crowd of bargain-hunters into a stall advertising books for 30 rupees, rather than the usual 300-400 rupees, and shuffle through battered Tom Clancy and Tony Hillerman paperbacks. I find two thin volumes with nice covers -- one red (*The Perplexity of Hariya Hercules*) and one green (*I Speak for the Devil*) -- that I think my wife will like.

The man at the doorway demanding payment looks at my book of poetry and my novella and declares, "*Ek sho*," 100 rupees. I point to the sign on the wall indicating that he's overcharging me by 40 rupees. He smirks, and reaches his hand across the door frame, blocking my exit.

I argue, but he doesn't budge. I could tell him he's an asshole and walk out without the books, but then I'd be both angry and book-less. So I tell him he's an asshole, pay the Rs 100 and walk out with the books -- just angry.

I duck into another doorway. I am examining a copy of *Leave Me Alone* by Murong Xuecun and wondering how to pronounce the author's name when a well-dressed young man hands me a business card so crowded with text in various fonts that I can't figure out where to start reading.

"My father was a lawyer," says the youth, whose height matches my six feet or so. He sighs theatrically. "But he's gone now, and I am just trying to get by on my own in this city." He looks at the floor and frowns, really hamming it up. He looks at *Leave Me Alone* and says, "I'd really like that book. I think it would advance my education, but I can't afford it."

I tell him lightly: "I'm in the same spot." I open my wallet to show him a 50-rupee note and two 10-rupee notes, which don't add up to enough to pay for this full-priced book. But he doesn't give up.

He keeps telling me his story of trying to make it in this city of Hobbes' nightmares, where 13.5 million or so people live lives that are nasty, brutish and short, forced to fight even for a decent place to sleep on the sidewalk, one that isn't too close to a gutter full of piss or a pile of garbage.

I am sympathetic. I am sure his life is far harder than mine. But I am also unemployed since I quit my job at the newspaper. I am not poor, but I am feeling poor and don't have the cash on me to buy him the book.

"You're asking the wrong guy," I tell him, gripping him gently by the shoulders, trying to seem friendly. "Go find someone with a job." He looks at me sharply, no more slow movements, no more theatrical expressions. "Give me my card back," he snaps. I do. He walks away.

Among all these thousands of people, I am sure he'll find someone else who will buy him a book he can either read or resell to raise enough cash for his supper. After all, Kolkatans love to say their city has a heart, unlike Delhi or Mumbai. If you fall in the street, someone will help you up, I've been told by six different Kolkatans.

That wouldn't happen in other big Indian cities, they said. It doesn't always happen in Kolkata, either. I see people nearly every day who are sprawled on dog-shit smeared sidewalks alone, with pedestrians stepping over them complacently.

The truth of Kolkata's heart is that, if a well-educated, well-bred Bengali sees someone like him who has fallen, he might well stop to help. But if he encounters an "other" – a dirty, poor-looking man passed out drunk on the sidewalk near the curtain that serves as the door to the basement moonshine den across the street from my apartment building, for example – he will likely just keep walking.

After a few rounds of shouting into our cell phones over the din of the book fair crowd, my friend Chandan and I agree to meet in front of the Bangladeshi books display. I stand there looking over the heads of the thousands of people milling around, confident he will be able to pick me out. He does.

I browse books with Chandan then, unmolested for a half-hour or so. He buys one at the listed price with no argument. Then he calls his driver to bring his car around and pick us up. We settle into the back of sedan, the windows protecting us from the chaos, dust and exhaust outside. Chandan scrolls through work emails on his iPhone as we talk.

"I was talking to my immigration lawyer," he says. "He told me that, under my current category, it'll be 65 years before my greencard application is approved." Chandan's family is Indian, but he's spent most of his life in the US and likes it there. He's planning to move back.

He continues: "'Sixty-five years!' I said. 'I'm 25 now. By then I'll prob'ly be dead!' He said if I apply under this other category it'll only be a 35-year wait. 'By then I'll be retired!' I told him."

The lawyer proposed a way to speed up the process, though. Chandan's family's company could simply invest $500,000 in starting a subsidiary in New York and declare Chandan the CEO. Problem solved.

Chandan's driver pilots us to my home, a one-room apartment in a six-story building in central Kolkata. It's a nice place, colorful and cozy. My only complaints are that the lack of glass in its windows means black soot coats everything inside, and that there's a fault in the electrical system so, sometimes, when I reach to turn on the shower, I get electrocuted. Our landlord gave me a voltage detector and advised me to test before I

touch.

I thank Chandan for the ride, and climb out of that safe glass-and-metal box, back into the jungle. A little girl grabs my arm. She is only waist-high and she's not wearing any pants – just a long, grimy t-shirt. She holds out her hand mutely. I shake my head and walk toward my building's front door, looking at the ground as I walk to make sure I don't trip or fall.

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In Malaysia, I bought a pair of jeans. In a Levi's store in the old wing of 1Utama shopping mall, I tried on a pair of bold curve, boot cut jeans. It fit me like a second skin, hugging my hips, loving my curves. Perfect fit, flattering cut, comfortable and durable – a perfect pair of pants for travelling. I paid over RM 200 for my travelling pants and I walked out of the shop with the jeans neatly folded inside a paper bag.

That night I took my new jeans out of the paper bag and unfolded them. A beautiful pair of jeans in boot cut dark blue denim. Its button shone under the electric light. I cut off all the tags and I wore my new pants without even washing them first. I wore my brand new jeans to the top of the Petronas Twin Towers and looked out over the lights of KL city, with all its buildings and roads and traffic.

In Thailand, I got a stain on the right thigh of my jeans. I was eating a sweet, sour and spicy fish dish called *pla saam rod* at one of the many roadside stalls in Bangkok when some sauce fell from my spoon onto my jeans. I didn't notice it at first, so I didn't try and get the stain out. The red, orange, and oily sauce dried out on my jeans.

Then, 24 hours after that dinner, stains weren't my biggest problem anymore. Feeling a bit queasy, I ran to the bathroom and threw up a brown mess in the toilet bowl. Later, another brown mess came out the other end. The next two days were spent alternately kneeling by or sitting on the toilet, spewing vomit and watery brown diarrhoea into the white toilet bowl.

The next few days I was doped up on Metoclopramide and Loperamide, prescribed by a Thai doctor whose English I barely understood. On the fourth day, weak, pale and dehydrated, I finally left Thailand. Food poisoning in Bangkok is no fun, but the only bright side is it made me lose weight. My stomach was flat and my stained jeans felt loose on my waist.

In Brunei on Borneo Island, I ripped my jeans in the left knee. I went for a ride on a long boat along the Temburong River. I thought it was just going to be a boat ride, but the boat stopped and we all got out to go jungle trekking. I slipped on the mud and fell, ripping the left knee of my jeans on fallen tree branches and sharp rock on the ground.

It was worth it though. On that trip I saw the elusive proboscis monkey sitting in a tree. The locals call the monkey *orang Belanda* or Dutchman. The poor Dutch people – a monkey with a big nose and a pot belly bears their name. I also saw a rhinoceros hornbill in the jungles of Borneo. It's a majestic bird with black and white tail feathers and a big yellow bill that curves upwards like a crown on its head.

From Brunei I travelled by road, crossing the border into East Malaysia. In Miri, Sarawak, I wore my stained, ripped jeans to an evening barbecue, thinking jeans would protect me from mosquitos. I was wrong. I made the mistake of wearing sandals with my jeans. The Asian tiger mosquito feasted on my feet. It felt as if a hundred needles were poking me like I was a pin cushion. Because the bottoms of my jeans were flared, the black-and-white striped mosquitos flew under my jeans and up, biting my lower leg and ankles, and also on my left knee where my jeans were ripped. I was bitten on my arms as well. After the barbecue, my feet, ankles and left knee were a mess of red, bumpy, itchy mosquito bites.

The mosquito bites were so itchy. I scratched and scratched at them. Two days later, the itchiness wasn't my main problem anymore when a high fever raged through my body. While sucking on my blood, the *Aedes albopictus* mosquitos had infected me with Chikungunya fever. On my bed I lay, barely conscious, sometimes cold and shivering from the fever, then sometimes hot and sweating from my fever. My sweat stained the inside waistband of my jeans.

It took months to recover from Chikungunya. I lay in bed a lot of the time, hardly able to move as the virus ravaged my body, making all my joints ache. I felt like I had been hit by a bus, as if I was a young person living in the body of an 80-year-old woman with terrible arthritis. Many months later when my joints no longer felt like they were pieces of broken glass grinding together, I picked up my stained, ripped jeans, brushed off the thin layer of dust covering it and I was on my way again.

In Singapore, the right hem of my jeans frayed when the sliding doors of an MRT train shut on it. I was running in the underground station to catch a MRT to Chinatown. I just made it inside the crowded train, but the doors of the train slammed shut and caught the flared bottom of my jeans.

In Singapore's Chinatown, I bought a pair of chopsticks that had my name on it in Chinese. I went to the Buddha Tooth Relic Temple to pray, but it was so full of tourists that it was hard to get into the right peaceful and quiet frame of mind for prayer. I took off my shoes and knelt on the floor to try and pray, but it was so noisy and crowded, and people kept stepping on the frayed hem of my flared jeans.

In Melbourne, Australia, I tore the back pocket of my jeans. I also learnt that stiletto heels, alcohol and cobble stones do not make a good mix. After a night out, I found myself walking alone along one of Melbourne's many narrow lanes. This one was a narrow cobblestoned lane and being slightly tipsy, the heel of my stiletto caught on a cobblestone and I fell on my bottom. My jeans cushioned my fall, but my left back pocket tore on the cobble stones.

In New Zealand, I noticed for the first time that the crotch area of my jeans was getting faded and frayed. Maybe it was from all the walking I had done or maybe it was from bungy jumping off the Kawarau Bridge near Queenstown. I had worn a safety harness that went under my crotch. Then I had leapt 43 metres off the bridge into the Kawarau Gorge, putting my faith in a safety harness and an elastic cord. The elastic cord around my legs unravelled behind me when I jumped.

In New Zealand I washed my stained, ripped, frayed, torn jeans in a laundromat and used a dryer for the first time. I think the dryer shrank my jeans because they feel a bit tighter now. But it could be that I've just put on weight from all the good food I've been eating in New Zealand. I've been eating good quality cuts of tender beef and lamb that just melt in your mouth, and rich, creamy dairy products.

In Samoa, I lost my heart (and my jeans) to a tall, dark, handsome Samoan stranger. I met him while walking along the waterfront of Mulinu'u Road. He wore a lava-lava and he had *pe'a*, intricate traditional Samoan tattoos on his thighs and on his arms. He had brown skin the colour of milk chocolate.

As I lay in bed with my Samoan warrior, I saw my faded, frayed, flared jeans a crumpled heap on the floor. My jeans were slightly shrunken, torn, ripped and stained, its cotton threads barely holding together after so

much travel. I thought to myself that it might be time to buy a new pair of travelling pants.

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The lamp was off the night I'd burst in smelling smoke, when the old youthful woman sat up in the shaft of light from the hall.

"Aaron?" she'd whispered. Her outstretched arm shook, my mother looked terrified, like Kate's shocked double. She held the gold gun two feet in front of her, eyes blinking.

My past returned in a rush as I looked down the barrel's black eye the instant before death, seeing Aaron's lined face, kind and polite old Aaron Winters who loved Delmus like a son and suffered from arthritis and with his divining rod found water but never never any oil—

"Aaron Markham?" Dolly'd said. *"Is it you?"*

"Mother, it's me, Kyla—" I raised a hand to block the imminent shot.

Then time began to stretch out, there was nothing to worry about, this had happened before, like when you just missed getting in a wreck and everything got slow, the coming headlight and familiar fender, and you observed the unfolding near-crash from a distance.

"No, it's mine! You can't take the butterfly!"

"It's Kyla," I'd said. *"I thought you were on fire."*

"Oh, Kyla," Dolly'd said, lowering the gun, but only half way. *"No, I had a cigarette."*

The next morning the string was tied to the lock. Dolly had hidden the gun, said it wasn't loaded anyway.

Where was it? In the night table drawer?

"I forgot to turn on the lamp," Dolly said from the dark.

I felt for the wall switch, found it and flipped it on.

Against the white pillowcase my mother's face was mottled, streaked with powder. Her long, thick steel-colored hair needed combing. Holding her string to the lock, she was like a confused blue spider.

But she still had the profile I had studied as a child, memorized to keep like a cameo, as my mother sat at the end of my bed in my room at the Lawrences after she'd sent me away and she came to visit a Saturday

each month.

“Here,” Dolly said, reaching and snapping on the lamp. The red and gold butterflies flew brightly at her Chinese collar buttoned at her throat. “You can turn the ceiling light off.”

With the oven mitt I set the plate down on the night table and slipped my fingers around Dolly’s wrist below the tight silk sleeve she’d never let me lift.

“The weather—” Dolly began.

“Shhhh,” I said, counting the frail beatings of my mother’s heart.

“The weather’s been funny, sort of makes you tired,” Dolly said. “Sometimes it makes me dizzy.”

Fifty-two, 53, 54 . . .

“And jumpy,” I said. “You’re fine.”

My mother sat up higher in the bed. “It’s the wind. Static electricity, ions or something. I read about it once.”

“There’s low pressure off the coast,” I said. “The door’s open for a storm on the raisins. Third year in a row.”

We sounded like contestants on “Queen for a Day,” the ’50s TV show where the three women told their sad stories. A dial with a needle—the Love-O-Meter—registered the crowd’s applause.

“Here’s your dinner, Mother.” I handed Dolly the warmed-over eggs. “Better late than never.”

“It’s nice to hear that,” Dolly said, looking up at me.

“What?” I said.

“‘Mother.’ I like that.”

“Isn’t that who you are?”

“Yes, but I like it.” She smiled and lifted her fork. “It’s probably just your nerves.”

"What's that?"

"Being dizzy. You shouldn't let it go. You should have it checked." Dolly cut a dry egg with the side of her fork. "I knew a good doctor, in Acacia. Dr. Bennell. He graduated from Harvard. Or Yale?"

She frowned, looking up from her plate, as if maybe I could remind her.

"He played sonatas on the piano. Loved opera. He always joked with me, called me 'Madame Butterfly.'"

I stared back at the gorgeous silver-haired woman I had known again for not quite four months, the fan rattling the scraps of newspaper tacked above her head.

"Puccini."

"Who's he?"

"He wrote 'Madame Butterfly'. Have you heard it?" She raised her chin. *"'Farewell fond sanctuary of romance and love—'"*

I gazed at her black trunk like a magician's chest against the wall, then the rhinestone-spangled dress folded like a blanket at the foot of the bed.

"Anyway, that was my nickname—"

"Great big house— In Acacia. Baylor says ten bedrooms—" Gladys, deaf Baylor's wife, had said on the phone after dinner. *"Called it the Butterfly House— He's going to write about it, in his column, 'The Way It Was'—"*

Three pennies and the yellow book lay on the night table, next to the upturned mirror where Dolly's picture stood beside the silver brush. She remained young forever, perfect as a movie star, the purple velvet draped low across her creamy bosom. The jeweled butterfly brooch shone pinned above her heart as she stood on the cliff above the sea.

Dolly's chin was modeled from alabaster, full lips, perfect aquiline nose, her long golden hair thick and piled high, white-blonde where it caught the morning sun. Even in the sepia brown and tan, her large eyes looked emerald green, like Kate's—

"I'd sit for hours beside him on the bench, just listening as I watched his beautiful hands—"

Summers Dolly wore the blue silk suit with blue-and-white spectator pumps and the hat with the blue veil

and pheasant feather. In winter the pearl-gray serge with gray gloves and the fox stole around her neck, the fox's eyes not dull buttons but flecked amber glass. How elegant she was when she pulled up in the big Cadillac outside the Lawrences house on those brief visits. I would hear the car and then race from the house crying, *"Mama! Mama!"*

"Not like Aaron's, the night on the Ferris wheel at the Harvest Fair—"

Always Dolly brought presents wrapped like birthday gifts, skates or a doll or games to play, with a card attached: *"To my darling daughter Kyla— how I love you so."*

"Franz Schubert and Chopin. The Nocturnes were his favorites— He was a surgeon you know—"

Sometimes I heard the Cadillac when it wasn't there—after searching the bare street I'd drop back onto my bed, lifting up the black book I was memorizing for Sunday, that had fallen open to "Acts" or "Revelation," some senseless murder or torment about to take place.

The picture on Dolly's table stirred memories of a house of large rooms and darkened corridors, a piano playing classical music that wound its way upstairs around corners and along secret passageways. A long cushiony rug whispered "*China"* when you stepped on the gold-robed emperor and his red and green nightingale.

"On Alma Street, a line of big trees—" Gladys had said on the phone, deaf Baylor eagerly coaching her in the background before I'd hung up.

By the street grew five liquid ambars, and along the side of the house a wisteria vine reached two stories high so I could breathe the scent of its purple blossoms through my screen at night.

"Mozart too—"

Had the house burned down, or been bulldozed to make way for a new development?

Maybe it was still there, right now, this second, the big trees even bigger, tall as the elm where the great-horned owl lived, the wisteria still blooming at the window.

I had never seen the house again or looked for it when for one reason or another—to picnic at Mooney Grove, by the statue of the dying Indian, or buy a present with Gold Bond stamps at the redemption center—I had passed through Acacia, just as I never tried to find my mother or contact her after the visits at the Lawrences ended.

"I'd hum a Strauss waltz and he could play it right off, tell me the title—"

Something had happened, maybe nothing more dramatic than my mother getting tired and bored with trying to raise a child alone. Mrs. Lawrence just said my mother had moved away, back East somewhere, her thin-lipped, hard-set mouth like Mrs. Watkins' telling me that was explanation enough.

But that was a lie, all these years Dolly had been in Acacia, 30 miles away, Mrs. Lawrences old letter with my address ticking like a bomb in a dresser drawer that smelled of dust and lavender. Or orange, sweet and acid, veined with whiskey.

"We were great fans of Mrs. Roosevelt—"

On the wall above the headboard the clippings of Geraldine Ferraro that Kate had cut from the paper charted the summer's decline, from excitement and hope to fear and uncertainty, to outright scandal and low accusation. *Mafia. IRS. Husband's finances.*

"Bennell was an awfully good doctor. He delivered you."

"Did he?" I glanced over at the phonograph and its single red record. *Nat King Cole.*

"He'd been in some trouble back East somewhere, got involved with an actress. His family turned him out, so he came out West. He wanted to marry me. It wouldn't have worked out.

"You didn't love him?" *Mona Lisa.*

"We came from different worlds."

I stared up at the rusty stains on the rippled ceiling. Would it rain again, to ruin another raisin harvest? A second ago, was that the wind from the sea, the Pacific, in the elm?

"Those eggs were good," Dolly said. "But next time, can you use just a pinch less salt?"

"Do you want a glass of water?"

My mother's plate was clean. I'd forgotten to bring a drink. Kate had spilled the carton of milk at dinner, before she'd run out crying to stand alone in the barnyard, before she'd gone upstairs to dress for Eddie Dodge—

"No thank you," Dolly said. "I'm finished."

"You were hungry."

"I didn't eat much breakfast or lunch." Dolly touched a kleenex to her mouth. "I've been sort of nervous. I felt a lot better, then not so good again—"

"Everybody's keyed up," I said. "Could you rest with all the honking?"

"You mean the white car? The one with the silver horse on the hood?"

"No. The farmers going by. Delmus' party is tomorrow."

Again I saw the station wagon with the black dice hanging from the rearview mirror, parked under the walnut tree, the dropped beer cans, the man in the red shirt undoing his pants to urinate against the walnut's trunk, all of them laughing and looking up at the house where suddenly Dolly stood at her upstairs window.

"You say there's going to be party? I don't remember—"

I stepped to the window, reaching out to touch the glass, above the wrinkled sill where old rain had seeped in.

"Don't worry," said Dolly. "It's not going to rain. I could feel it in my bones if a storm was blowing in."

In the window I could see the string on the sheet by my mother's hand. I was standing in this room because of her and Dr. Bennell, as Kate was alive because of me.

"Who's my daddy?" I asked my mother once as she tucked me into bed. Dolly Mable smiled, pointing out the window screen past the drooping wisteria blooms like bunches of blue grapes. *"The sun and moon. The stars and purple flowers. Is that good enough?"*

How old was I then? Five? Six?

I realized how tired I was, I could feel it in my neck and shoulders, still hear the screech of the grinder as Delmus sharpened the knife for the pig in the morning, Mrs. Watkins' peacocks' cries and the shrieking howls of her Dobermans at every passing car or truck. I was almost too tired to even answer people, to not just say whatever came to mind. *Slaphappy.*

"No paper tonight?"

"I forgot," I said to my mother's reflection in the glass. Beyond the dusty pane Kate wandered somewhere down a vine row, on her way to meet Eddie Dodge. Mrs. Watkins had called, sure a burglar, maybe the

Standpipe Strangler himself, was climbing down the side of the house. I'd said Delmus had to adjust the TV antennae and she'd said, "Oh, I thought it might be that boy who brought Mrs. Grayson, the one in the blue car."

"It's all right," Dolly said. "You and I never get to talk."

But we had talked, from spring through summer, on and on— About keeping the window and the door locked tight, about calling a doctor, Dolly's drinking and smoking and her heart, Kate and how she had to prepare for school in the fall, about Dolly Mable remaining Mrs. Grayson, a family friend from Merced.

"Just about the weather— You know, *'Today's not so hot,'* or *'Yesterday was cooler—'"*

Ferraro and the Gold Lady, then the gun and the string—

In the morning when I'd asked for the gold pistol Dolly declared she didn't own any bullets, she'd never fired a shot in her life, much less at a living person, it was a gift from an old admirer, really just a toy or bangle, a piece of pretty jewelry with the gold plate and the butterfly carved in the ivory, and anyway it made her feel safe, especially when Mrs. Watkins' peacocks screamed and she thought it was the Strangler attacking a young girl.

Sun Damsel had collapsed, defaulting on the raisin payments, and my mother had comforted me, told me she could sell her house in Acacia.

Did Dolly really have a house? She'd never mentioned it again.

But Gladys had, on the phone an hour ago, as she spoke for Baylor, after Mrs. Watkins had called about the intruder—

"Are you still having those dreams?" Dolly asked. "Of all the birds?"

"What birds?" A blinking plane crossed the sky.

"One day last week you brought my lunch late. You said you'd fallen asleep at the kitchen table. Then you woke up suddenly when you thought you heard a bird screeching at you. I remembered what you said, when I saw that crow today."

"I saw one too." Its black feathers had glinted red and green and blue in the setting sun as Delmus pretended to shoot it with his knife, lifting the shiny blade from his grandfather's sandstone grinder and aiming it like a gun.

"Black Raven," he'd said, one eye squinting. "That was Sam Houston's name, when he ran away to live with

the Cherokee."

"Maybe it was the same one," Dolly said. "And I saw a dove, like in my poem, the one who used to roost in the tree, before the owl came. 'When doves assume the branch at dusk, In shadows cool and murmurous —'"

A mourning dove, flying toward the blue gums, as I thought of Kate under the catalpa, my face against its trunk as Delmus sharpened the knife—

"You said your dream was about a condor," my mother said.

I recalled it as one of the peacocks, the great beak open wide and the tongue bright red. Then it was Mrs. Watkins' face. I'd dozed off at the table, over pictures of the poisoned birds at the Kesterson Refuge on the *Bee's* front page, the dead malformed wet chick and the broken egg.

"I was thinking that in your unconscious—or subconscious, whatever the psychiatrists call it—you're probably afraid it will go extinct."

"Maybe you're right." The elm limbs sighed in the wind beyond the window, the leaves sweeping the shingled roof like a wash of rain. Now I was forgetting all my dreams. My mother had to relate them to me.

"They've got them in zoos, in L.A. Special breeding programs. I saw one the other day, on TV. They use hand puppets that look like condors. To feed the chicks. I'm sure they'll survive. Like the quagga—"

"What's that?"

"The extinct relation to the zebra and horse? They reproduced one of its genes this summer, at Berkeley. From a hundred-year-old skin they found in Germany."

"Did they?" In the pane I could see the yellow book—*Book of Changes*—beside my mother's picture.

Kate and Dolly looked more alike than either resembled me. Except for the absence of the scar at her chin where Delmus dropped Kate against the iron headboard when she was five—the young Dolly in the photograph could be Kate, dressed in the purple gown from the bed, with the butterfly pin and her hair put up. It made sense that they would like the same things.

The elm leaves blew, the climbing roses scraped against the side of the house, where Kate had climbed down the trellis to lie with Eddie Dodge, Dolly Mable's one-day chauffeur, Mrs. Watkins had called to say so.

Yesterday I'd picked up the receiver and Kate had talked to Eddie on the phone, she said he was like

Ramon, Dolly's true love—

"You never told me how you liked living with those people up in Fresno."

I looked again at Dolly's reflection wearing the blue oriental gown. In the midst of a storm at sea she rested comfortably in the stateroom berth the captain had assigned her as an honored guest. She lifted the silver mirror to her chalky face while waves rose beyond her cabin's porthole.

It was the first time she had mentioned the Lawrences.

"It was all right," I said.

"I just wondered. You know, I fell out of touch."

"The Lawrences?" They're right here, I thought, in the elm leaves trying to touch the window. They're as much here as my mother. "I hated them."

The clothes they wore, how they held their bodies and moved their mouths to speak, the shapes of their heads, the way they combed their hair, the color of it like thin coffee.

"You did?" Dolly didn't sound surprised, though she lowered the silver mirror.

Their scents. Mrs. Lawrence smelled like sour vanilla, her husband like wet sawdust. The food they ate. Grits and rhubarb. Milk toast. Turnips.

"Remember that movie, 'Now Voyager,' with Bette Davis? What her mother was like? They made me get baptized in the Kings River, I couldn't swim and it was freezing, melted snow from the mountains. I thought I was going to drown, the preacher held my head under and wouldn't let me breathe. I swallowed water—"

My voice sounded like a child's with that rising despairing whine that was the echo of the real complaint. Which was anger. Which was loss. Why don't you love me?

"They couldn't have any children," she said. Her image set the mirror on the night table.

"They didn't deserve any." Now Dolly looked at me, at my face in the window.

"Are they still alive?"

"I don't know. I haven't been up to visit this summer. Mrs. Lawrence was sick the last time I saw her. Heart

trouble."

"Too bad." Dolly reached for the yellow book on the table.

Was it? In the little white house on Walnut Street—down from Washington School and his bronze bust watching from the alcove above the double doors—my room had been just as I left it.

"Did you ever read about Confucius?"

Kate bounced on the bed where I had lain awake at night, devising complicated plans of escape. It was always Mother, how to get back to Mother, all the time. Once when Dolly had come for a visit, I asked her why she had sent me away. Dolly had got upset and Mrs. Lawrence frowned at me as my mother left the room and hurried out to the car.

"'The wind is part of the process, the rain is part of the process.'"

When Kate got older I visited alone, as a duty, walking up the brick path between the cruelly trimmed tree roses—like that first day, after Dolly had driven off, when I ran into the unpaved alley to hide. I'd cried and cried, huddled down beside a black cat that kept trying to climb into my lap. Finally I let it, the cat purring and arching its back.

When I heard Mrs. Lawrence calling from the yard I went around to the front, up the walk and pushed the doorbell. Mrs. Lawrence answered and asked where I'd been, she was worried sick, that was Rule Number 1, never run off. Then she said it was my house too now, I didn't have to knock. "Just be quiet. It's lunchtime. Mr. Lawrence is praying in the kitchen before he goes back to work." I started in with the cat in my arms and Mrs. Lawrence stopped me, gripping my shoulder. "Oh no," she said. "That's a stray. It has ringworm. Anyway, we don't allow animals in the house." I took the cat down the aisle of roses and set it by the curb. It kept trying to follow me. "Leave it be!" Mrs. Lawrence called. When I ran inside Mrs. Lawrence took me into the bathroom. She made me undress and take a bath with Castile soap as she watched. "Don't forget behind your ears—" She leaned forward, afraid I carried lice or impetigo.

"'The superior man abides in his room. If his words are well spoken, he meets with assent at a distance of more than a thousand miles. How much more then from near by!'"

I never felt comfortable in the house, anywhere I stepped Jesus had stood while He talked to Them. He was in all the pictures on the walls, either crucified or a long-haired movie star in heaven. The Lawrences said boys were evil and wouldn't let me go out, not even to an afternoon ice cream social. I sat alone in the back yard as evening came on, plucking petals from one of Mrs. Lawrence's yellow cabbage roses, saying to myself, *"He loves us, He loves us not."*

As a grown woman I sat in the same musty living room with its bookshelf holding a single white Bible and a painted plaster cast of a woman's praying hands with red fingernails—I remembered all the endless evenings of Bible study after dinner and the long, involved saying of grace when Mr. Lawrence came home inspired from building the new Sunday school. The old radio still sat against the wall, its round frayed black speaker

like a dark mouth. The rule was I couldn't play it unless Mr. Lawrence listened too, and then only certain programs—"Amos 'n Andy," Father Coughlin's tirades against the Jews, the spiritual section of "Grand Ole Opry," Aimee Semple McPherson's Sunday sermons from L.A.

For nearly 20 years—until the preacher died of the accidental barbiturate overdose in 1944—the Lawrences were tormented by the nagging mystery, Sister Aimee's 1926 disappearance near Venice Beach—she was assumed drowned, the extended search claimed a member of the congregation and another diver who failed to find the body—

"'The town may be changed, but the well cannot be changed. It neither decreases nor increases. They come and go and draw from the well. If one gets down almost to the water and the rope does not go all the way, or the jug breaks, it brings misfortune.'"

She emerged a month later from the Mexican desert at Agua Prieta, just south of Douglas, Arizona, with a tale of chloroform and kidnap. Sister's mother produced a letter from "The Avengers" demanding $500,000 to ensure that Aimee wasn't sold into white slavery—but when Sister was found she had grass stains on her shoes and wore her own dress and her mother's watch instead of the bathing suit—

Could Sister Aimee really have faked her own kidnap to enjoy a sexual holiday with Kenneth G. Ormiston, the married and missing sound engineer from KFSG, who worked the broadcasts from Sister's 5000-seat Angelus Temple? The Lawrences wondered.

"'A shoal of fishes. Favor comes through the court ladies. Everything acts to further.'"

"I have to admit," Mrs. Lawrence said in 1936, "a time or two I thought as much." "So did I, looking back," Mr. Lawrence said, staring straight ahead from his chair. "Still, it's quite a shock. Just the question in your mind—" "Yes, it is," Mr. Lawrence agreed. "Let's pray for Sister tonight."

Soon a Sunday morning the sermon was interrupted by the flash announcing Pearl Harbor.

"The world's full of evil," Mr. Lawrence said. "Yes," said Mrs. Lawrence "there's hardly any Christian people left."

Just you and Mr. Lawrence, I thought, is that right? The whole world's at war except you. Later he made a lot of money during the war, building the new barracks at Hammer Field where the fighter-bombers trained.

"'Confucius has said of the great sacrifice at which the rites were performed, "He who could wholly comprehend this sacrifice could rule the world as though it were spinning on his hand."'"

They hadn't come to my wedding because it wasn't a church wedding, a certain church wedding, Pentecostal or something, I couldn't remember. Delmus didn't want a preacher, just a justice of the peace and afterward a little party on the lawn. Aaron Winters and Larry Jones and their wives were there. Florence,

Delmus' mother. *And his uncle, Baylor—*

"How did you decide to be a nurse?" Dolly asked, setting the yellow book on the night table, as if she'd just finished the story of my childhood with the Lawrences.

"I wanted to be on my own. The war had started."

"I paid for your schooling. I sent them a check for $300 every month."

"They gave me $60," I said. "I saved it for tuition and dormitory rent. That's where I met Delmus, in the Veteran's Hospital."

In the dark the yellow roses looked white.

"When you were with the Lawrences?" Dolly asked. "Did you ever remember when you lived with me?"

"I used to. I used to wait for your car to pull up. Sometimes I'd think I heard it, but when I looked it wasn't there."

"I came as often as I could, until they told me not to come any more—"

"They told you not to come?" Now I faced my mother. "You wanted to come and you couldn't?"

Dolly Mable nodded.

"Of course I did. But they didn't want me to. Bad example, they said. Because I didn't come didn't mean I didn't love you—"

A second more I watched her face, then again I turned away.

"Do you now?" I asked, looking at my mother in the glass.

"Of course—why do you think I'm here? The Gold Lady, the woman in the light, the one who looked like Ferraro? After that bad night? She told me to find you."

My heart leaped again. I smelled the sweet perfume of wisteria and heard the music—Dr. Bennell playing Mozart, "A Little Night Music"—he was the one who sat at the piano!

But my longing was divided, even now, like something weighed down, bent in the middle. It always had been.

Always?

The wind blew, rattling the roses on the trellis, in the elm folding back the owl's feathered horns. I watched my own shadowed face, waiting for an answer.

"'That's my Kyla,' I thought, 'I'd know her anywhere, from all the women on Earth or in heaven—'"

Her disappearance had left a bitter taste on my tongue. I had always tasted it, off and on all my life, in the Lawrences house, in the nurses' dormitory, even now in my bed at night.

"When I saw you that morning all the years fell away. You were still my little Kyla—"

And what was that taste—that scent? Whiskey, or stale orange blossom from some old springtime sealed in a jar?

No, something else—their opposite. Something sharp, strong and bitter, but also salt, that went with a sound. Delmus remembered!

He hated it too, he'd described it to me before, a whole planeful of it, so you couldn't breathe except on oxygen. It stung and burned and echoed in your ears. I'd finally identified it, the morning Delmus had to shoot the rabid coyote in the barnyard. Gunpowder.

"Why'd you send me away?" I asked.

"First tell me more about the Lawrences—"

"The Lawrences were going to leave me their house. Then one day they said no, they were going to leave it to the church. And their life insurance. And my life insurance, they had a policy on me. They bought it from the deacon, a crippled man who rolled on the floor and spoke in tongues. He taught Sunday school and said the Devil was everywhere. He called him the Big D and said his breath smelled like oil smoke."

"For him, I guess it was," Dolly said. "You know, when I was coming up here, with the boy in the car, I saw a sign that scared me."

"With Eddie Dodge?" I waited.

"Yes. I saw an advertisement for Lemas Honda in black letters, 'Honda' going one way, 'Lemas' the other, in

a big black cross."

"Why was that scary?" I lifted a finger, dragging it down the window at a slant.

"I kept thinking it meant something else, like an anagram. Like that game 'Spill and Spell'? Gods—dogs. You know. Then it changed and I felt better."

"What do you mean it changed?" I crossed the line to make an X.

"Lemas Honda," Dolly said. *"Salem had no—"*

"Witches," I said. "When I saw your blue car this spring—when it pulled into the yard—I had happy thoughts, of the way things used to be—"

"Did you? So did I! That's why I came. I mean the Gold Lady told me to come, when she stood by the bed, but I knew she was right. We had fun, didn't we? Dr. Bennell and you and I. Remember Mr. Hayes?"

Dolly leaned forward eagerly.

"I've got to call and see if my house is okay. I've got things there I couldn't bring with me."

Great big house— In Acacia. Baylor says ten bedrooms—

Dolly's fox stole rose on quick paws, bushy tail flashing through the night, amber eyes shining as it trotted down a vine row for the blue gums with Kate's red dress in its jaws.

"Do you remember my china, the Wedgewood with Windsor Castle? I'd like Kate to have it someday."

We ate at the table with linen napkins and silver and she talked to Dr. Bennell or "Mr. Hayes" while I imagined I lived in the china's brown castle, in the highest tower room with the window, below the blowing banner and I could see all the world, I could see everything before it happened.

"After you sell your house?"

"I can, like I said," said Dolly. "There's a man watching it for me."

"Eddie Dodge?"

"No, somebody older. His name's Hack. He owns the Chevron station. I could have him bring up a few things. I've got the deed. I need to call him, give him the combination to my safe." She reached for the night table's top drawer. "Before I forget—"

"You've been talking to Kate all summer."

"Once in a while she stops by." Dolly lifted a note pad.

"What about?"

"This and that. Lots of things."

"About you?"

"No, not about me." My mother shook her head firmly, holding the pen. "The campaign, how Ferraro is doing. Things in the *Fresno Bee.* Early history."

"What early history?"

"Joaquin Murrietta. Sometimes Sontag and Evans. Larry Jones' old book. Did you know my father knew them, before they robbed the Central Pacific?"

"You don't talk about Eddie?"

"No— Just about Joaquin." My mother watched me now. "Why should we?"

"I just wondered." I looked out the window, past our double reflection. "She doesn't talk to me."

"I haven't seen her for a couple of days. That's all."

"I told her not to bother you," I said.

"She's no bother. I love when she visits. She just says hello. We chat a little."

Eddie, tonight was the best—

Through the shut glass, from the eucalyptus grove I could hear coyotes yipping, ready for the night. Like

Dorothy in the forest on the way to the Emerald City, now Kate walked in the blue gums—

"There's always something interesting, in *National Geographic.* Like the quagga—"

I rested my forehead against the cool window. The trees frightened me at sundown, when they turned to a black iron ship towering above the flat ocean of purple vines. Like in "Wizard of Oz" a few white, tall trunks stood out from the edge of the grove, sometimes something white flickering at the top of a high turret, the open outstretched underwings of a big bird of prey.

"I tell her what the Valley was like, when I was a girl—"

And once a year a thousand turkey vultures circled half a mile above the trees. It was a stop on their migration route, though where did vultures migrate, and why? Home for crows and hawks, especially owls, in the evening the blue gums echoed with the massed voices of sparrows, robins, in springtime greedy starlings returned from stripping an orchard of young plums.

"Would you would believe there were rabbits, thousands and thousands, and coyotes everywhere and once my father roped a badger?"

At dusk in winter across the bare vineyards long flocks of blackbirds dipped and swerved like snapped black sheets as their leaders made for the grove. The trees were planted 60 years ago, perfectly in rows, like some giant's weird orchard, 20 acres for blue gum furniture and lumber, after the World War I timber scare.

"Did I mention the time my sisters and I went to Santa Cruz on the train?"

But the forest went uncut—the wood was twisted, no good for building—and grew 200 feet tall, shading sections of vineyard that starved for lack of light and wilted from the oil leached from the blown pungent leaves.

"We'd never seen the ocean and we each tasted the salt water and spit it out."

A man named Flowers leased the grove and turned turkeys loose inside, morning and evening you could hear their roar. The closer you got, the louder they got, until at the chicken-wire fence you could see the white birds moving through the shadows. Just before Thanksgiving, the noise diminished. By Christmas it had ceased. Flowers had a female cocker spaniel that was always in heat and drew packs of dogs that went in after the turkeys. Firing shotguns one morning Flowers and his partner shot six of the neighbors' dogs.

"We watched the waves roll in and out and Bryan? He said it was the moon that did it and we laughed and splashed him with water."

One afternoon when he was pruning in the plum orchard, Delmus heard a dog yelping. Delmus got down from his ladder and climbed the fence and found Kate's fox terrier Mike in a snare. Kate's dog was too small

to hurt, much less kill, a 30-pound turkey. Delmus wanted to go talk to Flowers but I wouldn't let him. A week later, like Toto, Mike ran scared into the yard, with a piece of paper tied to his collar. The note said, *"Go feather your nest!"* and I never knew what it meant or who sent it.

"We rented wool suits, the five of us girls, and tossed a big shiny ball."

The blue gums sometimes appeared in my dreams, always mysterious, foreboding, full of hidden cries, gliding prehistoric birds, and shadowed people living unaware of one another, blue smoke going up from red campfires in front of hobo huts made all of branches and silver leaves and bark fitted every which way. Once, with Delmus, before we were married, I ventured in a few steps where the light came down in long white strings, magnified, and I reached up and gripped one with my hand, trying to grasp the bright cord. The birds' calls sounded unafraid, disrespectful of man, wide swooping wings overhead, hawks changing towers. I smelled the acrid dust, the thick floor of stale leaves littered with years of droppings.

"And Bryan swam so far out we got afraid the sea would take him and made my father call him to come in —"

Then somewhere far off, as in a real forest, I heard the roar and whoosh and concussion of a fallen limb, the crackle of rabbits and unknown animals clambering about the slash. A quail trilled and with two fingers Delmus peeled from the broad smooth trunk the long sheaf of bark like parchment—

I opened my eyes. "Are you ever afraid you're going to die?"

"Did I tell you about Bryan, in the war?"

"Who's he?"

Dolly's surprised reflection began to smile.

"No," she said. "Not with you taking care of me the way you do."

"I mean the idea of death."

"I don't dwell on it," Dolly said, glancing back at her note pad. "Why do you ask?"

"I just wondered."

"It depends who you are," Dolly said. "For some people it's one way, and for other people it's another. That's been my experience. I've known people so devout they wouldn't lick a stamp. And then when the time came —all the time they were saying, 'When I get to heaven, when I see Jesus'—they went to pieces. And others

—hard-drinking, hard-living men like Joaquin—they'd just laugh, as if it were a joke."

"It's not a joke," I said.

"No, it's no joke."

"And everyone dies alone," I said.

"That's right, Kyla. Everyone."

Dolly lifted a hand that held the pen. "In the midst of the multitude, you still die alone. I guess you could say it's the ultimate democracy."

She sounded like Delmus. A philosopher. With her white hand in the air she could be posing for a sculptor.

"Why did you really come here to live?" I asked.

Another plane crossed the sky, its wing and taillights a little constellation, blinking red and green, stop and go, the way Delmus' B-29 might have looked, if they hadn't made them fly in the dark. Or his friend Brawley's bomber, the *Evangeline,* before it exploded and the engine shard crashed through Delmus' turret and branded his arm.

"I wanted to be with my daughter. With my family," Dolly said. "Is there something wrong with that?"

The plane turned, lifted a wing, now there was only one light. Maybe it would land in Fresno, on the blue-lit runway.

"Do you want me to leave?"

"No," I said. "Not at all." As I said it, I realized it was true. "I think it was meant that you come to stay. Just like it was meant for me to go live with the Lawrences."

"No— That was something else that came up."

"Don't you feel it?" I said. "We've been together in this room all the time."

"I don't think I follow you—" She wrote on the pad.

"Think about it. Each place you ever were was where you were supposed to be—so you were always there, in a way."

Dolly didn't answer.

"It's hard to explain," I went on, remembering the lines of spiders' silk stretched across the vineyard at morning and evening when the sun was low, aiming like a gun. "It's my own idea. It's as if everything were connected, like some network. Like a web. At the center, where all the lines meet, there isn't any time. There never was."

"I don't know. I'd have to think about it. I've had a lot on my mind. What with the election—"

"Sure. This is where it ends, or begins, depending on how you look at it."

Again I put my hand against the glass.

"I guess that's where faith comes in. Faith that a rose didn't make itself or grow by accident. That's what Delmus said."

"Kyla—Don't open that window."

"Why? You could smell the roses then."

"Just don't. I don't want to."

"I'm not," I said. "But *why?* It's nice and cool outside. There's a sea breeze."

"Just don't do it, it makes me upset." Dolly raised herself up in the bed in the window.

"I'm not going to," I said. "But what are you afraid of? I know it's not the rain."

As I spoke, already I regretted my words, but it was too late:

"Are you scared your soul will fly away?"

I saw my mother's blurred reflection wrench around as it shoved its hand under the bottom pillow. Now I knew the secret hiding place.

"Kyla!"

The gun glittered gold in the light. All along I had been waiting for it. I'd wanted my mother to point the derringer.

"'Wait a little longer, till your little wings are stronger, / Then, then you can fly away.' Remember that? You used to read to me. About the little bird leaving its nest?"

"Kyla, don't stand by the window."

"Who is Aaron Markham? Why were you afraid of me, that night you thought I was him?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Was he my father? Did he make you pregnant, then leave you, the way Eddie's going to do Kate? Or was it Ramon?"

"Oh no, not Ramon—"

My mother lurched forward and snatched the purple dress and brought it to her breast.

"He was Joaquin Murrietta, in another life, before he became a movie star, Domingo Esquivel, the first Zorro. Ramon found his treasure, when Aaron hypnotized him by Cantua Creek, where Captain Love and the posse rode him down with Three-Fingers Jack—"

In the light the rhinestones twinkled and shone like 50 sparkling eyes.

"You can tell me, what's there to lose now?"

"Don't say those things, Kyla."

"Shoot," I said. "Go ahead."

It was Kyla talking, not someone standing safely just outside my body. Or someone inside who wanted to die —

When I smelled the smoke, it would be like incense, like wisteria. At the last minute I'd remember everything.

All my life there was something I'd forgot.

"Kyla, come here, don't stand by the sill. It makes me nervous, the gun might go off." She held the dress and the gun.

"I thought you said it wasn't loaded."

"It isn't. I mean I don't remember."

"I'm not afraid," I said.

"Don't talk that way."

"What would you like to talk about?"

"Anything, the weather— Just don't open the window. Or talk about Aaron. The Harvest Fair. I don't want to. You don't understand. It's too upsetting."

"The weather's changing," I said, turning to face my mother, who met my gaze for a heartbeat and looked away. "Bones or no bones. The neighbors are calling, your friend Mrs. Watkins who gave Kate the sex book and found her red dress her Dobermans tore from the line. And Baylor, Delmus' idiot uncle. The whole county knows who you are."

Her greens eyes looked into my gray eyes, searching for something familiar, then her head dropped against the purple dress.

"By now half of Lemas knows," I said. "Isn't that what you wanted? You're famous."

"No one knows," she said. She put the gun down on the sheet. "I'd know if they did."

"The way you knew Ferraro was going to win the nomination? 'She and Mondale are sure to beat Reagan, before he drops the Bomb!' Or how it's not going to rain? The Gold Lady wouldn't let it? No, I don't think so. I'm afraid for once you're wrong. This time they all know about Dolly Mable."

My mother turned her head. "You don't know Ferraro's going to lose—"

"Kate knows, doesn't she?"

"How could she?"

"Eddie Dodge knows. I know Kate talks to him on the phone. Or you told Kate yourself. You're together all the time. It's all right, you can say whatever you want. You want me to tell her?"

"No, there's no point. You don't know everything anyway. You don't understand. It wasn't my fault—"

"You're right," I said, ignoring the sudden regret in my mother's voice, still wanting to hurt her more. "I don't know. I don't remember. I don't know anything."

"You're better off," Dolly went on, looking down at her hands that held the faded velvet. *"That's why I sent you to the Lawrences. I'm sorry—about everything."*

"Are you really?"

"Yes," Dolly said, *"Sorry I ever brought another person into this terrible world—"*

"You don't mean that. Kate wouldn't be here if it weren't for you."

Then, before she could answer, my voice getting higher:

"Just think! She wouldn't have met Eddie Dodge. It was you who brought them together. Congratulations! They're together right now, in your blue Cadillac, parked by the ditch! Can you picture that?"

I moved to the night table and picked up Dolly's fork and plate, then looked down at the gun with the flying butterfly cut in the ivory handle.

To the point of threatening murder she was terrified of something or someone, maybe just the peacocks, it was wrong to taunt her about the closed window. She was old and ill, half crazy, even if she looked like a younger pretty sister.

"No more needles," I'd heard her murmur, her face turning on the soaked pillow in the heat. *"No more ink—"*

I started to reach out and touch her blue shoulder, to tell Dolly I was truly sorry, that I felt dead on my feet, I didn't know what I was saying, I didn't mean it.

Mother, please forgive me, I know your heart's not strong. You can keep the string if it makes you feel better. I'll just take the gun, for safekeeping, the smell of gunpowder doesn't agree with Delmus and me—

Anyway, it's all water under the bridge, now Kate has to figure it out, it's her own life to live.

But I didn't. I couldn't if I wanted to, Life or Death.

I turned, letting my mother lie there, with her head bowed against the rhinestones. On the sheet beside the gun was the fallen note pad—X's and rows of lines like a broken tic-tac-toe, and a few scribbled words: *Zorro's Mask, Silver Heart, Ramon's guitar*

Her hand gripped the string.

"Would you close the door?"

I wanted to whirl and strangle her, grab her neck with both hands and squeeze, harder and harder until her face turned younger still and it was Kate—

I had to do something or my head would come off—I would go out to the pump in the field and throw the lever, drink and drink from the tin cup hanging from the chain at the standpipe, run to the barn and lift the bale and swallow Delmus' bottle of whiskey, every drop, rip Mrs. Watkins' sex book to shreds, the one she'd forced on Kate out by the mailbox. I'd flood the vines, wake Noah from his drunk and drown Eddie Dodge, open the gates to free the horse and the doomed pig—

If I got that far, if she didn't fire the gun.

I wouldn't run or hide, fall and roll under the bed.

Kyla, Kyla roll under the bed!

"Kyla, please close the door."

"I'm going to," I said. "Gun or no gun. I'm going to close it tight, for a favor, and then you can pull the string."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. Now you'll be safe—like a little moth in a snuff box!"

Like in "The Devil and Daniel Webster," the man's soul batting in the little square of wood with a few scraps of torn paper—

"Kyla!"

But already I was gone—slamming the door against her cry and no shot going off, the lock clicking back—up the hall and starting down the stairs where nothing ever changed, where there was no weather, Kate never left the house, my mother Dolly Mable never arrived. "*One spin of the wheel,"* Delmus said as the grindstone turned beneath the knife. *"Safer to go to Reno than make raisins every year—"*

Here Delmus and I would always be in love among ivy wallpaper where it never rained, away from the Lawrences in Fresno. And little Kate would run into the house so excited, calling me to come look.

There was young and handsome Delmus, leading Kate's prancing new pony up the drive, white socks and a matching blaze on its forehead.

I could lie down to sleep on the stairs, see the high slanting ceiling rising above me like the nave of a church, where God always was, like the Lawrences said. He never moved, he was always here, asleep.

I dropped the plate in the sink and went back into the living room and picked up my knitting from the coffee table. I turned on the TV, the rain-interrupted baseball game starting again, the grounds crew rolling back the tarp through the light drizzle, as quickly I interwove the two strands of red yarn to stop the rain.

One strand stood for my love and one strand for my hate that had once been my fear, I'd weave the two, hoping what resulted would be something I could live with.

It wasn't working right, I kept expecting the band to play, some celebrity to sing the National Anthem, and I put the needles down and took up my embroidery, holding the wood circle with my oven mitt and sewing with one hand.

"'Many men will leave the earth on the wings of the butterfly,'" Dolly Mable told Kate as I passed in the hall with fresh sheets. *"'And when you die you will know, the Butterfly will fly off to the stars. What a marvelous death!'"*

"Really?"

"That's what Dr. Bolger said, when the beautiful girl woke up in San Francisco, in Aaron Markham's great house by the sea—"

Once I thought I heard someone outside the window screen as the vine canes blew in the wind. The Standpipe Strangler?

I didn't look up, not even when I heard gunshots rippling across the vineyard, someone shooting rabbits at

night as they froze in the pickup's headlights.

"We begin bombing Russia in five minutes," Reagan had joked over an open mike the other week, Delmus said.

My free hand worked quick as a wing, like an expert's, the needle flying through and back and through again leaving new lines of bright color.

I might have been Betsy Ross sewing late into the night, stitching not a butterfly sampler I'd worked on for a year but a brand-new flag I'd finish by morning, for some wonderful new country that had never been discovered—

Nels Hanson grew up on a small farm in the San Joaquin Valley of California, earned degrees from UC Santa Cruz and U of Montana, and has worked as a farmer, teacher and contract writer/editor. His fiction received the San Francisco Foundation's James D. Phelan Award and Pushcart Prize nominations in 2010 and 2012. Stories have appeared in Antioch Review, Texas Review, Black Warrior Review, Southeast Review, Montreal Review*, and other journals, and are in press at* Tattoo Highway *and* The Milo Review*. Hanson lives with his wife, Vicki, on California's Central Coast.*

Monday

It is a dream come true for Sipho Mbongolo. His prayers have been answered.

……
"Sipho, as a matter of interest, with whom are you staying in Old Magwegwe?"

Madam Mumba is relaxing on a gold-coated garden chair; her back is fidgeting as if itchy, or as if resting on something pricky. So short are her lacey shorts that Sipho's eyes are magnetically riveted to where her huge legs are joined together in a union of fat and flesh. The sight drives Sipho's poor heart into a series of emotional jerks. However, playfully, mischievously and slowly, she launches light but lively kicks on the lap of Sipho, whose chest in turn vibrates breathlessly as the hormones run riot.

"Ah…ahh…. Madam Mumba, I sit with my small father, my small mother and their children: Makhi, Mzwakhe and Sethekeli."

"Sipho, please call me Mona or Monalisa. Are your cousins friendly to you, do you get along well?"

Sipho's bloodshot eyes roll in their sockets as if at that point in time all they seek in this tempting world is to flee.

"They have the stubbornness of a black millipede, largely Sethekeli who has no shame to say she cannot be under a man. She has a mouth and I always protect her when her brothers want to beat her. But she thanks me by counting for me, hey I eat too much, hey I finish everything she gives, hey this, hey that. She has a tongue too, that's why I don't tell her my secrets, because her chest was kicked by a zebra. She sees me quiet and thinks I have no liver to tell her not talk bad about me."

Madam Mumba cannot help laughing hysterically. "She has a mouth! A big mouth! A tongue...? Well, she abases you baselessly. But what does a person who has a liver do? We all have a liver, don't we?"

"No, some people don't have a liver. Those who don't have the encouragement to tell you you have a mistake. I have a liver even if I see a lion, I don't urinate with fear. I face it like uShaka!".

"You mean courage! I see, but what do you mean your cousin counts for you? You cannot count money?"

"No. I can. She counts for me. Uyangibalela ukudla. She says to people I eat too much of her father's food. She forgets tomorrow is yesterday."

Madam Mumba's ribs are itching from a burst of laughter. She steadies herself, before tapping Sipho in a

hooking manner between his legs. The rustically inclined man draws away, batting his eye. He gasps, looks askance – much to the amusement of the teaser.

She picks up a glass of wine and ungracefully some wine splashes out, dropping on her fatty neck.

“Sipho, you talk of your uncle, aunt and cousins; where is your biological father? Ehmmm. But before you respond to that question please towel the spilt wine on my neck with your tongue”.

Sipho’s yellow-tainted teeth are bared. In fact, if he were swimming one would be forgiven for thinking that he is on the verge of drowning. He is practically gasping for breath.

“My bio-o-ological father, he died five years old while the maize was kicking and the pumpkins were vomiting in the fields.” His face is a little gloomy. He adds: “It was the disappearance of luck as elders say. He, my father, didn’t like a person who doesn’t hear. His stomach was running him, running him…”

“Sipho, my goodness, you’re such a fascinating literal translator. Your parlance is what is sometimes referred to as Ndenglish. I guess that even if you cannot give me a blow-by-blow account of how your father died five years ago, you’re basically saying he died while the maize plants and pumpkins were blooming or tasselling”.

“Is that so?”

The reply is phrased like a question.

“Yes... Madam. No… Mona. Yes is that so, shuwa. Maa... Mona, I mean he was going outside fast-fast. He was carrying heavy.”

“Ooh, gosh! My Lord! I think I’m getting more confused now.” Madam Mumba whimpers.

“No, Madam… Mona… what confused do you have? It’s simple: Wayesiya ngaphandle. Out into the bush. Ethwele nzima, just carrying heavy.”

“Okay, he had a running tummy! My goodness! What do those who don’t hear do, generally?”

“General, they do bad. They don’t work what they are told to work. They have hard heads. You don’t need to see a moon or isangoma to tell you that they do bad. Same like Sethekeli; she thinks she has black because no young man will point her. We cry not for the self-doer but for the done-to.”

“Oh, I see, Sethekeli must be stubborn and disobedient but whatever your opinion –men are funny creatures .They will make passes at anything, ghosts and corpses included. You’re just being hard on

Sethekeli, I think. What does a moon or sangoma do?"

"Madam, sorry, Mona, a moon I am referring to is not the banana-shaped light that appears at night, but an inyanga. I mean a herbal man – one who cures. A sangoma can foresee, can tell you your tomorrow."

Time tears on.

Wednesday Night

The bladder threatens to open apart with sudden violence if he does not respond to the call of nature right away. Sipho slips out of the bed, rushes towards the door, hits against the door frame and curses, "Demedi!" Common sense orders him to put on the lights.The lights uncover one thing: he is wearing a tattered undergarment. He does not care a dot because he is alone. He slips into a pair of purple trousers – and races into the toilet. Inside the beautifully painted small room, he feels for the zip.

"Demedi! Where is the damn zip!" The zip-it is the other way round, at the back! He struggles with the waistline, hitches the trousers down but, no, the urine is irrepressible. Tremulously, he navigates his human hosepipe to face the toilet pan – but it is already too little too fast… There is a desperate whirlwind inside him. It is spurting out, making the floor messy and cloudy. The short bursts of the coloured watery waste have made an emergency landing on an exclusive imported tapestry of the quilting products. Like an efficient scrub-man, he fetches the scrubbing cloth, sorts out his mess, sighs a sigh of a fireman who has stumbled and fumbled before putting out a raging fire. He walks along the passage.

At Madam Mumba's door, he hears some noise. Mumba dreaming aloud! Dreaming? Soliquising? He places an ear on the lockset.

"I care for you."

(An inaudible sound).

"Yes, I confess I was going out with that Minister but…

(An inaudible sound).

"Please… Let's not dwell on that issue.

You killed him out of jealousy, now you suspect I am going out with that …"

(An inaudible sound)

“I won’t shut up! I don’t have a crush on him. He is just my… eh…”

(An inaudible sound).

Sipho says to himself: I am convinced that Madam Mumba is arguing with a boyfriend. Hmmn… so she has a boyfriend after all. Anyway, she is only human.

Once on his bed, he recalls everything. How last Saturday he met Madam Mumba in a salt queue, his speechless admiration for her high-class car. How a naked man burst into the queue and started fondling the backside of a plump woman who, on discovering the presence of the mentally challenged man, took to her heels like her body was a mere feather. How they talked about the incident and the endless queues, ending up discussing the sad state of the economy, and how Madam Mumba was prepared to dig him out of his financial mess by offering him a job as her bodyguard. How they later weaved their way through the bustling crowd into her gleaming car.

Then on Monday, at what appeared like a billionaire’s evening party – at the Mumba residence, men and women who drove the latest and most expensive cars, spoke on the trendiest of cell phones and wore immaculate designer suits converged, wined and dined. They spoke English, danced in an English way and even sneezed in English – or so it seems to Sipho. He remembers one silly man with an elephantine neck who gave him a glass of wine, and when he told him that he was a teetotaler and a member of the Zionist Bakhonzi Beqiniso Church, he called him a stupid, rustic pumpkin who did not know that Heaven is on earth.

He also has a vivid picture of a lady who told him squarely: “I love you boy. I’ve gold and silver. Gold is my first name. Fun my second. Bodyilicious my surname. What more can a soul want? Those who have had the privilege and pleasure of rubbing shoulders with me have confessed that I uniquely nurture a soul’s heart and body like the earth’s axis is on my palm. Run away from this portly pig, Mumba. I would pay you more; give you my everything, boy. My body oozes love and more love for you. Your body, oh boy, I feel like licking you up like a chocolate bar.”

He remembers his response:

“I appeared for my wife sometimes ago. The go-between asked for a fire. I paid the open-the-mouth money. I will pay the suitor be-known money. Sorry, besides in my culture, a woman does not smoke or point a man.”

The smoking, swaying and over-embellished woman unleashed f-prefixed obscenities at him. She called him the most unintelligent, rural, backward cat she had ever seen before reeling away and kissing a man who could easily be her oldest grandson.

He is now half-asleep. He hears some patting sounds from a distance, but finally he drifts into sleep. He has a grandparent of a nightmare.

Thursday morning

“Madam, me thinks there is a witch here?”

“What?”

“Me thinks there’s a witch who’s doing rounds and sounds here.”

“Sipho, get this clear, I hired a bodyguard, not a witch-hunter, okay?”

“Sorry, madam, but I’m made to see in my dreams as a Zionist…”

“Antiquated nonsense! Whether you’re a Zionist or Satanist I don’t bloody care a whit. Stick to your job description or else…”

That is it. Madam Mumba is bad-tempered today. She is a flooded river. Maybe her boyfriend rubbed her the wrong way. He too probably drives a stunning car. He must be one of the billionaires who were at the party. Madam Mumba is now dazzling in her dress. She drives away.

Thursday afternoon

Sipho is trimming the hedge. He wonders: when will I start body-guarding her? He tries to hack off a green leaf but the floppy folio dodges the cutter! He is shell-shocked. A shrieking laugh is heard. The source cannot be seen! Then he is pelted with small stones! He runs for cover in his room. Shiver holds his legs captive. He puts on the lights. His heart is full of pounding boulders now. A sub-human creature enters…

”Nkosi! My God!” He is screaming with a fear without ignominy and confines.

“Mfowethu, don’t panic. I won’t hurt you. I’m Mkhulumanothisa. I live here.”

The child-like voice is peppered with a swishing streak. Mumba’s bladder betrays and belittles him. He wets his tattered pants. The hobgoblin sneezes, sending out a yellowish, smallish and circular fluid across the room. It patters on the ceiling. Sipho’s world is now a tremulous den of the unknown. Small wonder he releases some squishing sound that gets the back of his trousers vibrating.

“Don’t worry. I won’t harm you. In fact, I’m disappointed with lady Mumba. She won’t get away with it. I brought her all the fortune she flaunts. Now she wants to get rid of me. Shat day she served me with salty relish, yet she knows in our clan, salt is an allergy. I read the mind. She forgets shat. Now she has left for Chiredzi, to seek a muthi man who will wipe me off the face of the earth. Yeppee! No! Nowayzshee. How narrow-minded!! Kill me? Never! I killed her meddling minister boyfriend. I will kill her too if she continues running madly like a nervous fool trying to castrate a burly bull with their bare teeth!”

Sipho almost melts into fear itself. Finally he summons enough courage to ask: “So you has a wife like us

people?"

The awe-inspiring 40 cm-long creature with a lengthy beard, rolling eyes and a hairy, whitish rugged skin replies in a low but child-like voice:

"I had a girlfriend who also worked for Mumba. Coz I'm a blast furnace in bed, the maid left in a huff. But me thinks she was already pregnant! Coz I`m a sharp-shooter! Shen…hhh…How can I put it? Shen, Mumba had no choice but to hook up with me. Needless to say Mumba and I are an item. And I'm a jealous man. So velly jealous shat you don't mess with our relationship by hook or crook, day or night and live to see another day. Forget."

Sipho finds himself posing another question.

"How did you make Mumba reach?"

"Rich, you mean? I loot. Yes banks, factories, stores, mining concerns, you name shehem – I raid. I can sheeleep with a man's wife in his presence, on the shame bed. Shat me."

Though a watery coldness slithers down his legs, he manages to ask another question.

"So Madam Mumba will point the house where there is beer?"

"Yes, that woman will taste my wrath. They don't call me Ntokoloshi for nothing. Now take this and disappear. You did not talk with me. You did not see me, is that right? You disclose, you're dead."

Sipho cannot believe it. A suitcase filled to the brim with crisp notes! He walks past the computerised colourful gate. With a trembling joy, he hurries on, his horizon characterised by the diminishing grandeur of the house and the snowballing mysteries therein.
……..

If this is not a dream… if these are real notes… If… he wanders.
————————————————————

Glossary
Small father: uncle
Small mother: aunt
To have a mouth: to provoke people to fight you
To have a liver: to be courageous
To count for: to accuse one of eating too much (especially of the given food)
To have a tongue: to talk about someone else (usually) in a damaging way in that person's absence
A chest kicked by a zebra: this refers to a person who cannot keep secrets or whose chest `leaks` confidential information easily
To point: a direct literal translation which refers to propose love

Tomorrow is yesterday: Bear in mind that whatever bad thing you do or say today will haunt you in the future (e.g You can laugh at someone else's abject poverty today but when you are in need in future you may turn to the same person for help).
The maize is kicking and the pumpkins vomiting: this a literal translation used to refer to the stage at which the maize plant is tasselling and the pumpkins are blooming
Shuwa:sure
Carrying heavy: Toiling or suffering
Inyanga: (In SiNdebele, this term refers to a moon or a herbalist/traditional healer
Has a black: a literal translation for bad luck
Ask for fire: When a suitor's delegation goes to the girl's parents/relatives in order to tell them that a man is interested in marrying their daughter
(It used to be a fiery affair, with the mediators being sometimes (initially) beaten/tossed about or chased away
Open the mouth money: the money that kick-starts the above negotiations
Point the house where there is beer: to be in hot soup

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From behind the rain-streaked windshield, cleared briefly when the wipers are turned on, I watch the street.

She knows where the Peugeot is parked and she has the extra car key I gave her.

"This Ông Đốc town," I told her before we split, "has one main street and backstreets are the rib bones. Find the main street and you won't get lost here." She dropped the car key into her purse, said,

"*Chú*, you make a good teacher." Her voice is soft with a lilt in 'chú.' Uncle. Then sauntering off she threw me a sidelong glance. "Don't worry for me," she said.

She came to the inn, 20 kilometers north of this town, where I live and work in the Mekong Delta, with her American mother who adopted her in 1974 when she was five years old. She's nineteen now.

It's raining hard like the evening I picked them up at the pier when they arrived on a barge. Since then her mother has bought them two raincoats. In fact, I bought them the raincoats in this seaport town on one of the crowded backstreets where you have to duck your head going under suspended wickerwork baskets and sieves and colorful apparel, where the broken pavements were ribbed with green moss in dark crevices, damp year round in a sunless gloom.

Now come the wind-born sounds of an arriving barge's siren and then just the sound of winds hurling headlong toward the river.

I light a cigarette, rolling down the window just a crack. The window fogs quickly and I wipe it with my forearm. You don't want to be in this town after a hard rain. When water has receded, everywhere sewer-spewed gunk lie stranded like wet daubs of black paint, and a stink fouls the air. Chi Lan might be sheltering under a shop's awning on some backstreet, watching rivulets of rain running off the street where its blacktop is so far gone the surface is patched with shorn boles of black mangrove. On the shop's wall, under the lee of the awning, she might be trying to read some handwritten words in Vietnamese scribbled in black crayons, "Repair nets, see Boat #20," "Buy and sell jewelry. See Mr. Hưng, Barge #4." I told her,

"Never pay the price they ask for. Haggle—down to every knickknack, every jerrybuilt gimcrack, for they can tell you're a *Việt Kiều*." She said,

"Overseas Vietnamese? They can? From my accent?" I nodded with a shrug.

"Sure. And because you look different." She leaned her head to one side, her lips parted with an unasked question. "You just look wholesome," I said. "Beware. This dog-eat-dog town is full of drifters."

“Like you?” she said with a chuckle.

“Like me,” I said. Most of them, I told her, rent a squalid room somewhere to sleep in, a pay-per-day room for one or one family whose husband, a hired hand, goes to sea at dawn, sometimes gone for several days at sea, and the wife works the town for odd jobs, sleeping alone at night. Between fair weather and big catches, she hoards money and in time would use his cash to open a knickknack shop and stash away the profit little by little in gold leaves until one day they cash them in to buy themselves a fishing boat. This town abounds with opportunists. Some of them would later own a fleet of fishing boats. One used to own a seafood manufacturer that employed one-third of the town’s population, another a boat-repair factory, and another an ice-making plant, and now one of those drives a taxi for a living, another works as a coolie on the dock, and another died alone in an alley.

I told her when we left the café to come back to the car and wait for me after she was done with her excursion. The café had a red-inked, handwritten sign hung on the door. She noticed the sign when we stepped out of the café. She read it, puckering her mouth in tiny creases.

“What exactly does it mean?” she asked.

“First,” I said with a cigarette unlit between my lips, “tell me what you understand from those words.” She glanced down at the sign, her finely curved eyebrows raised a little, then turned to me.

“Something about the Vietnamese slow-drip café for serious men?” I thought the figure of speech would be hard for her to understand, but she caught on its figurative language. I pointed at the particular words for which I couldn’t find a comparable expression in English, and she said,

“It means ‘for the birds.’” I put the cigarette back in my shirt pocket, said, “Sweet dreams are for the birds. On sleepless nights real men drink only café *phin*.” She flicked a smile, her clear, perfectly shaped eyes blinked.

“Like you, chú,” she said. Then, after a pause, she looked away from my gaze. “You go buy your stuff, have your hair cut, and I’ll meet you back soon.”

Walking past the café was a boy carrying on his head a wicker sieve covered with a white cloth. “Sugarcane!” he called out. “Sugarcane!” I stopped him. The boy brought down the sieve and peeled back the cloth cover. Round chunks of pale yellow sugarcane filled the sieve. I bought half the sieve and the boy wrapped the chunks in a moist cloth. We stood, sucking on the cane cubes, and flies came whirring around. I told her it was sugarcane season, and she, wiping the juice from the corner of her mouth, leaned toward me, said,

“What’s that noise I keep hearing in the air?” I listened, spitting shreds of cane in my mouth.

“The chirpings?” I said.

“Yes,” she said, “the chirpings.” I took the cigarette pack from my shirt pocket.

“This town is a bird-town,” I said. “They raise swiftlets everywhere and profit from selling their nests. The nests the birds build with threads of their saliva.” Restaurants serve bird’s nest soup, I told her. Quite expensive. Rich people buy them as delicacy and eat them for health benefits. At least that’s what the merchants had them believe in. Credulous people and greedy opportunists. Perfect combination. And the chirpings? They come from those birds, and if the birds stop chirping then what you hear are the mechanical chirpings. The town’s breeders dedicate a whole story of their homes as a bird colony. They lure the birds with the birdlike sounds. They build tubes for the birds to make nests in. Neat, cup-shaped nests. When a nest is built, the breeder would take it away and the bird has to build another one to lay its eggs in. But day and night this town is kept awake by the birds’ chirpings. I stopped and offered her another chunk of cane. She shook her head, wiping the corners of her mouth with her thumb and finger.

“Such a bizarre business,” she said, “which I’m sure I won’t ever see again but in Vietnam.”

Now I take one last drag of the cigarette and flick it out the rolled-down window. In the sound of winds I can hear the swiftlets’ shrill sounds, scattering in tidbits, and down on the windward side of the quay sometimes you can hear them too, the strident notes of those black-billed, black-footed birds now trapped in the man-made bird colonies in the town’s matchbox-sized dwellings.

I hear a rustle of raincoat and glancing up at a knock on the window I see a hooded face. A girl wearing a pink, clear-plastic raincoat bends her head looking at me. I roll down the window. She wipes her face and smiles. I notice her eyetooth.

“Remember me?” she asks.

“I remember you,” I say, nodding.

“What’re you doing in town?”

“Having some business to tend to.”

“Why didn’t you stop by anymore?”

“I might, someday.” Then leaning back I look at her a bit longer until she starts giggling.

“Why’re you looking at me like that?” she says.

“You have lipstick on, so I didn’t recognize you at first.”

“You like it?”

“You didn’t have it on then.”

“You mean the first time you met me?”

“Yeah.”

“So you like me better looking plain?”

“You look fine either way.”

“You’re always polite. You’re not like any of them who went in there.” Then she looks the car over. “This your car?”

“I don’t own a car. It’s the inn owners’ car.”

“You told me about the inn. Well, I’ve never been out that way though.” A wind gust nearly blows her hood back. She grabs the top of it and holds it down.

“Are you on your way up there?” I ask, glancing toward the café, the second story of which has three curtained windows overlooking the main street, the shutters painted pale pink wreathed with red bulbs.

“I don’t have to be there in another half an hour,” she says.

I notice her hand resting on the edge of the rolled-down window glass. Her fingernails painted a gaudy red. I motion with my head to the passenger seat.

“Come sit inside,” I say. “It’ll be clearing up soon.”

She walks around the front of the car, stops abruptly as if changing her mind, then walks on to the other side. I push open the car door.

“I’ll mess up the seat,” she says as she wipes rainwater off the front of her raincoat.

“Just get in,” I say.

She flops down on the passenger seat, shuts the door with a *clunk*. I look at her peeling back her hood. Wet

strands of hair matted on her brow. Her hair is longer now, touching her shoulders. Three months ago it was shorter. Now she wears a rooster's comb-red plastic hairband, as bright as her lipstick that smears toward a corner of her mouth. She dries her face with the back of her hand, then pulls open the visor to look at her face in its inset mirror.

"Where're you from?" I ask, watching her wipe the smeary lipstick off the side of her mouth.

"Not here," she says, her voice cracked a little. "What'd I tell you last time?"

"I wasn't there long. Didn't get to know much of you."

"I remember. You paid. And did nothing." Then she reaches for the visor again, looks at herself in the little mirror. "You didn't tell me why. Then you left."

I say nothing, just watching her fixing up her looks and when she turns to look at me, she flinches then quickly breaks into a nervous laugh.

"Why d'you keep looking at me like that?" she says, stops laughing now, running her tongue over the eyetooth.

"You were too young," I say. "That's why."

"I didn't tell you my age. I swear."

"You can't hide your age with your looks."

"Looks? Nobody ever told me that. They . . . you think they know? Or care?"

"They didn't. Obviously."

"How old d'you think I am?" Then she touches her lips again, clears her throat. "You have a cigarette?"

I fish out the fresh pack, tap it and watch her pinch a cigarette between her red-nailed fingers. I click open my Zippo, light her cigarette. She coughs immediately, waving the smoke off her face.

"This isn't mint cigarette," she says and picks some tobacco shreds off the tip of her tongue.

“Not mint, not filtered.”

She checks me with her eyes and grinning she hands me her cigarette. “Not for me,” she says.

I look at the red-lipstick stain of the unfiltered tip, then with my thumb and finger snuff out the burning end. She pulls back a little. “Hurt?” she asks.

“No.” I slide the cigarette back into the pack. “When did you pick up smoking?”

“Not too long ago. All the girls in there smoke. We’ve got nothing else to do.”

“You’re the youngest.”

“Guess how old I am then.”

“Sixteen? Seventeen?”

She brings her hand to her lips, chewing the tip of her fingernail, and peers up at me. “I’ll be seventeen real soon. The three other girls they’re older, one eighteen, the others twenty, and twenty-one.” Now she gnaws at her pinkie’s nail. “You done it with them, didn’t you?”

“I have. Before you were there.”

I crank down the window halfway to let out the cigarette smoke. Rain drums loudly on the car roof, popping on the rim of the window glass. I feel droplets of rain on my face, my eyes. When I turn back I see her gazing at me, her eyes plain, her eyebrows full, natural. Perhaps it won’t take but another year before those eyelashes will be thickened with mascara, those eyebrows plucked, sharply aslant, toward the ears.

“Is there something wrong with me?” she asks, her eyes still.

“You’re just too young.”

My calm voice seems to have convinced her, for she drops her gaze and, playing with her raincoat’s front zipper, speaks into her lap, “Some guys said I was too skinny. Am I too skinny to you?”

“Yeah.”

“So it’s better with those other girls than with me, right?”

“No. It’s just that I didn’t feel right.”

“Why not?”

“There’re certain things you don’t do. Do it and you would hate yourself afterward ’cause you’ve broken some personal rules.”

She peers up, says, “*Mmm*.” Then she brings her hand to her mouth again, stops as she sees me staring at her gesture. She presses one thumb into the palm of her other hand and speaks, hoarsely,

“Your wife knows what you did, I mean visiting that place?” I chuckle.

She looks up quickly. “What’s funny?”

“What’d you do if you find out the sort of things your husband did when he’s away from you?”

“I don’t know.” She scratches her head with a tip of her long nail, then giggling, raises her voice a notch. “Ask me again when I’m married.”

“I was about to say the same thing to you.”

“So you’re not married. Right?”

I shake my head. Someone is hurrying across the street, stopping to find footing in the running water, then wading on toward the Peugeot. Bundled up in a yellow plastic raincoat, the figure stops at the passenger door and knocks on the window glass. The young girl cranks down the window and a hooded face peers in.

“Chi Lan?” I call out.

“Can I get in?” she speaks in English with her lips hardly moving as rainwater drips freely down her face.

“Open the door,” I tell the young girl.

“Who’s she?” the young girl glances back at me.

“She’s our guest at the inn.”

“She’s *Việt Kiều*?”

“Yeah. Vietnamese from America. Open it!”

As Chi Lan steps back the girl pushes open the door and struggles to get out. I watch her exit the car, work her hood back on to cover her head as rain falls spouting on the window’s edge, pricking my face with sprays. The girl waves, just one quick hand motion, and turns and walks up the waterlogged sidewalk.

Arm resting on the steering wheel, I turn toward Chi Lan as she flops down on the seat, swinging shut the car door. Rain slants in on the dashboard, staining it quickly. I reach over and roll up the window. The wet creaky sound of her raincoat, yellow as banana, makes me pause.

“Where’d you get this raincoat?” I ask, leaning back against the car door.

“I bought it from a street vendor.” She pulled back the hood and gave her head a shake. Giggling, she watches me wipe wetness from my eyes. “I had to buy it,” she says. “I didn’t know when it’d stop raining.”

“You had any trouble with them vendors?”

“Yes . . . no.” She hung her head to one side. “I walked away and he called me back. Because I remembered what you paid for our raincoats not too long ago. This one . . .” She pauses, looks down at the front of her raincoat glistening with moisture, “is just like the one you bought and he asked for twice the price.”

“Sure,” I say. “But if I didn’t get you that raincoat, would you have paid what he’d asked?”

“Well . . .” She rolls her eyes, her tongue’s tip protruding from the corner of her mouth, and then looks back at me. “I took your advice seriously, chú. I bargained. That’s why I had some money left and bought you something.”

I notice she still keeps her other hand under her raincoat. With her free hand she runs her fingertips under her hair, tangled and damp, gathering it over and behind her ears. Then she unzips her raincoat and I see a purse slung over her shoulder and her other hand holding a brown bag against her purse.

“I bought these near where I bought the raincoat,” she says and opens the bag.

I look as she picks up a styrofoam cup, lidded, and hands it to me with a white plastic spoon.

“What is it?” I take hold of the cup, the spoon.

“Chè.”

I pop open the lid. Longan *chè*. Inside each succulent pearly longan is a paste of yellow mung bean. I can’t help chuckling.

“Must be your favorite?” I say, remembering what she’d said about eating longan *chè* in America.

“Favorite?” Her brow creases a little. “I’d only tried one flavor of *chè* back home. I don’t know it’d be my favorite because I haven’t tried other flavors of *chè*.”

“I’ll get you some other flavors before you leave Vietnam.”

I spoon a longan, cool, pulpy into my mouth, and chew, letting the faintly sweet taste of mung bean melt on the tongue, then I sip the ginger-flavored, sweetened juice. She stops sipping the juice from the cup, tapping the spoon now against the cup’s rim. She’s looking at me.

“You had your hair cut after all, chú,” she says.

“Something I really hate having done.” I take a long sip of the cool juice. Feeling better in my throat, I lid the cup.

“Don’t you like this flavor?”

“I save it for later,” I say, wanting a puff of cigarette badly as I look at her.

“This flavor’s the only flavor I know. They’ve got like thirty some flavors and they all look yummy. What’s your favorite?”

“I don’t know. I’m not too crazy about sweet things.”

“You don’t have a sweet tooth, huh?”

“What’s that?”

“Sweet tooth. A craving for sweet things.”

“Mmm,” I say, putting the new words away in my mind.

“Did you buy the stuff you came to town for?”

“Yeah. Got the groceries for the inn.”

“Who’s that girl in here?”

“That girl?” I tap the spoon on the lidded cup. “She’s a local prostitute.”

“A hooker?”

“Yeah.”

Chi Lan tilts her head back and looks at me. “She was in here soliciting?”

“You mean her asking me . . .”

“Yes.”

“No. I asked her to sit out the rain. I saw her once three months ago and she remembered me.”

“Saw her where?”

“Above that café.” I motion with my head toward the café up across the street.

Chi Lan ducks her head trying to peer through the rain-smeared windshield. She sits back, nodding.

“I saw the red bulbs on the second-story windows when we left the café. Kinda odd looking, I thought.” The cup raised to her lips, she says, “So that kind of business is legal here?”

“Of course not.” I pry open the cup’s lid and then press it shut.

“So that café is also a brothel?”

“A what?”

“A whorehouse.”

“Yeah. The café’s owner pays off local police. Been like that.”

“She looks very young though.”

“Yeah. Younger than you.”

“So you visit that place every time you go to that café?”

“Only three times since I came to the inn. Will be two years after this month.”

“So it’s roughly every eight months that you visited the brothel.”

“Give or take.” Then I chuckle. “Or it could be three months in a row and the next twenty-one months the river runs dry.”

“If you can quit going there, you can quit smoking.”

Her eyes drop to my shirt pocket through its white color shows the one-humped camel. I watch her tuck in her juice-moistened lower lip, sucking it gently then running her tongue over it. I can see a tiny black mole under the corner of her left eye. She lifts her gaze, blinks, when she sees me gazing at her.

“What else did you buy?” I ask her softly, breaking the silence.

“Nothing else. I took many pictures though. And a few of the town in the downpour when I was waiting it out.”

I glance down at her purse. She always carries the camera in it whenever she leaves the inn.

“You must be very good with the camera,” I say as she spoons the last longan into her mouth. Tilting her head to one side, she chews slowly, lips closed, glistening, then she sips until the cup is empty.

“On the spur of the moment,” she says finally as she drops the empty cup and the spoon into the brown bag. “Anything that captures my imagination in such moment becomes my camera’s subjects of interest.

Just like you, chú. You draw, I photograph."

I nod, smiling, at her statement. I could have drawn the young prostitute and I know someday I might. The subject must first capture your imagination, like Chi Lan said.

"Are you going to draw her, or have you already?" she asks.

"That girl?" I say, piqued by our coincidental thoughts. "I might draw her when I'm up to it. You don't do it without that special feeling. It's different with a photographer, though. See, you must capture the subject with your camera on the spur of the moment. Or lose it. An artist waits until a subject matures in him. He has time because the subject has already entered his memory."

"But they say memory is the ability to forget. Have you heard that?"

"No. If something's gone from the memory, it's not worth remembering."

"Will they be gone after you've drawn them?"

"No. All you do is giving them a decent burial. The ghosts are never gone. They just rest in peace."

"Because they were painful memories?"

"Not really. If I draw you someday"——I pause, nodding at her——"it won't be from a painful memory. Yeah?"

She shrugs, her lips curl up with a smile. She has seen many of my drawings. Sketches of people and things. Remembered. Unremembered. And that's how you unburden your memories.

"You draw beautifully," she says, her eyes softened as she looks into mine. "There must be many stories in those drawings, chú. Like a diary in pictures."

"Because I'm not good with words."

"Though I've found my creativity through the eye of the camera, I want to write."

"You're natural with words."

"I want to know every story behind a photograph, every story behind a drawing. I love to hear them. And the

stories untold in your drawings."

"Yeah," I say, taking her in with my gaze. Then turning away I start the car. I'm sure when I finally draw this girl, I won't forget to dot the corner of her left eye with a tiny mole.

Khanh Ha's debut novel is FLESH *(June 2012, Black Heron Press). He graduated from Ohio University with a bachelor's degree in Journalism. His new novel has earned a 2013 Leapfrog Fiction Award Honorable Mention. His short stories have appeared in* Outside in Literary & Travel Magazine, Red Savina Review (RSR), Cigale Literary Magazine, Mobius, DUCTS, Lunch Ticket, The Mascara Literary Review, Taj Mahal Review, Glint Literary Journal*, and forthcoming in the summer issues of* Zymbol, Yellow Medicine Review (2013 September Anthology), The Underground Voices (2013 December Anthology), and The Long Story (2014 March Anthology).

Sharon, in the kitchen preparing appetizers, heard her husband telling the guests, "Our cocker spaniels have no street sense," and wondered what event he had kept hidden from her. Louis often took the sisters, twins from the same litter, with him to their Bootheel house. Perhaps they had gotten away from him, and he hadn't told her about it.

"You've always walked them on a leash here, right?" their guest Debbie assumed. "And I saw you have a fence out back." She was a junior staff member in the Environmental Geology Office, new this fall to the Survey and the area. Louis, her manager, knew she and her husband had not found a social niche yet.

"Right, but I've read about the breed, and, while they are great bird dogs, they have no idea where they've been or where they are in relationship to a starting point. Just lost in the woods."

And that was Sharon's clue that he was about to slide into his one Vietnam story. How this occasion required it, she couldn't guess. Sometimes he started his account of going A.W.O.L. and, still not exactly sure what it meant, couldn't finish it.

"I can be like that, not sure where I've been or where I'm going," joked Thomas, Debbie's husband, who had just been hired as an assistant loan manager at Fairfield State Bank. "But sometimes I deliberately keep where I've been a secret."

"Don't think I don't have my spies, darling," Debbie said, her head tilted back knowingly; but Sharon felt her mouth couldn't quite achieve a smile. The town of Fairfield was still small enough that marital indiscretions were hard to hide. And a man as good looking as Thomas was noticed.

Sharon had caught an undertone in Debbie's conversation earlier that suggested the couple's relationship might be under strain. And now she understood why her husband had invited this couple nearly forty years younger than they were to dinner.

A hospital chaplain, she also knew the stress two professional careers can put on a marriage when one partner, especially a man, feels the sacrifice is all on one side. She understood that Louis' fidelity to her was grounded in her having waited for him during his overseas tour.

They had decided to get married when he got his draft notice; and, after nine months together at Fort Leonard Wood, he left the country. Their marriage was still being shaped.

Older than many in his unit overseas, Louis wrote that he was the one they turned to when their "Dear John" letters arrived. She was irritated at hints that he needed reassurance himself. Coming from a military family, that kind of betrayal was simply inconceivable to her.

Sharon brought in the cheese, crackers, and fresh vegetables as Louis went on. "We have this river house down near Sikeston, southeast corner of the state." Even though Debbie now worked for the state Division

of Geological Land Survey, he explained where this was because she and Thomas were Illinois natives. "We spend a lot of our summers there, but I also go down periodically in the winter just to make sure everything's secure--no water flowing from broken pipes, mold not taking over the closets, squirrels kept from getting into the attic and eating the wiring."

The house was over one hundred years old, and they were in the process of modernizing it as a retirement home. They both loved houses that had stood the test of time, but knew regular maintenance and tender loving care were even more important than in modern constructions. Sharon was often busy on weekends and not able to take the three-hour trip down as frequently as he, senior head of the Water Tracing Department and within a year of retirement. Louis didn't mind going alone, convinced he was keeping his peace of mind by regular escapes to their hideaway.

"I hope it's in a more lively place than Fairfield," observed Thomas. "This burg closes up at 6:00, even on weekends."

Sharon agreed. "We are a family-oriented community. A lot of our entertainment is having friends over for dinner--as tonight." She swept a hand in front of her to include them all in the evening. Looking at Louis, she smiled, "He doesn't do it just because he's the boss."

"Princess and the Queen thought they wanted more excitement, too," said Louis, steering the conversation back to the dogs. "When they escaped the PT Cruiser, they were ready to chase other dogs, stray cats, field mice. But they discovered a truth I learned forty years ago." Sharon could tell he was already seeing the Mekong Delta rice field in his memory, the rows of young stalks, women in conical hats knee deep in the water, permanent low hanging clouds in the rainy season. And then the jungle.

"Let me freshen your drinks," Sharon said, smiling. "This might take a while."

"Can I help?" asked Debbie, half rising from the sofa.

"Oh, no. The lasagna just has fifteen more minutes in the oven; the salad's already made." She grinned. "And he needs an audience."

Thomas took a long pull on his beer. Sharon saw it as another sign of the restless spouse caught in a social engagement with the partner's professional associates. In the kitchen but still was able to hear her husband, she recalled the discomfort she had felt initially at the Survey's social events. She opened the oven door to check on the lasagna, wondering when Louis would start his story about taking a stroll off base.

"The girls ride in the back, with the seats down flat, behind a gate. And generally they fall asleep once I'm under way. But this time, Queen--who's the Alpha dog, as you might guess from her name--was restless. Maybe she smelled the cookies I had stashed away. Anyway, she pawed the gate in some way, and it fell back on top of both dogs."

"And they were in the front seat with you in a flash, weren't they?" laughed Debbie. When she'd met the cocker spaniels earlier, kneeling down to accept their eager tongues, she explained how she'd always had

dogs, at least until she married.

"You're right. And I'm trucking down a two-lane road at 55 miles per hour, so I'll have to stop to put the gate back. This is all flatland, nothing but fields around me. But then I spot a farm road--really, just two tire tracks in the dirt--and pull in."

"This isn't going to be a *Deliverance* story, is it?" asked Thomas, though his expression was hopeful. "Or something about a meth lab hidden in the woods?"

Debbie had told Louis that her husband, having lived all his life in big cities, had not been eager to come to what he characterized with the expression, "not the end of the earth--but you can see it from there." Still, like some people from other areas he was intrigued by the wild tales of hillbilly decadence in films like *Winter's Bone*. Did such things really happen, a girl sawing off her father's hands?

"My story isn't nearly so dramatic, though," assured Louis. "As you'll find in a moment, I could have been killed if human nature--well, if *canine* nature hadn't asserted itself. See, I found I couldn't get their fence back up while I was in the front seat; I was going to have to go around, open the tailgate, and put it in place. So, I pointed a stern finger at Royalty--that's their collective name--told them, 'stay,' and backed out of the driver's side door."

Again, Debbie was quick to pick up. "They got past you."

"Call of the wild," suggested Thomas, looking at the window.

"It may have been simple curiosity, but you're right. First Queen was on the ground, then Princess followed. I caught the second one by her rear end, though. She is a sweet dog, the subservient one, and will let me do anything to her. So, I pitched her back in and turned to find Queen."

"Not in the road, I hope?"

"On the shoulder, but, fortunately, nose to the ground. And bless the Lord, there were no cars coming either way." He paused. Sharon, taking her time in the kitchen to let Louis do his work, heard him lower his voice conspiratorially and imagined him leaning in: "If she'd been in the road, and a car coming, I knew I might as well lie down there with her. Queen is Sharon's dog. If she were run over, I would have said, “Take me, too, Jesus. Take me now.'"

They both laughed, though Thomas seemed unsure if he should. Debbie said, "If I had a dog, and Thomas lost her, . . . he'd better pray, too."

"Maybe that's why I don't want any pets." He smiled thinly. "Besides, we might be moving next year, if I get an offer I can't refuse."

Debbie had confided in Louis about Thomas' restlessness. He'd taken the Fairfield bank job more as a holding action than a commitment, and Debbie feared he would later ask her to give up her position and follow him. But this was exactly the kind of job she had dreamed about in graduate school.

Sharon carried the drink refills in on a tray, and Louis went on with the story. "So, when Queen stopped . . . to do what dogs do, to leave her mark, so to speak . . . I pounced on her." He paused, anticipating chuckles. "I was polite, though, and let her finish."

Thomas tried to continue the story, "Then you turned around and were face-to-face with a wolf, or a pack of wolves."

Louis laughed. Sharon raised her eyebrows as she handed another beer to Thomas, more sparkling water to Debbie.

"No wolves," admitted Louis. "But the danger wasn't over. I got her back to the car, plunked her down on the front seat so I could fix the gate."

"She didn't get away again?" asked Sharon.

"She did! Sly fox, right between my legs. But this time she went away from the road, out into the field."

Sharon suspected Thomas's personal experience could produce no picture of a soy bean field in late fall: the plants about eighteen inches tall, dark green leaves, parallel rows down the rich, sandy, delta soil. Nor would this young couple be able to envision the rice paddies, the water buffalo, the twin wooden buckets carried across the shoulders Louis had described for her. That's what he had passed on that day he wandered away from his base, a moment of madness on a day of sorrow.

"Again, I kept Princess in the car and went after her sister. She'd gone about ten yards or so down the path, then turned into the soy beans."

Sharon added. "If you've never seen them, it's a pretty sight in the fall. The fields are completely flat, so the rows are straight and go as far as a mile sometimes."

"That's right," agreed Louis. "And Queen was prancing down between two rows, her cocker spaniel ears flopping, her nose up to smell the air. All I could do was play defense, like a basketball player: stay between the other player and the goal behind me."

"The goal being the road in this case," said Debbie.

"Yes. I figured she could go as far as she wanted into the field. I just had to keep her from being flattened by

a speeding car."

Thomas wondered, his blue eyes sparkling. "Maybe there was a boy dog out there on the prowl, tired of the monogamous life, looking to score. You might have ended up with a litter of mongrel pups."

"Thomas," said Debbie softly.

Louis answered, "That would have been one of my worries, if she hadn't been spayed. But, as I said earlier, canine nature kicked in. Or something pretty deep inside her."

In her mind, Sharon heard Louis' account of passing through the fence of the base near Can Tho, walking past rice fields, wandering into a clump of banana trees. The branches arched over the path, blocking the sun, and he found himself standing in what was almost a tunnel or a cave. He became aware of flitting shadows, unpleasant smells, strange animal (and human?) sounds. The insane impulse to desert, to find the river, to escape by boat, evaporated.

"I know we can't read a dog's mind," Louis admitted. "Shoot, we can't even put their thoughts into our words, but still, that day I felt I knew what Queen was thinking."

"Oh?"

"You see, what happened was, all of a sudden, Queen stopped where she was and looked around her--ahead, to this side, to that. She had to stretch her neck to see over the soy bean plants, they were that tall then. She was the picture of alertness, scouting the territory before making a dash for whatever interested her most."

Thomas again interjected, "I'm telling you, some wild dog, who wouldn't care if another dog was in heat or not, . . . "

"Thomas!" This time Debbie's voice was louder, and sharper.

Louis hurried on as if they had not spoken. "One moment Queen was free, the world open all around her; she could escape all barriers, do whatever she wanted. Then she froze. And I am honestly convinced she thought something like, 'I have never in my life seen anything that remotely resembles this. Where the hell am I? There are no sidewalks here, no front lawns, not a house in sight. This is an alien landscape, a foreign world.'"

Debbie agreed. "I can understand that--a town dog out in the country."

"And I tell you, she looked around, and then she looked back at me. I'm about ten rows toward the road, again ready to intercept her if she comes this way. She looks at me, and I am certain she thinks: 'Hmm, I know that guy, that guy yelling at me to get back here. He keeps me on a leash and makes me walk in the

yard and takes me to the vet, but . . . but, you know, he also gives me food and belly rubs. I understand him. Out here,' she says to herself, again looking around, 'it's weird. I don't know how this place works. And I don't trust it.'"

"You mean that she came back to you on her own?" Debbie smiled.

"You've got it exactly. She took one last glance around her, then turned and trotted back down the row to the double tire tracks (where I'd moved too in a parallel fashion, still playing defense), came right up to me, and let me swoop her up, plunk her back in the car."

Thomas said, "Ah, she bailed. Took the easy way out." He finished his beer. "So many do that."

Debbie opened her mouth to speak, but Sharon took the cue. "Well, I think that it's a happy ending to a shaggy dog story, so, please, let's all come to the table."

Debbie and Thomas excused themselves to wash their hands after petting dogs, and perhaps recover some social composure. Sharon sent a worried glance after the young couple and raised her eyebrows to Louis. He shrugged. She suspected he wasn't going to make the transition into his Vietnam story after all.

Sharon knew Louis had told his tale many times, but each rendition was a bit different, the meaning shifting. His tour as a map compiler was uneventful except for this one incident, and he felt he had no traditional war story full of daring and courage to offer. It didn't cast him in a great role either, oblivious of the people they'd supposedly pledged to protect and liberate, abandoning those who depended on him.

True, on the morning of his stroll, Louis had watched them bag the bodies of the two men blown to pieces when a rocket landed in their bunker. Choppered in the day before to gather updated intelligence maps, he'd drunk beer with Duke and Roy while waiting for the ride out that didn't come. They had gone on perimeter guard duty, and he sacked out in their hootch. The shells came with the first light of dawn. What Louis, standing in a clump of banana trees, later understood at an almost visceral level seemed to be so important he struggled for ways and places to communicate it.

When they were all seated, Sharon asked with a smile, "So Debbie, tell me what it's like to work for my husband?"

"Don't answer that," Louis laughed, but she did.

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and Growing Up on Route 66 *(1999).*

A few years before a civil war broke out in Bosnia and Herzegovina because of the country's attempt to distance itself from the Yugoslav federation, Carla Palumbo, who had recently booked a trip there, sat watching her niece open gifts wrapped in baby-blue paper ornamented with sailboats, small yellow ducks, and other images that reminded the attendees of the baby shower that a boy was on his way. Carla was wearing a sweatpants and sweatshirt combination embroidered with tiny beads that formed flowers along her breast and down her side. Her sister's tiny Fox Chase townhouse was nearly filled with two generations of women from various cultural backgrounds. The off-white wallpaper was lined with plastic edges and was peeling and brown at the corners from the years of cigarette smoke that normally filled the room. On the wall above the cemented fireplace hung two paintings of Pope John Paul II and Christ; both attended to by the same artist's hand, both busts looking off to the upper left corner where an unknown source of light shone on their smooth pallid cheeks and softly curved noses.

The women formed a circle on plastic fold-out chairs to admire Carla's niece, Donna, who was glowing and round in the eighth month of her pregnancy. Carla was by her sister, the soon-to-be grandmother Gloria, with whom she exchanged glances of delight at each adorable piece of clothing that Donna pulled from the department store boxes.

"That's precious," one woman said, remarking about Carla's gift, a tiny teddy bear with a blue ribbon tied around its neck. The women around her smiled in pleasant agreement.

When the gift ceremony ended, all of the women went to the tables where a spread of food had been prepared. Carla and her sister had made meatballs and Italian sausage in a large, stove-stained pot next to an unarranged bag of long rolls. Donna's mother-in-law had ordered whitefish salad, Nova lox, cream cheese schmear and bagels all arranged in display on a bed of lettuce decorated with sliced tomatoes, white onions and capers. Carla approached the Jewish food cautiously, and pulled a piece of the smoked salmon onto her plate. The woman following her in line must have been watching Carla's decisions.

"You should really try that on a bagel, with some cream cheese and onions or a tomato. Whatever you like. It's really marvelous."

"That sounds nice." Carla listened to the woman and tried the concoction. She was bewildered by the woman's use of the word 'marvelous', she would have never used that to describe food. The woman was wearing a gaudy purple cape on top of a yellow and lime green pant suit that she no doubt bought at the new retail store, Chico's at the King of Prussia mall. Her jewelry looked old and noticeable against her brightly colored and professionally finished finger nails.

She explained, for the third time that day, the trip that she was preparing to take.

"Where are you travelling?" The woman who had helped Carla prepare her lunch asked.

"To Yugoslavia," Carla said. The woman nodded in understanding. Yugoslavia was brought to America's attention because the most recent summer Olympics was held there. Despite seeing scenes of the country on the local broadcast, to Carla, the country still seemed as foreign as any other place outside of

Philadelphia; she had been confined to this city for all of her sixty-four years.

"How exciting! And what is this trip for?"

"It's through my church. Mary appears there every year or so, she helps to heal the sick. It's at a church in a place called Medjugorje." Carla pronounced "Medjugorje" with a refined accent that she had been working on to cover up her South Philadelphian drawl. "Some Jewish people even go there to see her."

"It sounds very nice." The women exchanged a pleasant glance and Carla went back to trying to eat her bagel in a dainty and careful manner.

"I think Donna would like it, I think she'd find it very nice."

Carla had recently learned that this new child was to be raised without religion so as to allow, as her niece put it, "David to make his own decision when, and if, he decides to practice a religion." Somewhat horrified with the idea of a boundless soul, Carla remarked in private to her sister that she would have even preferred to hear that he would be raised Jewish. Without a child of her own, her interest in her great-nephew's sacrament consumed her thoughts at times as she worked through the routine of maintaining her house and running daily errands. The child simply must have some guidance, some chance at knowing God.

When she arrived home, Carla lined up eight pieces of tinfoil with two slices of bread on each. She bought enough lunchmeat and tuna salad to make exactly eight sandwiches. For Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday she made capicola and prosciutto sandwiches, alternating each sandwich for each day. She labeled the outside of the tinfoil with the days of the week. Friday, he would eat a tuna fish sandwich on a roll with hardboiled eggs mixed in. For Saturday and Sunday, she made a pot full of meatballs and pork with red gravy that he could eat for dinner the night before and use for sandwiches for at least two days. After she had finished writing the days of the week on the individual wrapped sandwiches, she began to make sausage, peppers and onions for the night she left. That week, she bought a loaf of Italian bread, eggs and unsliced bacon that would last him for most of the week. If he ran out of breakfast foods he could walk down to the deli for an egg and asparagus sandwich, which he usually did on the weekends. The men at the deli would sit outside and smoke cigarillos and he would come home in the early afternoon, smelling of wine and cigar smoke, just as she was preparing lunch. She wrote out instructions for how to boil the pasta and made baggies of salt and other spices that he could put in the sauce whenever he heated up his meals. When she was finished all of this, she began cooking dinner for that evening.

Chuck walked into the kitchen, tracking rainwater onto the laminate brownish-yellow flooring and threw an overcoat onto the table. He kissed his wife and sat at the table behind her. She asked him how his day was, stirring the pot. They ate dinner every night at a table attached to the wall sitting in two wooden chairs that once belonged to Carla's mother.

"Now Chuck, Nancy is coming to get me at three tomorrow afternoon for our flight. Are you sure you don't

want to come to see me off?"

"I'll be fine here," Chuck said while looking around the plastic cabinets overhead. "I want to get a few hours in at the garage tomorrow." Carla had grown accustomed to Chuck coming home every night smelling of gasoline. He had a habit of eating his dinner without washing his grease-stained fingers.

"Busy day?" She tried to sound hopeful that business was picking up.

"Not so much," he said. "How was the, uh, the thing?"

"The shower?"

"Yeah, the shower."

"Fine. It was nice. Some of Donna's husband's relatives must be very wealthy. His aunt gave them a gift card for a hundred dollars," Carla said. "Can you imagine?"

"Must be nice," Chuck said and stuffed a piece of sliced bread in between his mustache-covered lip. "What kind of baby needs all that? No kind of fancy baby I know." He laughed to himself. "Some hot shot baby."

"Well it is nice to give according to what you have," Carla said.

"If I had that money I wouldn't be spending it on some hot shot baby that wasn't mine. That'd have to be one fancy baby."

She laughed a little when Chuck repeated himself. Even though the church gave a large discount on the trip, Chuck had complained about how much it was costing him nearly every day since she had asked him what he thought about the idea. The Catholic Tourism agency offered discounts for church groups, and furthermore, if there were twelve in the group the thirteenth person would travel for free; Carla was the thirteenth person to sign on for the trip and so they split up the rest of the cost accordingly. It took the church a year to fill in all of the necessary paperwork, provide valid background checks, and authorize all of the clearances to allow Americans to travel to a country like that, with all of the problems with the Soviets. Carla didn't bother reading up on the country. What was there to know besides that the blessed mother had chosen that precise location to enact and display miracle? Carla often imagined Reagan himself looking over their paperwork and approving the trip, reading her name, and with a presidential signature, signing his blessing. So many boundaries were blocking their harmless church group from witnessing the vision, and finally, the day had finally arrived.

Nancy, with whom she played Scrabble on Sundays after mass at Saint Paul Parish, practically begged her to join. She had already been to the Vatican and watched John Paul II pass by and bless her, as well as going on the church's trip to Ireland to visit the old cathedrals. Christ echoed in the walls, she would later tell Carla. You could feel Him around you and speaking to you, Carla wanted to cry when she heard that.

Nancy had described it so beautifully.

Chuck and Carla ate their dinner quietly and she cleared the dishes and made sure the entire kitchen was clean before her evening activities. She took inventory on Chuck's meals for the week and gave him a quick lesson on how to run the dishwasher. She wiped her hands on her apron and removing it. She walked up the narrow staircase of their town home decorated with pictures of her sister and her sister's children, a picture of her mother and her step-father dressed down on a porch with green AstroTurf beneath their feet. She stopped at a picture of Chuck in full Mummer regalia with his saxophone hung around his neck. The picture was tearing at the edges and stained with a coffee mug, but Chuck had insisted that they hang it up, often joking that it was when he was still the best looking Italian in Philadelphia. She always wondered what the best looking Italian did when he was off playing gigs in Atlantic City or Pittsburgh. Chuck's picture hung next to a photograph of the two of them leaving the church on the day they were married. The picture was stamped with their names in a classic cursive font and the year, 1948, pressed into the bottom center of the frame. They both stood on the church steps on that day beaming with youth, ready to begin their lives of child-rearing as soon as they got back home. But something inside of one of them, and it was never determined who, was unable to reproduce. And as such they never had a child that would have had Carla's family nose and the grin of the best looking *goombah* in Philadelphia.

In her room she surveyed the mustard and brown-trimmed luggage and packed her purse for the third time with travel necessities, in case she might have lost her luggage: a toothbrush, hairbrush, two Valium in a Ziploc bag for the plane, and her recently acquired passport which she had showed off to the women at her church on the day it was finally printed.

Chuck watched the Phillies game in his green, swiveling recliner and she sat on the couch next to him with a coupon booklet for that week's groceries, although she would not be shopping, she wouldn't even be in the country. She lingered on that thought for a moment, thinking about the globe and how it must feel different to stand on a different part of it, she thought about the distance and vastness between her home and Yugoslavia. Her family had never been back to Italy since arriving in the States seventy years before, something about travelling so close made her feel as if she was travelling back in time, that people would know her and miss her.

She lay in bed that night and twitched with a nervous excitement. Chuck usually talked and cursed in his sleep. He mumbled a little and then yelled quite clearly, "Fuck you." Typically annoyed and restless with Chuck's sleep-talking, instead, Carla laughed to herself and then out loud, she could not hold back the infectious growth of joy that seemed to bubble in her throat and cheeks. Tomorrow she would be eating dinner on a plane and sleeping on a plane and only exciting people live their lives on airplanes. She felt adventurous.

Carla watched the skyline disappear behind her in the car and asked Nancy's husband how long it is to the airport.

"Oh, I'd say another ten, fifteen minutes." He wore a moustache and a golf shirt tucked into Dockers. Nancy and her husband were Irish and she was very similar to the Irish girls that Carla went to school with at

South Philadelphia High, when it was still divided by gender. She was bubbly and fun, talkative and pleasant.

Nancy reached back and grabbed Carla's hand and said, "This is exciting, isn't it?"

"Yes, very." Carla squeezed back and then relaxed herself into her chair.

They were rushed through airport security and given a short speech by the sisters of the parish before boarding the plane. A "buddy" system was established and each traveler could choose who would be there partner. Nancy linked Carla's arm and they were each other's buddies for the week. Carla looked up and smiled her much taller companion and Nancy grinned back down at her.

On the plane they sat listening intently to every word of their handsome-sounding captain, his inflection made Carla feel safe. She glanced around at the other passengers. The two nuns sat looking directly ahead and she felt assured because she thought, nuns don't die on planes, this plane is special. Nancy pulled her hand into her lap and recited, from memory a prayer for safe travel.

My holy angel guardian, ask the Lord to bless the journey which I undertake, that it may profit the health of my soul and body; that I may reach its end; and that, returning safe and sound, I may find all at home in good health. Do thou guard, guide, and preserve us. Amen.

Their words collided on "Amen" and Carla reached into her purse, fishing for her pills. She swallowed the tiny blue tablet as the plane began to speed and lift, her chair shook and her eyes closed. She thought of the ground below and Chuck tinkering with the microwave oven, of her mother's homeland and all of the people who piloted through the air and all of the people she had never met all around the world, as a synthetic blanket of warmth soothed her to sleep. In the sky, closer to where she assumed God was, she tried to dream of closeness, a lingering touch of a hand magnificent and powerful handing her over to the land of her ancestors and Mary.

The plane cut through the clouds and brought Carla over a deep blue ocean and further away from her home than she had ever been before.

There was a layover in Rome for two hours. Carla and her group reconvened outside of a kiosk that was selling crucifixes and tiny statues. The sisters led everyone, like a pack of children, to the connecting gate and explained their time limitations and emphasized the buddy system. Peeking out the window, all Carla could see was roadways and flat fields, far from her own imaginative representation of this holy land; the distance reminded her of looking over at New Jersey from the Delaware, nothing foreign. All of the airport signs were translated into English, seemingly for her own ease of understanding. She constrained her desire to break off from the group and wander through security, through the front doors and into the land of her parents.

Before they broke up to eat, the sisters led the group in a small prayer. They circled around the elderly women and bowed their heads. Carla lifted her eyes up and peered around at the people circumnavigating

the group and looking over at their huddle; she wondered how common this occurrence was and if they were so blatant in their foreignness. She lost track of where they were in the prayer and looked across the bent shoulders at a young boy being led by his mother by the hand past the group and turning back to look again as he was pulled further from them. Smiling at the boy and maintaining eye contact with his curious expression, she felt for a moment a chill of fear and solitude and thought about how Chuck was for the first time since she had boarded the plane. She was hoping the meat didn't expire and that there was enough mayonnaise to last him until she returned in a week.

Touching down in Sarajevo, Carla felt a surge of nervous exhilaration.

"Can you believe it?" Carla turned to Nancy who was gathering her things.

"Just wait. Wait until tomorrow. It will be wonderful."

Nancy grabbed her hand once more and Carla experienced a ridiculous urge to rest her head on her companion's shoulder.

"How long is this bus trip supposed to be?" Carla asked while searching around her itinerary.

"Four hours or so," Nancy said. "But there will be so much to look at, I've heard it's a very beautiful countryside. Much nicer than anything we've ever seen."

"Well I haven't seen *that* much," Carla admitted in a bashful utterance, almost to herself. She smiled and they awaited instructions.

They walked out into the Yugoslavian air and simultaneously felt the vigor of international travel and the shortness of breath of a higher altitude. Their trepidation of their loss of breath was calmed by a sophomoric explanation of the science behind this feeling by one of the sisters; it was all a part of trying something new and Carla was ready to begin, everything was going to be okay, I need this.

On the bus, their tour guide was introduced. She was a young and enchanting woman. She dressed casually yet tasteful and her name reminded Carla of a sweet young girl, innocent and pious, whom Carla would love to get to know: Nina. Nina's dark features and tanned skin reminded Carla of the Biblical women she had so often read about: beautiful *and* fruitful, given all those qualities that God saves for the perfection of the virtuous.

"Hello everyone, and welcome to my home," she paused. "I wish you all a safe and memorable experience in my country." Nina spoke in a thick, layered accent that caused Carla, at least once, to smile and lean over to Nancy and ask to repeat what she had said.

“The trip will take approximately three to four hours to Medjugorje. When we get to the hotel, I need you all to stay with your buddies while we retrieve the luggage and organize the

room assignments,” Nina said. She flashed a smirk. “Now don’t you worry, we provide the same hospitality as you do in the States. There will be running hot water and toilets and you get used to the goats by the second night.”

The group laughed and Carla smiled, turning to Nancy and asking, “What did she say?”

“She said ‘we’ll get used to the goats.’”

Carla laughed and looked up at the laughing Nancy. “She’s a doll.”

“She’s delightful.”

“Our country is very kind and safe, but there are some things you will need to keep in mind to make it a more enjoyable trip and to avoid any complications,” Nina said. She brushed a beautiful strand of hair from her eyes and smiled with an assurance that was contagious. “There are certain groups that are known to pickpocket so a good idea is to only bring exactly what you need and to hold your purses, or wallets, gentlemen,” she jested at the two men in the group, “directly in front of your body or in your front pocket.

“The Roma and Muslim population will try to sell you things, because you are all Americans and they think you have lots of money, but these are not authentic and there will be plenty of goodies to buy at the shop near Saint Jacob. The best thing is to avoid eye contact or politely refuse.”

Carla wondered how they would know they were Americans and she turned and asked Nancy quietly, “What’s a Roma?”

“Gypsies,” Nancy said and gave a solemn glare towards Nina.

“Remember to stay with your buddy at all times and we can all have a spiritual experience together. And again, on behalf of my country, welcome.”

Carla began to clap but refrained when the rest of the group directed pleasant smiles at Nina in lieu of applause. When the speech was done, the bus began to roll through the gates outside of the airport where men in military attire waved them through. The rifles the men held were mismatched. Each soldier slung around their shoulder a different old gun with wooden stocks, although they were all dressed in a similar steel gray garb with a sash and a lush maroon beret.

The hills of Sarajevo looked as if they were delicately sculpted by God Himself. Carla looked out of her window at the motionless countryside, decorated with isolated little homes nestled into the pastoral scenery. It all looked so Biblical to Carla, a time without buses and airplanes, without cities and governments, left

alone to tend to their families and serve God. She at once felt a connection to this history and the fear of being so far removed from everything, a shiver of remoteness sent her back to thoughts of Chuck. Carla had remained awake for the entirety of the bus trip, refusing to divert her attention from this distant and bizarre country. She even tapped on a sleeping Nancy several times to point out landscapes that she thought were particularly picturesque.

The sun was setting on Bosnia as they arrived at Medjugorje, a simple town situated amid an elevated plain and encompassed by larger mountains. There was a glow of light emanating from the town's center and Carla could see the neatly rowed white homes, all with matching brown roofs, the same way South Philadelphia looks, but instead with brick and cement. They pulled up outside Hotel Martin and circled around a brick fountain spewing light from its center. They were told to gather their belongings and look around their seats for anything that may have fallen or been misplaced.

Finally stepping onto the stone path to the entrance, Carla found Nancy waiting with her arms crossed in front of her, smiling while short brown men in white shirts removed the luggage from beneath the bus. They were handed keys which had written on it a small number indicating their room assignment. Nina gave a short speech explaining the events of the next morning and the amenities of the hotel and they were sent off to bed.

Inside the room, the two women placed down their belongings and each claimed a bed. The room was barren and rustic, each occupant was given a dresser and cot with a thin mattress and recently washed linens. It had been so long since she had slept in a bed that was not her own. Sure, she stayed at her sister's house in Fox Chase from time to time, but that home had belonged to her mother and so sleeping there reminded her of the comfort of growing up. Carla sat on the bed and before unpacking her things she stood up to announce that she was going to look for a phone to call Chuck.

"Give me a minute, and I'll walk down with you." Nancy suggested.

"Nonsense," Carla said. "I'll be fine. I'm just going to the lobby."

"Carla, I really should come with you. Remember, the buddy system."

"I'll be okay. I don't want to disturb you. You get comfy."

Carla was halfway out the door when she smiled and walked down the hallway to the staircase leading to the main lobby. The lobby was dark and empty, not a single member of the tour was in the common area, not even the kind owner of the building who they had just recently met. She saw one of the small baggage boys scurry by the door.

"Excuse me?" She said, just above a whisper. "Excuse me? Is there a phone I could use?"

The man shrugged and walked closer.

“A phone? To make a call?” She thought that he must not speak English and so she gestured a telephone with her thumb and pinky finger and repeated: “Phone?”

The man shrugged again and kept walking by. At this point, Carla was struck by the eeriness of the vacant lobby. She wanted to speak with her husband and she peeked around the main desk and blurted out, into the emptiness, “Hello? Is there someone there?”

She thought about what Chuck might be doing at this hour. She looked at her watch and noted the time in Philadelphia. It was just after 3 p.m., Chuck’s time. Maybe he was at the garage or down at the deli with his friends. Still, she wanted to call and tiptoed towards the main entrance scanning the walls and tabletops for a phone to call her husband. She wandered through the front doors and outside. She took a breath in the brisk night and then caught eyes with a brown-skinned man leaning against a white car in the driveway. He was wearing an old blue sports coat with patches on the elbows. He sucked on a rolled cigarette, the end of which was lost in his thick black moustache and his eyes caught hers as he looked her up and down, never breaking his gaze and pulling smoke deep into his lungs. Carla froze for a moment and went back inside, in an organized panic, never letting on the fear that this man evoked within her and refusing to look back, although she wanted to see if he was following her. She made it up the stairs and back into her room where Nancy had already changed into her nightgown and was getting into bed.

“Did you find a phone?” Nancy asked.

“No. No, I didn’t.”

It seemed like they had been walking for ten miles when the dry air of an open field hit Carla’s face. She shielded her eyes from the wind and looked down at a flower along the trail, growing out of the white dirt. She had never seen this kind before; they sure didn’t have these types of flowers where she was from. It was a red, fleshy flower budding out of the ground staring straight at her, proudly displaying its fertility. She bent over and plucked it from the ground, tucking it into the fanny pack she wore around her waist, and when she lifted her head again she had to jog a little to catch up with the rest of the group.

Earlier that morning they ate sliced fruits with a thick yogurt that Carla had never tried before. She hoped that Chuck ate the eggs and cooked some bacon. Even if she knew what the fruits were that they were eating, she still turned to her table mates to ask, “What’s this?” The tables were old and wooden and creaked when you shifted positions. Each table was set with a glass vase filled with three tiny flowers and refined metal silverware that Carla thought seemed different than the types she used back home. On her first morning waking up, everything felt so different. Nancy and Carla packed their cameras, water bottles, passports and money and began their morning trek with the rest of the group.

The tour guides led the group on a walking tour of the town, explaining the history of the country and the region. Carla heard about years she had never thought of before, dates from the sixteenth century, empires she had never heard about, an entire range of knowledge transcending any fathomable trace of her family, her friends, the schematized order of history that made Carla who she is. She learned about the wars that were fought and were still being fought; the dark-skinned people that settled this town; the imprisonment of the pastor Jozo Zovko in 1981, who was linked to both the visions of Mary in Medjugorje and Bosnian

nationalism; all of these people proved the existence of this place, and Carla thought about who they were and how they got there. And all of this, from the sixteenth century until that moment, brought Carla to that singular pathway, bending at her waist to pluck the intoxicating flower on a remote village road.

St. Jacobs was built upon a hill in the center of the town. The church group shuffled inside the tall, yellowish building with two pillars extending up the front. Carla was awestruck by the stained-glass windows; however, she was told that there were no photographs allowed inside. At the altar, six people stood next to a priest, the sisters from the Saint Paul Parish, and that lovely young woman, Nina. Nina served as a translator for the six who stood up and were introduced individually.

"These six people are the visionaries who were just children when they first encountered Mary," she said and waited a beat to let this information settle.

"This is Marijana, who sees Mary every day." The crowd looked over the young woman, smiling. She was no older than twenty-three and had perfectly blonde hair and light blue eyes, that looked as if they were filled with joyous tears at all times. Her cheekbones stood out and accented her young, clear skin. Carla said to Nancy that she thought the girl looked like an American and Nancy said, "I know. She's beautiful."

And down the row, Nina introduced each of the six visionaries and explained how the phenomenon had affected their lives. There was Ivan, Vicka, and Marija, who also saw Mary on a daily basis; Ivanka, who saw Her once a year, on June 25th, the anniversary of her first appearance; and Jakov, who met Mary on Christmas day of each year when she appeared holding the baby Jesus.

"Each of these young people were promised to be told ten secrets by the blessed Mother. Once these secrets have all been revealed, Mary will stop appearing every day and she will show her presence in the form of three physical world events, which she will tell Marijana ten days before they occur. When all three have happened, salvation will come to those who have committed their lives to Christ," Nina said.

Carla looked at Marijana, who was the bearer of the knowledge that the rest of the world desired. A secret from the blessed Mother, the details of the final judgment, Carla eyed up this young smiling girl who seemed to have no trace of the heavy load of the world's fate on her shoulders. Mirijana was smiling and looking around the crowd, as she must do every day, with her soft cheeks and blinking with her moist eyes, welcoming the pilgrims.

The priest began to speak in a dense language with soft consonants. Carla listened and then watched Nina translate the announcement.

"Some of our visitors have reported things like the sun spinning around the sky, changing colors and even witnessing figures in the center of the sun," Nina said and waited for the priest to finish. "Now please, we advise you not to look at the sun to try and see these phenomena. We have had several guests suffer from permanent eye damage while trying to see these things. You will all feel Mary's presence and Mirjana will tell you the things she is commanding. Okay?"

The group responded, "Okay." They all shuffled in their seats, and Carla became excited by the realness of these events, that their wishes for assurance and salvation were imminent. Nina described Mary, from the

description of the visionaries, as being between eighteen and twenty years old, about one hundred and sixty centimeters, with a long oval face and long black hair. Regardless of whatever images of Mary Carla had ever seen, she couldn't help but picture Nina standing there, in old robes, pregnant with immaculate child, holding out her arms.

By 5:30 they were standing on the hill, awaiting the arrival of Mary, who appeared every day at 5:40. The September sun was setting in the distance, still hanging above the hills, casting a deep yellow light on all of their faces and omitting a holy halo around the scene. Nancy and Carla stood side by side, jittering with anticipation, each looking up and down at one another like children waiting for a roller coaster. Carla looked over at a husband and wife holding hands. They were both dressed in department store clothing. He was wearing khaki pants and a button down shirt. They had their eyes closed and it looked as if they were praying as one body; their quivering lips were moving in unison, transferring thoughts and messages through a complex and invisible system of correlation. They were bound to each other. What would Chuck have thought standing on this hill? Maybe he would have felt her. Carla and Chuck would have held hands and smiled at each other the way she and Nancy had. Carla closed her eyes and thought of her husband and tried to clean him up, she put him in a suit with a flower pinned to his lapel. She cleaned his fingernails and combed his wet hair to the side. She polished his shoes and straightened his tie right to the base of his neck. She saw Chuck gaze at her as a new man, ready to be saved.

As the minute approached, the crowd was asked to hold hands, but Nancy and Carla already were. Carla grabbed onto the elderly woman standing next to her, a woman whose entire life must have been leading to this, she thought. Carla held her eyelids closed and a silence fell upon the group that she hadn't experienced since her feeling of terror in the hotel lobby. But this was different, this felt transcendent and illuminated. She could feel 5:40 approach; she knew when it would happen. At that very moment, she heard that thick language again, this time preaching in a tone that she understood.

"She is here!" Nina yelled over the light breeze.

Nancy's hand squeezed more tightly and the foreign language filled the air.

"She says," Nancy translated, "'When you pray, you must feel more. Prayer is a conversation with God. To pray means to listen to God. Prayer is useful for you because after prayer everything is clear. Prayer makes one know happiness. Prayer can teach you how to cry. Prayer can teach how to blossom. Prayer is not a joke. Prayer is a dialogue with God.'"

Carla could hardly contain herself, she was feeling such a surge of emotions that she shot her eyes open. She needed to see her as well as feel her. She looked up at the same scene she closed her eyes to: the setting sun, the six visionaries standing on the hill, Nina standing next to the messenger. There was nothing there. Carla broke her stillness and craned her head around the crowd, all of the members of the parish stood there muttering to themselves with tears soaking their cheeks. Their mouths were hung open in a euphoric trance as if they were trapped in an unrealized laugh, smiling and bouncing lightly. Carla was so frustrated that she began to squint at the sun in an attempt to see the shapes and visions that supposedly danced across its surface. She blinked and blinked and could no longer look directly at it. She thought about all of Chuck's money that she wasted and how she wasn't there to help him all week and how she

was not of pure enough heart to witness this miracle. She became deflated and uninspired.

Nina continued to translate: “Dear children! Today also I want to call you all to prayer. Let Prayer be your life. Dear children, dedicate your time only to Jesus and He will give you everything that you are seeking. He will reveal Himself to you in fullness. Dear children, Satan is strong and is waiting to test each one of you. Pray, and that way he will neither be able to injure you nor block you on the way of holiness. Dear children, through prayer grow all the more toward God from day to day. Thank you for having responded to my call.”

A collective sigh travelled around the crowd as they began to open their eyes and hug whomever they were standing near. There were tears in the eyes of every member of the congregation, including Carla who was silently cursing herself and trying her hardest not to break out into a full sob. All of that travel, the months spent filling out paper-work, the difficulty of travelling to such a country, it all unfolded in one angry moment that took only seconds to transpire. Nancy looked as if ten years of weakness was lifted from her aging body. She appeared to be floating above the grass and the emptiness of her pupils suggested that she was lingering in another world.

Nancy turned to Carla and said, “Wasn’t that incredible? Did you feel Her?”

Carla felt ashamed, and with swollen eyes told Nancy that it was incredible and that she could feel Her.

It was about two months later while Carla was visiting with her sister Gloria, that Carla was alone with her newest grandnephew David for the first time. Gloria had left for the grocery store to buy the ingredients for that night’s meal and left the child entrusted to her sister. The child looked up at her and was just beginning to be able to reach with his tiny fingers. Each digit was miraculous; every little fingernail looked as if it was placed there by some grand machine, some perfect being that attended to every minute aspect of every newborn child. God’s presence was apparent in this little boy. The child was safe in Carla’s arms but his eyes displayed a vague terror as he gaped around at the new world.

Carla already told her sister about how amazing it was to see Mary, how unique an experience, and she urged her sister to travel there. She told the story many times to women in the neighborhood, to the women at her church that couldn’t afford the trip, she told the story to anyone who expressed interest. She and the other people on the trip had some shared experience to which they could all relate. They shared a visit with God closer than any preacher’s sermon could replace. She even began to believe her own story.

And there she sat with the child who knew nothing of the burden taken on by our savior and was going to be raised in a household that would not be guiding him in that direction. Something had to be done. After fifteen minutes of sitting with the sleeping child, Carla stood up, holding him close to her chest and went over to her purse. From the front pocket she pulled a small vial of holy water engraved with the skyline of Medjugorje. She purchased this vial, which was blessed by the Pope, for ten U.S. dollars at the gift shop adjacent to St. Jacobs church in the town’s center. When she bought the holy water, she had no initial purpose for it other than the necessity of carrying the sacred fluid with her. It was the only item of the shop that had a practical purpose. She also bought a crucifix for Chuck and a large print of the statue of Mary for

her sister.

Carrying the child over to the kitchen sink, where he was also given baths any time he was over his grandmother's house, she placed David on the cold metal bottom of the sink. As soon as she lifted her hands, the child woke up and began to scream. He swaddled his arms and legs in the air, begging to be lifted again. She hushed him in a calm tone, explaining that it will be okay and not to worry. She unscrewed the lid of the vial and began a prayer that she had heard in the baptismal services at her church.

"May I, who share in Your Life as Your child through Baptism, follow in Christ's path of service to people." Carla dipped her fingers into the vial and splashed the water on the child's head. David writhed and squirmed, emitting loud yelps and coughs as she touched her thumb to his forehead and made the sign of the cross.

"It's okay," she told him. "It's okay, honey."

She splashed some more water on the child, repeating a prayer and David screamed even louder. It wasn't working. The child had his eyes clenched shut and no matter how righteous Carla felt, she couldn't help experience the hopelessness in what was supposed to be a holy moment. Her disappointment from the hill washed over her again. She picked up the unsaved boy and cradled him in her arms, walking around the small kitchen and humming softly.

At that point she heard the latch on the door turn open and Gloria walked into the front room, carrying a paper bag in her arms. Carla reached for the vial and tucked it into her pocket and became embarrassed by her sister's arrival. She forced back tears and wanted to admit what she had just done to the child, to alleviate the guilt of the futile act. She wanted to share with another person that strange feeling you get when you ask yourself these large questions.

Gloria put down the bag and stuck out her arms, asking to hold this new-found love in her life, this precious and perfect child that she felt as if she had known from the moment she was born and was waiting her entire life to meet. Carla looked at the grandmother holding her first grandson, her arms swinging the child, and became absorbed in the eternity of the moment.

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From Fethiye we took a bus to Olympos, where I met Surpi in the ruins of the old world. He and I sort of got together, which was a sore spot for Sophie. I wanted to stay and get to know him, but Sophie wears the pants in all this. She always goes on about how selfish I am. There was a year in high school where we didn't even speak. She said I was psychotic for boys. She was jealous of the attention I gave Barry Bartoluci. Now it was Surpi she was bothered by. She didn't want a repeat. My theory is that because Sophie was an only child, she's more sensitive about that stuff. The only way she knows how to express her sense of loss is by depriving others of strong relationships.

From Olympos we rode the ferry to Rhodes. We arrived before lunch and were walking out of the station with our backpacks when this guy came out of a purple minivan. Sophie walked on to the tourist office to use the courtesy phone, looking into where we might stay the night, but I talked to the guy. He was about short and unshaven, in his mid-sixties and had what I've heard called a bulbous nose. Then Sophie came back and I took her aside and was like, let's try him—I had his card and all—and I thought he was cool. So he took us up in his minivan and drove us to his place at the edge of the ancient city. It looked like his mother's house, you know, like he inherited it. A small courtyard in the garden with some tables gave it a homey look. It was a two-storey with a scraggly overgrown orchard of some type behind it, a bunch of antiques inside the house everywhere you looked, familyish stuff. The furniture and pictures on the wall were all very old.

"Sit down at the table, girls," he said. "You want some Ouzo?"

We sat. He poured his own tall glass and poured us some. It was pretty obvious that he drank the stuff all day.

He shows us an upstairs room. We said we'd take it, even though the toilet was in the shower stall.

"You girls wanna go to the market?" he said.

Hell yes we wanted to go to the market. Sophie had on these tight stretch pants, and Rassas, that was the guy's name, kept complimenting her body. "You have a really nice figure," he said as we got back in the minivan. Sophie rode shotgun, and Rassas looked over at her bust and said, "Holy Mama, very nice."

"God, this guy's a smarm," Sophie said to me privately when we were at the market.

"No, no, he's just complimenting you," I said.

Sophie was skeptical, but at the market Rassas knew everyone, and that sort of warmed her up to him because Sophie is a total social hound, an etiquette expert and a foodie. Rassas was like try this, try this, reaching out and packing us up with stuff. Tons of different types of grapes, cheeses, cucumbers, all different types of tomatoes. He was just taking it, not paying for any of it, stuffing the stuff in our bags. We stopped and talked for awhile with this guy who sold goats, and the guy said all this stuff about modern times, how now all the kids in Rhodes have cell phones and people lock their doors. All the islands used to be self-

sufficient, he said, but now because of globalization the islands had lost their integrity and were becoming more and more like “anyplace” which was a word he really seemed to despise. Rassas packed us up with nuts and honey and tons of sweets.

Then back at the place we ate some of the stuff, this great goat cheese stuff, and some grapefruit and olives to gear us up for checking out the city, which was a lot of fun. We walked around looking at stuff and then came back and washed our great food and prepared it and laid it out for everyone, all the other roomers, in the communal kitchen. There was a couple from Latvia. They lived on a goat farm. They were like oh, you’re from Florida, are you okay from the hurricane and all? I felt bad because I was like what country are you from? Where is that? I had no clue in my mind where Latvia was, but they knew all about my part of the world.

Then there was this guy from Israel with long hair, and he had a girlfriend from East Asia. They were on vacation from art school in Prague. He was very soft spoken. The girl was studying public art, and was sort of hippyish and quiet, and they were on a low budget and doing a great job at it, I thought. We had a bunch of wine. It was a beautiful spread.

Eating the food outside in the courtyard, getting acquainted and all that, and drinking the great wine and everything, I thought back on Olympos, and sort of wished we had stayed. Not that I didn’t like this new thing happening, but it seemed like we’d just started getting into the folks in Olympos, and getting a sense for the place. I’d wanted to stay, but Sophie wanted to keep moving, so that’s what we did.

The Latvian guy, when he met the Israeli guy, was like, “What the fuck are you guys doing to the Palestinians?”

The Israeli guy, the way he talked was so soft that you could tell he wouldn’t hurt anyone. He said, “Me, I grew up on a dairy farm. I’m a student. I have nothing to do with it. I don’t hate Palestinians. The kids in Israel get in trouble if they don’t carry guns around with them. I was on the outskirts.”

The Latvian guy’s name was Sven, and he said, “You can make excuses for anything.”

I was thinking shit, think of the life on the street in Israel and ease up on him. They were all about twenty-one or twenty-two. We were twenty-five.

Israel and Southeast Asia go back to their room or whatever, and we sat out there partying with the Latvians. A Canadian came by and we talked to him. His name was Gary and Gary was a grocery store clerk. Gary was with a bunch of Australians. Like us, they had all been in Turkey. Like us, they had checked out Fethiye, so we talked about Fethiye.

They were all very interesting to talk to, I thought, especially the Latvians who were Nordic, from the high country, stocky, pasty, and blond. Earlier that day they had done laundry where they’d met a bunch of Russians. As it got dark, we were still out there in the courtyard, and Sven shouted, “Mr. Rassas, Mr. Rassas! Come out to the bar with us. Meet the Russians and drink vodka!”

So Rassas drove us to this Russian lady's bar, and Rassas danced with her. The Latvians thought they would be comped, but weren't because of me, is what I think. "Stupid American," I heard the Russian lady say to Rassas. It was all that Star Wars crap, all of the eighties cold war bullshit I'd been spouting. The Russian lady must've lived the prime of her life—she was 40ish—during the Reagan era when Reagan was making a lot of strides with Gorbachev. And here I was talking shit about superpower versus superpower, you know? I mean, she came from an era where the superpowers were pitted against each other to the point that inevitably one would destroy the other. All that intense competition. I was naïve. I'd gleaned a few things through the Latvians, but I must've seemed like a real bastard. I talked about the fall of the Berlin Wall to her as if I had been there, and all about how Russia had taken a lot of sucker punches. I was drunk, and sort of missing Olympos and the time that I might be spending with Surpi, whose eyes were saggy and brown, yes, but he was loveable all the same. He had whispered "I love you," in my ear. On another night we walked up to this place called the Burning Mountain. It's got an endless reservoir of natural gas below it, so all these flames gush out of the rocks. Surpi laid out this rug sort of thing and we made out between the stars and ruins of the old world. Later Surpi told me that the Gods had watched us make love. It was romantic bigtime stupid, but there was always the chance that I was pregnant. If I was, I thought, this child would be a child of stars and ruins.

We revelers walked home, lots of gambling joints everywhere, a kind of weird rustic sort of party scene going on, and I kept thinking of that "stupid American" stuff. I knew she was right, but the more I thought about it, the "American" part didn't even seem to matter. I was just stupid, that was all there was to it, but what was cool, anyway, after that woman said that, was that Rassas danced with her. Maybe I'm self-centered to think that it was about me as to why she made us pay for our drinks, but we were drinking vodka like mad. Even though Rassas was part of it all, his presence wasn't enough to make us into princes and thieves. Had I not been so easy in talking my ignorance, however, who knew?

Sven, on the way back, was being like a frat boy, drunk as fuck, across the line like Jim Morrison drunk. These Nordic people were just balls to the walls wasted. His wife had to sort of drag him home. It was really funny.

And we went to sleep. Next day Sophie said the place had bed bugs and we had to leave. Squirrelly Sophie. If she'd had bedbugs that would be scabies, right? She'd have to get medication. So we packed up and went to the beach and Sophie went topless. I felt too weird to do that, but I was impressed with Sophie. Huge breasts freak me out, on the whole, but Sophie pulls it off. After she came up out of the water I told her she looked like Aphrodite being born. That made her happy, and I walked up the beach with her so that she could show them off while they were still wet, the saltwater droplets sparkling in the sunlight.

Later that day we got back on the ferry and went over to Mykonos Island, and got a place there, and next morning saw a Band-Aid commercial during breakfast. We couldn't understand it, but it was like one of those medicated Band-Aids that has medicine attached. The gist of the commercial was that they were like magic healing Band-Aids, and it was like this guy with his lover, she like scratched him on the back and put a Band-Aid on his back, and then he goes home to his wife and she has a Band-Aid also. The TV was on in the breakfast room, and there were families, and they had pastries and jellies and stuff laid out, but in the town square we argued.

"You didn't come to my dad's funeral and I'm really upset about that," Sophie said. It came up because I was saying how if we had stayed in Olympos a little longer I could have gotten to know Surpi better, and who knew but that maybe Surpi was Mr. Right.

“Sorry sorry sorry sorry,” I said.

“Fuck you. I’m sore about it.”

“Sophie, I talked to you about it. I gave you the opportunity to tell me to be there, but you said go take your exam, don’t worry about it.”

“Well, you should’ve read through that. I needed you and you should’ve been there.”

“Sorry, I’m really sorry. I don’t know how I could ever make that up to you. I wish you would have told me to come.”

“Goddamnit, you should’ve known. It’s a big deal that my dad died. You should’ve felt that. My dad was convalescing for months. You should have known.”

I felt terrible, of course, plus ignorant, and self-absorbed like she says, and I felt bad, sad because even in that situation, where her dad was dying, she wasn’t able to get through to me. She was right that I should have read through the smokescreen and all, but I was afraid, or, I don’t know, who knows, I won’t try to pass my flaws off on abstractions. The truth is I should have known better and taken responsibility and dropped everything and flown to Texas to be at her side.

She was emotional, but then was like shit, let me gain my composure. She wiped her tears away and smiled, and said she’d worked it out, but it wasn’t worked out. We’d tempered it down to a reasonable level. We ate lunch, not exactly talking but saying a little tidbit here and there. Then we get on the ferry to Athens, and Sophie disappears. I go looking for her, looking everywhere, above ships and down, looking like I’m totally lost, deck to deck. I looked like I was looking for someone, and these two girls, kind of chubby and voluptuous and from Iowa were like, “Hey, are you lost?” “Yes.” And they were like, “Hey, come sit down with us.” Cherice and Kristy, they were really cool. We talked about how annoying it was that there had been a Starbucks in Mykonos, and an Applebee’s.

We sat there for awhile until finally Sophie showed up and I gathered from what she said that she’d been off on a pout session. That really stunk because I’d been genuinely worried. I asked her please not to do that shit anymore. We hung out with Cherice and Kristy at the next island, and then we’re in Athens, and we found a fancy hotel that had billowy curtains that looked down upon a scenic square. We spent the night, but then there was a parade going on down there in the morning. A patriotic thing. Some people came out of the church and there was a military presence. We watched a lot of it from the balcony, then went out and ran into the cashier from Canada—Gary. By that time we were on the third or fourth day with the Iowa girls. It was cool to pawn them off on Gary.

We tooled about just looking at stuff. Sophie has a family history with jewelry. Her dad was a diamond dealer. Midwestern Jewish jewelry people. She met him, her biological dad, when she was twenty. He’s her real dad, but I think she felt more daughterish with her other dad, Robert who died of throat cancer. I’d seen them together before, when Robert was healthy, and the two of them qualified for all the clichés about peas and

carrots and pods and whatnot. They were really really close.

But Athens. The ruins are all kind of below the city and we walked around looking at stuff. Real touristy. We're like window shopping, looking around and we go into some place and are looking at stuff and we asked about this charm symbol thing that was everywhere. It's two bees, face to face, and there's usually like a dangly love drop thing attached to it. The lady told us it was a symbol of the Queen of Minos, and it meant that two people doing things together could get more done.

"Oh cool," I said.

Sophie was less into the mythology, but I was more superstitious. The Queen of Minos ruled people. There was a Minotaur involved, a bullheaded, manbodied creature. As I understood it, the queen would send a virile young buck into a maze where the Minotaur was. It was a test of strength. If he came out unscathed he was more powerful, but if he got blocked in he was eaten by the Minotaur. I guess it was a matriarchal society, because if the young buck survived, the Queen of Minos would have him brought to the castle where if he didn't make love to her they would chop his head off and put it on display in the market where everybody could see it.

Anyway, our plan was to make our way up through Italy, and then fly home from Madrid. I guess I kept bitching about Surpi. Finally Sophie gave in and said, sure, okay, let's backtrack and waste our vacation time so that you can piss away our friendship with a little more gusto. She wanted me to feel awful, and I granted her her wish. Sophie was not working with me like the friendly helper bee. When we'd first started out, all was gold, we had so much fun, but what it finally boiled down to was that we were about sick of each other. I wanted to get back to Turkey quick as possible, to see Surpi, to start back up with him and see where our togetherness would lead us, but Sophie says, "No, as long as we're making asses of ourselves, I think we should stop in to see Rassas."

"Really? I thought you hated that guy?"

"No, I like him, I think he's really cool. He's cute, too."

"What?" I couldn't believe she was saying this. I said, "What about the bedbugs?"

"I'm sure Rassas will give me a different room," Sophie said.

"Well, that's you for you. One thing one moment and the exact opposite the next moment."

"I like hairy men," Sophie said. "Maybe that's because my dad was hairy, I don't know."

"Your dad? You mean, Robert? What are you saying?"

“Oh, are you going to go act like you care anything about me and my dad all of a sudden?”

“No, I’m just wondering why you’re talking about Rassas’s hair and then making a connection to Robert. It’s fucking weird if you ask me.”

“I won’t even tell you what I think is weird,” Sophie said, but we made it back to Rassas’s place, and Rassas, of course, was thrilled to see us. He filled us up with Ouzo and took us to the market again in his purple minivan, and all the while Sophie was like all over him, laughing at every word he said, and patting him on the back and telling him that he should come to America to visit her and just generally acting like a total fool. She was doing her best to upset me, and having some success at it, especially since I was freaked out by the fact that the Latvian guy, Sven, still had a room at Rassas’s place, and he was sharing it with the Israeli guy’s girlfriend now, the East Asian art student. All the others had gone home, except for Gary from Canada who, like us, apparently couldn’t get enough of Rassas, so stopped back in for a second round.

It was just really upsetting is all. I knew that the Latvian guy was married. We had hung out with him and his wife and they were a great couple. I had also thought that the Israeli guy loved his girlfriend. I had thought that each pair was a solid entity. I had thought that they were madly in love with each other, traversing the world, real earth stompers. I remembered the Israeli guy talking about how he and his girl had been together for three years, and he was so proud of her, I could tell. The way he looked at her was like with love and admiration in his eyes. It made me jealous. The longest relationship I had ever been in was like three months, tops. I didn’t know what happened after we left, and I didn’t ask questions. At least Gary from Canada was there. Gary’s trustworthy neutrality helped me feel at ease.

Only that night we had another feast out in the courtyard, and long-faced bald Gary starts in on how he “boned” Kristy and Cherise from Iowa, and he called them corn-fed farm girls, which really grated my nerves. Gary was drunk, confessing stuff and bragging, but anybody who says, “I told her to moo and she did it for me while I boned her,” in any context, deserves to be written off the face of the earth. So much for Gary. I was getting really sloshed, irresponsibly so, and Rassas, to entertain us, danced all crazy and everybody joined in and the next thing I know I’m passing out next to some bushes. I woke up a few hours later and puked, and then curled back up and was woken up later by the Latvian’s girlfriend, or, I should say, the Israeli guy’s ex-girlfriend, the hippyish East Asian art student. In my heart I guess I was mad at her for crossing over, but it was really weird to open my eyes and see her face, you know, staring down at me with its round nostrils, it bright all out and sunny. I didn’t know how much time had gone by, but she’s begging me to get up and follow her quick, so I oblige. I don’t even have my shoes on. What the hell happened to my shoes, I’m thinking, but the Asian seems so panic stricken that I just forgot about my shoes and followed after her, not even knowing her name after all the time I had spoken to her—how embarrassing is that?

I chased her to the back of the house on down a grass decline and over a creek sort of thing and up a hill, thinking surely my eyes were about to behold some gruesome sight. I was scared. I pictured Sophie hacked up, her naked body splayed out in a clearing. It was inexplicable really, but the Asian girl was all in a tizzy over some horror she saw is what it seemed like. I was revolted, confused, headachy. I wanted to run the other way. Why was I following her? It was unreasonable, but alas we arrived at a small building made of mortared stones, a padlock on its wood door. That didn’t stop my Asian friend. She just skirted to the side of the building and climbed the stones and stuck her head into an opening. I watched her pink Converse sneakers flip out sideways at the end of her bronze calves, then slide through. “Come, come,” she said, so I did as she had done. I could barely fit, but I slithered on down to the dirt floor and got to my feet and saw her squatting by a nest. “Hurry!” she said. I settled down onto my knees beside her in front of these weird-ass-looking birds who flapped their jaws toward the ceiling. In my mind I was like, you made me come all this way for this? Why you little bitch, but it was weird. The birds were kind of human-looking. They looked like little old

men with wrinkly naked bodies and wrinkles in their foreheads—and didn't most birds lay only three or four eggs or so? Whatever kind of bird had laid these eggs had laid fifteen or more, and at least half of them were already hatched and others were hatching as we watched. Even stranger was that the birds were not making peep sounds at all. They were just flapping their jaws, their beaks I guess I should say, in silence. I looked toward the window, half expecting the mother to drop in and attack us. Then I looked around the room and was surprised to find that nothing was in it but for this nest filled with birds and, at the moment, us.

Those birds, man, they creeped me out. Their bodies begged for worms, I saw their hearts pounding through their thin bald skins, and their stomachs were sucking in and expanding hungrily like *feed me, feed me, please*, but all the while their old-man eyes flipped about, and looked full of intelligence, and it seemed to me that maybe that's why the birds weren't peeping, because their smarts ruled the day. Somehow they knew that by asking for something important they would be denied it. I thought briefly of my child of stars and ruins. As of yet, I still had not had my period.

I looked at the Asian. I said, "Thanks for showing me. I'm going back now." I got up to leave, but the girl caught my wrist and pulled me back. Then she did something that still bothers me when I think of it. She picked up a bird and stuffed it in her mouth.

That was it for me. I scraped back through the hole in the rocks and tore out of there and ran all the way back to Rassas's. When I got to Sophie and my's room, Sophie wasn't there. I went to Rassas's room and knocked and Sophie opened, fully dressed and ready for travel. She looked me up and down, saw the hard-breathing disheveled woman that I was, barefooted with sweaty hair all in my face and all, and smiled as if I was so beneath her that she didn't even know why she had ever put up with me in the first place. Talk about smug. I think maybe that that's Sophie's major talent—condescension.

When her stepdad died, I did what I could to be supportive. She wanted me to come to his funeral in California, and I wanted to go, I really did, but I had a final exam coming up in Native American Art History. It was bad timing. Robert had fallen ill suddenly of throat cancer, right after Thanksgiving. The man had lost his wife, Sophie's mother, to breast cancer a couple of years before. His life had been so sad since then, and all this death was happening all at once for Sophie, but she quit her job and flew to the cancer center in Dallas to be with him. She was with him when he died, and when they shipped the body back to California, she was in the same plane that he was on. Then there I was, going, "I have this exam, but if you need me to come I'll come." She wanted me to drop everything and just come, but there was nothing to be done now about it. Why couldn't she see that? I just wished she would forget all that stuff and move on.

Rassas drove us to the port and we rode the high-speed hydrofoil over to Turkey. By the time we made it to the main bus station in Fethiye, and boarded the bus to Olympos, my feet were blackened and felt raw. I'd looked for my shoes in Rhodes, but no luck, and we didn't have time to buy a new pair before the ferry left. This gave Sophie great pleasure. All the while as we retraced our steps she acted so smug, smiling and approving all of a sudden of my interest and faith in Surpi. It made me mad. Sophie just agreed with every nice thing I said about him to where it seemed like she was humoring me. I felt sick. I questioned my heart. I mean, what did I expect from this? Did I think Surpi and I might grow to be madly connected and in love? Did I think Surpi and I might discover a love that annihilates all interests but the interests we held for each other? When I thought of such a love I saw a heart floating in the sky, a huge pulsing red blob with all these roads connected to it, so many highways and bridges. The heart was cluttered up crazy with dangling pathways and cloverleaves. I saw the clutter all falling away, leaving a single road that, when I followed it with my eye, led to Surpi's opened mouth. I saw blood rolling down the road, entering the mouth of Surpi.

Perhaps I was letting the whole idea of "romance" get the better of me. I still had that brass trinket of the two bees that had all to do about the Queen of Minos. I had put the damn thing on a cheap necklace that I bought on our return trip through Rhodes, and it rested against my breastbone. I may have thought, not on the surface necessarily, but inside the dark of my person, that the little drop of honey, the golden love drop that was falling from between the two bees, was all about what would happen when I met back up with Surpi. Surpi would return to America with me, and we would have a baby and get along famously and be happy. In my mind I pictured Surpi pacing his little room up in the tree house where he lived, so sad because I'd let him get his fill of me, that's the thing. I had sated his desires so that he didn't have his mind on what he was doing when he let me go. Once I was gone, I imagined, reality hit him like a grand piano fallen from a rooftop, all that exploding disjointed music mocking his broken body and heart. If he was to ever see me again, the piano would lift, its splinters and keys coming back together, time rewound, wow! This is what I carried inside me in anticipation of our reunion, this image of myself as a giver of miracles. But I wasn't sure. I was afraid that it all was a foolish dream, as Sophie wanted me to believe. According to Sophie I was too selfish to have a lasting relationship.

The bus trip was five hours long, and even though we'd seen the great scenery before, we still marveled over its beauty. The waters all along the Turkish coast are so inviting, so invigorating—just looking at them makes you wish you were a mermaid. It's the color, partly, that sense of depth and richness below its shimmery surface, plus the stillness of it all. That's where the word turquoise comes from, those cool-ass Turkish coastal waters.

But we get into Olympos, and as the minivan drove us to the camp, my heart raced crazy with excitement. I couldn't wait to see Surpi. We would start out slow. I would not reveal my feelings to him, but we would look at each other knowingly. So we made it to the reception window and Sophie rang the bell and I was sure that in a few seconds Surpi would appear, his button-up shirt buttoned way down—but it was his uncle, and there was all this hair bursting like tainted snow out of his shirt. "Oh hey, I remember you guys," the old man said. "Welcome back to Olympos, girls."

"We couldn't get enough of that old shrine to Hephastus," Sophie said, and checked my expression. She then looked down at my feet, and snorted. After the customary small talk, Sophie said, "So where's your nephew?"

"Surpi? Oh, well, he is not here at the moment."

Surpi's uncle took us to our tree house then, and along the way told us stuff we already knew about Olympos, like that the flames on the Burning Mountain were used as a navigational reference in ancient times, and that in the first century BC Olympos was invaded by Sicilian pirates. I guess the pirates came in and slaughtered everybody and made a settlement of the place. The pirates probably made slaves of the women, but our tree house was the same one we'd slept in before. As we fell asleep I wanted to tell Sophie about what had happened to me back in Rhodes, how the Asian girl—I could remember her name now, it was Monica—had stuffed one of those freaky-ass birds in her mouth as if she intended to eat it. I knew what Sophie would do, though. I knew all the things she would say about this mystery, so spared myself that particular humiliation. The whole thing, to me, was such a puzzle.

In the morning we ate apples and granola and settled in, and we slipped into our bikinis and sunhats and made down to the river beach where we laid out below the ruins of Olympos. We were sitting on the bank together, looking out at the water when we heard laughter, and looked over to see Surpi strutting down the mountain path, shirtless with a backpack on. I figured he'd just seen me and that that was why he was so

happy, that he'd spent the whole night on the Burning Mountain praying for my return, and then here I was—wow! I was about to stand up, thinking I would strike a slightly sexy pose for him, but then I see he's got a woman with him. His joyous burst was because of her. A glimpse was all I needed. I turned back and hunched over and looked at the water and just hoped Sophie would not take this opportunity to screw me in the ass.

"Hey, is that you?" Sophie said.

The turquoise water condensed into an oval, blurry around its edges. I would have been perfectly fine had the oval grown fangs, reached out and yanked me down into it.

I was forced to stand up and meet the girl. I shook her hand. She was a lot prettier than me. I pretended that our coming back here had nothing to do with Surpi. After shaking the girl's hand—she had blond dreadlocks and was from Venice Beach—I gave Sophie a look that said *Please don't reveal what ought to be shared privately between us.*

I expected Sophie to destroy me now. I had it coming. I was toast, but she said, "A bomb went off in Madrid," which was total bullshit. She said, "Some terrorists were caught, but they're still searching for the others. Fifteen people died in the explosion and right now Spain is a dangerous place. I think our lives are more important than a visit to Spain. Spain ain't going anywhere. You will always be able to see Spain. Who needs Spain? I sure don't need Spain. Do you need Spain?" Sophie went on to say that she missed the hell out of our little tree house. As Sophie talked on like that, my admiration for her growing and growing, I noticed the rug sort of thing that Surpi had rolled out for me up on the Burning Mountain that night. It was tucked into the elastic contraption attached to the side of his backpack.

Sophie was always right. I had simply wanted to be right for a change. I had wanted to prove that I was not too selfish for love, that I was not so guilty as she kept trying to make me feel for not being with her during her grief over her stepdad's cancer situation. All my bullcrap was about proving Sophie wrong, and proving to her that I could have a lasting relationship with a guy. In truth I was still the self-centered small-minded brat I had been while we were growing up in Key Largo.

So I wrote Surpi off. Falling asleep that night I thought back on the ignorant Asian girl who stuffed the bird into her mouth. It was her right, of course, to do what she wanted, but it bugged me, and who knew what she'd done after I left her alone in there. It was just the weirdest thing, and the more I thought about it, the more it seemed to be related to the possibilities of my womb. In my mind I saw her stuffing the old-man birds into her mouth, one after the other, eating them until all that remained was the nest.

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ALRIGHT so we're drunk – *real* drunk – full of cheap wine and Bill takes off down the dirt road towards the shore. I gotta follow him, can't let him get lost out there, not in his boxers anyway, so I take off after him. We're both burnin' down the gravel and dust, but he's got a good lead on me, and behind us the party just continues on without ever even noticing. It's roaring real loud by now. Bill just keeps yelling about getting to the beach. He wants to go for a swim and that's all he wants. Somewhere before we get to the main road, he kicks off his sandals and keeps on movin'. I gain a little ground on him, but we meet up when he stops at the main road, realizing he doesn't know where he's going.

It's dark and we're way out in the country so it's that real nowhere dark that cities are afraid of. Bill is panting with his hands on his knees, his full shoulders hunched and heaving with his breath.

"All I want to do is go to the beach," he says between hard gasps, drunk, "You know where the beach is, bro? You could come with me."

I'm feeling adventurous and not that old tired heavy-head wine drunk, more of a passionate fever-heart wine drunk.

"Yea man, let's do it. Bottom of the hill, not a half a mile. Let's go."

I've noticed that Bill gets this wild look in his eyes when he's got an idea, grins with every tooth in his mouth, real wide. He's got that look right now. He takes off again but this time I'm right with him. We're running down opposite sides of the road, him on the left me on the right. My sandals are off too, and we're hittin' the pavement with loud, animal slaps. Our soles are black like the ocean but we ain't slowin' down. We can't help laughing. There are these incredible tall trees on the side of the road with leaves that grow only at the very top, you know, like the ones the giraffes eat, but we don't even notice them. They're here and beautiful and so tall, but we're going to the beach.

"Yo, Bill! There's a car coming! Look the fuck out man!"

"Nah this is New Zealand bro, its comin' on *your* side! Get outta the fuckin' way you stupid American fuck!"

Sure enough, there's yellow coming out from behind the trees down the bottom of the hill right up my lane. I still haven't lost that imperialistic American tic in my brain, I have not learned to think upside down. I peel off into Bill's lane, he's laughing like an idiot, but it's okay, he is an idiot. He's running down some midnight road in his underwear drunk off boxed wine in New Zealand. We're both idiots, man, but it's okay. The car passes no problem and we are feeling *good*. Drunk like old poets. He's feeling a bit like Moriarty and I'm feelin' a *lot* like old Jackie Duluoz. And that's alright; the beach is just up ahead.

"Is this it? Tell me this is it!"

That wind is picking up a bit, or maybe we're just running downhill, but we're lettin' it roar, yelling to the stars.

He's jumping, trying to see the beach, but keeping pace. We get to an opening in the trees, there's an old white Subaru parked there, probably with some Kiwis in the back necking under the big big sky. We can hear the water comin' in, sloshing happily like it only does down here. Here, the trees here grow straight out of the ground, no bullshit man, branch out right from the stump. Makes 'em easy to see through, and we can. We can see right through those trees and there's that big beautiful ocean calling us over and over and over and over. God's perfect clock.

"Yea this is it, Billy Boy, this is it!"

We're tired, we're fuckin' wheezing, man, but we feel so good. We don't know how else to feel. Our faces are flushed, Bill's feet are sore, and his thick knees are almost done running. But not yet: the tide is dead low and the water is far out there. I stop and pull off my gym shorts and t-shirt, Bill keeps going, darting between tide pools. I'm quick to follow. There's a bit of reef shuffled in all the sand, and I rip a hole in my left foot 'bout the size of an American dime, but I keep on running. I'm bleedin' like a pig but you can't even tell in the dark. Bill hits the water before me with an reckless guffaw.

I don't *really* know Bill, he was just *there*, and I felt a sudden crop of concern for him. We had been casual friends at the party, toasted a glass or two, argued the merits of American football to a few obstinate Maoris, but we never really got deep into it, me and him. I'm not sure where his clothes went to begin with, but the wine dissolved all that. All I care about right now is that hole in my foot, now filling with wet sand, and getting in that water. It's the Pacific man, the great blue bastard that never ends. It just keeps on going forever, and even though it's already got so much, I let it take me too.

It wraps around me like a mother.

The water is the same temperature as summer sky. My foot is stinging hard and my thin lips are tastin' too much salt, but we're singin', out there in a big dark, dark ocean we're singin' like the idiots we are, songs about nothin', just making noise. We're still drunk, but the water, that easy gentle monster stretching her mothering arms to the shore; she's getting us good and intoxicated.

"You're never gonna see anything like this again in your life!" Bill screams, plunging the water with his burly Irish freckled arms, "Take it while you can."

I'm just laughing. Bill's a writer too, so I know just what he means, and I know he knows just what I mean. I can't talk, man, it's too beautiful; so I just laugh like an idiot. There are these big cliffs on the right of the beach, all covered in trees, but from a distance it looks like spoon moss. So those moss-covered cliffs are climbin' up to the right, and, in the distance, we can see the glow of City beaming bright. That's where we live, student flats in Auckland City, but she's all the way over there under some other sky, and *our* sky is so full of its own lights, so we forget about flats and textbooks. The moon is only half illuminated, but we can see it all, so bright, lookin' back at us surrounded by stars. More cliffs on the left, not as impressive, but we know we'll miss them if they ever collapsed, so we try to remember how beautiful they are. We use that word a lot, only now we actually mean it. We try to say it other ways (being writers and all) (and drunk), but we just can't say it right.

"This is incredible. It goes on forever man, fucking *forever*. Now you know what forever looks like, Jerry, this

is it. It's lookin' back at us, two little fuckers with nothin' but ink and wine in their heads, and we're laughin'."

We're so full of wonder, and we're stupid for it all.

"Yea man, we're laughin' and they can't do nothin' about it, so keep on laughin'!"

We're both laughing now. We're yelling up there waiting for an echo or a reply. I have never seen so many stars, and that makes me feel smaller than a thimble. I think I'm fine being just a thimble, though, must be overwhelming to be something so big and far. I'm happy and stupid in love and it's all perfect, and that's another word we say a lot, but, in this drunk happy moment, we mean it. We say it like there was no better word, and there isn't. The Pacific is only waist-high here, and that's all we need.

Those cliffs man, the grinning face of a mountain all rocky and sand-colored, they're right next to the city lights if you look at it just right, and the contrast is almost enough to suck the alcohol right outta my senses. This is what we've been pressing for ever since we came here. Ever since San Francisco ever, since New York, ever since Boston. I never thought I'd be able to see this far and this high, and, all at once panoramic be so astounded with how the sky isn't actually black, it's just really dark blue, and the ocean is the same color if you really think about it, too. You wouldn't believe it, and maybe I'm wasting my time trying to explain it, but it is all here, and it all makes sense to fools. Makes my heart swell up like a boxer's fist.

"I just wish I had like a high-rise or something out here, you know? Maybe over there." he says, pointing behind me, "that way I could wake up every morning and see this same thing, every morning."

"Ever think it'd get old though? Like, after a few months, you'd just stop appreciating the beauty? I feel like we do that a lot, anyway."

"Maybe you're right. I donno though. I donno if I'd ever get sick of seeing this."

Bill raises his arm, points one finger from his meaty knuckle up to the moon and says to me:

"If this all was yours to give, who would you give it to man? This whole big everything, who deserves this? I mean, we definitely don't," he snickers, "so who does?"

He's right, we don't. We don't deserve to be so astonished, we were just stupid and drunk and lucky and alive, but we're here now, so I need to decide who would I give my yellow moon to.

I don't even think, I just say it.

"My kids, man. They need to see something like this before they die."

“Yea, you’re right. You’re fuckin’ right man; I just want to share this so badly.”

“I’m good with just us right now, but some day I’m gonna come back here, under this same 2 a.m. sky on this same little beach in nowhere, New Zealand, and show them how amazing this world can be.”

“What about you, man, who would you give that fat old moon to?” I ask, sliding backward into the water so it’s right up to my neck. Bill does the same because it looks relaxing. It is.

“Jenny…”

He lets it out real slow. *Jennnnyyyyy*. I can tell he’s being sincere. Bill reminds me of a child sometimes, it’s one of the things I love most about him and every little emotion he has is so pure and so full of absolute honesty that it makes me almost sick to not be the same.

“Tell me about Jenny.”

“She’s from back home, me and her had a real good something in high school, but we broke it off when I came here. She’d know how beautiful this is. It’s the only thing almost as beautiful as her. I wish she was in my arms right now. I’d cradle her in these waves here and we’d laugh just like you and me. We’d stare up forever and just remember what we actually knew about love and forget that I’m an ocean away on this fuckin’ island and we’d run down and make love on the beach, yea man, under the stars and all, like the songs say. It’d be everything for me.”

“Sounds like a song to me.”

Wiping the salt from my lips: “One day you’ll have that.”

Suddenly, he gets up out of the water, barrel-chested and serious this time.

“But she can’t have it, man, not *this* sky not *this* moon.”

“Why not? Sure she could.”

He eases up a bit, less serious, reflecting like an old man, starting to sober.

“Nah not tonight Jerry, this is ours tonight.”

And we laugh. We laugh like idiots because we are idiots, but we’re idiots with our own sky and our own

moon and no one can have it or tell us what to do with it.

Jerard Fagerberg is a pigeon-heated, lion-chested poet and writer of the world. He received a degree in creative writing from Loyola University Maryland, where he founded the Greyhound Collective Poetry Revival. *He is also a two-time Academy of American Poets Prize honoree and has been published in* Boston Poetry Magazine, Word Bohemia, Phobos Magazine *(forthcoming)*, and The Eunoia Review *(forthcoming). Currently, he serves as an editor and graphic designer for* Manik Music *and can be seen performing poems at open mics in Boston and Cambridge, MA. @JGFagerberg*

Microjourneys

It was after the first crumbling turret that they started following us. “Careful. Be careful. You go too fast. Danger. Bottle water?”

We had dashed to leave the group behind and the two women appeared out of nowhere. We pretended not to speak English, but they knew. We showed them our canteens, but they persisted.

Tamped earth and pieces of auburn brick ground underfoot as we raced to find solitude in the mist. We didn’t want to be tourists and so we refused. Hearts racing we felt the terror of pursuit when the wall failed. When we thought we had eluded them we hid in a deteriorating battlement. Crouched together out of breath we listened.

I cried out when her hand appeared at the opening. She smiled.

“You go too fast. Bottle water?”

We ignored them and eventually they retreated. It is only now that I realize it wasn’t a matter of defeat. I wish I’d been nobler and seen the enemy for who she really was: my denial of place. I wanted an experience unadulterated by the cheerful chatter of need. I wanted to take my partner’s hand and pretend that we were alone in the pureness of a foreign landscape. I was annoyed by the village women and so I missed the chance to pause and be present in what was real.

By not buying a bottle of water I missed the chance to stop being a tourist.

Born and raised in Iowa, Laura Story Johnson has lived in New York City, bush Alaska, Mongolia, Boston, Austria, west of the Zambezi River in Zambia, and in Chicago: www.laurastoryjohnson.com.

The abstract takes hold in jutting rocks, pillars, and cliffs.
The universe distills to black, volcanic earth.

In the distance sand hills rise and fall
like the curves of a body at rest.

The hushed land barely breathes.

I press my face to the glass
Against blue sea and sky.

Down below a small island floats
a lima bean in turquoise waters.

It seems a breath, a finger's touch
Not miles of ocean away.

Between me and the world lies An island,
white and clean,
Like an elusive dream.

Jan Zlotnik Schmidt is a SUNY Distinguished Professor of English at SUNY New Paltz where she teaches composition, creative writing, American and Women's Literature, creative nonfiction, memoir, and Holocaust literature courses. Her work has been published in many journals including *The Cream City Review, Kansas Quarterly, The Alaska Quarterly Review, Home Planet News, Phoebe,Black Buzzard Review, The Chiron Review*, and *Wind*. Her work also has been nominated for the Pushcart Press Prize Series. She has had had two volumes of poetry published by the Edwin Mellen Press (*We Speak in Tongues*, 1991; *She had this memory*, 2000). Recently a chapbook, *The Earth Was Still*, was published by Finishing Line Press. In addition to her poetry publications, she has edited two anthologies of women's memoirs (*Women/Writing/Teaching* [SUNY Press 1998] and, with Dr. Phyllis R. Freeman, *Wise Women: Reflections of Teachers at Mid-Life* (Routledge 2000]). Her literature for composition anthology, *Legacies: Fiction Poetry Drama Nonfiction*, co-edited with Dr. Carley Bogarad (deceased) and Dr. Lynne Crockett, is now in its fifth edition.

And once I had become the leopard, the World seemed to shift around me, and my talons receded into paws. I grew hind legs, and attached were two more paws.

My skin turned soft with a coat of hairs, and my body elongated itself. I had a tail, and my head grew ears into which a cacophony from the vast horizon entered.

At once, I believed I was where the Universe needed me, and I looked over the scorched Earth, the trees and the beasts that roamed over it, thinking they had been made for me.

I turned back before pursuing a larger prey as my new self, and saw the remains of the former me strewn about the ground.

What I would become when the winged ants scuttled over the former me was perhaps what I had become now: food for something greater than myself.

And as I took down the wildebeest, slowly as though Time had prolonged itself for the eyes of Nature, I thought of that former self inside the ants who would become feed for the ant eater. And how the remaining ants would take parts of me into the soil when they perished, thereby making of me what we shall become: nothing, yet all things.

So I crossed into Night aware of the fates of others there. And how Nature had laid her plan, and how some creatures became others, while the ones she offered me were taken into my journey over the waiting, arid terrain.

Falconhead currently inhabits the anatomy of a writer of fiction, but may, at times, inhabit a poet or playwright.

Scrubby shrubs shot their way in between overlapped black boulders. We broke free of the jungle at the bottom of the sloped rock field. Just above the crest, the tip of Volcan Arenal spewed smoke into the clouds. We were lucky. Normally by this time of day, they'd descend and cover the upper half of the volcano's cone. Unlike Volcan Poas, Arenal looked like a volcano that you'd find in a middle school science fair.

On top of the hill, all of Arenal was visible – from her powder rimmed peak, to the lava field, and on to the lagoon. Off-green patches of moss slithered across the slag, slowly obscuring their vesicular roughness. I begged the Goddess inside to show me their creation; show me how she stole life from the plants to birth her children. She never answered.

We moved on a couple days later to the base camp at Mt. Uran. It was a tiny place carved into the side of the mountain some five-thousand feet up. The only place to get food was a small bar. The first morning there, I sat on the porch eating breakfast with my journal and a fresh cup of Tican coffee in hand. A TV in the corner whispered Spanish to me as I watched swallow-tailed kites chase each other. Erupción—Volcán Arenal…. I glanced at the tube and saw Arenal answer my request. Two days after we left, she covered everything we saw that day in ash.

Andrew R. Baker is a traveler, photographer, graduate of Tusculum Colleges creative writing program, and a good ol' southern boy from the hills of southeast Tennessee that now lives and works in China.

It didn't matter that I had the dagger in my hand; that I had stayed up, keeping watch after Grandmother had finally got my sister to sleep and had turned in herself; that I sat behind the front door, priming my weapon, ready to plunge it into whoever bothered us again that night. Big Guy, I hoped. And Small Guy too. The blade was long enough to go through both their necks at once. My arm was strong – I threw javelin in school – and they wouldn't be expecting it. I had seen Commando enough times to know.

None of that mattered when the door burst open. The teak frame bashed my side and tossed me out of the doorway, sending the dagger out of my reach. Rays from several flashlights found my couched figure as I struggled to find my feet, and then two hefty figures grabbed me and held me up, allowing Small Guy to walk in and stare in my face. I could tell from the collar of his shirt that he was still wearing his school uniform.

He took out a gun and slid the barrel into my shorts. The muzzle rested on the shaft of my penis, and I shuddered as the cold metal swung it left and right. My mouth opened; my lungs froze; I drooled on my chest. Sweat beads quickly collected on my forehead, and then my ears began to whine and ring, perhaps preparing me for the heat and mess that would be left on the floor should he pull the trigger.

Between getting knocked down by a ram at seven and a car at sixteen, Ope Olum'degun claims to have gained all the experience and insight possible into the tragedy of humanity, and there is no shortage of such pretension in his writing. Born in Nigeria, he currently lives in Charlotte, NC, where he teaches English as a Second Language to overly inquisitive 8th graders. He is also an Adjunct Professor of English at Strayer University.