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Editorial

With this issue we farewell our fiction editor, Suzanne Berne, with eternal thanks for helping us discover so many fine authors over the years. I once heard Suzanne say, when asked what she was looking for in a piece of fiction, that she wanted to feel a little bit worried by the end of the first page—a clever way of reminding writers that a story needs a degree of tension and that it's better if it doesn't take too long to manifest. Suzanne's own writing is taut and suggestive in precisely this way; she once described one of her own books as a "comedy of menace." She has been a great pleasure to work with and an asset to the journal, and we will miss collaborating with her.

We have had a busy year already with the publication of the *Renga for Obama*, an occasional poem featuring the work of 268 American poets, edited by our poetry editor, Major Jackson. We celebrated the launch of this, the first volume in our new chapbook series, with a *Harvard Review* Salon Series event in March headlined by Paul Muldoon.

Issue 52, which features a fine poem by Muldoon, also includes the work of several longtime *Harvard Review* contributors: Lloyd Schwartz, Kevin McGrath, David Rompf, and Robert Anthony Siegel. I am happy that we have been able to maintain so many of these long relationships, some of which go back to Stratis Haviaras's day. On the flip side, we are also showcasing an unusually large number of talented emerging writers, including Erica X Eisen, Virginia Marshall, and M. Rachel Thomas, as well as important writers like Arthur Sze and Carmen Giménez Smith, who are appearing in *Harvard Review* for the first time. Finally, we would like to call attention to the striking visual poetry of Francis Sánchez, a Cuban dissident writer who came to us through a conference hosted by Harvard Scholars at Risk, an organization whose mission we enthusiastically support.

—Christina Thompson

STANLEY MOSS

How I Came to Meet the Fates

I was walking in Puglia,
I found myself almost lost, uncertain,
the sandy woods full of violets and nightshade,
I came to a house half-cave, I walked through
an open door between olive and fig trees
in a village where they still speak Greek.
I saw three large women dressed in black and silver,
silver threads from distaff to spindle.
There was no food on the shelves
except, I believe, honey and *fragoline di Nemi*.
Beyond the orchards I heard crowds weeping
in temples, waterwheels, slave songs, blessings,
curses, battle cries, like flocks passing overhead.
The three were not persons, still they were ladies—
one wore a necklace, a live blind snake,
no, the necklace was a string of eyes
sometimes blue, sometimes green.
I have it, three sisters, *personifications*.
I heard their names in voices that first echoed,
then groans and winks, bruised agony.
I wondered, Can I ask questions?
I knew if they answered I would never get home again.
I asked, "How long have I got?"

Nona said, "Nine days after your life began,
the time of your death was determined by me.
I gave you two months,
then because your mother prayed to Ocean
in the Rockaways, Zeus said,
'Give him a sweet death, in sugarcane bull rushes.'"
There was snow on the ground, and fire.
The snow did not melt, changed color.
I've seen blood on snow, but the red
seemed more August sunset. Then I asked,
"Fates, make me a sweater
of many-colored threads that Achilles
might choose rather than a sword." I came to the point:
"Name the day, the time, the place."
They said, "A Saturday night after we've finished
your turtleneck sweater, longer than the life
of a turtle—if you don't fall first."
I saw a thread made of lightning
struck from spindle to sun to moon.
I kissed Morta, whose scissors were not mortal,
too large for simple thread, smoky,
useful in Carthaginian peace—with a single closing
they slaughtered herds of goats and wildebeests,
sheared flocks of sheep grazing on the moor.
In the marketplace I saw an actor, a tragedian
playing Tiresias as man and woman.
When he spoke, an eagle left his roost:
"Poets are masculine, poetry is feminine,
the poem the child."
I kissed the Three Fates goodbye.
They used their rough tongues, I thought my thoughts.

Informed by all occasions,
a life full of despites,
I'll have one last love affair.
I'll die an upstart.
Before the Fates I listen to *Boris Godunov*,
his dying words: "I am still Tsar."

KEVIN MCGRATH

Art of Travel

Last summer I returned to the Kacch of Western Gujarat, a large island next to the border of Pakisthan and on the Arabian Sea. In the east and north it is bordered by salt marshes and when the monsoon comes in July, the Rann, as this area is known, becomes a shallow basin that isolates Kacch, except for the one causeway which connects it with the Gujarati mainland. I flew from Boston via Doha in Qatar, where I always want simply to walk out of the airport and into that profound desert; all I did, however, was to stare through walls of ambiguous green glass, admiring the dust of evening and the elusive life out there.

My driver met me in Ahmedebad and—at three in the morning—we passed through the unlit streets and headed west. Thousands of men slept in the streets upon the low string beds known as *charpoys*, and the temperature was above a hundred degrees, the air heavy with rotting vegetation, refuse, and smoke. It was always a pleasure to see Jagdish, our driver. He was effectively one of the family and had seen our children grow up from the early days when we first lived in the Kacch at the turn of this century. I trusted him absolutely, and his driving skills were

remarkable, almost preternatural. At one place, where we stopped for tea, I handed him a wristwatch that my wife had found for him, which pleased him extremely, although I never saw him wear it.

Jagdish's son was working in Dubai, in the gold business, and we spoke about the Gulf. Jagdish himself had been there in his youth in order to secure the cash to purchase his first automobile. His father, who is now in his nineties, was an old sea captain who had sailed the dhows that Mandvi—the seaport of Kacch, where even the Romans had once traded—is famous for about the Arabian Sea. The vessels ply towards Mombasa and Zanzibar and up toward Muscat, following a triangle of seasonal monsoon winds. In those days, mariners did not use timepieces, charts, or sextants to navigate; they understood the lore and living details of wave and airstream, much as the old Polynesian sailors knew the swells and the night skies showered with delicate signs, and the patterns made by migratory birds. Mandvi is one of the last places on earth where the colossal old dhows are still constructed; made from huge baulks of Burmese mahogany, they are built on the tidal sands of the Rukhmavati River, the shipwrights working with few iron tools and no plans.

It was wonderful to be back, and as the car sped along the empty unmetalled roads in the pre-dawn toward the causeway into the Kacch, I felt happier and happier, more easy and familiar. It was as if this was a homecoming, as all the terse gravity and imperative life of Cambridge dropped from my shoulders. When I first met Jagdish many years before, he had owned a tiny rudimentary automobile with a two-cylinder diesel engine. Now, thanks to all the business which the state government in Ahmedebad was promoting for the district, he owned three stylish cars and employed his own drivers. Jagdish was also a drummer in the port's Dariyalal temple, a high-status position, and we spoke about that for a while and the recent Kacchi new year ceremonies. The

Kharves, his seafaring people, had long ago migrated into the Kacch from the region of Jaipur in Rajasthan.

In the early years of our life in the Kacch, my family and I stayed on the date farm of Mr. L. D. Shah, a retired timber merchant from Bombay, who had simply given us a house on his estate. Mr. Shah had been born in the village Kacch and had gone to the metropolis as a boy and had succeeded remarkably in business; his people had also migrated into the region from Rajasthan more than a hundred years prior, during a time of drought and famine. Now he had returned to his native terrain and was cultivating dates. He was a passionate environmentalist and developed many tree-planting programs and cistern-building projects; this is where I helped, speaking publicly and conducting various inaugural events for the establishment of orchards. Reforestation in a sterile and rainless desert topography was difficult, however, and much of the work was bound toward failure.

Shah-sahib was considered a guru by the village, for he was a Jain who gave much of his time—at least three hours a day—to *dhyāna*, the Sanskrit term for "profound reflection." This was in an underground marble-lined ashram which he had restored and which bordered his farm. Jainism is the oldest continuing religion in India and is nowadays far more prominent in spiritual life than Buddhism. I learned so much from Mr. Shah as we sat in his small, shadowy gazebo surrounded by peacocks who patrolled the sandy ground in search of grain. He would speak about his own guru, long ago in the Himalayan foothills, who had initiated him into a world of *dhyāna* that was immaterial and intangible: "Nothing in the world can replicate that experience," he used to say, "and from that my most important knowledge derives."

I journeyed far in that diminutive wooden gazebo during the hot pre-monsoon afternoons when the fan spun noisily above us and we would drink coconut water and cooled buffalo milk and he would

describe his illumination. That was a world without entities and unspeakable, and yet it drove his endlessly philanthropic life, for he was a most munificent patron among the poorer and outcast communities of the village. Talking about his plantation work he once said, "I can hit a stone a hundred times with a hammer and it will not break, and then, someone else will come along and break the stone with one blow. That is karma," he added. It was a view of human efficacy that I had not encountered before, an appreciation of causality that inhered not in action but in speech and thought, and thus a sense that daily altruism was the only way for humankind to move forward pragmatically. "We die when we exhaust our suffering and are no longer capable of compassion," he once told me.

I recall him saying—gnomically—on several occasions that it was "the sight of the sight" that we should pursue in life, and that it was the only right terminus for human endeavor in the universe. "All that we can ever do in this life is to be a perfect witness," he used to say. I never quite understood what he meant by these statements but the words remain with me still. "When I am there, I shall be free to die," he would say.

On this particular visit to the Kacch, one of my intentions was to spend time with another good friend, the Maharao Pragmulji III, who had requested that I return at some point before the monsoon. He had been unwell and was troubled by his future and I had not been back to the Kacch for a while, having been too busy in Cambridge, writing books and simply keeping quiet. Pragmulji had always been most generous to me, with his knowledge and with introductions among his *bhayad*, "the brotherhood," introducing me to many of the Jadejas, his clan. They had ruled the Kacch for several hundred years, having migrated into the desert region from Sindh to the northwest. The Maharao possessed great moral stature in the Kacch—although he held little material presence—and that kind of prestige was mysterious to me. We spent much

time discussing its nature and presence in the world, and I eventually wrote a book about moral authority based on those conversations.

In Pragmulji's youth there had only been one road in the district, from the capital town of Bhuj southwards toward the coast and the prosperous port of Mandvi; travel otherwise had been by cart or camel along desert tracks. He had grown up surrounded by ritual and performance and his childhood had been thoroughly imbued and informed by such devotional life, so that he was now what he described as "the first servant of the goddess," Ashapura Ma, who oversaw Kacch and its fertility. The best times I shared with Pragmulji and his wife, the svelte Maharani, who came from Tripura, far away on the eastern borders of India, were at those rites, which were marvelous and unearthly, complex, beautiful, and thoroughly transparent in their sincerity and belief.

Pragmulji also kept a sanctuary, the Pragsar *rakhal*, to the west of Bhuj. There was a lake there—rare in that dry landscape—where many crocodile lived; the Maharao's great-grandfather had stocked the waters with these creatures, imported from mainland Gujarat. The site also attracted thousands of birds, spectacular varieties of gallinules, storks, and cranes, and it was the last area in the Kacch where leopard continued to thrive. I spent many afternoons during those years out at Pragsar, walking the hot stony landscape, always making my way toward a hill above the lake, toward what the Maharao described as his "lookout," where there was a sandstone bench upon which I could sit and almost disappear from myself as I looked out over the waters of the valley. In June thousands and thousands of silky white herons would congregate noisily before nesting in the shadow of viridian banyan trees. Dark floating forms of crocodile were discernible upon the surface of the lake as they ceaselessly stalked their prey.

I traveled far in those fugitive hours, always returning downhill reassured about the vicissitudes of ordinary life, all my anguish and

uncertainty pared away and refined by the aerial light and the quiescence of such a bare, harsh solitude where only hawks and snakes existed. Pragmulji and I often used to talk about our experiences at that scene; it was as if the place were the locus or metaphor of much of our shared thought and observation concerning the natural world. "All my life," he once said to me as we both sat on the hilltop, "has been a search for a truly moral sky that I could always admire and draw strength from. If we cannot be true in this universe," he added, "then we are dreadfully and obliviously lost … Time is not an embodiment of years past but of human experience that is retrieved. That is why I come here and sit with you on this hill." He laughed. "Love does not only occur within the dimension of time."

Pragmulji would spend the hot season at another palace on the coast, just to the north of Mandvi. The gardens were extensive and *nilgai*, or blue buck, roamed the paths, and many juvenile camels wandered about the *chikoo* groves. There were no wells, so the place was arid and rough and the ponds and courts were dry and desolate, with here and there a few worn faux-Gupta statues; even the palace water had to be trucked in by lorry every few days. We spent many hours in a small cabin on the rooftop, where it was shady and breezy and hidden behind stone screens. We would discuss kingship and the kind of life he had once led, and how it was that his support of and participation in temple ceremonies was now the focus of his days. This was his form of *dhyāna*, he said, and it was his duty to preserve, sustain, and implement such consciousness within the kingdom. The former martial code of rule had long been abandoned, once the British arrived and the Jadeja income from taxation, customs duties, and the royal mint diminished, only to be curtailed at Independence and terminated during Indira Gandhi's tyranny.

I traveled through time during those inimitable conversations. There were many early seventeenth- and eighteen-century pictures on the walls of the palace, and they too illustrated a world as it had been before the

Scottish Captain James MacMurdo arrived with his artillery at the beginning of the nineteenth century. That former age—absolutely non-secular, preliterate, and premonetary—could be one of terrific duress, with famine caused by failing monsoons, yet it was also one of equilibrium, a world whose domestic economy was based upon a tradition of fidelity and service, exchanges made according to loyalty and hierarchy.

Pragmulji was like an ancient giant immersed in all the centuries of his clan, who could touch upon those eras and epochs at will and walk among all those small intermediary days, drawing them closer in order to illustrate or magnify his words.

Two years before I had been in the Kacch during the winter and had, in the company of a guide, walked across the small and isolated Banni territory in the north of the province. On that occasion I had met up with two friends—both virtuoso natural historians—at a periodic fresh-water depression to the south, the Chari Dhand. Jehan's family had migrated into the Kacch as Parsi traders in the late seventeenth century, being refugees from Iran who had later become creditors to the Jadejas. Jugal, having trained with an American zoologist in Danakil Eritrea in the late twentieth century, had left his family town in Rajasthan and come to the Kacch in order to study and record its rare and notable wildlife, especially the birds.

Tens of thousands of migratory flocks from as far afield as Siberia would migrate to the Chari Dhand each winter, and the view was outstanding, almost supernatural, especially at dusk, when innumerable and enormous flocks would descend upon the shore for the night, singing their strange songs. I had often spent time there, sleeping in a small concrete hide that the Government had built for ornithologists; yet there was always a problem with the starved and rapacious foxes and jackals, who would try to maraud our camp, and we would have to build a defense of thorn.

This was the part of the Kacch where the Phakirani Jaths would bring their camel herds during the cold season, when the Banni would become a rich grassland—that is, if the monsoon had arrived. Herds of many hundreds of camel would be strolling there, drawn toward the lake for refreshment. The Phakirani are one of the most unusual communities that I have ever met, being esoterically Moslem and eschewing property. They considered their whole life a pilgrimage and survive almost completely on camel milk, which it was forbidden for them to sell. Centuries ago they, too, had moved southward out of Iran. How I loved watching the Phakirani, and I would drink tea with them upon the tawny sands; they were always strangely quiet and possessed such benign mystery about their eyes and expression.

On my visit this summer, I particularly wanted to return to one of the Indus civilization sites far out in the desert on a small island in the Rann. I had been to Dholavira many times before and had sometimes stayed out there for a night or two, on several occasions with my wife and small son, sleeping on the stony ground in a rural shelter, always wary of scorpions.

On this occasion Jagdish collected me at the date farm long before dawn, when even the animals had not yet awoken from a breathlessly hot night. We drove out towards the northeastern part of Kacch, passing through Bhuj and by the Maharao's city palace, now in partial ruin from the earthquake of 2001, which devastated much of the district. That eastern region was all desert, austere, and sterile; it was the most conservative area of the Kacch, where many of the communities remained hardened in their attitude of manly violence and feminine seclusion. Jagdish never liked to go through Vagar, as it was called, and detested the brutality and narrowness of the culture there. We had been many times though, visiting ceremonies and festivals and had seen amazing rites of sword-dancing and fabulously exotic camel festivals.

The heat was terrific, and to put one's hand outside the vehicle as we sped toward the Rann was like placing it in a fire. Soon we were driving along a thin, perfectly straight causeway toward the first of the lesser islands, crossing the bare alkaline waste under a fierce, candid sky, without the distinction of horizon. The car rolled on for hour after hour without any sign of animal, avian, or human life, until we finally approached Khedir isle, where Dholavira was located. The place was ancient and untouched by humanity, made up of stone and waterless mineral and a few *Prosopis juliflora* thorn bushes. Jagdish parked the vehicle in the shade of a solitary neem tree and we found a terrace upon which to lay out our food and dined, surrounded by a crowd of young boys from a nearby nomadic Rabari camp.

Then I left him and wandered up a beige sandy hill toward the massive walls of what had once been a citadel. There were several deep, completely lined cisterns in that quarter, for the people there had perfected the art of water harvesting and conservation. In fact the hydraulic and sanitary systems of the town—a small city—were remarkably sophisticated and complex. This had been a pre-bronze-age Chalcolithic culture, and it was still possible to come across fractured chert blades, broken but still razor-sharp, and small green copper beads or pieces of shell bangle that had once been worn by women. I always managed to detect lovely smooth potsherds, sometimes with beautifully painted decoration, and my wife had once uncovered a diminutive terracotta bull which must have been about four thousand years old.

It was vibrantly hot, almost delusively so, and after an hour or two of wandering the abandoned lanes, walls, and rooms I was beginning to feel blank and hazy. The air was brilliantly sharp and clear and of a cerulean hue—caused by the salinity of the atmosphere—and this began to affect my vision; my pocket thermometer recorded a temperature of 123 degrees. After a while, I took an old piece of cotton cloth from my bag and wound it about my head as a turban to keep myself from

becoming deranged. My vision began to oscillate and become wavy and black and I could feel a euphoria superseding all sensibility. So, reluctantly, I set off back toward where I thought I might find Jagdish, sad to leave behind this transport of another time and barely recognizable humanity.

Once back in the car, we set off further into Khedir island, heading northwards toward the coast itself and away from Dholavira. There was no road any more, only rock and stone and a vague indication of an animal track along which the infinitely resilient Jagdish drove slowly and with special care, always in low gear so as not to break an axle on a boulder or to rip a tire. We spent about an hour winding our way up a hill and then, there before us, lay the glorious Rann, gleaming and obscure in a terrific aqueous heat. The sky was an electric blank, the sun so radiant it was invisible, and there were not even any shadows, the light being so diffuse. We descended toward the brackish waters, the track snaking back and forth across the hillside in random bends, and when the way ultimately vanished we left the car and walked down toward the shore, which was stale and acrid. The hyper-saline margin reeked of preserved decay—a peculiar odor, almost feral and yet unnaturally clean.

Some weeks earlier, one evening in Bhuj, as we sat out in the courtyard of his family's house, Jehan had told us about this place and said that if we walked to the west we would discover some ancient trees in what must have once been a large grove. Drenching our *paghadis* or "head-dress" from water bottles, we set off, only to be dazzled by the intransigent glaring light. In the far distance, another island was visible, in dark gray silhouette, ominous and apparently gigantic, for such was the complete lack of perspective. There were no sounds at all, not even from the desiccated salt pools of Rann water.

Then, there they were, lying horizontal upon the rock, inclined slightly downward toward the shoreline: huge umber-colored trunks of trees with a few visible limbs and an indication of roots. But they were

stone: fossilized timber from the Jurassic period, sixty-five million years ago. Their petrified immobility and the intense, flaring illumination of the place, the absolute silence, all combined to make both Jagdish and myself somewhat uneasy and restless. He did not stay long, saying that it was too hot, and retreated back toward where we had left the vehicle. I wandered about, trying to focus and to think about the place, but my brain was too heated and I only became confused by the rocks and the total muteness of the air. Then I, too, staggered back toward the car and soon we left.

I have never been in that position before, at the site of something which evades all comprehension and which actually makes normal perception impossible. It was beautiful in its sublimity but without any medium, for such was the surreal temperature and its unique luminosity. There was also the weirdness of being beside a former living thing which had not moved in an inconceivable amount of time. It was, in fact, not possible to experience anything there but only to quickly withdraw and to know that one might perhaps at best imagine what it was that we had experienced in that unnerving locale.

In former times, to travel was either to engage in trade or to migrate from landscape to landscape in an effort to survive, and was by sea or on foot with draft animals; to travel as a means of learning, or for acquiring experience, is a peculiarly modern phenomenon. For me, the reality of traveling is essentially an act of *confusion*: to become confused by what one does not comprehend and therefore to struggle—verbally, intellectually, emotionally, and perhaps even physically if conditions are not good—to apprehend what one is not. Like the Socratic fish that put its head out of the water and saw "the true sky, the true light, and the true stars," so the traveler—like certain artists—puts him or herself in situations that are initially incomprehensible in order to perceive what it means to be human. That for me is the true purpose of any excursion: to approach the margins of human experience and observe a severely new or untold sight.

The art of travel in its purest form cultivates a state of uncertainty and moves beyond a situation of similitude toward a condition in which there is no *likeness*. For me, friendship is also like that—a personal amity that comes from shared distance, from the experience of being in common situations when, in the presence of a companion and with tremendous effort, one witnesses something entirely human that is unlike anything that one—until that moment—has previously known. The human affinity that occurs then—like the Socratic form of ideal harmony—is the one sustaining and unerring truth of our existence, supplementing our otherwise imperfect exchanges. Friendship, at its best, is founded not upon resemblance but—to my mind—upon *unlikeness*, upon an affinity drawn completely from the present, and from the recognition and admiration of that distinction.

I recall what a friend once said to me, one night when we had walked out into Banni from the hamlet of Foulay and slept out on the Dhand platform. This was a young farmer called Dasharath, a scion of the Rathors, a *ksatriya* clan that was affiliated with the Maharao's Jadejas. That chilly evening as we crouched over our thornwood fire, the limitless black sky nacreous with stars, he sang a few of his favorite ghazals and I responded with a song of Georges Brassens. We sat there in the great silence, listening to the jackals whooping behind us and to the myriad sounds of cranes and other birds that came from off the water; the darkness was tuned by the vibrant staccato of a million insects. A fine gibbous moon hung in the air above us, suspending all life in an abstract glow of zinc-colored silvery light. Dasharath had been speaking of his dream of a moral world, where borders were no longer guarded by infantry, a world that was predictive and generous, without cruelty and friction, and good for all days. "A place where greatness was not superfluous and where solitude is the gentleness that breaks suffering," he said.

STEPHANIE BURT

Pomegranate in a Bowl of Water

1.

Am I the jailer, or the girl, or the mom who saves
The girl who cannot be saved? Or am I standing
Not quite patiently before the tiny
Chaos of floating, fibrous tasteless plaster-
Colored bits, like whole days
From a year that you won't
Remember, trying to pick
Out the last few acidic/Fructose-bearing
Seeds? Inside my world
Is another world, the color
Of Mars, and inside
This Mars, a honeycomb
Of easily envisioned colonies,
A series of bubbles for humans to hide inside
Or else a broken-open
Cinnabar-scarlet richness, ripe
For bees. All the bits
You would want to eat sink
Slowly towards the bottom of the bowl. You can stain
Your fingers by choosing to taste
The remainder yourself

Or feed them to children, who, being children, asked
Every day for a week,
Then left what we gave them intact on their
Plates. How do we tell
The difference between what such children
Say they want and what we think
That grown-ups need?

2.

When I am most
Myself
I feel like a thief

Not so much rich
As sour and sweet

In the story we heard
You can't
Be mother and daughter
At once
It defies
Belief

You have to taste seeds
To take a side

Not so much rich
As sour and sweet

Other than those

Who never
Had anything there is no one
In this world or

The next who can
Say they have
Nothing
To hide

VIRGINIA MARSHALL

Bell Parts

I USED TO LIE AWAKE at night and give away parts of my body, assigning certain ones to people I love and people I want to remember. The splotch of freckles on my left shoulder blade belongs to my mother; the creases between my knuckles and my fingertips belong to my piano teacher; the click in my lower back when I lie on my side belongs to my college boyfriend; my right kneecap belongs to my best friend, who helped me pick the gravel out of it when I skinned it on the driveway; the birthmark at the base of my neck belongs to my high school boyfriend (he said he would identify me by it if ever my body were left unattended); the parts of my lips that catch strands of my hair blowing loose in the wind belong to a girl I taught English to one summer. She would watch the corners of my mouth whenever I took the class outside and brush away the hair, reaching her own fingers up to my face, patiently, as if bothered by my carelessness.

This ritual began in high school, when I got my first boyfriend and started to learn about my body. When he placed his hands on the space between my ribs and my hips, I discovered my waist. I began to feel the curves that pressed into my mattress springs at night, reveling in them

the way a tourist revels in the discovery of a neighborhood. I was new to this land and it was overwhelming, so I started to give parts of it away.

For thirteen years I played classical piano. By my senior year of high school, I was practicing two hours a day to prepare for the culminating event of my music career: a senior piano recital. During the after-school practice hours, I made my high school boyfriend sit quietly in an armchair while I played the trills of Scarlatti and Beethoven again and again, holding one finger down and banging repeatedly with the other, just as my piano teacher had instructed. When he left, I would have my sister sit beside me at the piano and push down on my hands as I played so that when she released her hands, mine would feel lighter, as if there were little helium balloons beneath my palms.

Sometimes my boyfriend and I would go to his house when his parents were out. We would take our clothes off and throw them on the floor, where they would mingle like fond acquaintances. Lying on his bed, I would separate his lips with my fingers and kiss his smooth, shiny teeth. He would do the same to mine. Then we'd laugh.

The first piano recital I brought him to was a Baroque competition, music from the 17th and 18th centuries, where I was to play a Bach Invention—nothing I hadn't done before. He sat in the back with my parents as I walked up to the front. When I got to the piano bench, I looked down at the keys and they did not look familiar. I could feel my heart pulsing in my elbows and the keys swam. I produced only a minute or so of noise and then gave up. The audience looked at me with one collective pity face as I managed a wobbly bow.

After that, I told him I couldn't get too distracted. "I have to give piano everything," I said. So I practiced and practiced. In between practicing I would kiss the pearly white piano keys in his mouth to make sure that he was still there, waiting for me.

I don't remember the details of my senior recital, only that I have never felt so relieved after taking a bow. I spent the rest of the summer working at a day camp with three- and four-year olds, putting on and peeling off their socks and brushing bits of gravel off of their tiny, pudgy feet. After work, I'd drive to his house and we'd watch basketball on TV or read. When the time for college came, we left each other at the bottom of my driveway, and I could feel a huge emptiness sneak into my chest, an enormous, terrifying balloon settling right in the space I was trying to use for breathing.

We said we'd write letters and talk on the phone in a schedule I'd laid out beforehand. I wanted to divide my time wisely, to love him and give college whatever was left over. Or maybe it was the other way around, I can't remember. All I knew was that my resources were finite. I only had one brain, two hands, two hips, one nose and so on. At college, there were five new women to learn how to live with, classes that assigned more books than I was used to reading in a year, and a strange campus geography to learn. I taught myself to forget about my body, my boyfriend, my friends in high school, and tried to find some other formula for stability.

A day or two after arriving, the freshmen were all herded to a far-flung area of the campus for the activities fair. On tables arranged in rows on a wide, green lawn, upperclassmen sang a cappella, tap-danced, and thrust pamphlets into our hands. A young woman with short-cropped black hair stood behind a table supporting a bell the size of a lobster pot. She told me about a bell-ringing club that met at the top of Lowell House tower, an upperclassmen dorm, on Sundays and described huge bells rung with ropes and pedals. I had yet to make weekend plans, or even college friends for that matter, so I went. That first Sunday, I found my way to Lowell and started climbing, huffing by the fourth set of stairs. The seventh set was no more than a metal ladder leading to a small, square door in the ceiling. Beyond that, a belfry filled with sunlight. The wind greeted me, and

I took a moment to look out over the courtyard and the students scurrying below.

And then I saw the bells, huge and wide and lovely. The largest bell hovered over the first landing like a UFO, over fifteen tons and ten feet in diameter. Its clapper hung from the innards of the bell with a trailing rope like a dog with a limp leash. The senior bell-ringer with the short black hair told me her name was Inna and that the largest bell was called Mother Earth. Inna handed me a pair of earplugs and brought me up yet another flight of stairs to an area like a crow's nest with a view of the Charles River.

"These are the melody bells," she said, pointing to the wires attached to rows of bells several feet from us, hanging from the tower's arches. "And these are the trills." She grabbed four ropes in one hand and settled her stance so that, with her back to me, she held the trills in her right hand and poised her left over the wires.

The Catholic church across the square chimed one o'clock. Inna motioned to me to stuff the earplugs into my ears and then nodded at the bell-ringers below. The student standing underneath the largest bell started swinging the huge clapper back and forth until, after several pumps, the clapper touched the rim of the bell. What issued from the bell was more than a sound. Immediately, I became aware of my chest and lungs as my insides vibrated. Something like a thrill caught in my throat and I watched from behind as Inna touched the wires of the melody bells, her hair shuddering in time with her precise movements. I had to step out of the way so the student behind me could grab hold of the chains attached to the enormous pedals. He brought his feet down onto them and the stomper bells added their din to the fray. I retreated down the stairs until I was level with the body of the largest bell. It quivered with each strike: a small quaking of the earth.

"We need more women bell-ringers," Inna said to me as we made our way down the stairs, after the ring. "To be a member and get a key to the tower, all you have to do is survive the winter as a bell-ringer."

I laughed; Inna was serious. "You'll keep coming, won't you?"

It was either the earnestness in her voice or the allure of the key that made me agree. I assured her that I would.

As classes continued into the winter and daylight dwindled, I dragged myself to the tower once a week. I would grumble about the lost hour I could have spent reading or finishing an essay for class, but once I had inserted the little blue earplugs into my ears and tilted my head up to the bells, all regret was erased. I was with the bells. I got to strike their clappers gleefully and grin at the students below, anonymous and so very loud.

I talked about the bells to anyone who would listen, in the dining halls, my dorm room, on the phone with my boyfriend and my parents. Did you know the Lowell bells are actually replicas of ancient Russian Orthodox bells? I'd say, and then launch into the history: in Russia, bells are "singing icons," decorated with saints and prayers and their sound is meant to extend the reach of the church. So even if you're toiling away in the barley fields, you can hear the patterns of the bells and know which prayers are being sung at the service miles away. There was a time when almost every church in Russia (about 60,000 by 1900) had bells and rang them throughout the week.

Then, I would say, my voice getting grander and more dramatic, the Communist Revolution came to Russia. In 1917, the Soviets took control and ordered the murder of religion and the old regime. Monks, nuns, and clergy were executed, and their churches were demolished. The bells pushed out of towers, melted down, and turned into engine parts and bronze sculptures. The Danilov monastery in Moscow held onto its bells until 1930, when a visiting American purchased the bells and shipped them overseas. The Danilov monastery had been transformed into a prison for orphans and children of Soviet dissidents. The bells were installed in Lowell House at Harvard and played every Sunday by a rotating cast of students.

In the 1990s, after the fall of the Soviet Union, the Russian Orthodox church decided it was safe to ring bells again. Most of the bells in Russia had been destroyed, but Lowell House had a complete set of Russian bells, being rung badly by generations of Harvard students. It took until 2003 for a delegation from the Danilov monastery to visit Lowell House and negotiate a return of the bells. As part of the agreement, new Russian bells were cast for Harvard's tower and an exchange program was established: every two years, Father Roman—the head bell-ringer at the Danilov monastery—travels to Lowell House to teach a new set of students how to play the bells in traditional Russian style, and on the odd years, members of the Harvard bell-ringing club travel to Russia to see the original set.

After I finished the story, on the phone or in the dining hall, the listener would invariably wow in a vaguely interested way and say they'd try to join me one Sunday. Few made the trip, but I continued to ring each week. I'd climb up to the tower and re-create Russian peals. But when I rang, I did not think about the heavy history of these strange creatures. To me, the bells were a quirk, beautiful and enormous though they were.

When I went home for the summer after my freshman year and met my high school boyfriend again, things had changed. No teeth kisses, no talk about the future. We had broken up, blaming distance, and then gotten together again. But something was gone, and I started to feel guilty and restless in my skin. One night in late summer, I drove to his house and he came out when I texted, bringing his dog with him as a cover-up. I had recently started narrating everything in my head, an annoying sign that I was lonely.

He walked towards the car and bent down to talk to her through the car window. "Want to go for a walk?" he asked.

We followed the dog around the block, and then he stopped to look up at a streetlight, pausing to think in its orange glow. "I don't think we should see each other anymore," he said.

"What do you mean?"

She was sweating under her arms and between her legs and in the folds behind her knees. His dog took a shit and he stooped to pick it up.

"It's too confusing. I don't even think we should text each other or anything."

I couldn't catch my breath because my heart was beating in places it didn't usually beat, like my neck and my elbows. I thought of a thousand things to say but only said one: "Well, I'm not inviting you to my wedding."

It was, sadly, the most hurtful thing I could think to say. He laughed, tugged on his dog's leash, and walked me back to my car. I remember sitting in the driver's seat and, in the devastating assuredness of eighteen, I was certain I would never know heartbreak so intimately as I did in that moment. It was more like leg-break, lung-break, or belly-break. With the car still in park, I moved my hands from the steering wheel onto my thighs and dug my nails in, feeling for the first time the distance that can open like a cavern between a person and her body.

After a year of ringing, in the wet and in the snow, I got my key to the bell tower. Sometimes, at night, I went up to the bells and rested my forehead against their silent, chilly curves. My bells, I thought of them, mine to show off and adore.

I was a reasonably consistent ringer, showing up as often as I could, fudging through the peals. Despite the similarities between the melody bells and a piano keyboard, I couldn't keep the notes straight in my head and often started a third higher or lower than intended. But I was still able to go to Russia on the exchange trip established by the bell trade.

When I arrived in Moscow, Father Roman greeted me at the entrance to the Danilov monastery's hotel. I was used to seeing pictures of him on the walls of our practice room in Lowell House; in one photo, he poses at the bell foundry during the replicas' birth and in another he

is dangling from a ladder as he hangs the replica bells in Lowell tower. But seeing him in person was a different experience. He was very tall, and his black robes made him look even more impressive. My plane had landed eight hours before the four other students were due to arrive, so it was just me and Father Roman for most of the day.

After I'd settled my backpack in a hotel room blessed with a portrait of the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, I met Father Roman in the monastery's cafeteria. Women dressed in long skirts and headscarves, men in long black robes, and a few disheveled-looking men in work clothes moved among the rows of Formica tables and chairs. Father Roman is a hierodeacon, which means he is a monk ordained as a deacon, with a rank below that of the priests, bishops, and patriarchs on the Orthodox ladder of power. In the cafeteria, the robed men signaled their ranks to each other with metal crosses and icons of the Virgin Mary. We shuffled through the serving line and collected plates of bulgur wheat, cabbage, and pickled mushrooms. When we had collected enough food and were seated at a table, Father Roman bowed his head to whisper a prayer while I sipped my glass of extremely sweet prune juice.

"How are the bells?" I asked when he was done.

Father Roman dabbed his beard and mustache with a paper napkin before answering. He spoke so softly that I had to lean in and focus my eyes on the table in concentration to hear him. He told me about the new bell-ringing school he had started at the monastery. We would meet the students later that night, he said, and learn peals with them.

When I asked where the peals came from, he started to tell a halting story, looking up at the ceiling every few minutes to recall the words in English. In the 1990s, he began, after the old regime was gone, Father Roman and other bell-ringers started to look for records of the traditional ringing patterns. For decades, bell towers had been silent and many of the old ways of ringing died off as the people who remembered the peals passed away. But there were still a handful of people living who could recall the melodies, and so Father Roman

and other bell-ringers and monks traveled around Russia to transcribe what they could. I imagined Father Roman leaning forward to hear the old men, as I was leaning forward now, scribbling as the bearded fathers hummed an ancient tune. The old men would have had their eyes closed, I supposed, as they played invisible wires in the air. All the traditional peals were echoes of a time before the Soviet regime, unavoidably transformed by slippery memory.

One peal, an Easter song that Father Roman hoped to teach us while we were there, had not come from these living sources. Instead, it was adapted from a Rachmaninoff piano concerto based on the composer's memories of the peal that had wafted over his town around Easter time. It too was a re-creation of a re-creation, from bells to piano to bells again.

That night, we met Father Roman's students in a half-built cement complex outside the monastery's walls. There were no lights in the hallways and no windows in the frames, but when we entered the practice room, the bell-ringers were playing their peals. Even dampened by the cloth tied around the bells' clappers, a beautiful sound filled the room. Father Roman's students could play the melody bells, stompers, and trills all at once, a feat that requires incredible coordination (I have tried it before and failed). We met a young boy no older than ten who played the whole set on his own with such twitching zeal that I looked at my fellow American students in awe. The Russian students asked us to demonstrate our peals, so with embarrassment we arranged ourselves at the practice set—three ringers at a time—and clumsily coaxed some improvisation out of the bells. The sound was nowhere near as wonderful. We stepped away awkwardly, like children caught banging on metal pots and pans.

Over hot tea from water poured from big plastic bottles, we learned some of the bell-ringers' stories. A blond woman told us, through Father Roman's translation, that she was a policewoman and that she'd always been Russian Orthodox. She'd heard the bells as a girl and longed to play them one day. A burly man who worked as a fireman during the

day, told us how he'd found Christianity because of the bells. They saved him, he said, and learning to play the peals became his way to worship.

Then the students wanted to know where our church was at Harvard, how often we rang, and whether we were Russian. There was no church, we answered, once a week, just for half an hour, and a little, one eighth maybe, generations ago on my father's side.

Over the next few days, we climbed countless stairs, ducked our heads in countless narrow passageways, and emerged at the tops of dozens of church towers. Perhaps half of the cathedrals, churches, and chapels we visited were under restoration or being built anew. We would often pass by bells waiting to be installed in adjacent towers. They sat patiently, fresh from the foundry and covered in plastic wrap.

In the news reports I clicked open occasionally throughout my college years I sensed that Russia was becoming more religious, but I had not expected to see quite so many churches under reconstruction. In 2012, I watched a video of Pussy Riot, the feminist Russian punk band, perform with stockings over their heads their song "Punk Prayer—Mother of God Chase Putin Away" in Christ the Savior Cathedral in Moscow, the seat of Russian Orthodoxy. Two band members went to prison for two years because of that performance and I was angry along with my fellow college liberals. But my understanding of the connection between the bells I rang every week and the political and religious tensions in Russia (the Russian Orthodox Patriarch called actions by Pussy Riot "the work of the devil") was foggy at best.

When we visited Christ the Savior Cathedral, I was surprised at how grand it was and, yet, I thought, monstrously muffled. All around us, worshippers dropped rubles into little wooden boxes before nestling candles into vacant spots, lighting them, and praying. Every so often, a nun pattered by in slippered feet, dressed in a black skirt and habit, to snuff out the wavering flames and un-snug spent candles from their holders. Then, more worshippers dropped rubles into boxes, lit new

candles, prayed, more wax dripped, and nuns circled back to clean up the mess with their fingers curved into little shovels.

"Where are the others?" Father Roman said to me. I snapped my attention away from the mesmerizing candle-cleaning cycle.

"I'll go find them," I said. Father Roman nodded and walked toward the elevator. I scanned the huge room—gold, marble, and bright white paint—looking for the other American students. Christ the Savior Cathedral is the largest Russian Orthodox cathedral in the world. The current building is brand spanking new, completed in 2000. Before its current state, it had been a Soviet swimming pool—the largest outdoor swimming pool in the world—from 1958 to 1995. Before that, it was the largest Russian Orthodox cathedral in the world. Christ the Savior Cathedral today is one enormous echo.

My fellow American students were not hard to spot; they were the ones looking up at the vaulted ceilings rather than at the icons on the walls or down at their feet in prayer. We joined the others in a tight elevator and emerged onto the top level of the cathedral.

Yekaterina, one of Father Roman's students, pulled me aside while we were waiting for the head bell-ringer, and taught me the names of the bell parts.

"*Usha*," she said, pointing to the crooked attachments on top of the bell. "*Usha*," she said again and gestured at her ears.

"Ears, okay I get it," I said. "And this part?" I touched the circular base below the bell's four ears. That was the *korona*, crown. And the slope dropping from the *korona* were *bleetzya*, shoulders. Then the *tylovo* (torso) and *guba* (lips) at the bottom. And the clapper? *Yazyk*. Tongue.

I imagined a Picasso painting of a figure, four ears on top, shoulders protruding from either side of the head, a body without arms, lips for feet, tongue for toes. When the head bell-ringer arrived, he grabbed the ropes of the trills in one hand and positioned his other hand over the melody bells' wires. He listened to the half-singing, half-chanting prayer issuing from the speakers nailed to the tower beams. This was the sound

of the service happening many stories below, he explained at a pause in the prayer. He told us about the "sweet spot," the point at which all four clappers of the trill bells—attached to ropes gathered in one hand and stretched tight—touch the lips of the four bells. This is the position from which a bell-ringer starts in order to ring the trills evenly.

With a cue from the speakers, the bell-ringer raised his shoulders and picked up his foot. In a moment that must have lasted only one second, his limbs reached a peak, shoulders up by his ears and arms floating, ropes taut in his hand. Then his body came down into the ropes and the pedals and the cacophony began.

We stood and watched with our heads habitually tilted back, the default position for a group whose primary goal was to see as many bells as possible. I looked out over the balcony, at the other onion-topped towers in sight. Father Roman told us that the shapes of the domes were meant to mimic Tatar helmets whose pointed tops were designed to deflect a glancing sword. As the peal cascaded over the city, I imagined the domes as giant heads strewn across the horizon, ears tuned to the call of the bells. The sound of the bells drowned out everything else, and I wondered whether anyone thought to ring the bells when Pussy Riot appeared. Would it have worked? Or would the protest song have prevailed?

When we drove out of Moscow to visit remote bell towers, the tightly packed buildings gave way to birch forests and rolling hills. The golden domes popped up every so often as we drove farther and farther from the city. They were our guides; we seemed to follow the trail of domes to find the bells.

After a visit to one countryside monastery, St. Savva monastery outside the town of Zvenigorod, we were taken to the bottom of the monastery's hill. To bathe, they told us. It was a small, wooden building topped with a cross with separate entrances for men and women. We entered to find a changing room, and beyond the changing area, what looked like a very large bathtub filled with freezing water and

separated into two sections by a wooden wall. One Russian bell-ringer laughed when she saw my confusion. She was small and plump, in her thirties or forties, and I had thought of her as shy. So when she confidently stripped down to her underwear along with the other women and nodded at me to do the same, I mourned my lack of language. We were to dunk ourselves, naked, in the holy water. I could not ask, *Are you sure this is culturally appropriate for me?* I couldn't say, *I really don't like being naked,* or even, *I can't, I'm on my period*, which I was and which, truth be told, was my main concern.

So I rolled up my pants to just below my knees and smiled as I followed them into the cold spring. I waded in and watched the other women shiver and squawk, gasping and crossing themselves. I could hear shouts and splashes coming from the other side of the wooden divider where the boys were imitating Father Roman's deep voice, repeating the only words in Russian we had so far mastered: *pah-ZYAL-stah*, they said, and *spa-SEE-bah*—please and thank you. The male Russian bell-ringers laughed and so did Father Roman. Then there was more whooping and splashing as my toes slowly lost feeling.

This was a more delicate lesson in body language than the others I'd learned during the trip: the twitching of limbs required to ring the bells; how to chase vodka with a bite of brown bread and pickle; the odd little bow I'd picked up when I couldn't respond to questions put to me in Russian. This, the gasping and crossing, the nakedness and friendly chatter, required a familiarity with bodies I have never understood.

Days earlier we had witnessed another kind of baptism. At the Litex foundry outside of Moscow, we saw bells being born. Inside the warehouse, the air was filled with burning, molten smells and the piercing sounds of heavy machinery. Golden dust gathered in the beams of light from overhead lamps. One worker tossed bars of copper and tin into a flaming barrel of metal goop, while another stirred the molten metal with a wooden stick until the stick caught fire and aerated the liquid metal. Then, when the metal had reached the right temperature, several

workers lifted the container with cranes and positioned it above the line of bell molds on the warehouse floor, ranging in size from one foot to six feet tall. Many pairs of hands were needed for the pouring of the metal: one controlled the crane, another positioned the barrel above the molds, a third turned the crank that tipped the barrel, pouring the metal into the molds, and another scraped back dark clumps of impurities as the liquid poured from the barrel's mouth.

It was immensely satisfying to see the liquid gold slop into the vessels like syrup, making gulping sounds as it hit the bottom of the mold. As the bells drank up the metal, the sound created by the liquid splashing into the mold increased in pitch, just as the sound of water filling a bottle arpeggiates upwards. When each mold was full, molten metal splashed out of the top and scattered in droplets, which quickly turned solid on the cold cement floor. For up to a minute after that, flames continued to dance above the necks of the molds, each burning a slightly different color and intensity—one an angry orange, another frighteningly green, a third bright blue.

As the bells cooled and the flames all but disappeared, a man with a small tin of wax visited each bell and dropped pieces of wax into the top, uttering words of prayer. The warehouse was silent except for the creaking of the ropes and the hum of the crane returning the barrel to its original station. Father Roman explained that the wax being dropped into each bell had been taken from the residue of church candles; they were prayers laid to rest in the necks of these cooling giants.

When the women finished bathing, their bodies fresh and sharpened by the freezing holy water, I retreated to the changing rooms with them, wishing I had had the guts to join in the cleansing. They were shivering and laughing and I made a show of warming up my feet and stuffing them back into my shoes. They were numb, my feet, separate and somehow holier than the rest of me.

I cannot tell this story without a confession. At school, when it all became overwhelming; when I gave up piano and was pining after the next boy; when I started picking tiny scabs from the arch of my hairline; when the air hugged onto me like layers of heavy cream; when my closest friend started closing her bedroom door with her boyfriend inside and the rest of the place all stuffy and still—I would go to the bells as if they could save me.

It would happen like this: at nighttime, I would climb the many stairs, key in hand, wearing almost but not quite enough layers for the cold. Maybe I'd brought homework up there, to that sacred place. Or maybe I was trying to compose a text and pulled out my phone to begin. But when I got up there and saw the bells, I'd realize all that is silly. I'd put it all down and sit underneath Mother Earth's generous rim. Stretched out on the grated metal platform I saw something few people have a chance to see—the underbellies of the enormous bells. Even though I did a terrible job ringing them because my rhythm is unsteady and I can't keep the order of the notes in my mind, the bells remained above me, silent and powerful.

I had been up there at night with other people. I'd brought up groups of people to sit in a circle and gossip and had used the bells to flirt with boys, bringing them up the seven flights and letting them touch the beautiful, sloping sides of the chilly nighttime instruments. The bells knew, I am sure, that they were the party trick I kept in my back pocket and brought out when the conversation lulled. But these nights were different. I would go to apologize to the bells and also to take from them some wisdom of bodies. They had been through fire and brimstone to be born and maybe we all have too.

Suddenly, I would need to get higher, to stand level with their crowns. So I would climb the ladder that took me up alongside Mother Earth. If I leaned toward the bell, I could just barely touch the outside

of her, where the saints are, their raised metal faces bumpy and transcendent. The saints were looking up at the great spirit, I assumed. So I'd go further up on the ladder until I was level with Mother Earth's ears. And then, I would hear it. The memory of her grand hum, her many pitches that wavered and shook the air around her when she was struck. And I opened my mouth to be like her, the vibrations growing stronger as she gloried in the curving shape of her body even though no one had hit her tongue against her skirt.

And then, like some madwoman, I would take back all the parts of my body that I had given away. My collarbone clicked into place, the freckles on my back tingled, my kneecaps screwed back above my shins, and my lower back settled on top of my hips. My waist was the last part to fall in line but when it did—lovely and bold—I gave thanks to Mother Earth and descended, whole again.

We had come to the mouth of the Volkhov, in Novgorod, where the river lets out into Lake Ilmen. From our perch in the old bell tower we could see the river and, directly below, the bells that used to hang from the tower's arches. They were sitting contentedly on wooden structures; they had not been returned to their original height since WWII, when the town of Novgorod hid them from the advancing German army. Under bullet fire, the rescuers managed to hoist the huge bells onto a boat. A few of the bells received bullet wounds and, in the rush and confusion, the boat sank in the river, taking the bells with it. The bells stayed submerged, safe from the war, for over two years and when the war was over, the townspeople dragged the bells out of the river and decided not to put them back in the bell tower. Instead, they placed the old bells next to the bell tower, hung on a platform.

Father Roman walked back down the stairs and we followed him. He took recording instruments out of his bag, a mess of wires and microphones. As the sun set, he announced that he would be taking

measurements and began taping wires at various points on the outsides and insides of the bells.

In the dusky twilight, we were instructed to strike the bells one at a time and then again in unison and to wait until the very last of their tones died away. Father Roman monitored the sound waves on his laptop; we were silent. He would interpret the squiggly lines on his screen and form a map of each bell, noting the places on the bell's body where sound dies more quickly or resonates longer and which of the many overtones in each bell is loudest. Then he would compare these bells to others made before or after the Novgorod bells in different regions of the country. When he was done, there would be fewer holes in the sonic picture of ancient Russia.

People started to gather just outside the gate and directed their cameras and phones at us. When we struck, flashes went off and there were beeps and murmurs from the small crowd. Father Roman shook his head, urging them in Russian to please be quiet, and motioned at us to dampen the bells. It's no easy task to quiet a bell that has been hit, especially bells of this size. We flattened our bodies against the sides of them until the vibrations were mostly gone. Then, like a conductor, Father Roman brought his hands up and down and we struck the bells again, leaning back and pulling the ropes until the clappers touched rims. The people were quiet this time and it took a minute for the waves to die away. Slowly, the crowd dispersed; people went down to the river to submerge their toes in sand and chilly water or to buy an ice cream from the little carts lined up along the bridge.

We rang again. And as the sound died, I looked up at the roof of the nearby cathedral. The day before, we had been in Uglich, a small town that, hundreds of years before, had been the site of the death of Dmitri, the Tsar's son. The bell in the church's tower had sounded the alarm following the murder of the boy who might have one day posed a threat to the Tsar in power. Enraged and embarrassed to find the little boy dead,

the townspeople, moving as a mob, murdered the man they thought responsible for the boy's death and ripped the bell from the tower. Several dozen people died in the violence that ensued, and, as punishment, the bell was whipped, its tongue removed, and its ears cut off. It was exiled to Siberia with almost a hundred other Uglich residents. The people eventually died, but the bell remained in exile for three hundred years, until the citizens of Uglich finally petitioned to return it to its former home. It had suffered enough, they reasoned.

We saw the abused bell in Uglich's museum, forlorn and pathetic, a testament to the outsized power of these metal beings. It had somehow escaped the purges of the 1920s and '30s, though the other bells in Uglich had been destroyed. During the Communist Revolution, the writer Boris Pilnyak described how the Uglich bells "fell with a roar and a thud, digging holes some five feet into the ground" and the ringing that used to sound over the city turned into a "monotonous, measured throbbing of motors, of machines, a new idol, a new Moloch of the land."

Bells have been said to cure sickness, start revolts, and usher the passage of prayer from earth to the heavens. They are born from glowing liquid metal like magic and the tones that emerge from the finished bells are each unique. Even the science behind their sound is mysterious; computers haven't yet mastered the design of these instruments to re-create exactly the many overtones in an old bell.

I tore my mind from Uglich as Father Roman raised his arms again. Novgorod was fully dark now, and I squinted to pick out his black robes from the backdrop of the dark sky. When his arms came down, we struck our respective bells almost perfectly in unison. We listened and waited in near blackout darkness. Without vision, the sound seemed to stay around us longer. Even when Father Roman nodded and closed his laptop, sensing the death of the bell's sound, I could still hear it, humming.

KRISTEN CASE

from Leibniz/Spinoza

Every possible is existence-seeking. When you wake all of your possibles wake also. Let thought be approached, someone said. November is in all the windows.

*

That which cannot be conceived through anything else must be conceived through itself. Some mornings you wake with a column of flame as part of your anatomy. This is either an image or a feeling. You wonder how pictures of the inside of the body compare to your thoughts about it. Often a memory or a dream is attached but the attachment seems too frayed to call a cause. A bad feeling is full of good reasons. Feed the fire with small causes until it cannot be conceived through anything else. On the other side of the kitchen window common birds flicker machine-like against the cold. Make it a column of birds, a sudden flame of wings.

*

God is the indwelling and not the transient cause of all things. Often your contingency interrupts your necessity and you find yourself a thrown animal in a roomful of souls. The month has restored your hollowness, which you hold like a tame bird. The light hits one face of the steeple of

the abandoned church behind the barn. You practice the word " infinite" but your mind makes a field of frost. The fire is going and your battery low and soon everyone will wake, and you will take up your transience and carry it with you into the day like an indwelling cause. *Like a body wholly body, fluttering its empty sleeves.* Light occupies the empty field.

*

A soul can, however, read in itself only what is there represented distinctly. It cannot all at once open up all its folds, because they extend to infinity. You wake to your inability to all at once open all your folds. Inverted shadows have settled overnight on the trees as in a photographic negative. The business of forward motion is already writing itself on the internal scene. You meant to type *internal screen*. Now it is raining and the world is tuned to dissolution. Turned to. There is a signal just out of range. You spend so much of the time thinking what you would say if. Internal seen. Think of someone a finite distance away in the same weather, just waking, drinking coffee, thinking in words.

*

Furthermore, we see that nature has given heightened perceptions to animals, by the care she has taken to provide them with organs, which collect numerous rays of light or numerous undulations of the air, in order to make them have a greater effect through their union. No light yet through the kitchen window, your organs gather what undulations they can while you push the ashes of yesterday's heat through the grate. You remember your father's seizures on the last day. Not enough oxygen, the night nurse said. For a few months you thought of this every time you ran, the way the body must collect a certain amount of air, the feeling of insufficiency. Leibniz is more interested in receptivity than Spinoza, who fears a void. Both

are interested in optics. The trees blacken against the low light, and you imagine first void as capacity and then void as void. You imagine your body as a collection machine. Dear reader, please receive these rays and undulations. By the care she has taken to provide.

*

Thus it may be said that not only is the soul (mirror of an indestructible universe) indestructible, but also the animal itself, even though its machine may often perish in part and cast off or put on organic coverings. Abandonment describes your animal. You move within its circumference. Midwinter, a perishing machine. Blue begins along the horizon.

Note: Italicized sentences are from the following texts (in order): *24 Metaphysical Theses* by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, translated by Lloyd Strickland; *The Ethics* by Benedict de Spinoza, translated by George R. Montgomery; *Monadology* by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, translated by Robert Latta, revised by Donald Rutherford; and "The Idea of Order at Key West," by Wallace Stevens.

LLOYD SCHWARTZ

Escher: Still Life with Mirror (1934)

Look into the tilted mirror. You can't see your face, just
the reflection of a toothbrush and toothpaste (*PIM*)
standing in a water glass, the back of a saint's card tucked
into the corner: Anthony carrying the Holy Child. A basket
with an unwieldy sponge hangs by strings looped over one post
of the mirror-stand. Wedged under one edge, a little tin—
"SKIN FOOD"— keeps the mirror askew. On the dressing table, not
reflected, a guttered candle, perfume (*My Sin?*), a comb in a hairbrush,
all resting on a white doily with lace trim. But in the mirror—
something uncanny—not, as I said, your face, but a narrow
arched street, with black doorways and windows receding
into the future, luring us away from our preparations
to meet the world, into a world inviting yet closed
to us—sinister wonderland hopeless to resist.

LLOYD SCHWARTZ

Vermeer's Pearl

I used to boast that I never lived in a city without a Vermeer.

—You do now, a friend pointed out, when the one Vermeer in my city was stolen.

It's still missing.

The museum displays its empty frame.

But there are eight Vermeers in New York, more than any other city—and not so far away.

Sometimes even more.

Once, the visiting Vermeer was one of his most beloved paintings.

It was even more beautiful than I remembered.

A young girl, wearing a turban of blue and yellow silk, is just turning her face to watch you entering the room.

She seems slightly distracted by someone a little off to your right, maybe someone she knows better than you.

Her mouth is slightly open, as if she's just taken a breath and is about to speak.

The light falling on her is reflected not only on her large pearl earring but also in her large shining eyes ("Those are pearls," sings Ariel of a man drowned in a tempest at sea, "that were his eyes").

And on her moist lips.

There's even a little spot of moisture in a corner of her mouth.

Some art historians think this was not intended to be a portrait, just a study of a figure in an exotic costume.

Yet her presence is so palpable, she seems right there in the room with you, radiating unique and individual life.

Already in the museum is another Vermeer in which a woman writing a letter has a similar pearl earring.

She's interrupted by her maid handing her a letter—is it from the person she's just been writing to?

And in a nearby museum there's a painting of a young woman with piercing eyes and another enormous pearl dangling from her ear (a "teardrop pearl").

She's staring out a window and tuning a lute.

Scholars tell us that these pearls aren't really pearls—no pearl so large has ever come to light.

No oyster could be big enough.

So the famous pearl is probably just glass painted to look like a pearl.

Pearl of no price.

Yet as you look, the illusion of the pearl—the *painted* pearl, glistening, radiant, fragile, but made real by the light it radiates—becomes before your eyes a metaphor for the girl wearing it.

Or if not the girl, then Vermeer's painting of her.

BEN SHATTUCK

Scrimshaw

Sam found the tooth in the chimney's ash dump on a particularly rotten December afternoon about twenty years ago on Martha's Vineyard.

He and I were living in his dead grandmother's house. Post and beam. Centuries old. Filled with paintings of his ancestors. It stood in a bayberry moor and with a clear view of the ocean, though not on the ocean. Sam's parents said we could live there until they sold it the following summer. We hadn't been dating long—a couple months—but we'd both just graduated from RISD and felt lucky for having met close to the end, so together moved to the island that fall.

There were immediate problems: we didn't have a car, so it took us two hours to carry back groceries in a wheelbarrow we found in the shed. We didn't have jobs, so we spent too many hours alone. I was sneezing all day because of the mold or dust. But the worst, by late fall, when the storms started and the daylight folded down, was the cold. I'm not sure how the old woman had lived there. No matter how far I turned the dial on the thermostat, frigid dampness passed right into the house. I once watched a tumbleweed of dust and hair make it all the way across the living room floor, blown by a draft

coming from the rotting French doors, which, when thrown open, let in all the sea air.

One night, the two of us pressed together under comforters in bed, Sam said that his grandfather shouldn't have built the closet over the upstairs fireplace. "There's a fireplace?" I said. I'd been wearing two pairs of socks to bed.

"Behind there," he said. He pointed to the wall at our feet.

The next morning I returned from the market to the sound of him sledge-hammering through the wall. I walked upstairs to see a pile of sheetrock and white dust coating the bedroom floor.

"Check it out, Leda," he said, pointing to the bricks that I could see through the damaged wall.

"It works?" I asked.

"I don't see why not. We'll collect driftwood later."

I smiled and nodded. I might have been more upset about the sheetrock and clouds of dust in the bedroom if the house were mine. But it wasn't, which Sam made clear in a few ways during the first weeks we were there. He moved the dishes from where I'd put them to where they belonged. He told me that I shouldn't wear my shoes inside because they would scuff the old floors, and asked if I could shut the doors more gently, please, because, you know, the glass was antique. He was the first man I'd ever lived with. I was surprised at how annoyed I'd become by his long silences at dinner, which, that summer, I had thought of as stirring moments of reflection. Or the way he'd stand right by my elbow and talk to me as I did dishes.

Later the afternoon that he smashed through the sheetrock, when I was out with tea on the stone terrace watching brown songbirds flit through the bushes and wondering if, in fact, I didn't love him as much as I had hoped, if I'd bet wrong in coming out here, he opened the bedroom window above me and said, "Leda, come look what I found."

The bedroom closet had been totally destroyed and was piled on the drop cloth. The fireplace behind it was small, the hearth about half the size of the one downstairs.

"Look at this," he said, holding up a giant tooth. "I found it in the ash dump."

I came up beside him, leaned on his shoulder.

"Scrimshaw," he said.

Black engravings webbed over the whale's tooth, which was longer than my hand. The lines were scattered, like cross-hatching that had come apart. It took me some time to see I was looking at a mermaid, if that's the word. A human of indefinite gender with a fish's lower half. For scales, the artist had made zigzags. The eyes were two little dots, same with the nostrils—which was the entirety of the nose.

"What a bad drawing," I said.

"Mermaid, right?" He spit on it, rubbed it on his shirt.

The hatch marks surrounding the body were, I supposed, the sea. She was underwater.

"We should bring it to the museum tomorrow," he said. "Donate it."

"You don't want to keep it?"

"Why?" he said.

"It might be worth something. And you found it. It's yours."

"That's no reason to keep it. It's a historic artifact."

Sam always was doing what he thought was right. I once saw him pick out a plastic bottle from a garbage bin on a Providence sidewalk and put it in his backpack to recycle later.

"That seems exactly the reason to keep it," I said.

He tossed the scrimshaw on the bed. Picked up the broom leaning against the wall, and walked to the fireplace.

"I need a bath," I said to his back.

"Your second or third today?" he said, ramming the broom up the chimney.

Warm water was my only escape from the cold. I loved doing the dishes, taking showers, baths, anything with near-scalding water. Sam would find me soaking my hands in the sink long after the dishes were done. "I don't know how your grandmother lived here," I said. He talked about thick blood that his family had and that mine, apparently, didn't. Waiting for the bath to fill, I walked back into the bedroom.

"I'll deliver it," I said to him. "The scrimshaw. Tomorrow. Be nice to see the museum."

"That's fine," he said. As he shook the broom, a cloud of soot fell from the chimney's throat. A black shower.

I needed to leave the house for longer than a walk to the market. By then, I felt the boredom of my days sharpening and turning inward. Every day was the same: we both woke late in the morning; we asked how the other had slept; we sometimes had sex; then coffee. Sometimes Sam went to his childhood friend Marshall's house, to play video games and drink beer. I'd joined them for one afternoon early on but left after an hour. I didn't have my paints, so I sketched in a pad of newsprint I'd brought, had lunch, walked down to the beach, then started drinking early. The beautiful old house, the fact that I had no job, that I had no painting deadlines, no school anymore—it all took on its own luxurious gravity, holding me in one position, day after day.

Above the bathtub was a skylight. In that lavender light of the winter evening I saw snow tacking itself to the glass. The first snowstorm of the year.

I've always been afraid of ghosts. I'm not sure that necessarily means I believe in ghosts. During the day, with sunlight filling the 200-year-old bedroom and the ancient-bell call of gulls out the window and Sam's shuffling downstairs, the idea of postmortem fog loitering in the bedroom was absurd. But at night I'd lie awake, certain that someone was looking at me—usually from the same corner of the bedroom, off to

the right of the fireplace. When I told Sam about the ghost, he said it was the fengshui of the room, that we should burn some herbs in the corners. Still, every night my eyes inevitably snapped open. The only thing I could do was ask Sam to sleep on the side of the bed closest to that corner.

So I was even more scared when, on the night Sam found the tooth, I was lying in the bed alone, nobody between me and the ghost corner. We'd had a fight after I'd gotten out of the bath. With my eyes closed and soaking in the hot water, the snow falling on the skylight, I'd decided that I needed to move back to Providence, that I couldn't sit through another silent dinner or another frigid day, or stare at another stranger in the market and wonder what his hands might feel like.

The conversation didn't go well. Standing in the bedroom with the broom still in his hand, he used the words "freeloader" and "disingenuous." He told me I didn't respect other people—and I asked him if "other people" meant himself. But by far the most surprising was when he turned his back to me and his shoulders started to shake. The whining pitch of him crying came next. I had assumed he was also uncomfortable in our silences, that he noticed we didn't shower together anymore. I thought he'd agree that we should split, that he'd be relieved, that maybe he'd ask Marshall to drive me to the ferry the following day. I'd never seen him cry, never mind have a meltdown like this.

He said he was going to Marshall's, and headed out into the snow without a jacket. He was gone for hours, I assumed playing video games and getting drunk, which was fine with me. I hoped he wouldn't try to come back to the house that night, even though Marshall lived only a half-mile down the road. A full-blown blizzard was burying the island by nightfall.

Still, I couldn't sleep without him there. Not with the ghost.

On the bedside table was the tooth. I grabbed it and walked downstairs, cold wood creaking under every step. In the kitchen I flicked

on a light, put on some water for tea, sat at the breakfast table, and positioned the scrimshaw in front of me. In art school we'd done copies of paintings at the museums, which didn't make any sense to me because nobody from my class liked figure painting. This felt right, though, copying the mermaid into my sketchbook. I filled the page with copies of her, all underwater, all staring straight ahead with her freaky, beady eyes.

The next morning I woke on the couch, under blankets I'd lugged down from the bedroom. I wasn't surprised that Sam wasn't home. He'd likely spent the night at Marshall's. Outside, the land had changed with a foot of snow. It all felt fresh, and I suddenly didn't mind being stuck there for another day. Especially if I had the house to myself. I put on some music, made coffee, lit a fire in the downstairs fireplace, colored my mermaid drawings, sat in the squares of sunlight blasting through the windows. There is a Danish word for that feeling of extreme coziness—of palming a mug of tea and listening to the crackle of a fire the day after a snowstorm, the sky pressing its icy blue face against the windows keeping you warm.

Later that morning, I found a pair of rubber boots, put on a jacket, and shuffled through the snow on the patio.

That night I would have to detail every minute of this morning in a statement to the police. I might have done something more substantial if I'd known that. I might have called Marshall earlier. I might not have spent the whole day in blissful solitude, making a snow angel on the beach before the high tide swept the snow away. It was embarrassing, admittedly, when the officer taking my statement asked me to estimate what time I had made the snowman in the front yard.

In the evening, Sam still wasn't home. I reheated part of a roast chicken and then went up for a bath. I piled my clothes on the floor, brushed my teeth. The house was quiet.

I picked out a book from the stack I kept by the tub, rested my head, closed my eyes, wondered if it was the cold that was making me so tired. Most of my books by then were crinkled with water damage.

Sam was not home when I woke, the bathwater tepid. Wasn't home when, later that night, the storm was punching the house in gusts that shook the old windows in their panes. I was annoyed. I didn't want to stay alone in the house for another night, despite the fight. It seemed childish to stay away for so long. I called Marshall.

"Hi, Leda," he said, flatly.

"Can you tell me when Sam is coming home tonight? I know he's mad, but I need to get back to the mainland."

"Sam's not here," he said.

"Is he already walking back?"

"What do you mean?"

That might have been the first time I felt the knot tightening in my stomach.

"Didn't he spend the night at your house?" I said.

"Nope," he said. "Are you guys buried in snow like me?"

I called the library, which was closed. The café where he sometimes spent the days drawing, was also, of course, closed. I didn't know who else to call. There were no cell phones back then. At least Sam didn't have one. On the fridge was a list of phone numbers. Neighbors, none that I knew. At the bottom of the list were Sam's parents, in New York.

"Since when?" his mom kept saying on the phone. "Call the police," she said.

"I was just about to call them," I said. She said to stay at the house, and they'd be over on the first morning ferry.

The police sent over two cars behind a snowplow. I gave my statement. They searched the house. Asked if Sam had a boat.

That night I watched flashlights sweeping through the bayberry moors in front of the house. I heard dogs barking. I walked onto the

patio once, in my boots, to see a policeman poking a long pole into the tall snowdrifts pushed up on the stone walls.

Sam's parents arrived midmorning. This was the first time I'd met them. I hadn't seen that sort of animal grief before. The circles under the eyes, the silence and then sudden flurry of questions, the frantic movements. The mother, still with her puffy winter jacket on, walked through all the rooms, as if the police and I hadn't already done it. Opened all the closets, went into the bedroom, down to the basement, into the shed. She asked me, "What happened to the bedroom wall?" but didn't wait for an answer before throwing open the patio doors and walking through the bayberry down to the beach. She was gone for an hour or more, while Sam's father talked to the police, the Coast Guard, Marshall, and the neighbors who came to the house.

The dad made us tea, asked if I'd had anything to eat. I could see Sam in his face. In his mother—with her bird quickness—no. But his father had his soft eyes, his big ears. I watched him make cinnamon toast and thought maybe he was the part of Sam I liked. The way he so delicately sprinkled the cinnamon, how evenly he made sure to spread the butter.

I told this story to a friend recently, who responded, "There are no right or wrong feelings. Just because you didn't cry then doesn't mean you didn't feel something." But I knew I wasn't doing it right. I should have been out there walking the beach. Or sitting with the police, going through tissues. Not thinking about Sam's dad twenty years younger.

I tried to give the parents the master bedroom, but his dad said that they would be happy in the guest room downstairs. "You have all your stuff there," he said. "You've gone through enough already."

"It's no problem," I said.

They asked if I called my parents. I lied and said I had. I didn't think they'd understand—my parents and I didn't have the relationship Sam

had with his parents. First, they were divorced. I also wasn't sure what city my dad lived in, and my mother didn't take bad news like this well. When I eventually did tell her, months later, her first question was why I'd moved there in the first place.

Later that afternoon we heard that someone had found Sam's hat at the library, but security cameras showed that he'd left it there weeks ago. A cotton sweater washed up on the beach, but it was, Sam's mother decided, too small for her son.

I didn't know what to do with myself that first day, so I stayed upstairs in the bedroom, listening to police and neighbors gathered downstairs, moving in and out of the house. I could hear their conversations from the patio and listened for my name. "She's staying here," I heard Sam's father say once. "For now."

I liked the downstairs sounds. The front door opening and closing. Worried pacing. Dining-room-table chairs screeching across the floor. Sometimes, when my parents were fighting, instead of plugging my ears like most children would do I'd lie on the living room couch, pretending to be asleep, as close to the action as possible. Mom or Dad would see me, and then their voices would go into a tight whisper, which made the whole thing even more exciting. I liked to feel as if I was in a theater of my own life, a wide gap of dark space between me and the stage.

"Have you guys ever found any antiques in here?" I asked Sam's parents one night, days later, as the three of us sat in front of the downstairs fireplace. Conversations weren't easy. Sam's mom seemed to be handling the search by sitting stone-still and drilling her gaze into the ground.

"Are you interested in history, Leda?" Sam's dad said. He sat with his elbows on his knees, a drink between his hands.

"Not really," I said. "During the day that Sam…the day that I couldn't find Sam"—I'd learned by then to not use the word "missing,"

as it did something to his father's kind face—"I was going to go to the museum."

"You know," he said. "You've done a lot. You don't have to stay here with us, in the middle of all this. You should be with family, friends." He paused. "If you want."

"Thanks," I said. Now I think about what I said next and cringe. I said, "I'm wondering if I can invite a friend to come for a few days?" Julia, in New York, had been wanting to come for months. "It's just," I said. "I'm feeling like it'd be easier to handle all this."

Sam's mother didn't look at me, but shook her head.

His dad took a deep breath.

"I can pick someone up at the ferry if you want." He paused. "To stay for a night or two."

I felt like his dad and I had a pact. We'd get through this together. I didn't stop to think that those days were a million times worse for him than for me. My selfishness might have been stoked by the fact that the house was now filled with people, that I didn't feel so alone. I was scared for Sam, but was sure—or naïve enough to be sure—that he would eventually turn up. He likely had taken the ferry to the mainland, I thought. Partying in Providence. I told this to his parents and the police.

A few days after Sam disappeared, I was sitting by the fire, reading. His mother settled down beside me on the couch.

"Hello," I said.

She smiled. "Leda," she said. "I know you've told the police everything you can think of. But you are the only one who would have any information, who knew anything about what happened. You can't think of anything else? Any other details. Something he might have said?" Her voice had gone smoother.

"Nothing," I said. "Really, I'm sorry."

"Nothing?" she repeated, spoken so softly she barely said it. She smiled again, the corner of her mouth quivering.

This was my chance to tell her about the fight, that I had broken up with Sam and was planning on leaving. But when the police first came, I'd told them that he'd left while I was in the bath. I didn't want to change the statement, which would only lead to more trouble, I imagined. Plus, at the time, it seemed like the fight shouldn't really matter—that's not what got him lost. What got him lost was his own walking out in a blizzard. Of course, now, decades later, this is exactly the detail I've obsessed over. The one detail I was too embarrassed or afraid of to admit. Afraid to articulate, on paper, that I'd hurt their son. I wonder now if I would be free of this guilt if I'd just come clean to her right then, even if the inconsistency of my statement had gotten me into trouble with the police. If, had I cleared my mind totally of that night, I would not, years later, have become suddenly and irreversibly guilty—for which I've found no forgiveness. In the end, I was responsible for Sam disappearing. But, in those days, I saw our argument as just a part of the night in which he went missing.

"Nothing," I said again. "I'm sorry. I know he'll turn up."

She closed her lips tightly, and leaned back on the threadbare upholstery of the antique couch.

"Okay if I smoke in here?" Julia asked the following day, sitting on the windowsill of the bedroom, holding up her cigarette pack. Sam's dad had picked her up at the ferry dock earlier that morning.

I waved at her. She opened the window a crack. The smoke blew back into the room. She leaned on the window. The sky was purple-gray behind her. Evening light coming through a dying storm. Wet snow was collecting and dripping down the glass. She looked like a painting there, in the window: her black hair sculpted up with pins; her thin, uncomfortably pretty face.

"Can you turn the heat up?" she asked. She picked up her jacket from the bed, draped it over her shoulders. "Or light that fire?"

"We found a tooth in there," I said.

"A tooth?" she said.

"Scrimshaw. A whale's tooth."

I kept it in the bedside table drawer. I liked to touch it, to feel its cold, billiard-ball surface. The past few nights I'd found myself waking up, checking the drawer to make sure it was still there.

"Cool," she said, nodding at the tooth. "So does that fire work or not?" Sam and I hadn't had time to collect the driftwood. I went to the downstairs pantry for cardboard boxes. Julia tossed me the lighter, shut the window.

We watched the fire from the bed, sitting side by side against the headboard. I imagined being one of those whaling captains, Julia, my wife. The two of us thinking about whales or knitting or whatever washed through their minds. The cardboard and paper lit up bright and died fast. Again the room went dim.

"There's a ghost in this room," I said, pointing to the corner. "I should tell you before you fall asleep."

"Why are you staying here, Leda?" she said.

"On Martha's Vineyard?"

"Yes. Or in this house. I mean, what are you doing here now? Not to be insensitive, but now that Sam isn't here, and his mom seems really weird around you."

Sam's mom had quickly greeted Julia when we arrived at the house and wouldn't look at me.

"Where else would I go?" I said.

"It just seems like—what else can you do here, you know? This house is creepy."

"I like it here," I said, believing it for the first time in months.

"Why put yourself through this?"

The wind shook the windowpanes. I heard waves pounding the cliff. Seagulls were on the roof, as always, screeching even in the dark. I'd only recently noticed that when they stood on the beach or on the roof, they all faced the same direction: into the wind, beaks pointed to the worst of the weather. I had lived on the Vineyard for months, and somehow I'd been blind to this detail.

"I just feel like I should be here now," I said.

"You're in shock. Or denial."

"Still."

Later that night, Julia asked to keep the bedside lamp on. We slept under five blankets. Her legs curled up to her chest, like mine, so our kneecaps touched. The down comforter was missing most of its down, and in the buttery light I could see the outlines of feathers.

The next day, while she was flirting with Marshall in the living room, I walked out to the patio, looked over the moors, to the cliff. I tried to remember what it had looked like when I first moved there, if there had been any more erosion. The rose bushes on the other side of the patio wall looked bad, lint gray—it seemed impossible that there was any life left in those sticks. Water had collected in a line of clamshells on a wall. I poured it onto the bushes.

"Leda," Sam's dad said, walking up beside me. "How are you feeling?"

"Just thinking," I said.

"Listen," he said. "Thank you for your help. For being here. But maybe it's time you go back to your friends and family. I can take you to the ferry tomorrow, when I drop Julia off. You should go home."

I had been preparing for this day without knowing it. "Okay," I said quickly. I lifted another clamshell and poured its water on the rose bush.

"Thank you."

Something had changed. He didn't look me in the eye. I heard Julia's screeching laugh from inside.

"I'll pack my stuff tonight," I said.

I had nowhere to go. I couldn't move back in with my mom.

I walked upstairs, began packing. I separated my socks from Sam's, my T-shirts from his, my pants from his. I would have done this anyway, a week earlier, if he hadn't gone walking off. But I felt then, touching his clothes, grief pass over me, clear and piercing but quickly gone. Like a lone birdsong in early spring. An announcement of more to come.

I removed the scrimshaw from the drawer. On my knees at the fireplace I dusted away the ash from the boxes I'd burned. Opened the ash dump. Mildewy air rose up. How many drafts were in that house? The swampy heat after my baths. The cold and dry wind roaming between walls and up the back of the fireplace. The wind blowing up and down the stairs in the changing heat of the house.

I laid the scrimshaw at the bottom of the cold and dark ash dump.

After Sam's dad dropped us off at the ferry, I told Julia to wait in a café, that we'd take the later ferry. "I just have to do one more thing before we go," I said.

In the atrium of the Whaling Museum hung a whale skeleton. I bought a ticket, and asked where the scrimshaw collection was.

"Upstairs," said the woman behind the counter. "Keep going. All the way back."

I went up to the third floor, beyond all the whaling paintings and the harpoons, the model boats and the mannequins wearing hoop skirts, to a long glass display case. The back of the case was upholstered with black cloth, so the interior lights illuminated the rows of teeth to shimmering cones. On the teeth were etchings of boats, of busty women, of American flags, dancing couples, broad-shouldered men, what looked like a little park filled with trees. Some were done with far more detail and skill than the one that Sam had found—a woman's shoe the

size of a rice grain, adorned with a minuscule flower. I scanned the rows for mermaids but found none.

A placard beside the display case read, "Scrimshaw was made by whale men to pass the many idle hours on a ship. Some whalers were away for years. Crafts like this were a way to cope with boredom. Often they carved images of home or loved ones, thousands of miles away."

I was alone up there, on the third floor. So quiet I could hear my pulse in my ears. A second wave of more confusing grief passed over me then, as I looked back over the scrimshaw, not so brief and easily disregarded as the first.

Sunlight from a mostly sunless winter sky puddled on the ocean. Julia stood outside during the ferry ride, smoking. The rocks near Woods Hole had turned to wax, caked in white sea ice. Flocks of ducks bobbed through the freezing currents. Gulls hung over the ferry's bow. Seals draped over the rocks like dead bodies. I was finally getting my wish, leaving the island.

JOHN HYLAND

Dear S

Dear S, forget the darkness
it does not surround us as we thought it did—

who we are or have been
we exceed
any given movement of the body, shift
of perspective, tilt of a head.
I am stuck here in radio static, the constant wash of bad

weather, the feeling of the far bank
as too far.

Perhaps the only route rises
from bright to cave
to bright again.

JOHN HYLAND

Dear S

Dear S, your letter, fine green leaves
between my fingers, a few curved lines
occurring in dusk in this place that does not clamp me
between its teeth.
(Last night loud winds. Trees like piano hammers on steel. The language
of weather, a
raucous of syllables, playing in the storm's dark: the sound and
my sense of it
changing with each clatter of branch across branch.)
Wind curls the sheets' corners. Gulls thump air above me.
I stare out across the rooftops and sky washed in grey, foolishly trying
to see across
an unseen sea, another unknown ocean.
I want to believe I am a distinct contrast to this cement wall
I am pressing against.

THOM SCHRAMM

A Letter to Aliens

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The little bit of hope up my sleeve fell
and there it lay: a glossy red spaceship,
apparently a fake, a diamond shape
on a trick card that made me whisper, *Well,*
we might as well stay in this, don't you think?
My partner at the table had fallen asleep.
While counting cards or mutilated sheep
she slipped into oblivion. I took a drink,
false landing gear of light came heaven-sent
from a green lamp, and there in my best hand
two figures gleamed: a heart and the diamond.
Sadly I played the heart, but no one went
for it. Now would you please come out of the blue
we see around this modest chunk of dust,
where with a little bit of hope and not much trust
we've tried to win the future? We are due.
And not in aerofoils made of tin,
but come in social swallows, come in oaks.
Come in, *come in*, we'll say, *Come meet the folks.*
You'll discourse for a moment on our sins

by dropping leaves or flying in an arc
that nearly sickles through our necks. We'll stake
our lives on yours. To help us pray, you'll make
a nest inside our heads. You'll forgive on a lark.

ERICA X EISEN

Have You No Home to Go to

At Irish College they sent you home for speaking English, so of course that was what we did once the *ceannairí* were gone, me and Cathal, spoke English like the words were sweets we'd nicked, all alive with the joy of rule-breaking as we walked from the school back to the house where we lodged for the summer, and then we'd see Mrs. Mhic Mhathúna out front, and quick as you like we'd be back in Irish with a very polite *Dia duit*, as if we'd been hello-ing to people like that all our short lives long. We were Dubliners, we'd only Irish in school, not like some of the ones from down the country who were liable to have it in the home as well, Irish class we had three times a week after the religion lesson was over and the Protestants were called back in from the hall. It was worse than sport, worse than the Greek class taught by the woman with the hairy face, the Irish teacher'd hardly any Irish himself and spent the class with the textbook open across his knees to sneak a look at the answers as though we'd not see. All the same, Irish isn't so bad, you've only to memorize the words and there's no special cleverness about that really, not like reading poetry or doing long calculations at the board, and sometimes at night as I lay in bed at Irish College I'd go through

the forms of the Irish prepositions, which were a tricky business with all their different endings. I'd do them over and over until they were smoothed down to familiarity, like how you polish a fairy stone: *liom leat leis leí linn libh leo. Agam agat aige aici againn agaibh acu. Dom duit dó di dúinn daoibh dóibh.* And by the time I got to *ar* or *chuig* I was away.

The first thing that happened at Irish College was you got your new name, the Jameses became Séamuses, the Michaels became Mícheáls, Grace-Gráinne, Patrick-Páidrig, Anne-Áine, and so on. Getting a new name is not nothing, you've to break it in like you break in patent leather shoes, and for the first few weeks at the *coláiste* it was a slippery thing to get a grip on, to feel its place in me. For the students who weren't from away, who had Irish names on their birth certificates and who spoke Irish at home anyway, summer at Irish College bled unremarkably into their normal lives, and they sat at their desks looking terribly bored and couldn't be bothered to raise their hands though they must've known the answers. They walked home to eat hot lunches at noon and walked straight home again once the lessons were over and hadn't much interest in the rest of us, and the *ceannairí* knew this and let them be.

The *ceannairí* were older ones who'd been to *coláiste* loads, and they knew the ins and outs and ups and downs and had very good Irish besides, proper Standard Irish too, not the rough culchie way they spoke it down the back of country lanes, and if they caught anyone messing at something or bunking off, or, worst of all, speaking English, they would turn up their noses and fiddle with their special green sashes as they made great speeches about Proper Conduct and the Preservation of Our Mother Tongue. And when they had reprimanded whomever it was and gone off again the person they'd lit into would look about defensively at everyone watching and say, *What?* and then, in a littler voice, *He has spots.*

The students who'd been to *coláiste* before had a handle on things, but we'd never been; Cathal and I were the only new ones that year besides one of the other Marys. We had three Marys at Irish College that summer: I was Mary Dublin, and then there was Mary Wicklow (who in secret we called Gimp Mary) and Mary Tipperary, who had a farmworker's big meaty hands and brought her books to class in a brown leather satchel that smelt whenever it got damp. And wasn't she useless at the quiz we had every week, and hadn't she a mouth on her like a well when there was something she didn't know. The first week the two of us were put together for the quiz, and when our turn came the teacher asked Mary Tipperary to spell *ainmneacha*, and her jaw fairly dropped away. *Ainmneacha* the teacher repeated in her great bell of a voice, and I thought to myself that that wasn't such a hard one, it didn't have a silent *fh* or a cluster of three vowels that managed to make only one sound among them, not a hard one at all. But Mary Tipperary didn't say a word. She couldn't spell. She couldn't spell worth anything. She hung her head and put her hands out resignedly, like a girl who was used to getting her knuckles rapped, and as the teacher struck our names off the board and the shame of our loss hotted up my face—the first team eliminated, the very first among these sons and daughters of turf-cutters and bricklayers and beef cattle-rearers—Aoife Quinn, who sat on my other side, gave me a tap on the shoulder and said *Haven't you heard?* And then, in a littler voice just for me, *Her mam's at a Magdalene laundry.*

A mouth on her like a well.

At the *coláiste* they put you in houses of local Irish speakers, and Mrs. Mhic Mhathúna was who me and Cathal stayed with. Our parents drove us down from Dublin once term was finished and presented us at her doorstep just like that. Mrs. Mhic Mhathúna knew my parents, but I was a while learning how. I could tell they were familiar by the way my father kissed her on the cheek and called her by her given name,

but when she asked after him he talked about things from ages ago, as though their only correspondence through the years had been cards at Christmas. What she was to me, a great aunt or a cousin's cousin or just a friend of my parents, I'd no idea, and by the time my father kissed me goodbye it had grown too late to ask.

All the week before we left Mam followed me and Cathal around our house calling rules after us for when we went away. *Wash your hands before meals*, she would say, or *Mother of God, will you stop with the knuckle-cracking. Offer to help with the washing-up like a good girl, stir your tea so it doesn't slop over the sides of the mug, will you stop putting things into the fire, don't spit your vegetables into your napkin or down the toilet like you're always trying, don't lie, don't curse, say please.* But she needn't have done, we learnt right away there was no pulling one over on Mrs. Mhic Mhathúna, who had raised to adulthood the children whose beds we now slept in, a picture of the Sacred Heart over our pillows at night. She kept a dark house, with thick lace-edged curtains and heavy wooden furnishings, and there was a big front room turned nicely to the sun but she kept it locked and never put it to any use, *It's for special guests,* she told me, but weren't we special, me and Cathal, the two ones down from the capital to stay? Still, I'd never say that to her face, I saw what was what. And the night after I'd lost at the quiz on account of Mary Tipperary I thought to ask Mrs. Mhic Mhathúna about Magdalene laundries as she was wishing me *oíche mhaith* but I knew I couldn't, not because they were English words but because they were bad, even not understanding what they meant that was plain to see, they'd the same flavor as behind-the-hand whispers and adult conversations heard through the crack beneath the door, the same bitter taste to them, the same sluglike feel of the sounds.

When we played sport we played Irish sport with none of those English games. We played hurling and Gaelic football, and if the *ceannairí*

weren't about I would sit on the side with Gimp Mary. And when she talked I would listen, but mostly I would be thinking to myself not to look at her twisty foot, and I wondered did she know we called her Gimp Mary and did she mind, and I felt sorry for thinking about her foot and what it must look like beneath her cotton socks, and I knew it was terrible thinking like that, so when we made daisy crowns I gave all mine to her until her head was piled with them, but really I was thinking how does she put on her shoes at all. Gimp Mary stayed in a house down the street from Mrs. Mhic Mhathúna's with two local girls, and while the two of them spent their afternoons taking turns going up and down the road on their bicycle Gimp Mary sat in the closed little garden by herself, and if we passed her as we came or went she'd give a wave, and when enough dark had gathered she'd stand and go in.

And the excitement at night was the town disco, which meant on Wednesday evenings the back room of the pub got cleared out and the Thirteen and Unders had a go at dancing. Mrs. Mhic Mhathúna gave us a couple quid for fizzy drink and when we went to the till the barman always gave us a wink and said, *Double whiskey is it,* making that same little joke each week before handing us down a Club Orange each and a packet of Tayto. The room was crowded with the tables and chairs that had been pushed against the walls to make room and we stood girls on one side boys on the other, you didn't look up because the ceiling was black with fag smoke and you didn't look down because the floor was sticky from old drink so all you had to look at was each other, which for some reason was all of a sudden unbearable, and it took several songs before anyone crossed over to the other side for a turn and then things got going a bit, but I always danced with my brother, I was having none of that business, so me and Cathal did a sort of swirly dance, just the two of us, even though he was too little to do it properly.

But Mary Tipperary was always dancing with the boys, in class she'd a runty look but at the *céilithe* she was changed completely, a new light

came over her and she wore a skirt with a bit of movement to it like something you'd get from Clerys at Christmas. I watched her over Cathal's shoulder or over his head: always with the boys she was and she moved like she knew what was what, not having to look down at all, giving the full force of her moony face to the lad, the light in her hair, her eyes. A flash of something would come over me then: who was she to be dancing like that? A country girl, mother off somewhere, no learning in her head at all. Mouth like a well.

But all of this would be interrupted by closing time, which always came on so swift no matter how early the dancing began. The lights would be flashed off and on again and the barman would ring a bell by the till, *Last call, ladies and gentlemen,* he'd say as the customers at the front of the pub gathered their things and the music sputtered out, *last call for the evening, it's time, it's time, have ye no homes to go to, have ye no homes at all?*

Mrs. Mhic Mhathúna went to church not just once a week for good form but every day, and when she came back she'd always a terribly sad look on her like they'd crucified our Lord up the road at Our Lady of Perpetual Succor that very afternoon, and all she could do was daub his wounds with ointment and weep. I wondered what would she think of my father, who went to Sunday Mass the same way you attended the weddings of third cousins, and if it was winter and lashing down, he'd take a look out the window and say, *We'll leave it until next week, will we?* and as he said it he always looked privately pleased. And my mother too, with her decorative attitude toward Catholicism, fussing over Mass cards, my brother's tie, the laying of the Christmas table. But there was no cross of St. Brigid on our mantelpiece, no Sacred Heart pictures over our headboards, and if they taught us rules and morality, it was without the weight on Heaven and Hell that our religion teacher lent to it, but more with a vague sense of good and

bad attached, and if there was an idea of godliness there it was as misty as the light of an April noontime.

Still there were times when Mrs. Mhic Mhathúna lost her hardness. On certain evenings when the feeling took her she'd start in on gauzy talk of her husband who'd died, or else she'd collar me and Cathal and say, *I remember your da from before he went up to Dublin, I remember your da from when he was just a boy like you,* and as she pointed her doddering long-nailed hand at my brother you could see the used tissues she kept stuffed up her sleeves and smell the primrose lotion she used to stop the skin of her fingers from cracking. So that was it then, Mrs. Mhic Mhathúna's connection to my family: an old neighbor of my father's from his earliest childhood. It was difficult to imagine my father small, without his fine-framed glasses and the serious cast his gray eyes got when he talked about politics or the fate of the Irish pound, difficult to imagine him here, living in that street or in one of the streets nearby, playing in the same creek, walking past the same shops painted in colors like Jordan almonds. It was a corner of his life he never mentioned. My mother's childhood home I knew well enough from the black-and-white photographs she kept in an old tin of Fox's Biscuits beneath the linens in the hot press: a squat pebbledash house that had fallen into the Wicklow sea when the cliffs started to crumble. My father had to have been quite small when he went up with his parents because he spoke like a Dubliner all right, and in the shape of his expectations he was a Dubliner the same as any. I'd no notion he'd ever lived anywhere but our little detached house in Stillorgan that had once belonged to my grandparents, no notion that he hadn't always been the person he'd become.

We'd not wanted to go to Irish College, only Da never asked us. Once he took it into his head there was no changing his mind. *Can't we go to Auntie Rita's caravan in Tramore?* we asked, or *Can't we take the ferry out of Dún Laoghaire to England?* or *At least, at least, can't we stay in Dublin?*

but my father was firm. *You may not*, he said to us each time, *You may not you may not you may not.* In the first few weeks my neighbor Sadie Noonan wrote me letters saying how she'd gone up to the amusements in Bray and spent a day bathing at the Silver Strand, and I wrote back to her saying how wonderful Irish College was and that she should be jealous of all we got up to. But then a month in Sadie stopped writing and I thought maybe I'd done the wrong thing after all.

And our parents wrote us letters too because we weren't allowed to phone, my mother always beginning them in her wispy right-slanting cursive and my father's note coming in at the end. He told us to be good and not to bother our teachers or Mrs. Mhic Mhathúna, but he never made any mention of the town and his childhood in it, despite what Mrs. Mhic Mhathúna said to us when she got into one of her glassy-eyed evening humors. There was no mention of the years he'd spent among these people and these streets, no mention of that at all, and he always wrote in English, spelling each word out in his clear hand as square and precise as an architect's drawing.

We'd never been to the Gaeltacht. The furthest from Dublin I'd been was to Newgrange on a chartered bus for a school trip, and we'd looked around the ancient stones and gone inside the narrow passage and purchased picture postcards to take back home to show our parents all the greatness of our ancient people. But being at Irish College made me notice the Englishness of Dublin, its place names like Waterloo Road, Victoria Bridge, Nassau Street, Nelson's Pillar before they blew it up last year. The grand houses all in Georgian style with their fan windows and tricky masonry that my father would point out to us every time we took a Sunday walk in Fitzwilliam Square, gesturing towards one of them and saying *How would it be if we moved into that house one day? How would it be if we lived in there?* In Dublin Irish was in its own separate room of my life, but at the *coláiste* it spilled over into everything, blessing sneezes and saying excuse me, the teachers' lessons and the games at recess, being

sent to buy Lyle's Golden Syrup and asking the grocer for change. If the townspeople knew you were there for the summer they'd make a special effort for you, if the shopkeeper had been discussing the weather in English with the woman in front of you in the queue he'd switch to *Dia duit* by the time you got to the till. Nights I dreamt in Irish, repetitive everyday scenes that were fuzzy by morning, when all I remembered was the strain of trying to understand the fast flow of talk. Irish was sleeping and waking, talking and silence, and everywhere, everywhere, in among the folds of your skirt, almost, between the grains of salt.

But we were always improving, we all of us were always improving, and as the days and the weeks wheeled on the things about Irish College that had seemed most foreign lost their prickling strangeness and became a part of us. And we were all of us speaking faster, and understanding better, and saying more. And when the school held a contest for poetry recitation the day even came that Mary Tipperary won a prize of her very own, not first of course but a decent enough second to my own poor fifth. "*Fill Arís*" she'd chosen, and as she said it out she closed her eyes and tapped out the rhythm with the flat of her palm, as though reading it off from a deep and inner place with no mind to anyone else in the world. Such an odd sight it was to see her taken by the words completely, and even through my jealousy I had to admit that there was a beauty to her performance all the same like a swan's call, and when the teacher fixed the prize badge to her jumper Mary pressed her red farmworker's hands over her mouth to hide a private little smile meant for no one but herself, and the light from her eyes then was like I'd never seen except when she was dancing at the *céilithe*, in the sweet hold of the night's slow songs.

We came to know the streets and the houses and the hills around, the teachers, the shopkeepers, which *ceannairí* were strict and which were soft. And the students: Siobhán whose parents sent her tins of Ginger Nuts each weekend; Fionn who was bitten by a street dog and had to

have shots in his stomach from the country doctor; Orla with the nicest singing voice; Breandán who we wouldn't let play at football on account of he was a cheat. And when Cathal and I walked back from class at the end of each day it sometimes happened that an aul wan would stop us and say, *Aren't you Seán Ó Domhnaill's children down from Dublin for the summer?* and *Isn't he very good to send you home?* and whenever they said that I always grew very quiet and flushed, for no reason I could name.

Mrs. Mhic Mhathúna had no television and no children's games, and in the afternoons when our classes had finished Cathal and I would spend the hours before dinner in the street or in the garden rather than staying in her darkened house with its shut rooms. Rounders we played if there were enough children about for two teams, or else one of us would close our eyes for Dead Man Come Alive:

Dead man, dead man, come alive
Come alive by the count of five.

And in those long outside hours with my brother I went back to games I had not played in years, the games of a littler child, such as our father might have played before he left. At the end of the summer came the wild strawberries, and we'd hunt for their small white fruit among the thistles in back of Mrs. Mhic Mhathúna's house, or we'd try to make a dam on the little creek that flowed there by throwing stones in but it never got made, however many stones we threw, the water kept flowing the same as before, and one afternoon I thought about Gimp Mary sitting quiet and alone in the closed little garden down the way and got very sad. And I thought how must it feel to go about all your life with your foot all twisty, so I bent in my left foot like hers and walked round and round the garden, to feel and understand what it was like, but when Mrs. Mhic Mhathúna saw me she shouted out the kitchen window, *Máire Ní Dhomhnaill are you having a laugh at the clubfooted girl in your class?* And that dinner I had nothing but turnip mash on my plate though the rest had roasted rack of lamb,

and during grace Mrs. Mhic Mhathúna gave me concealed little kicks under the table to let me know that she greatly feared for the integrity of my immortal soul. The whole thing made me want to cry, not even the not having dinner and the kicks but the principle of it, the principle of it, because why was it a bad thing at all what I had done, to try and understand?

They'd a Mass Rock in the woods outside the town that was put to use on certain occasions and that was where Mrs. Mhic Mhathúna took us once at the tail end of August, wading out through the mossy trunks of the young pines that had been planted to replace the old forest that the English had cut down. I'd thought the rock would look something special, but it was like anything else, just a great stone in a clearing with a bit of a flat top for the sacrament. And after the concluding rites, the mayor of the town was called upon to give a speech about the importance of the Gaeltacht, of learning our country's language. He said we'd to write to the Dáil and to President de Valera about the grave importance of preserving our national tongue. And he said that the *coláiste* was doing a great service teaching us Irish and Irishness, organizing dances and sport and the like, and it was a great and good thing altogether that we'd look back on and appreciate many years later when we'd Irish-speaking children of our own. And then we took communion.

Mary Tipperary was there too in a hairy white jumper and the same skirt she wore to the Wednesday night *céilithe*. It looked different there, odd with her navy woolen tights, the same as I wore to school in the winter, an off color somehow in the soft daylight. And I could see now that it was not at all like something you would get from Clerys at Christmas but in all likelihood a hand-me-down, nipped in where it was too big at the hip. And there was a softening in me as I wondered what she would be returning to when she was collected at summer's end. A cold stove, a bone-colored sink with a runny nose of a faucet. Grayed socks on the radiator to dry. A crowded house, sleeping with your money in

your pillowcase to keep it yours. Learning subtraction by watching men in the pub play darts, and learning to dance by watching the people in pubs dance. A mother away.

I thought all of this, brought all of this to mind as we walked through the mud and the moss back to the main road with the rest of the townspeople, and then I thought again of what the mayor had told us. And was any of it true at all? His definition of Irishness was like the picture postcards of Newgrange I had brought back for my mother after the school trip, or like Newgrange itself which, in truth, had not been left alone but resculpted and remade according to nowadays notions of oldness. There was room for trad music and barmbrack and Kenmare lace but not for Magdalene laundries, not for people like Mary Tipperary and her mother, not for Gimp Mary with her twisty foot who'd to sit by herself in a *súgán* chair at the dances, her hands folded and still, watching the rest of us at our fun, listening to the rest of us at our laughter. We heard a good bit of English when we came out of the Thirteen and Unders Dance or were queueing in the shops, and in the kitchen at evening Mrs. Mhic Mhathúna turned on the BBC Radio Service for the news just the same as my father in Stillorgan. Even in the Gaeltacht people were speaking English more. They would put on their show when the students came to town for the summer, but among themselves they found less and less use for it, and the young ones all had different accents from their parents when they spoke Irish, flatter somehow about the consonants, thinner about the vowels. And when they were grown they were bidding their families goodbye and going up to the city as my father's parents had done, as Mrs. Mhic Mhathúna's own adult children had done. I thought back to my teacher in Dublin, who sat at the front of the class with the textbook open over his knees, making us read made-up stories about a dog called Fraoch and his owner Breandán. Again and again the same sentences with the same sounds: *Snámhann na mná ar maidin. D'ith damh dubh ubh amh ar neamh.* But was it any different at Irish College, rehearsing for lives we'd never lead?

I remembered all the secret English conversations me and Cathal'd had on our way to Mrs. Mhic Mhathúna's after class, and a queasy feeling came over me, and it was as though the whole summer long I had been playing a game wrong because I had misunderstood its object.

On the last night of Irish College they had us put on a play for all the townspeople who'd housed students: Cathal was a tinsmith and I a *sean-bhean bhocht* with a heap of raggy shawls over my shoulders and a loose hessian dress to my feet. It was a political play they'd thinned out to give everyone a turn at speaking, but still the content was clear enough, the *sean-bhean bhocht* mourning the loss of her four green fields and her sons. But it was an old play about independence and hadn't any attention for what came after. And when it was over Mrs. Mhic Mhathúna gave me a little bouquet of large daisies and said to Cathal how convincing he had been smithing tin and how convincing I had been with my old woman's quavering voice and my rags. The flowers had a faint smell of diesel on them, and I remembered that on our way to Irish College at the beginning of the summer Da had stopped at a petrol station at the edge of town that sold flowers out front. And when he'd paid at the till he tipped the young stringy pump attendant with all of the change out of his tenner, not only the ha'pennies and the sixpence pieces but the half crowns as well, and it was such a thing as I had never seen him do.

That evening Mrs. Mhic Mhathúna allowed us into her front room just for once, and we could look about but under no circumstances disturb the furnishings: dust covers over all the chairs, their claw feet peeking out very shy from under the white cloth. The fireplace was cold, with a few loaves of peat stacked beside it giving off their loamy smell of deep earth. In the corner was a stand-up piano, and on its shelf were a cluster of framed photographs of a man who must have been Mrs. Mhic Mhathúna's husband, smiling in all the pictures as he cradled a fiddle under his chin or held it by his side like a prize trout. There would have

been *céilithe* there once, trad music until late hours, the hum of strings being tautened into tune. Commoner use as well, "Happy Birthday" pecked out with one hand as the cake was brought in under dimmed lights, a child's fumbled first C scale. And my father there too perhaps, sitting on the sofa or at the hearth, brought over by his parents for Sunday calls or for one final farewell before they went up at last to Dublin. But the room had gone silent now, none of the warmth of music in it, though Mrs. Mhic Mhathúna'd tried to stop its changing, and the cover on the stand-up piano was closed. I tried to open it just to see, just to run my fingers over the varnished keys, just to test were the notes sour from being so long unplayed, or were they sweet, but the lid stayed closed, closed tight and locked against my wondering hands.

When Mam and Da came to collect us they had big smiles, *Well now my cailín,* Da said as he kissed me on the cheek, and I hugged him with a serious expression on my face like a convict had, and Mam with a big smile on her as well, asking after us with, *Conas atá tú? Conas atá tú?* But they couldn't keep it up; neither of them had Irish. They'd polished up the bits they knew like silver at Christmas, that was all. And as Mam turned to Cathal and made a great fuss over how long his hair had gotten, I saw my father in the gabardine coat he'd bought at Arnotts, looking down at me and around at the town, at streets that may or may not have still been familiar to him, with the satisfied look of a man who had at last settled a difficult account.

Da, I said, *you never told us you were from here.*

I lived here once when I was very small, he said, his face turned away from me as he measured out his words, *and it is as though nothing has changed in all these years.* And though I waited, he said no more than that, and though he looked about him, he made no move to walk down along the road or to visit with the people of the town, who would know his family but not, after so long a time, his face. Had he much Irish living here, and how long did it take to lose? I stared out across the street: the

woman who'd come for Mary Tipperary was standing there, ashy blond hair falling down from her head in limp curls as though she'd gone to the hairdresser's and then walked back home in the damp. Ruddy cheeks she had like a drinker's, and a purse of a mouth. Couldn't be the mother, then. The aunt or the neighbor maybe. The cousin. And as she led her Mary to an idling car, the woman held her by the arm and not the hand, Mary's flesh going pale where the woman's fingers pressed in, and even after they'd driven away I kept my mind on that image: the black black of the car's sides, the white white of bare skin against those thick red fingers. Already it had the quality of a photograph about it, the feel of a picture that would not go. *Well now, my dear cailín,* Da said again, as he rested his hand on my shoulder. *You've to say slán to all your friends so.* And off we went.

I knew the way back now and could see it before me: past the few houses, the few streets of the town, and past the hills where if you squinted you could make out the tracks of a famine road, warped and mossed over in the intervening years as it traveled from nowhere to nowhere, and we would stop to take lunch in Cashel or in Kildare, eating hot soup and brown bread before driving onwards, and the narrow winding country boreens would give over in time to the new government motorway, with its broad, sure paving cutting a straight path through where the ground had been leveled and the gorse had been burned, and the last week of summer would be spent at home or in the garden as the Irish we'd learnt dropped away with disuse. I could see all of it so clearly, so very clearly, rolling out with its firm eventuality like the road beneath.

The Leader

I did eventually renounce raspberry-picking and rosary-camp
for the hotbed
of Belfast, surviving there on black pudding, Bell's and Badoit.
The life of a BBC impresario

allowed not only for hols in Spain and Portugal
but moonlighting with Osip
Mandelstam and sad-eyed Fernando Pessoa.
At thirty-five I substituted bonny clabber for clapboard

and found myself in the innermost recesses
of the Ivy League. There I boned up
on Wimsatt and Wilmot (*pace* Vivian de Sola Pinto)
in much the way El Cid read Caesar,

hoping to show such legerdemain
whilst laying down a curtain of fire behind a fire-curtain.
If ever anyone inquired
about my life as a mid-level manager,

"Terrific," I always said, "Terrific…"
The corpse of El Cid
was propped up in his saddle
the better to lead his army towards that one last victory.

GARRETT HONGO

Homage to Michael S. Harper at the Equinox of Heaven

The frozen white humps and hillocks of your Providence landscape
Seem to me the extended reef of dead coral in a silted bay,
Brown skeletons of winter trees like the fronds of fan and finger coral
Reaching through a flurry of diatoms for the surface of the sea.
But those are snowflakes tracking our passage from the airport
Where you'd just met me curbside, pointing to my bare head,
Saying *You gots to have some kinda hat in this shit*, pulling off
The grey and black Nigerian fez and waving it like a hook
Through the frozen air. You fling my luggage into the trunk
Of your maroon, 5-speed Saab, and we're off, blasting Coltrane's
"Naima" on the 5-channel, custom surround-sound of your car stereo.

Your rap peppers the air, a non-stop, soul-soliloquy you whistle
Through a gap-toothed, Cab Calloway smile that disappears into
Disquisitions on male fashion, critiques of my green L.L. Bean polo,
Instructing me that *You just can't wear no argyle socks…*
Banners of earthly wisdom tailing into the common stream
Of celestial harmonies emanating from Tyner's keyboard
As he comps on your words chattering like a snare and hi-hat
chomping on the beat.

You don't take me to my hotel but to your loft home instead,
A 2nd-floor walkup through a wide stairway, behind a solid,

Metal door with three locks and a numbers code you punch in,
Saying with a grin, *It's the same ol' three-six-nine*.

It's a tri-level with cantilevered bedrooms, a sunken kitchen,
And a big living space filled with two couches, a TV on a rolling stand,
Huge museum-sized paintings hung above a long, low bookcase
That stretches across the length of the room, full of record albums,
All Periodized, alphabetized, and absolutely no fusion allowed.
"Closest we git is Rufus and Chaka Khan," you confess.

You've a turntable and slide a white-jacketed LP out of its sleeve.
A surprise, you say, flipping it to the choice A-side
And settling its cutout eye onto the silver spindle.
The bassline jumps into the long vamp of a hardass hook,
And the air comes alive with a dance beat, synth notes
Jumping our bones as you bob your head, *The hardest thing to move*,
As your ample body shakes to the rhythm and you slap on the One,
The plain white cover of the album flapping against heavy gabardine—
Small explosions of cloth billowing your shivering pant leg
As Jackson coos and screams. It's "Billie Jean," first I ever heard it,
Its prehensile sound moonwalking across your loft's hardwood floor.

sex fingers toes there is no substitute for pain
you tuck the roots in the earth

At the faculty club, you show me how to cut the yellow flowers
of frozen butter,
Break bread in pieces before the silver paddle of the knife touches them.
We talk about your roots in Brooklyn before your parents moved west
To Crenshaw in L.A., your Japanese neighbors, the stain of Camp
still on their souls.

Bloods and Buddhas schooling each other, rice and Rasta
on the dance floor at Dorsey High,
Motown and *min'yo* our common mix-tape,
Can't nobody take it apart…

Back in Iowa City, there for the Workshop, you and Inada
couldn't rent a room,
so Rutsala fooled the landlord, got the lease, and you two moved in.
Three months until December and then eviction *for some bullshit,*
Your poems in praise of jazz greats in boxes on the street outside,
Gathering a dust of snow.

The inflated heart the tenor kiss

At the reading, you spoke of Robert Hayden murmuring on his death bed
Words that still burn my ears and I read a poem from a photograph
"On Civil Rights Demonstrators," water cannons
on the Edmund Pettus Bridge.
I AM A MAN and three from the *Dartmouth Review*
rose from where they sat
On the carpeting of that fine, book-lined library room,
buttoned up their coats,
And walked out mid-poem, a needle of ice running through my heart.

why you so funky?
cause I am
why you so black?
cause I am

Who knows that Isherwood was your early mentor?
That Auden came to class and praised your poems?

cause I am

How far have we come with history as our own heartbeat?

Minstrelsy Yellowface Rochester and Hop Sing

Kin is more than a cold word spoken on frozen stairs.

your body now crystal as you plod up into the electric air
heart, genitals, and sweat

Dear Michael…

why you so sweet?

cause I am cause I am

The dawn comes upon both of us, rising in the East,
Providence to L.A., a sun caught in the coral fingers of a tree

by river through the swamps witness to *a love supreme*

CORNELIUS EADY

Good People

There are good people in the world.
I have to keep telling myself this
As I sit on the subway. It's rush hour,
And we're all swaying together,
Bumping down that tunnel to wherever
Our fates will tug. I moved back to
New York partly for this, the mingle,
The blend of skins and hair styles,
The murmur of tongues, bored with
Delay and garbled PA announcements,
The universal thrum, translated a dozen ways.

I don't want to bitch, man,
I'm trying to hum along,
But what about this space
Next to me, this empty seat
No one dares fill? I'm not crazy,
And my arm pits are dry.

When I was
Younger and living here, I'd work for this;
Pull out a comic book, watch the lady
Reconsider,

Now, I'm an old mojo guy,
Clean, at mental parade rest.

I catch my five-year-old self,
Folding my hands, and think,
Here is the mark of my Kindergarten class!
Cornelius, how do we make friendly?
Mr. Rogers' mother told him;
If you ever get in
Trouble, look for the helpers,

But there's no help here,
As we roll through this mass confusion;
Their tech says, *now*, their bodies hug
Then.

Some are tired as they sway, I can see it;
Too many bundles, or a touch of stress,
The small ways this city can eat us, their knees
So want to bend, to fold, to give in, to tug down,
But there's the matter of me; I'm waiting,
A pool of colored, a mess of black.
There's the problem of the touch of me.

This should be just a line in a poem about
The City of New York.
How I long to fly up the stairs,
The real and the dread of me,
To the knock out wonder of the street.

LEE GUTKIND

Meshuggina

I OFTEN ASKED MYSELF why I have stayed in my hometown and not chosen another city, or country, which might have led to another life. Or a better life. For a man like me, constantly complaining about being isolated, alienated, and bored in Pittsburgh, I have been hopelessly entrenched in the same city and, basically, in the general vicinity of where I started out my life. All of the twenty or more different houses and apartments I have lived in in Pittsburgh are within a three-mile radius of the house on Beechwood Boulevard in the Greenfield section of the city in which I was born. In fact, I lived in three different locations on Beechwood before I was eighteen. I lived in Squirrel Hill, adjacent to Greenfield, seven times. I lived in Shadyside, adjacent to Squirrel Hill, eight times. I live in Shadyside now—I've been in the same house, off and on for thirty-five years.

But that's what often happens here in the Burgh. People stay in the same place, their old neighborhoods—or move for one reason or another, schools for their kids or better jobs, but only for as long as necessary, and then return to where they were from as soon as possible. And it's like they never left—and little, in the interim, has changed.

There's the old CoGo joke—you know, the CoGo convenience store?—that Pittsburghers like to tell. Goes like this: An out-of-town driver pulls over on a corner where a long-time Pittsburgher is standing, and asks for directions.

The Pittsburgher replies: "Just go down this street and turn left."

"Where do I turn left, exactly?" the out-of-towner asks.

The Pittsburgher shakes his head with exasperation and then answers: "Right where the CoGos used to be."

Sometimes, I like this unrelenting sameness because you always see people you know; it's amusing and comfortable. All the neighborhoods here are tight and independent, like a cluster of self-sustaining islands. But you rarely meet people you don't already know, so it gets kind of boring after a while. Sometimes I don't even want to talk to people that I see every day because I know what they are going to say before they say it—and what I am going to answer. What's the point? Sometimes I cross the street or duck into a store front, pretend I am window shopping, just to avoid endless, repetitious banter. The Pirates. The Steelers. The Penguins. The unpredictable Pittsburgh weather. Or, worse, when I see people I haven't run into for a while, they invariably ask: "When did you retire?" I hate that.

It's not that I always want to avoid these neighborhood people, but something or somebody different would be uplifting. It's funny because there are many newbies moving into the city. Because of the death of the manufacturing base, mostly steel and aluminum, the population in Pittsburgh has shrunk from 760,000 in 1968 to a bit more than 300,000 now. But over the years, we've seen an influx of students and professionals from all over the world, who come to work and study at our major universities, like Carnegie Mellon and its famed Robotics Institute, and the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, now the largest single employer in Pennsylvania. And Google, Apple, Microsoft, Uber have established major facilities here. National magazines are publishing articles

about the invigorated Pittsburgh "foodie" scene. Pittsburgh has been on many "most livable" lists for at least ten years. And yet, the place hasn't changed all that much.

You can tell a native Pittsburgher from a newbie because Pittsburghers have their own distinct and often incomprehensible way of talking—sometimes called "Pittsburghese" or, more often than not, *Yinzerspeak*. Folks in the Burgh screw up vowels—for instance, the *o* or *ow* sound: instead of going *downtown*, you head *dahntahn*. And *Yinzers* sometimes miss the *i* sound in words like *iron*, which is "arn," and *fire*, which will come out "far." Sometimes they put in the *r* sound when it doesn't belong, like "worsh" instead of *wash*, while the double *e* (*ee*) comes out like an *i*, as in our beloved Pittsburgh Steelers, pronounced with pride, "Stillers." Sometimes we make up our own words, the most significant of which we use when referring to a group of people. Southerners say *y'all*, while we say *younz* or *yinz*. Thus, *Yinzerspeak*.

But Pittsburghers have recently become sophisticated to the point that they even make fun of themselves, celebrating and publicizing our *Yinzer* quirks. Visitors can buy all kinds of souvenirs highlighting *Yinzerspeak*—shot glasses, T-shirts, and coffee mugs. There are also dolls that talk *Yinzer* if you squeeze their stomachs. And nail polishes like Glitzburgh, black with pink sparkles, and various "Polish polishes" featuring the shimmering colors and textures of foods inspired by Pittsburgh's large Eastern European population, like Pierogi, Kielbasa, and Kraut.

And Pittsburgh's got its celebrated heroes—or should I say anti-heroes? That is something I really do like about Pittsburgh, even though the heroes I admire make me feel kind of dated. Like that guy who went *dahntahn* on a bus. He was six feet tall, weighed more or less two hundred pounds, and wore a white shirt, no tie, zippered jacket, and a baseball cap, and quietly handed neatly printed notes to bank tellers demanding cash from their drawers. Sixteen robberies between 1961 and 1963 by this guy who, according to the FBI, would have been on

their Ten Most Wanted List if they'd known his name. Pittsburgh embraced him. People all over the city were running around claiming to be him or accusing others of being the mysterious robber. He was cleverly branded by police and beloved by the media as the elusive, uncatchable, legendary "commuter bandit."

Then there's Nicholas Perry Katsafanas, aka Nick Perry. Unlike the commuter bandit, who blended in with the businessmen he traveled with, Perry was a dapper dresser with an ebullient personality, whose early evening local TV show, *Bowling for Dollars,* beat out the national prime-time evening news. Perry was tapped as host of the statewide Pennsylvania Daily Numbers drawing. The daily number was determined from three machines in which Ping-Pong balls, numbered zero through nine, were shot around a Plexiglas container by puffs of air. In sequence, one ball popped to the top of each of the machines when a trap door opened, and together, the three balls formed the winning number. One day in April 1980, every ball except those numbered four or six was injected, by Perry and a cohort, with white latex paint so they would be too heavy to come to the surface and pop through the doors. The idea, for Perry and those few friends he confided in, was to bet on every combination containing only fours and sixes. The winning combination that day turned out to be 666. No fours at all, which was kind of amazing and unfortunate for Perry, for it made authorities suspicious enough to investigate.

Perry was proven to be the culprit and sent to jail, but in Pittsburgh, he has been lionized. In fact, two decades later, a movie was made called *Lucky Numbers*, inspired by the infamous "Triple Six Fix." John Travolta played the Nick Perry character, with Tim Roth and Lisa Kudrow as co-stars. Despite the excellent cast, and the direction of a well-known comedic writer with deep Manhattan roots, Nora Ephron, it was a bust. But the movie continued the lasting legend and made Nick Perry immortal in his own hometown.

As Pittsburghers saw it, what Perry was doing was ripping off the state—so he was cool. No harm done. Pittsburgh is "someplace special," a slogan we cling to, while Pennsylvania was someplace else.

On the other hand, Sienna Miller—an actor who came to Pittsburgh to make another movie, *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*, from Michael Chabon's first novel—was not so cool. In an interview with *Rolling Stone*, Miller complained to a reporter about her difficult life as a movie star, traveling all over the place. "Can you believe this is my life?" she asked the reporter. Then she referred to the city as "Shitsburgh."

The *Yinzers* were in an uproar. In this town, it's OK for natives to diss the city—in fact, it's a popular pastime—but visitors beware. Sienna Miller never returned to Pittsburgh after the premiere of that movie. Even today, she would not be welcome.

I was never a Yinzer. My parents employed some Yinzer phraseology, but they were not pure, unadulterated Yinzers; their speech was peppered with Yiddish. So you can't tell where I'm from by the way I talk.

When I first came to my current neighborhood, Shadyside, I was a beatnik—young, seeking pot and poetry, and hungry for cool conversation about Kerouac and Ginsberg. Walnut Street, the main drag, teemed with wannabe beats and bearded men, like me and sinewy, lazy-eyed women encased in black. I was still in Shadyside when I became a hippie a decade later, raunchy with outlandish sideburns, cultivating grass in my backyard to tempt the coeds. "Free love! Kill the pigs! Fuck the Establishment."

Walnut Street had these unique stores, like the leather shop, infamous for porn and pot, run by a ponytailed beatnik named Ringo. The best jazz in America came to the Encore. Keith Jarrett, Chick Corea, Stanley Turrentine. The Encore served great steaks and was dark as a dungeon; you could do almost anything with a date—or someone you just groped, who groped you back, in the squashed-together crowd.

The Encore was open until the early morning. You could get a martini at 3 a.m. or go across Walnut to the Gazebo for the best pastrami omelet from New York to Chicago.

One late night, I spotted the comedian Henny Youngman at the Gazebo. I begged him to wait until I ran home and got his latest joke book to autograph. He did. You know what he wrote? "Take my wife…please!" This, for the uninitiated, was the punchline of his signature joke. The book he signed for me was *Take My Life, Please!*

Today, I am often the oldest person wandering Walnut after midnight. The Encore is now the Steel Cactus—nachos-and-cheese cuisine. There's an honest-to-God steel cactus—a gigantic prickly penis that you have to dodge—near the middle of the sidewalk. It lights up at night in lime green. The days of jazz and pot and sex at the Encore are long forgotten, except by us old folk, once the Beats and later the Hippies. Sometimes I do still feel like I belong. After all, I have been here off and on for most of my life, and I recognize a lot of people who are still walking Walnut, hanging onto the old neighborhood, remembering what it used to be. Or maybe just pretending, imagining that, in some ways, it is still the same.

But I also feel somewhat like a ghost or shadow as I walk the streets, rather than a person in real time and a native, among so many graduate students and the hordes of upscale millennials who don't seem to notice me and wouldn't know what to say to me or how to relate if, on the off chance, we did make a connection.

Like one unusually friendly young woman at Starbucks recently, who smiled and asked me what I was reading and when I said, "Mailer," replied, "I never read direct mail."

It was December 14, 1964. I had mustered out of the military and had just started at Pitt in night school as a freshman. I had recently settled into an apartment, my first on my own, and I had come over to the

family's Beechwood Boulevard house to see my mother for breakfast that morning—something I would do from time to time, waiting until my father left for work, then showing up at her door, smiling sheepishly and hungry as hell. We were listening to the TV news—not watching, the TV was in the living room and we were in the kitchen—as the report of the mysterious leaper came on. My mother ran into the living room to turn up the volume so that we could hear the details while I was eating.

The backstory, which I mostly learned later, was interesting. Construction on the Fort Duquesne Bridge, a double-decked arch bridge over the Allegheny River, had begun in 1958. It was meant to connect the downtown business area with the north side of town. The main span of the bridge was almost completed in 1963, but because of delays in acquiring the necessary rights-of-way for approach ramps, the bridge did not connect to the other side of the river until 1969. This meant that for some years the bridge—technically not yet a bridge—ended abruptly, frozen in midair, hanging naked over the river. It was referred to by amused if frustrated local commuters with the tongue-in-cheek moniker "Bridge to Nowhere." Years later, this became the nickname of another unfinished bridge in Alaska that Sarah Palin claimed she refused to support. But Pittsburghers insist that our "Bridge to Nowhere" is the real deal because, of course, we were first.

The story that day, which absolutely amazed and tickled my mother, was about this mysterious, crazy guy who drove in his car—"leaped," according to the reporter—off the Fort Duquesne Bridge, sailed 170 feet over the Allegheny River, and landed upside down on the dry riverbed on the other side, only to emerge unscathed. He literally crawled out of his vehicle and walked away without a scratch.

The guy was Frederick Williams, twenty-one years old, an undergraduate chemistry major, pre-med, at the University of Pittsburgh. He would eventually go through medical school at Pitt, serve his residency,

and leave town, moving to California. No one ever found out why he did what he did, which was one reason, maybe the main reason, the leap over the Bridge to Nowhere became a Pittsburgh legend.

But evidently back then, the police did not know the identity of the leaper until a day or two later because Williams wasn't named in the news that morning, which is why, on a whim, I told my mother that the mysterious, unidentified Bridge to Nowhere leaper was me. I even conjured up some delicious details, like how I had rocketed through downtown Pittsburgh at ninety miles per hour, tearing onto the ramp leading to the bridge, crashed through two sets of striped wooden sawhorse barriers and went airborne across the water. I was guessing, just spontaneously inspired by the moment, and, as it turned out I wasn't far wrong; that's pretty much what the real leaper did, I found out later.

I think, because of the way she glanced up from the eggs she was scrambling for me, that she believed me, at least for a couple of seconds. I think she believed that I was perfectly capable of doing such a wild, dumb-ass thing which, at the time, may have been true. But then she knew almost immediately, by the way I was smiling back at her, that I was baiting her. As she got older, I joked with her a lot. It was my way of connecting with her, appreciating her easy laugh and her willingness to play her own game back—the pretend peeved mother to her eldest son.

She was quite a simple, loveable soul. Once in a while, I took her shopping at the local supermarket, the Giant Eagle. Everybody knew her there. You walked into the Giant Eagle with my mother and the cashiers would yell out, "Hey, Mollie." Or, "I love you, Mollie!" She was a friendly, easygoing lady, always polite, interested in other people no matter who or what they were. She had a way of being sympathetic to anyone's problems and concerns, even if she did not always understand them.

For the next few months, we had a running gag about the Bridge to Nowhere leaper. We analyzed repeatedly how Williams had rocketed

through downtown, sailed over the water, landed upside down in his car and managed to survive. I don't know, can't count, how many times she said to me, in that way she talked, like the whining, high-pitched Jewish mother she was, "Why did he do such a dumb thing? He could have killed himself, that *meshuggina*." Yiddish for crazy. She went on and on about how stupid and meshuggina Williams was. What was he thinking?

Sometimes she would bring Williams up out of the blue, apropos of nothing. Maybe we were watching TV or eating dinner alone, and she would look at me carefully and say, "He could have killed himself." And I would jump back on it instantly. "Meshuggina," I would reply.

By bringing up Williams, I think she was telling me she was afraid that if I didn't watch myself and settle down and get a job or finish college, do something respectable, I, too, would become a meshuggina maniac. She was probably right. In high school, I was constantly truant, put into detention, expelled for fighting or general misbehaving. I once hit my senior English teacher on the head with a book when I was playing catch with a classmate and miscalculated our distance. Prior to that, I had been kicked out of Hebrew school when I hit the rabbi in the head with a bagel. I had meant to toss the book and bagel over their heads, but I missed in both cases. I wasn't much of an athlete.

It took my mother a while to begin to understand me, but down deep I think she appreciated my meshuggina behavior, mostly because it made her laugh, and very often, living with my dad was far from a laughing matter. Unlike my dad and even my brothers, my mother seemed to be able to picture, bring to life, the off-the-cuff spontaneity of the things that I did. When I hit the rabbi on the head with the bagel—and was expelled, permanently, from Hebrew school at the age of twelve—her first question was: "What kind of bagel?"

"Plain," I told her.

She persisted, "Was it a cream cheese bagel?"

And when I replied, "No cream cheese," she said, "Thank God. It might have made a mess on his suit and he would have made us pay for the cleaning."

Not that my mother endorsed my antics, but she was never judgmental—at least not directly. Instead she would make broad worried mother exclamations. When I returned to Pittsburgh after motorcycling the country, off and on—California, Texas, wherever—she'd say "What the hell is wrong with you? You could have killed yourself!" Or, responding to the way I was then dressing in leathers and cleated heavy black boots, "Nice Jewish boys don't wear cleats!" Which was precisely the point, as she well knew.

But she always wanted to hear about what had happened to me, especially the crazy stuff. Even as I grew older and less apt to be so meshuggina, she was always ready for another story. Like when I told her about my plans to enter a peeing contest with a guy from New Jersey, Eddie Price. Eddie was in Pittsburgh on business and I had met him through friends. He was constantly joking with me about how many times I had to stop at a casino to pee when I ran the Atlantic City Boardwalk. Every couple of miles I had a designated peeing place on the Boardwalk.

"I bet I could pee more than you," Eddie once told me.

So when Eddie was in Pittsburgh, I decided to drive him back to New Jersey so that we could count how many times we each peed. We didn't bet anything—we just did it for the hell of it. By that time, I had given up motorcycles and was driving a red convertible Porsche 911, and another reason to do this, for Eddie, was so that he could drive the car part of the way.

My mother was tickled by this idea. She was relieved that I had come to my senses and was now into sports cars with four wheels rather than motorcycles with only two. I remember that I called her a couple of times along the way to report our progress—which was slow. At Johnstown, sixty miles east of Pittsburgh, we had peed five times

each, if I recall correctly. At Altoona, home of the famous railroad Horseshoe Curve, 110 miles out of Pittsburgh, we were at eleven pees each.

Usually, it takes about three hours to drive Routes 22 and 30 from Pittsburgh to Altoona, maybe two and a half hours in a red Porsche, but at Altoona we were over the four-hour mark because we had stopped so often. Peeing and then subsequently fueling up, hydrating to maximize our peeing, took time.

I defeated Eddie in our peeing contest, my twenty-three to his twenty-two, but by the time we reached Philadelphia six hours later, we had pretty much given up, calling the contest an official draw. We were wiped out and just wanted to get to Atlantic City. And pee one more time, like a ceremonial congratulatory toast.

I telephoned my mother when I got to New Jersey to tell her that I had made it safely and that I'd out-peed Eddie Price, a goy, which seemed to make the story even better for her—Jews over Christians—we Chosen People could even pee better than anyone else. That was saying something. A positive point.

I devoted a lot of time talking with my mother about my travels and adventures, and I do think it delighted her, even though she constantly complained that I was not a doctor or lawyer. But, wherever our conversations rambled, we invariably came back to Frederick Williams and to wondering why he, a nice boy from a good family, a pre-med student with everything to live for, even if he wasn't Jewish, would take that daring, wild and crazy and meshuggina leap.

As I got older and busier, I didn't see my mother nearly as often as I once had. Then my dad died, and suddenly she was living alone. Her old friends were passing as well. My father used to joke that my mother had lived with a phone in her ear, she had so many friends at one time, but gradually the phone stopped ringing and she became reclusive and

afraid, refusing to venture out for nearly any social reason, except for the Giant Eagle and her weekly hairdresser appointment.

I hated to see this slippage, and, selfishly, I feared what was going to happen to me without her. She was the only person I knew, and would ever know, with whom I could be completely and utterly myself—silly, serious, confessional, hysterical. Maybe that's why I became so utterly paralyzed, and so embarrassingly and inexcusably angry and resentful, when I began realizing—although not completely accepting—that her demise was inevitable, would happen sooner rather than later. I could sense that it was happening every time I talked with her on the phone or thought of her while I was traveling. A dissolving image in the camera of my eye, like in the movies. My mother here. My mother fading out. My mother gone.

Not long after my mother's death, I read a newspaper story about the driver of an SUV who, speeding down Greenfield Avenue, lost control, crashed through a fence and the front yard of a house, careened from a brick wall, and went airborne, landing upright on his wheels on the roof of the Giant Eagle Super Market, an entire city block from where the collision started. This was my mother's Giant Eagle, where she had shopped almost every week until she moved to assisted living.

The police were everywhere, the story went on, along with officials from the fire department, Allegheny County's hazardous materials team, and the county's health department. The supermarket was soon evacuated when firefighters learned that gasoline from the SUV posed a danger to the building.

The driver was unidentified in the news story, but the reporter quoted a man whose rental unit was directly adjacent to the supermarket: "I was sitting on the couch, and then I heard, 'Boom!' I thought my chimney fell. Then I looked out my bedroom window, and I saw a car on the roof of the Eagle. And I saw a guy crawling out of the car

and standing up on the roof, saying to somebody, maybe himself, I don't know, 'Yeah, I'm all right.'"

I wish my mother had still been around so that I could tell her about the SUV flip-flopping and flying onto the roof at the Giant Eagle. I would have picked her up and driven her in my car to the spot. She would have been amused—fascinated, in fact. Then we could have had a great conversation—a vigorous dialogue and debate. The conversation would have ended the way all of our Bridge to Nowhere conversations ended. The driver of the SUV was clearly meshuggina. Just like Frederick Williams.

CARMEN GIMÉNEZ SMITH

All Money Is a Matter of Belief

Every poet glistens with the dew
of money, but surely only some of them
truly have it. Never enough, wanting to know
what enough felt like, I buy fake versions
of the things I want on credit, my shelves
laden with zirconia, Prada knockoffs, and
pirated Disney movies. I'm driven by envy,
and gluttony, the desire to consume better
than anyone else, but the pleasure is only half
of what it should be, and so on until my house
is filled with objects that belong to Chase
and AmEx. I've been relentless and I've been
lucky, but that's never been enough.
I'd sell my soul, but there aren't any takers.

JARED STANLEY

A Fate

Are those furies or constellations sewn on your sleeves?
Something in them catches the sun.
Your expression is "very clean wizard'"or semi-inscrutable zealot.
Calm cheer. I don't ask how it happened.

There's a shiver of flesh above
the shivering cloth of a magnificent shirt,

dense patterns of royal blue embroidery
and rose accents twined on a cream base of linen.
The wind catches little hairs
reaching out from the nose and ears.
Your body moves against itself
in great concentration: arm and hand rise to brush
an ancient eyelash from a groove in the cheek

and spotless in this dust
                your face is like a baseball mitt:
you constantly finger and adjust it;
                it's rough
around us, forthright and shimmering.
The light hisses.
It becomes you, bright and mute

waving at light in your inapt clothes.

A chunk of rock lifts to reveal a handsome slit of earth

and, sunned to a blunt color, skin loose and draped on your collar,
two kinds of richness of life touch where your clothes do.

The crow's feet are evidence of concentration in dry heat.
The forehead's patterns are pocked and lunar
set off against the lighthearted control the shirt has
over what's left of you, the cool mercy it must be
as they adhere to what's left of your hide.

And it comes to this afternoon plainness:
if your face is a landscape of contempt,
and your shirt's an allegory of satisfaction

should I just leave you to it,
silent but otherwise against nature?

I am a wisp of cruelty
with my eyebrow arched in surprise like this
as if ground birds had exploded under foot,
and there's a bullet hole in my windshield
and my other car's in the arroyo

and you're just standing out here
exposed and glowing like a mosaic
probably hiding some water and buried food.

M. RACHEL THOMAS

Goodbye in Italian

Lui: (oggetto, con prep*)* = him

The first time I saw Chris Prince was in the hallway of a now defunct youth hostel in Hollywood called the Banana Bungalow. I was eighteen years old and it was ten o'clock at night. What followed was almost a summer romance. Chris, two Englishmen, and a girl from New Jersey came with me on a road trip through California and Nevada. We visited Alcatraz, attended my stepfather's fifty-second birthday party, spent the Fourth of July in Pioneer Town, and swam in the skin-numbing waters of Lake Tahoe. One by one, the others left, but Chris stayed. I want to say that he stayed for two weeks, but that's impossible. More likely, it was ten days, or even seven. But the pertinent fact is that every night we climbed into separate bunks, the summer air ringing with crickets outside our window, and talked each other to sleep. Each night my body grew tense as I imagined climbing down from my upper bunk bed and into his, but, paralyzed by self-doubt and inexperience, I would rehearse it a thousand times before giving in to sleep and cowardice. Once he did hold my hand. Once, he did get very stoned and reach timidly up

to touch my breast. And once he did trace the features of my face with his finger while I dozed in his lap. We were in the living room of my grandmother's house, and my little brother, sitting in the recliner, later admitted to feeling very uncomfortable by this quiet show of affection in the dark.

Tre anni dopo: "tre" (m, adj) + "*anni*" (m, pl) + "*dopo*" (prep) = three years later

The person who picks me up is neither Irina nor Lorenzo, but an even more complete stranger. It's already dark when he pulls up to the bus station in Modena, helps me wrestle my bags into the trunk of his small Italian car, and drives me in what I assume is the direction of Scandiano, the small town where I will be living for the next year. As he doesn't speak any English and I don't speak any Italian, the drive is long and quiet. Eventually, the car arrives at its destination. But we are not at a house, we are in a field. About ten or fifteen other cars are also parked in this field; my first guess is that we have arrived at a county fair. Tired as I am, this is not welcome news.

As we get closer, I understand that we are not at a county fair but a beauty pageant. Men sit on bales of hay having beer and loud conversations, applauding as young women high-step in tight, shiny clothes. There are fairy lights overhead and it is noisy with music and Italian narration over a loudspeaker. I don't know what time it is, but I have been traveling all day and the thought of a warm bed fills me with longing. Everything already has the soft edges of a dream and the scene is so improbable I wonder if I've fallen through the looking glass.

Irina is wearing a pageant banner across a small bright pink minidress. Her hair is long and blond and makes light waves down her back. She has freckles across her nose and glossy pink lips; her large, green eyes are rimmed in silver glitter. She assesses me, whispers something to Lorenzo in Italian, and holds out her hand with a small, icy smile.

"Welcome," she says. "I'm sorry we weren't able to collect you at the station."

Her English has the accidental formality of a second or third language. Her eyes dart down and back up again.

I look down at me, too. I am wearing jean shorts, a T-shirt, chucks. My hair is braided and my face is oily from traveling. I have the vague impression that they are disappointed with me.

"This is quite a party," I say.

Lorenzo clears his throat and says that we should get my things out of his friend's car and head home.

On the drive, they speak in hushed Italian to each other in the front seat and I fall asleep, like a child, in the back. Finally, we arrive at their house. It must be past two in the morning. All I can make out in the dim glow of Lorenzo's headlights is a long driveway covered in pine needles, trees looming overhead, and, at last, a stone staircase leading up to an ominous stone edifice. There are no lights in any of the windows. Lorenzo takes one of my suitcases. I take the other and stumble wearily after him. He opens the door and disappears into the black beyond, flipping a switch to dimly illuminate the main corridor. We leave Irina on the second floor and continue up a narrow staircase to the third. There we find a small landing with several wooden doors, of which one is mine. Lorenzo walks into the room and finds a lamp on a bedside table. The room smells like straw and fresh sheets and stone and eucalyptus. He leaves me there to settle in. When I finally crawl into bed, I leave the bedside light on and have frantic dreams, waking up clammy and disoriented.

Casa rotto: "casa" (f) + *"rotto"* (pp *di rompere*, adj) = broken house

I wake up early on Monday with sunshine angling through the shutters into my eyes. The view from my window is spectacular: rolling hills covered in grapevines, fields, cottages, sheep, and a vast blue sky. I get up

and creep down through the dark villa and let myself out through the front door. I walk down the long driveway and onto a two-lane road, past a farm with a handmade sign in Italian that says "cheese for sale here," past large pastures with sleek, grazing horses, past a fig tree at the edge of a field. I continue to wander for an hour, completely enchanted, then make my way back to the house, elated and hungry, to find myself locked out.

I am unsure what to do. The summer heat is ringing just beyond the shade of the large trees and the air smells amazing. The stone steps are cool. I sit down, leaning back against them, and look at the sunlight coming through the canopy of pine. I doze off, and when I open my eyes, a young man is leaning over me.

"Ciao," he says with a thick Russian accent.

He is tall and fair and also blinking as though he has just woken up. He is wearing work pants and looking at me in a way that suggests he is wondering who I am and why I am napping on the steps.

"Ciao," I say.

Just then, Lorenzo breezes out the door.

"Andiamo," he says to the young man. And then, without so much as turning his head, "Good morning, Rachel."

The young man shrugs. "Sergei," he says, holding out his hand to me.

"Rack-el-lay," I say, taking his hand. "Rachel," in Italian.

Another young man stumbles out behind Lorenzo, this one slightly shorter and darker. Sergei points to him and says: "Mikael." Mikael inclines his head and continues down the steps, muttering a few words to Sergei in Russian. Sergei follows him, glancing back over his shoulder to wave as I go into the house.

In the kitchen Irina is perched on a stool, her blond hair pulled into a neat ponytail. She is wearing a workout bra and stretch pants and picking at some muesli and yogurt. The morning light is coming in through the window, backlighting her perfectly, and I vaguely wonder if she is sitting there expressly for that reason.

"Good morning," I say.

"Ah, Rechel," she says with her Russian accent. "Come. I will show you where are the supplies for cleaning."

She sashays around the house showing me where the broom closets are, where the laundry room is, where the spare sheets are. The house is big, but most of it is unused. As I change the sheets on their bed and clean their toilet, wondering with mild disgust if the small dark hairs are pubic hairs, I reflect how truly intimate a job housekeeping is.

"Irina?"

"Yes," she says. She is on the balcony of their bedroom, painting her toenails hot pink and petting her cat, Nerissimo.

"I think the vacuum cleaner is broken."

"Oh, no, I show you," she says. "Just one moment." She finishes the last toenails and then reaches to pet the cat, but the cat bats at her hand, scratching her. "Ow!" she cries, "*Cattivo*!" Spanking the cat on the head, she picks it up and tosses it off the balcony.

I try not to register alarm, and before long I can see Nerissimo skulking across the yard. I follow her down the hallway.

"Irina, how do you say 'broken' in Italian?"

"Rotto," she says, with a good double consonant.

"Same as Lorenzo's last name?"

She reaches the vacuum and begins rearranging the hoses until the attachment clicks firmly into place.

"Yes, but not spelled the same."

I fall asleep that night thinking about how when Lorenzo answers the phone in Italian, "Roto residence." He is saying "broken house."

Io: (pers pron) = me

Three months earlier I had been living in Santa Monica with a friend and her two large dogs. I was waitressing at a French restaurant and taking

courses at the community college. At twenty-one, I hadn't figured out what I wanted to do with my life. On weekends, we would hit the local vegetarian joint for dinner and then stay up late reading books and drinking tea. She was taking the year off from a college in upstate New York. Her boyfriend was back East but came to visit often. I, on the other hand, didn't have a boyfriend and was unlikely to find one. For one thing, I was a "late bloomer," for another, I was blinded by the torch I was still carrying for Chris Prince.

My quiet Santa Monica life unraveled when the semester ended and the restaurant closed. Italy wasn't a solution to anything in particular. It was just something to do. I answered an ad on the internet for household help in a town called Scandiano in the region of Emilia Romagna, bought an Oxford Italian Pocket Dictionary, and packed my bags.

Una notte d'estate: "*una*" (indef art, f) + "*notte*" (f) + "*estate*" (f) = one summer night

It is a Wednesday night and we are in town getting gelato. The whole town is out, the air warm and heavy, the lights and people glowing with perspiration and humidity. Couples push strollers and kids bound down the sidewalk, ice cream dripping down their wrists. Youths congregate around Vespas and sit on steps, heads swiveling when Irina walks by.

She is wearing a Jane of the Jungle outfit. In her short, tight skirt, short, tight top and four-inch heels, she collects the looks and whistles of other men and the jealous, disapproving looks of other women as if they were a kind currency. She takes my arm and leans up to whisper in my ear, "Let's check out hot guys," she says. I turn to look back at Lorenzo over my shoulder. He is several paces behind us with his lemon sorbetto, looking perfectly at ease.

"It's his idea," Irina says, batting her eyelashes at a young Italian man with a popped collar about to take a lick of his gelato. For a moment he stands transfixed, hand in midair, mouth agape, tongue hanging out like a dog. "He likes it when I flirt with other men."

We pace around the block in a slow parade: Irina and me, arm in arm, Lorenzo trailing at a distance of ten or fifteen paces. Irina is not like any woman I've ever met. I find myself feeling simultaneously judgmental and jealous of the power she has. Do I have this same power, hidden somewhere beneath my jeans with the worn-out knees, my '90s flannels, my thrift-store dresses and Rosie the Riveter bandannas? Is it simply a matter of unleashing a miniskirt? And would I be willing to exploit this power if I knew how? It feels wrong, but tempting. It seems like the kind of power my mother spent my whole life warning me not to use. On the other hand, I'm twenty-one and I've never had sex. And not for lack of wanting. So maybe I should be taking notes.

I observe to myself that I am the ideal lady-in-waiting for Irina. Not obviously sexual and therefore not diverting any of the attention from her. It doesn't thrill me to be a sidekick. Ah, well. None of these short, lecherous, gelato-licking Italians are my type anyway.

But what of Lorenzo? I think of my parents and their relationship. They are divorced, but their marriage was respectful; I never saw my mother so much as look at another man. This would not have pleased my father. But then, they are good Christians and Americans. These are Italians. Who knows what the rules are here.

Once we have exhausted downtown Scandiano of young, horny men and jealous, child-toting housewives, we head home. On the way home, Lorenzo makes a detour. "There's something I want to show you," he says.

"What is it?"

"You will see," says Irina.

As we drive through the sleeping countryside and begin our ascent up a steep, tree-covered hill, I admit to feeling some vague misgivings.

Who is this couple, really? What if I am just one of many foreigners they pick up on the internet and then…dispose of? What will I do if they are driving me out into the countryside to assault, murder, and bury me? I'll run for it. I think of my father telling me that if anyone ever tries to kidnap me, I should fight to get away, even if it means I will be killed because that will be better than whatever they will do to me if I allow myself to be dragged off.

The engine cuts and Lorenzo heaves the parking brake into place. We are at the top of a hill with a view in all directions. "Look," says Lorenzo. "You can almost see all the way to Modena from here."

The valley below is lit up for miles with patches of city between stretches of dark countryside. The sky overhead is almost as bright and even more dazzling. There are some teenage boys, clearly drunk and taking turns shouting obscenities out into the void.

"*Cazzo!*" One yells. (Penis).

"*Figlio di puttana!*" (Son of a slut).

"*Palle di pollo!*" (Chicken balls).

"*Tre Croci*," says Lorenzo, "The Three Crosses," as he points out different constellations. Irina, wearing his jacket, leans into him, arms around his waist, smiling.

Fare esercizio fisico: "*fare*" (v) + "*esercizio*" (m) + "*fisico*" (adj) = taking exercise

When I first arrived, Irina thought it was hysterical that I went on walks. Brisk walking and jogging are very American forms of exercise; Italians exercise by playing soccer or maybe squash. They don't speed walk past their neighbors' farms. But eventually her curiosity got the better of her, and soon we began walking together most days.

This day, we take a turn off the main road and climb a small deer trail along the edge of a vineyard. We are discussing a woman named Valeriya.

"What happened to her?" I ask.

"What happened to Valeriya is that her husband is an ogre. He makes her stay always at home and he treats her like…" she gestures, looking for a word. "Like a sex dog."

"A sex dog?"

"Yes, he makes her do disgusting things."

I shudder. Valeriya looks like she walked out of a Victoria's Secret catalogue, lithe and long-torsoed with blond hair and a child's breasts. Her husband is a stubby Italian with black body hair that grows out the back of his shirt.

"She can't leave him?"

"He is always dangling the green card. He knows if he gives her the green card, she will. So he dangles. All of them—Anya, Mishka, Anastasia—the husbands are bad, Coniglio."

Coniglio—"rabbit"—is the nickname I have been given because I am a vegetarian. Lorenzo has very definite opinions about how much people should eat to maintain optimal health. He thinks I eat too much and disdains the "suspicious vegetarian mush" I cook for myself.

"Why don't they go home?"

"Home? To Russia?" She shakes her head. "You don't know what it's like. People are poor and bored. You get out, you stay. Even if it's lonely and your Italian husband is *un maiale*."

"What will she do?"

"Probably, she stays with Bruno." She shrugs.

We are walking behind a row of cottages. There are laundry lines full of clothes, flapping in the breeze, and guard dogs who run at the fence to beg for belly scratches.

"I have my green card," she says.

I have heard the story before. Lorenzo was traveling in Ukraine and they met at a dance club. After a brief courtship they were married and Irina moved out of her father's house and into Lorenzo's.

"We have an honest marriage. If I want to leave him, I can leave," she says. "But I don't want to leave him. I don't like to be on my own."

"I don't like *not* being on my own," I say.

"Yes, I have wondered about this, Coniglio," she pauses. "You travel by yourself."

"*Si.*"

"I could never do that."

"I like it better." We walk along in silence and I add, "Where would you go?"

"California!" She says, "I want to see Hollywood and the beaches. Leonardo DiCaprio."

"So come to California! You can visit me. But I guess you can't just leave Lorenzo here."

"No," she says, "I can't just leave Lorenzo."

Gli Ruschi: "*gli*" (def art mpl) + "*Ruschi*" (pl) = the Russians

Meanwhile, on the third floor, Sergei is teaching me Russian.

It's not the same as when Irina teaches me Italian and I notate adjectives and conjugate verbs in my little notebook. My Russian lessons are less structured. The Russians also sleep on the third floor. They share the large room next to mine, so most nights after dinner but before bed we play cards and pass around a flask of vodka. Sergei points at something and we take turns saying it in our respective languages.

"Edi-yelo," he says, pointing at the bed.

"Ode-layo," I say, mispronouncing the word, then, "Blanket."

"Blin-kut," he says. Mikael shakes his head, laughing, refusing to participate until Sergei elbows him. Mikael cusses at him in Russian and then says quietly, "blin-kut."

"*Coperta*," Sergei says, then. He is the only one of us that speaks any Italian.

"Coperta," I say.

"Coop-ert-uh," Mikael says at last, shyly.

In my bad Italian, I ask Sergei where they are from, and he tells me Saint Petersburg. I ask him how long they have been in Italy. He tells me he has been here for several years, but Mikael has only been here for seven months.

"What do you like about it?" I ask.

Sergei scratches his head and deals the next round of cards. He shrugs. "Good money."

Mikael passes me the vodka and I take a swig, trying not to let my face scrunch up too much afterwards.

"What do you miss about Saint Petersburg?"

Sergei smiles and repeats the question to Mikael.

"Saint Petersburg, it's a beautiful city," he says reverently. "I miss my friends."

"Do you have girlfriends back home?"

"What?" Mikael asks in Russian.

"Podruga," Sergei says to Mikael. Mikael looks at me and nods ruefully.

"Not me, Rechel," says Sergei. "I've never had a girlfriend. I was still a boy when I left Russia and Italian girls are too—" he makes a face, looking for a word "—too snob."

I nod knowingly and we all look at our cards. I want them to ask me if I have a boyfriend. I imagine the deep sigh I will heave to allude to the boyfriend I don't have but wish I had. But, like typical boys, they don't ask.

Verdure, e la sessualità: "*verdure*" (f, pl) + "*sessualità*" (f) = vegetables and sexuality

It is late August. Two months of working in the greenhouse has not made me any less jumpy around spiders, but I am proud of the countless hours I have spent, sweaty and sunburned, to establish some kind of order.

Lorenzo has been surveying my progress. One afternoon, he drops by the greenhouse and we begin talking about the nonprofit he is starting that will teach children about farming. It is in anticipation of this nonprofit that he has planted so many vegetables, not to mention the goddamn zucchini plants, which are growing much faster than the nonprofit is. There are twelve of them, all in a row, all in full sun. They are beasts, with huge prickly leaves and thick, prickly stalks. Locating and extracting the vegetables leaves me with hundreds of small, stinging cuts and a persistent sunburn on my cheeks and shoulders. There are so many zucchini to eat that, even though we are five adult people, we are no match for them. I have acquired recipes for zucchini gratin, zucchini bread, roasted zucchini, zucchini stir fry. Every time the Russians sit down for dinner and see more zucchini, they groan. We are all paying for Lorenzo's nonprofit in zucchini loaf.

Together, we begin walking back toward the house: Lorenzo, long, lanky, dark; me, sweaty in a cotton skirt, carrying a bowl of tomatoes in front of me like a baby.

"Lorenzo?"

"Sí?"

"Can I ask you something?"

He looks at me, waiting. I take a breath and wonder if the question is too rude, but I ask it anyway.

"Doesn't it bother you that you and Irina have so little in common?"

He doesn't even flinch. "No."

I am emboldened. "What I mean is, you're a man of science."

He nods.

"You spend your free time organizing talks about astronomy."

He nods again.

"Don't you want to…connect with her on that level?"

"No."

"I don't understand."

"I don't need my wife for that." He looks at me. "That's what my friends are for. I need my wife to be beautiful and to love me."

I raise my eyebrows. Then Lorenzo surprises me by volunteering more information. "When I was young, I was always alone. I was tall and skinny. Women would never look at me. I had a lot of time to figure out what was the perfect relationship. What I realized is that the ideal woman should be very sexual. And it is important that other men desire her." He looks at me to see if I'm paying attention. "Monogamy is not so important, but sexuality is very important."

This line of thought seems beneath him—so obvious, so primal.

"So it doesn't matter that she is boring if she is beautiful?"

"If she is beautiful, she is not boring."

I roll my eyes, but I'm looking away and he doesn't see it.

"What about if you have a woman friend who is really smart and interesting, but not that beautiful? Could you be sexually attracted to her?"

And, like a final punctuation point, he wrinkles his nose.

Irina e gli lavoratori: "*Irina*" (f) + "*gli lavoratori*" (m, pl) = Irina and the help

The first time Irina sneaks up to the third floor to play cards after dinner with me and the Russians, the Russians are at a loss for words. We are mid-game when there is a light tapping on the door.

"Si?" Sergei says, surprised. She pops her head in, small fingers holding the door jamb, long blond hair tumbling over one shoulder, and asks in Russian if she can come in. Sergei looks at her dumbly for a second and then says of course and beckons her to come sit down on the floor with us. Both he and Mikael stiffen a little. I guess that she has never been in their quarters before.

There is a very clear class divide in the Roto house. On one side is Irina, Ukrainian lady of the house, on the other Sergei and Mikael,

Russian hired help. They share a language but never any conversation. And although we all eat together, it is usually Lorenzo, Irina, and I who talk. The Russians eat in silence, answering pleasantly but monosyllabically when I ask them about their day. Irina never addresses them except to talk about logistics, and even then she does it haughtily. So they think her a snob. But she is, nonetheless, a beautiful snob.

"You are always having so much fun up here, Coniglio. I thought I would just come say hi," she says to me.

We resume playing cards and it is only a matter of minutes before the boys relax and the three of them are joking easily in Russian. Naively, I am glad to have bridged the gap between them. It makes sense that they should be friends, all the same age, all strangers in a foreign land. On the other hand, when I think of Lorenzo sitting alone on the second floor while his young wife plays cards with the hired help, something does not feel right.

Irina begins making appearances upstairs after dinner more frequently. In our fun, she loses track of time, and suddenly our revelries are broken up by a bellow from below.

"Irina!"

And just like that we are reminded that to varying extents, we are all guests in Lorenzo's house.

Il precedente: (m) the precedent

The last couple of times I had seen Chris, I visited him in London. He had a girlfriend, Stephanie, who was studying environmental law. One night I was in a pub with him and all of his friends. He was sitting next to her, and my impression was that he was looking at me, directly or indirectly, the entire time. Another time we were taking a long stroll around sunset, when we passed a busy playground. His girlfriend began talking about how much she was looking forward to having children.

We both listened for a while, and then he said, "I think you would make a great mother." But this, he said to me.

It was so abrupt and unexpected that I was stricken with a deep, hot self-consciousness. I began listing all the reasons why I would not be a good mother, and anyway I didn't even like kids and was unlikely to have any, I heard myself saying, as I grasped wildly at some form of modesty to disguise my pleasure at having received such an inappropriate compliment.

The next time I visited him he did not have a girlfriend. It was only an overnight stopover in London and we slept side by side on his friend's living room floor. My heart beat rapidly for many hours in awareness of his body so close to mine. I was again seized by a desire to touch him, to kiss him. How were first moves made? I didn't know. I assumed he was in the same agony, as I could tell by his breathing and small shiftings that he, too, did not fall asleep for many hours. I determined that the next time I saw him, I would be bold. I would be brave. I would make a move.

Suddenly, mid-Italy, the opportunity arrived. A friend emailed to say that she would be in Paris in a week, did I want to meet up and follow her to London? I did. I wrote to Chris to tell him I was coming. He told me he had been having a tough time, but he would be glad to see me. He would clear his schedule, and I must come stay with him. I knew he had recently had a breakup and, having never had a breakup myself, I thought that meant the timing was perfect.

Londra: realtà e finzione: "*realtà*" (f) + "*finzione*" (f) = London: fact & fiction

The bar where I am going to meet Chris is a ten-minute walk from where I am staying and everything about this walk is charming. A fine, high mist has settled on London and I can see my breath as I skip down the sidewalk. I am in love with this city, in love with November. Inside is

loud and cheerful, warm with bodies and cigarette smoke. I find Chris and his friends, five of them in all.

"Ah," says Chris, standing to greet me. He pulls me in for a quick hug and introduces the people around the table. Most of them, I already know: Chris's best friend, Charles, and his girlfriend, Fiona; Alastair and George. In my imagination we sit down and I will have his full attention for the night. He will come back with me to my friend's house, which is palatial, with beds like clouds and an underground pool, and a house staff that will make grilled cheese sandwiches at two in the morning. Finally, after playing a game of Scrabble or watching *The Goonies* or sitting in the jacuzzi, we will slip between sheets that cost more than we can imagine and, at long last, do what adults do when they are alone in a bed together.

In reality, I see her before he says her name, "…and this is Joanne."

Joanne is smaller and prettier than I am. I recall, from Chris's emails, that she graduated at the top of her class, that she is ambitious, that he admires her. I recall how devastated he was just weeks ago when they split, she returning to an ex-boyfriend. Isn't she out of the country? What is she doing here? This is my night. This is my week.

Alastair is asking me what I have been up to, and I tell him about Italy. Even to myself, I sound happy. I make a few jokes. I tell the story of how I accidentally asked Lorenzo's sister-in-law for "a breast" in Italian when I meant to ask for the butter. Charles and Fiona think the story is delightful. Joanne is smiling blithely, pretending to listen. Chris is looking hungrily at Joanne.

I light a cigarette and take a gulp of my gin and soda. I've only just arrived but it is already almost gone. I look over at Joanne's beer. She has only taken a few sips. I hate her for her self-possession, her carefully guarded appetites, for ease with which she has Chris captivated, and the joy she is taking in watching me fail.

I know that I am failing, but still I try. I feel obvious and tragic. I get a second drink. I get a third. I smoke another cigarette. All the

while, Joanne sits there across from Chris, smiling, not drinking her beer, her small hands resting lightly in her lap, her small, white teeth flashing when she laughs, her blond hair heaped in an elegant mess on her head, her slender fingers now and again raising her glass to her small mouth. I am sitting to one side, an almost literal third wheel.

Fiona looks at me with a quick, lightly veiled look of sympathy. Joanne has just broken Chris's heart—she is a villain. Everyone is probably sad to see him enthralled, but Fiona is the only one who recognizes the territory war under way.

Finally, it is time to leave. My head is spinning. I know all is lost, but still I invite him to come back. "There's an underground pool," I hear myself saying. "We can stay up late playing cards."

"I've got to study," he says simply, looking after Joanne, who is walking away.

"But I'm only in town for a few days," I say, pleading. It's embarrassing, but I can't stop. "Can't you take one night off? Study tomorrow?"

"I can't," he says again, in a hurry to leave. "I'm sorry."

And then he jogs down the sidewalk after Joanne, who is smiling back over her shoulder at him.

I sob all the way back to my friend's house. When I get there, neither she nor her boyfriend ask me what happened. Instead, he begins playing guitar while she sings Jeff Buckley's "Lover You Should Have Come Over," as I cry myself to sleep. I wish this was the end of my demoralizing trip to London, but it isn't. The next day my friend leaves and I am supposed to stay with Chris for two nights.

It is late in the afternoon when he comes to meet me. He is restless and exhausted, caught in the throes of something I don't understand and refuse to recognize. He puts on Buena Vista Social Club and I help him make dinner. We share some wine and play half a game of Scrabble before he stands, stretches, and says he is turning in.

He pulls from the closet a sheet, a blanket, one flimsy pillow. I look at the sagging futon and then back at him.

"Can't I just sleep in your bed?" I say.

If I could go back in time to see his face in that moment, I'm sure I would see disbelief and horror. At the time, god knows what I think I see, but I know it isn't "yes." He laughs one deep, sad laugh. "No."

"We don't have to touch," I say, desperate to be in his bed on account of the deeply rooted, deeply misplaced belief that if I am, he would, in fact, want to touch me. "I can stay on one side."

"I'm exhausted. I need the whole bed to myself." He walks up the stairs heavily without looking back. "Good night," he says.

His door swings shut and I lie down on the couch, flushed with shame and a deep, desperate disappointment. I had one chance to make good on a flame that I have been carrying for years, and I have failed, full stop. I am a fool.

The next morning he leaves for class and stays at Joanne's for the remainder of the thirty-six hours that I am in town. My last night in London I sleep on his couch in his empty house with his empty bed overhead, feeling utterly unwanted.

I know he is not coming to meet me, but as I am leaving for the train station I look up the sidewalk, hoping he will appear. And say what? Do what? Grab me by the shoulders, saying, "It's you! It's you I've wanted all along! Please don't go!" In my imagination, at last, I take the rom-com off the reel, tuck it into its case, put it at the far end of the storage shelf, and turn off the projector.

The train takes a long time to get to Paris because the unions are striking. My train is redirected through Switzerland and, after many more delays, I get back to Reggio Emilia, having not slept or eaten well in at least three nights. I send Chris a message saying, *We can't be friends anymore. I feel things for you that you don't feel for me*. When he texts back, I am frustrated by the way my body reacts to the flash of his

name on my phone's screen—the jolt of misplaced anticipation. *Okay*, he says.

I finally get home at around 3 a.m. and sleep for what might actually be days.

Lo sconosciuto: (m, adj) the stranger

Lorenzo is not eating and Irina is not talking.

I've been home for about a week when Lorenzo calls me into his office. This is always the coldest room in the house. It is on the ground floor and, because the computer is in this room, the shutters are closed. Lorenzo is standing, and even in the dim light I can see that he is particularly gaunt. How long have I been gone? His clothes are hanging off him, his eyes are wide and bloodshot. He looks terrible.

"Your work has gotten lazy," he says, pacing a little.

"Oh!" I say. "I didn't realize…"

"When you came, you dusted and swept every day. Now, you clean once a week."

He stops pacing and stares at me, waiting for an answer.

"I'm sorry," I say. "You're absolutely right. I've been caught up in my head. I forgot myself."

He bites his lip, and stares at the ground.

"Okay," he says.

Just then, the front door closes.

"Irina?" Lorenzo calls past me.

"Yes," she says.

I pop my head out of the office in time to see her walking by.

"That's all for now," Lorenzo says, as he pushes past me and follows her upstairs.

In the evening, nobody comes downstairs for dinner, so I fix myself a couple pieces of toast and go back to my room. Something is very different. And then I realize what it is: the Russians are gone.

I nuovi amanti: "*nuovi*" (adj, pl) + "*amanti*" (m, pl) = the new lovers

It is another week before Irina speaks to me.

During this week she is barely home, and when she is she looks strained and anxious to leave. She is treating me like a stranger and I can only assume that she is angry because, like Lorenzo, she feels that I have shirked my responsibilities, that I have been a lazy employee. I redouble my cleaning efforts. I wake up earlier to sweep the forlorn dining room, dust the parlor, even though I have just dusted, clean the downstairs toilet, even though nobody has used it. The house is sparkling clean, and empty.

Finally, one day Irina announces that she must go into Reggio Emilia to run some errands. "You come with me, Rechel," she says. She doesn't call me "Coniglio" and she doesn't look at me.

We drive into town and it isn't until we get there that she starts talking. What she tells me is that she and Sergei have fallen in love and that she is leaving Lorenzo. If she had told me that she had taken up opera singing in my absence, I could not have been more surprised.

"You don't know, Coniglio," she says, now talking very fast. "Lorenzo wants me to be sexy all the time. He wants me to dance for other men—he drives me to parties and sits outside while I dance and then I have to tell him all about it. And he wants me to sleep with other men and tell him about that. It was okay before, but I don't want that anymore."

"How did it happen? With Sergei?"

She takes a minute to respond.

"I don't really know. All of a sudden, I was just crazy about him." She looks at me and smiles. "So I told him. Then we had sex, and when Lorenzo found out…" She shakes her head ominously. "Sergei had to leave, of course."

"But you just said he likes you to have sex with other men."

"Only when I tell him. I didn't tell him about this." She looks out the window. "I'm in love."

"You're in love?"

"Oh, yes, Coniglio."

"It's only been a couple of weeks."

"Sergei is so sweet." Now, she is dreamy. "We just lie in bed together and look at each other. I've never had anything like this before."

Then everything makes sense. For years I had been conjuring up my own first love fantasy, my head full of Jane Austen, rom-coms, and happily-ever-afters. I had projected all of that onto Chris Prince. Lorenzo had spent years conjuring up his sexual fantasy, all of which he had projected onto Irina. And now Irina was getting her first taste of love and she was rejecting his fantasy, just as Chris had rejected mine. Lorenzo and I had both made miscalculations. Irina was simply laying them bare.

"Oh, man," I say. "Oh, man." And then, "What does Lorenzo say?"

"He is giving me an apartment in Reggio Emilia so that I can try being on my own. But he cries all the time and he won't eat and he doesn't sleep and at night he begs me to hold him and just cries." Here, her voice breaks a little. "I can't take it, Coniglio. It's so awful. He is skin and bones. You must help him."

"Of course," I say. "I will help him." After all, misery loves company.

Arrivederci: (int) goodbye

Lorenzo is ever gaunter, ever more hollow-eyed, as Irina's official departure date looms closer. She has found a job working in a small retail store and most nights she does not sleep at the house. I do not know where she sleeps, perhaps with Sergei, wherever he is.

One evening Lorenzo calls me into the office. "I want you to stop talking to Irina," he says.

This is not what I am expecting.

"Lorenzo," I say, taking a seat. "I can't do that." I pause and hold my breath a little. "This is a difficult time for both of you, and I want to help you. But she is my friend, too."

"I want you to stop talking to Irina," he says again, "because I need her to understand what loneliness feels like. Then she will come back to me." He pauses. "Irina has never been alone. And now, if she is texting you all the time, she will not feel lonely."

I speak frankly to Lorenzo. I tell him that sounds like unhealthy behavior. That even though the separation is causing him pain, she has the right to seek independence if it is what she needs. That trying to make her lonely until she comes back to him is playing dirty, and does he really want her back on those terms?

"You don't understand," he tells me, taking his head in his hands. "I can't live without her. I will die."

"I know it feels like you will die, Lorenzo, but—"

"I *will* die. You don't know what love is. This is love."

I think to myself that Shakespeare did well to make Romeo and Juliet Italian.

"I will do anything to get her back. I would kill anyone standing in my way." This, he says levelly. He pauses, looking at the floor, and then looks me right in the eye: "I would even kill you, Rachel."

I feel like someone has doused me in ice water. I realize that I am looking at a crazy man. I know that he is one hundred percent in earnest in his threat.

Me and my meddling. How the hell did I end up in the middle of this marriage? This is Irina's battle, not mine. And as much as I want to help her, I am unwilling to do it at the expense of my life.

"You know what, Lorenzo," I can hear myself talking, but I sound very far away. "You are absolutely right. I have gotten too involved." I stand up. "I will go to Rome." And then trying to sound sympathetic instead of panicked, I say, "I'm really sorry about all of this. I do really want you both to be happy."

I leave the office. The hallway is unlit and, as I take my first steps, I remember that we are alone in the house. I know that he is right behind me and my body suddenly forgets how to do all the things I rely on it

to do: keep my breath level, move my arms at my sides. I force myself to keep walking, even though my knees are weak and my whole body is cold. If he kills me—if he strikes me dead here in this hallway—he will have time to clean up the mess and bury me in the backyard before Irina comes home. The floor is stone, easy to mop. It will take my parents weeks to realize something is wrong. I can't run for it, either. There is no door within reach and outside it is just miles of countryside. The moon isn't even out. I don't know any of the neighbors, and I certainly wouldn't be able to find any of their houses in the dark. The top of my scalp tingles. My body is braced in anticipation of a stab. Jerkily, I make it to the staircase and walk up the winding stairs to my room. Once there, I feel only slightly better. There is no lock on my door and I am acutely aware of the noises in the house below: there aren't any. I can't tell where he's gone or what he's doing.

I pack my bags, deciding which of my few possessions I will take with me to Rome and which I will likely never see again. I pack enough clothing for a week, but my winter jacket and most of my favorite dresses I leave. I take the few photos of my family, but only two of the first edition books I bought from a used-book seller in Austria. They had come from a monastery, the shop owner told me, and I was so in love with their cloth bindings, their library smell, that he sold them to me for half the asking price. I lie awake in bed all night, my last night in the attic room from which I can see across a vast, rolling Italian landscape of plowed fields and tawny hills that carry the scent of olive trees and the sound of people singing songs I can't understand from a location I could never quite identify; the attic room whose shuttered windows and ancient-stone smell had so enchanted me when I first arrived. I send a text message to Chris Prince telling him not to be alarmed, but if he doesn't hear from me within the week, to tell my mother to come looking for me, and if anything has happened to me, it was Lorenzo.

The next day Irina comes up to my bedroom and sees that all of my things are packed.

"Rabbit!" she says, alarmed, "What's going on?"

I tell her that I am sorry, but I am moving to Rome. Once she is gone, there will be no reason for me to stay with Lorenzo and, besides, it is time for them to figure things out on their own.

I stay calm as I descend the stairs with Irina and casually ask whether or not Lorenzo can give me a ride to the train station, stay calm as I climb onto the bench seat of the truck: Lorenzo, Irina, and me, all in a row. I stay calm as we leave Scandiano and drive through stretches of Italian countryside that look like they've been clipped from a tourist brochure.

"Are you crying, little rabbit?" Irina asks, mistaking my anxiety for sadness. I look out of the window and away from her.

"I'm going to miss all of you," I lie.

I hug them both and board the train to Rome. Then, I lose my calm. The terrible knot in my chest does not start to relax until there are hundreds of miles between us, until I find my way to the Spanish Steps, carrying all of my things, and realize I am safe.

Fine: (m) the end

Six months later, Irina goes back to Lorenzo. I see them one last time when I return to retrieve a few of the things I had left behind. For some reason they are both living in Irina's apartment in Reggio Emilia. We are standing in the kitchen. Irina has put on some weight. She is wearing shapeless gray sweatpants and an old T-shirt, her hair is unkempt—she is the exact opposite of the hyper-sexualized Irina I first encountered. How just, I thought, that Lorenzo should have succeeded in getting her back but, in the process, stubbed out the very sexuality he desired. For her part, Irina had, at least, acquired a taste for the great beyond. I did not think she was back to stay.

As for me, six months had had the opposite effect. Free of Chris Prince at last, I found myself in Rome surrounded by young, handsome travelers. I discovered that I did know how to talk to them, that I could kiss them under streetlamps late at night if I wanted, no miniskirt required. I traveled through Morocco and then I moved to Granada, Spain. Two months after that, as I was finally planning my return to the States, I received an email from Chris. It began with an apology about Joanne. They had broken up again two weeks after my visit to England. He had had a rough winter and had done poorly at university but, with the arrival of spring, was finally feeling better. He hoped I didn't mind too much that he was writing. He wondered what I was doing. Where was I now? Was I well? He missed hearing from me and wondered when I would next be in England. He hoped that I would consider letting him know the next time I was passing through. He hoped I would consider coming to stay again. He hoped it would be soon.

HEATHER CHRISTLE

Far-fetched vs. Far-flung

If a glowing door
were to appear in
the air would you
step through it and
out of your life?
I pretend to be
stern with myself
like I once pretended
my dark blue skirt
was a uniform
we all wore at
the Chalet School
where if we got lost
we ate chocolate
and tinned tongue
until someone
brought us home.
In 1921 a Serbian
poet imagined
the invention of a plane
"as small as a butterfly"
and marveled. He had
just come home

from the war.
I ordered potassium
tablets from Amazon
in case of nuclear
war because I have
a great imagination.
If the glowing door
were to appear I'd
tell you all about it.
I would miss my life.

HEATHER CHRISTLE

Shelter in Place

A tornado is when the wind
opens the door to your house
and closes it in the lake. A cyclone
is some kind of milkshake I think,
I think with candy inside? I know
someone who made a milkshake
for her babies made of meat.
When you write a book you must not
forget to build a door you can use
to get out or else you will die there.
It is very exciting to make a new mistake.
Every time I turn on the blender I am afraid
the blade will spin out through the glass
and on through my stomach, but still
I keep using it, mostly for soups
and sometimes for smoothies,
a word I would rather not speak.
I'm not brave, but I am hungry,
and the wind has taken my teeth.

REGAN GOOD

Walking Them Down the Droveway

It is smoky here and also in the distance—dark.
The hot-blooded animals move slowly in the sun,
blowing steam and smell ahead into the shaft-smoke.
We walk in a mellow foggy tunnel since the Danube
is a foggy body—a mellow, muddy, winding worm.
The cows moved toward the terrible doors, flicking flies—
but for now, the droveway is soft and this is afternoon,
all high notes and a constant summer buzzing sound.
Who could die with the sun so high and the worms so low?

It is gentle to walk so, to saunter—it is common but divine
and therefore holy—this place rivals Peckham Rye!
There branches bristled with men with enormous wings.
The trees flowered and fruited alongside the vision—
as if the men had lit there for an afternoon to provide
a poet his meat,
    just as the sun made a mellow kind of kidney-wine
                                for his drink—
I held a withy loosely like a rein, not fisted as a prod.
I undid webs and lifted leaves and rushed their lazy legs.
I enraged a spider while reanimating feathers from a bird.
I tapped my cows on their sides with this dry fingertip,
then let the stick bounce along their backs. I sang

to them: "When the willow comes out in bud,
then the eels come out of the mud." I made the song
emphatic in its gait—to distract them from the doors.
The cows collected burdock burrs they could not feel.
Was that when the winged men climbed down into the field?
Trundled down slats, hunched and stiff,
dragging their ragged wings?
Or did they remain aloft? Bespangled like that,
radiant and loitering?
(I swear I saw their hands and faces twisted in some grief.)
The day grew late. We walked past the house to shaded grass.
We lay down—them on their sides, me against them. They
were unaware that death would come today, and so
they watched the world as usual with patience and no pain.
I promised them we would not return the way we came.

DAVID ROMPF

Changes

My father endured countless setbacks after surgery to replace his aortic valve: life-threatening infection, caustic antibiotics, months quarantined in hospital rooms, lungs flooded with liquid. Each day brought a new hurdle and a new medication. During this period, as independence faded with bodily strength, he began wearing diapers, which on any given day was the least or worst of his worries. On some days it was more worrisome for my mother, my sister, and me because the task of changing him would eventually shift to us.

In the hospital, to allow some privacy where privacy was scarce, we stood behind a pulled curtain or waited outside in the hall while a nurse removed my father's pajama bottoms and then his diaper, turned his frail body, and cleaned what needed to be cleaned. If he was cold, a blanket was spread over his upper body. Turned again on his back, his groin and thighs were checked for any smears. Before a new diaper went on, he was swabbed with medicated wipes. Lying in bed for long periods causes the skin to break down and become tender; if it is not treated properly, sores will develop, escalating the risk of infection. Two or three times a day, and once always just before the lights were dimmed, fresh clothing and linen were exchanged for the soiled. Sometimes I watched

the nurses through an opening in the curtain; most of them worked methodically, with the precision and efficiency acquired from hundreds or thousands of changes. They applied lotion with their gloved fingertips, rubbing the substance in small circles. They asked, "Does it hurt?" or "Is it too cold? Are you uncomfortable?"

The nurses dressed him in a laundered gown or a pair of flannels my mother brought from home. Daytime blankets gave way to nighttime blankets, and when the change was finally done and the curtain pulled open, we re-entered the room to find my father looking snug in his bed and relieved.

"She was rough," my father said of one nurse. "Like a linebacker."

I'd met her. She was bulky and broad-shouldered, commanding. Her hands appeared capable of crushing stone. But she was also quick and light on her feet, and flipped her patient from side to side in a strangely silent motion. I imagined she could safely toss my father into the air and, before he landed, he'd be changed, dressed and ready for bed. She slathered the medicinal lotion with gusto, smoothing it over like plaster on a wall, but when it was all over my father seemed relaxed and renewed, no worse for wear on her field of play.

Staying clean in the hospital—a constant effort—was as important as keeping the antibiotics flowing into my father's body, monitoring his vitals, and removing toxins from his blood. No hygiene, no health; no cleanliness, no comfort. The nurses I observed seemed to approach the duty with cheerful expediency, like angels on their righteous quest. They knew it was noble to finish quickly and gracefully, out of respect for the patient. I never forgot that my father was one of many on the ward who needed changing, often in the middle of the night, and we were mindful that, upon his discharge, we would not have the help of these godly attendants.

Before he comes home, on Christmas Eve, the easy part is accomplished: we buy a box of diapers and set it on the living room floor, ready to be

opened. Although we know the change will need to happen soon, none of us has spoken about it.

It isn't the unpleasantness—the filth, the pungency—that weighs on us. My mother and sister, after all, have changed countless diapers for their children. But it is not a child who has been delivered to us on an ambulance gurney a few minutes before seven in the evening. He is a husband and father, partner and provider, a man who never expected to be dependent on others and who never thought he would end up wearing diapers. He is an eighty-two-year-old army veteran with unflinching modesty. Until my father's heart surgery, I had never seen his body naked, except once when my sister and I were children. We had hidden in his bedroom closet with the intent to scare him, and when we popped out of our hiding place, it was he who, while removing his work clothes, surprised us.

My brother-in-law, who once worked as a student intern in a hospital and learned alongside nurses, is the first to change my father at home. Narrating each step, he emphasizes points that might not have occurred to us—certainly not to me, a childless middle-aged man. Such as: after the adhesive strips have been cut off, turn the used diaper into the repository for the used moist wipes—a Changing 101 precept: keep dirty with dirty and as far away as possible from clean—and when you are finished, roll up the old diaper, keeping its contents at the center. Then slip the neat package of waste into a plastic bag. A small detail, and arguably insignificant compared with sustaining hydration or dialing 911 when blood pressure sinks below a safe level, but it is a detail that helps ease us into our new responsibilities. In sustaining my father's life with his comfort and cleanliness as priorities, the integrity of the change was paramount.

While my brother-in-law conducts our lesson, my sister holds my father, who lies on his side, his face turned toward the wall, looking away from us. There is no privacy curtain to be pulled. He groans as his

backside is cleaned, and at first we think he might be in physical pain, his muscles aching after the move from the hospital. But for weeks he would continue to groan during his changes, not from bodily torment but from the misery of having his family perform the unthinkable.

The next day, after several tutorials, it is our turn.

My mother will not, or cannot, go next. At first, her reluctance seems disconcerting. Decades earlier, she had changed babies when cloth diapers were pinned, not taped, and tossed into the washing machine for recycling. It was much easier now, I thought, but what did I know? Nothing at all, and no other worldly experience could prepare one for this. It isn't the process itself from which my mother initially turns away; it is the person that has deflected her, the one who had shared her bed, the man who was twenty-seven years old when he stood next to her at the altar. Although my father is home—for him, the most comfortable and reassuring place—she cannot yet bring herself to regard him as less independent than he was when we arrived in California in the nineteen-sixties and had nowhere to go, when he marched out into the scorching heat and found a job and an apartment for his family. I will come to understand her reluctance weeks later, not because it's an especially difficult thing to figure out but because, for now, we are figuring out how to change my father. A father waiting to be changed takes precedence over reflection and history. Do now; think later.

As I begin, for the first time, my father groans. The antibacterial wipes are icy against his body. "Just one more wipe," I say. "I know it's uncomfortable but it's almost over." Where his skin has reddened I apply layers of thick white cream.

"Almost done," I keep saying.

The mantras of relief: almost finished, almost over, looking good, all clean, getting ready to put fresh pants on.

I refer to the diapers as pants to preserve his dignity. They look like plastic gray underwear and I can pull them up over his feet and legs,

then up to his waist, like a regular pair of shorts or briefs. "There, your pants are on," I say. I prefer these to the other kind with two dangling, unwieldy strips that, for me, seem impossible to fasten correctly into place. These less desirable diapers are white, not gray, and look like they belong on an infant. They amplify my father's current vulnerability. My mother will come to insist on using the white ones because they fit more tightly, better to prevent leakage.

With my father unclothed before me, I remember someone once saying that he ate like a squirrel and needed to put more meat on his bones. He had always been a lean man. But he did not at all eat like a squirrel; he could gulp chocolate shakes and finish plates of cheese and crackers in the evening and never gain a pound. The man who had been skinny his whole life shed thirty pounds in the hospital, weight he could not afford to lose. Now, months after surgery, he seems emaciated, breakable. During changes I'm afraid that I'll wipe with too much pressure or turn him too abruptly. His legs, which have lost an alarming amount of muscle, look like thin, white rubber tubes. The skin of his buttocks sags and the spiky contours of his spine can be seen with textbook detail. Despite this diminished state, his body perseveres; it has fought and resisted, retreating only in the most vicious bombardments but always coming back to fight again.

During changes, I fear making a messy situation messier. My father has been good and kind to me, to all of us; his own curtains of humor and acceptance have obscured sacrifice and toil. He will live now in this den, in this bed, in these sheets, and I want his realm to be free of impurities. His waste carries stench, bacteria, and everything the world abhors, but whatever its name, eliminating all traces of it becomes a mission of absolute, pristine perfection. But I also fear hurting him and I fear breaching the most personal boundaries of privacy that exist even among family members. Montaigne wrote that man is the sole animal whose nudity offends his own companions, and the only one who, in

his natural actions, withdraws and hides himself from his own kind. His assertion seems generally true, but not now, not for us, and not for anyone who will become dependent on others, not for those who will surrender to undress, yield to a damp washcloth in someone else's tentative, searching hands. None of us can hide during my father's changes.

Each time I remove my father's pajamas, my own hands, gloved against bacteria and infection, link me with my paternal grandmother, who died when I was eleven. I've seen pictures of her as a young woman but could barely imagine her as my father's mother. To me she was the silver-haired woman who took out her false teeth at unexpected moments or gave us quarters for our piggy banks. Now here is her son spread out on a blue cotton sheet, the shades pulled at the hour for a new pair of pants. Here, too, is her grandson, gray at the temples, trying to focus on his mission. A man becomes connected to his grandmother through the changing of his father, and a father becomes child to his son. We are boys traveling together through ten minutes of infinity, and each of us becomes more bound to the other, differences purged like unwanted molecules. Montaigne seems to have forgotten about being an infant, or an elder without options. We may withdraw and hide during the long middle stretch, but at the beginning we are uncovered and unaware, and toward the end we are stripped of our modesties.

When my mother cleans him the first time, she announces, "I changed your father!"

She is triumphant. She is proud to have surmounted what seemed, only days earlier, unachievable. I cannot convince her to call the diapers pants because that is not her style; it's my choice, not hers. (*Your father's diapers*: words I never thought I'd hear.) Comparing online prices for bulk supplies, my mother assumes a dignity defined by cool practicality. My father is simply dirty or clean, ready for changing or good for another few hours. He smells clean or he doesn't. To get the job done, she

distances herself, for a time, from her role as spouse of more than fifty years. "I changed your father," she says, as if he was not also her husband. But soon, during the changes, they talk as husband and wife, planning the meals they want to eat or discussing the evening's TV schedule. She dresses him in a new shirt she has picked out, or wraps him in crisp sheets and spritzes him with his favorite cologne. She looks at him and declares, "You're so cute!" And that is how I imagine she thought of him when she was sixteen and he was twenty-five, my mother gazing at the butcher from the coffee aisle at the A&P. Cute, young, closely shaven, lean and sinewy from his work, healthy, clean.

Watching her take care of my father, I have never felt older. Not only older but on the brink of helplessness, of being unhelpful, even when I can assist with daily chores, the lifting, the feeding, and the changing. I am no longer the young man driven by exuberance and uncomplicated hope. I live in a grittiness of the present, with a perspective shaped by the minute that has just passed and the minute to follow.

You can never believe, or want to believe, that the time will come, this time when your father or mother will be swaddled, but when it does, all belief—moral and political and religious—seems to recede or evaporate altogether. What you are left with is a human who must presently be cleaned because he cannot clean himself. Changing my father provided moments of uncommon purity. We had never been so close, and despite physical decline and passing years, we had never been so ageless, child and parent merged, not separated, by transposed roles. As I pulled a new pair of pants up his legs, eternity belonged to us while duty and burden dissolved. And now that he is gone, the boxes of unused diapers given away, I dream of changing him one more time.

BRIAN TIERNEY

Summit

Dead eels sloshed about the fishermen's ankles in the surfs
of Lefkada,
where they kept on with their lives. Call them *ghosts*, & have a seat.
We've been discussing historicity, as one holds up
a hammer, imagining its force;
the way myth imagines god as a lyric non-modernist
with enviable clout. You see, there's a mountain there
many islands laid around
in theory, Strabo tells us, though Homer got it wrong
when he called it Ithaca & wrote it *farthest west*—
We can agree,
I guess, that's a different lesson. In the end, it was
the skill to kill that really saved
Odysseus
from the similar soldiers he glimpsed dragging the sand
with their half-smashed skulls among decapods
purpling & something
like brass; how small they must've sounded: as if violence itself
was the story's
little rumor, clinking in a glass
while the aft pulled away. Who's to say what Telemachus believed
to be approaching in the water
every dusk for twenty years; a shape he must've wished at,

like the contours left by a hollow
holster, swaying on a hip. You see, *once upon a time* means
already too late
for pacifist revisions. Fellow Citizens-in-Anachronisms,
can we consider them
more closely, the textual decisions? The fate of Agamemnon
in the memory of a knife? How even the ancient paters
were whores, or traitors, like Jefferson
& Burr, whose name means imperfections
a blacksmith pounds out
so a blade may enter smoothly. Note exhibit C:
even the dawn
rosy-fingered red in Fitz's version—as faint, aerated-red
as a stabber's right hand after the blood's dried
an hour. And here, too, we can agree: it was microbials
flowering like California
poppies in the gangrenous otter beached & finished off one summer
by river kids who lit its tire-
tough skin on fire, with napkins, & chanted
who's your daddy,
while it rolled itself out from a different sort of myth-
gone-wrong
under the elements we were all half-expecting to answer
with a fist,
I think. What did Athena know of poverty & need—
If we gain the steep, & look
beyond the story of the story, to the origin of privilege, we see
a mendicant
Odysseus, somewhere near the end, about to kill
some hundred men
in his beggar's outfit Homer would have it we take as cue

for cunning over power, but
even Pound knew better, friends; that power is power & cunning
    is not, & power means to lift & angle the pen
like a trowel, anyway you want—filled the way the earth is
                                filled with worms
& bricks, & pieces of weapons & rows of smallpox
    skulls we've seen
in textbook entries on Accokeek Creek & The Feast of the Dead,
which believe me looks beautiful
        the way a clear stone looks
beautiful on an aunt's neck like one drop of rain on a peach
    in a casket.

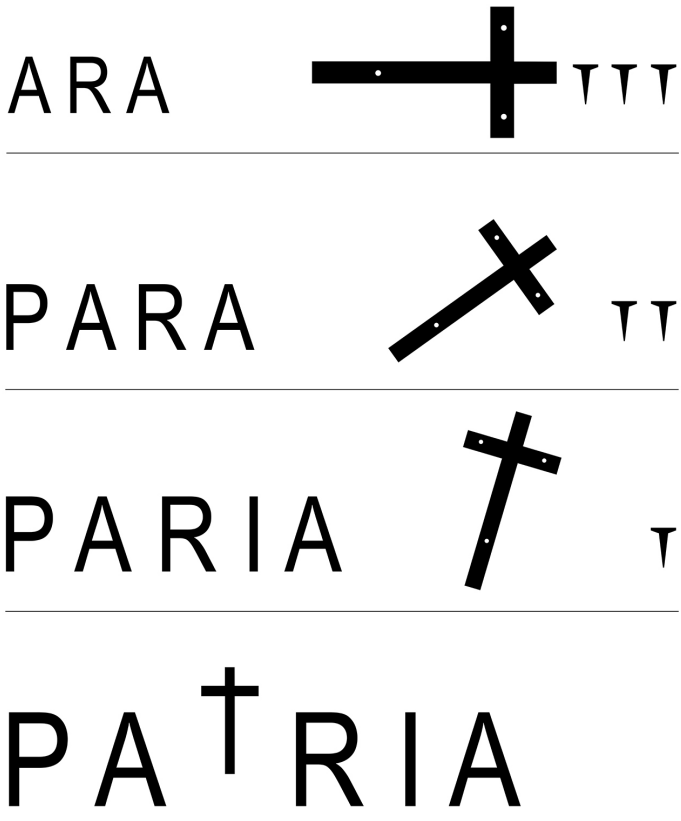
FRANCIS SÁNCHEZ

Words from the Artist

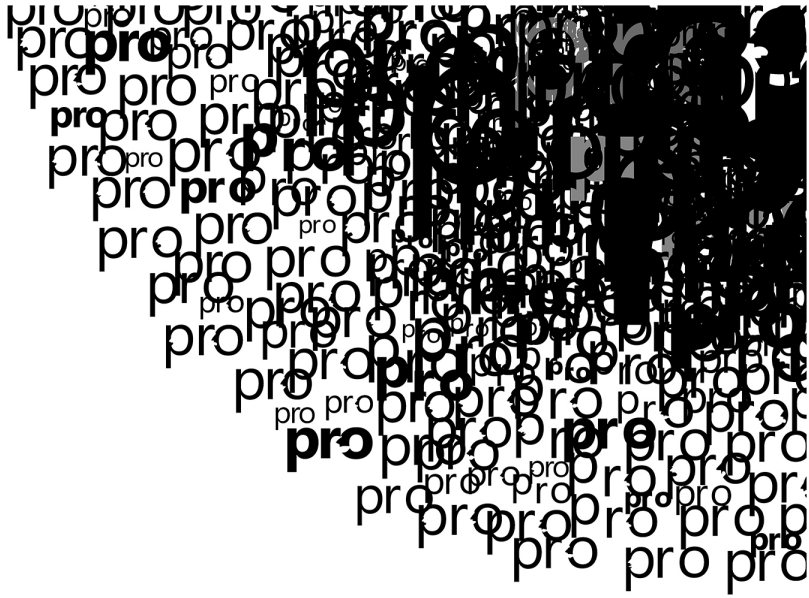
On the night I made my first visual poem, my son had just been admitted to the hospital suffering from an unknown illness. In addition to fearing for my son's health, I was also concerned about the consequences of having expressed my political opinions in defense of a jailed independent journalist; I could not sleep that night, I felt powerless in front of my computer. To write did not seem honest; I wanted to squeeze my life and get something as concentrated and real as possible—like a scream. This is how my first visual poem emerged: so that I could say I was afraid, and not only say it, but also make it felt and seen. An act of liberation, that is what visual poetry represents for me.

I come from a very rhetorical country. I grew up subjected to an ideological experiment full of noise and fury, between obligatory slogans like "Homeland or death," speeches and parades, where utopias rest on a play of words. In Cuba, politics contaminates everything, and iconography has always been the territory of propaganda and dogmatism. I stand up inside of each poem against this avalanche that seeks to override my individual viewpoint, my intimate voice. I wish to fill my life with vital signs, new words that are not invented by others. In Cuba, I have never been allowed to exhibit in institutions. I have only done so in private or alternative spaces. To express myself, to be seen or heard, even through small fissures, instills in me the hope to be able to exist by my own will.

Translated by Laura S. Kauer García



Francis Sánchez, *Repatriación*



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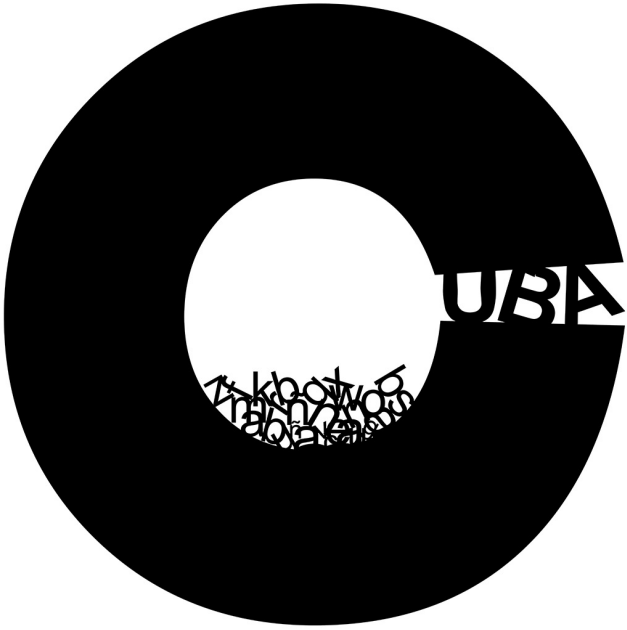
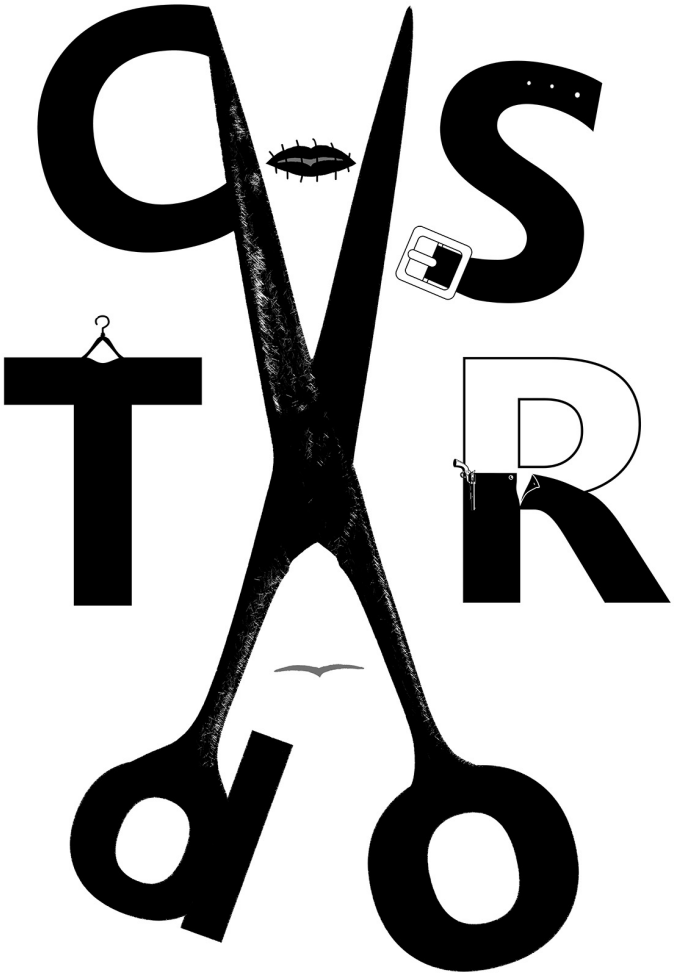
Francis Sánchez, *Acto de repudio*



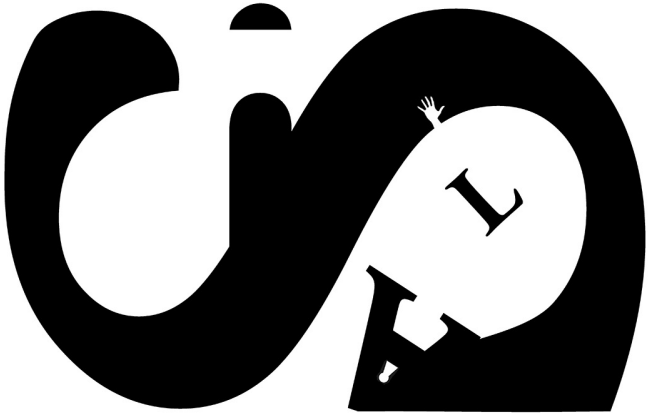
Francis Sánchez, *Mi país*

Francis Sánchez, *Grito-rito*

Francis Sánchez, *Deshechos humanos*



Francis Sánchez, *Castrado*



Francis Sánchez, *Isla náufraga*

SARAH SHEEHAN

Théa

She was the only one I noticed among the students in the library. Sugar maples were brushing against the windowpanes and beginning to redden; her hair was the same color. It was pulled tightly against her scalp, almost lacquered, and knotted at the nape of her neck. She wore a navy blue headband and her forehead was high and exposed. When her head turned, the sun caught her eye, and the iris was a startling red-brown. Instead of listening to the dean drone on about class times, I picked up a pencil and began to sketch her in the corner of my notebook. I looked up and down, up and down, until the upper left of my margin was filled with her features. Then she laughed when the professor said something, and I saw that her teeth were yellow.

After freshman orientation, I tucked my notebook under my arm, put my head down, and trudged across campus—ten acres of New Hampshire farmstead. I went to the girls' dormitory, which was nothing more than a gray painted house, and found my room and my assigned roommates. We had been given a suite on the first floor, and I stood reading the names on the door: Brigid Keating (me), Sasha Myers, Philomena Cullen, and Théa O'Connor.

"Théa," sniffed a senior, stopping by my door to look.

"I like it," I said.

"It's a little egotistical. Her real name is Samantha, but she told the dean she wanted to be called Théa." Somehow I knew this was the girl in the library.

The room looked like a prison cell, with a cement floor and cinderblock walls. There was a bed in each corner, and I chose one by the sunny window. My new roommates laughed at me for decorating my corner like a cottage with a spring-green quilt, apple cider candles, and dried lavender. Théa's corner was opposite the window, shadowy, with a ferocious icon on her dresser of the Black Madonna of Częstochowa. Sasha was florid and Jewish and strung up red Chinese lanterns around her bed. Philomena, the least expressive of us all, had a chaotic dresser and an ocean-plaid comforter.

In the first few weeks, I watched as alliances and antagonisms formed. Théa fawned on Philomena, weeping when she went to a bonfire without inviting her. Théa and Sasha locked horns, brawling over whose clothes were on whose side of the room. I sat on my bed and read poetry, watching as they pre-gamed parties, taking shots of whiskey, which looked golden and hot. "Brigid," they gasped, "Brigid, you know what we love about you? You don't judge us."

I was holding my book against my knees. I slid down a little and said in a small voice, "Why would I judge you?"

But I did. I judged everyone at that college. I couldn't help it; at eighteen years old, I was frightened and disoriented. Kolbe College had only a hundred students but it still boasted ninety-nine more than my high school. I had been home-schooled and had never tasted alcohol or watched a sex scene in a movie. I sewed extra buttons on my shirts to make the necklines higher and wore shapeless denim skirts. My clothing colors were juvenile: lemonade and rosebud pink. I didn't wear make-up because I didn't know how to put it on.

When my class went apple picking the first month, I added a straw hat to my ensemble. Théa and I were the last to climb onto the hay wagon, and we held our baskets and cast around for a seat on the hay bales.

Théa went directly to a boy. "Scoot," she commanded.

He looked up at her. "Scoot yourself."

"All right, then," she said, and parked herself on his lap.

I shifted my basket to my other hip. "And where should I…?"

"Here, Brigid," said another boy, getting up and giving me his seat.

I could see Théa watching me, her tongue running over her teeth. Then she circled both arms around her boy's neck. "Of course that's where Brigid should sit. No lap for her. She's Brigid Keating." She flashed a canine at me and I smiled politely back.

It happened that I saw Théa more out of our room than in it. She was highly social but not well-liked, especially by the girls. I figured this was because she walked so jauntily, rolled Smokin' Joe cigarettes, screamed when she laughed, and paired up with a new boy every week. I cuddled with my books, dreaming about the prince who would claim me in some immaterial future, and studied hard to make up for the fact that I hadn't learned anything in my teens. But I also had no idea how to bond with people, and it was simpler to keep my distance.

One night I was memorizing *amo, amas, amat*, when I decided to head down to the cafeteria. The caf was dimly lit, with a patterned sandstone floor, and smelled like hot dogs and bleach. I heard a shriek of laughter. In a corner I saw Théa surrounded by boys at a table arm wrestling.

"Chica," she hallooed, "Roomie!" and challenged me to a match. I went over warily and took her measure. I was scrawnier, though we were the same height.

"You're stronger than I am," I said, putting my Latin books down.

"Naw." Théa placed her elbow on the table. "We both grew up with lots of brothers. We're both country girls."

I fixed my elbow on the table and tentatively touched her palm. A dark-haired boy leaned down over us. "No covering your opponent's thumb knuckle, no touching any other body parts, keep one foot in contact with the floor at all times, and don't move your elbows. Ready?"

We closed hands.

"Go!"

I barely knew this girl, but the instant she pushed against me, I knew this wasn't a game. I could feel her desire to win, shooting up from her elbow, into her radial bone, through her fingers. The force of domination was nothing new to me, and I volleyed her current back to her, almost coming out of my seat, keeping one foot on the floor. She half-stood, too, and the boys began to howl. We gripped and pushed until our hands shook and we were suspended, neither one submitting. Finally a boy said, "Well, gosh, someone's got to give."

So I gave, and my hand hit the table hard. Théa laughed and snapped her wrist in the air. "Damn, you're strong."

"You won," I said, gathering my books up.

"No, that was a tie."

Not long after that, I was sitting on the back porch of the girls' dorm when Théa came out. It was early October and I had been reading Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* and watching the late sun trailing down the trunks of the pine trees, turning the bark orange.

"May I smoke?" she asked.

"Of course."

"You know where I just was?" she said, sitting on a step. And then, without waiting for an answer, "Down by the reservoir with Peter. You know who he is? The one becoming a priest. The short one."

With a nose like an elephant, I thought, *and a gray fishy face.*

"And you know what I think about him?"

"What?"

"That he's weak." She licked her cigarette paper along the edge.

I closed my book and turned toward her, picturing the two of them by the reservoir, lying in the dry grass. The prospect of a man and woman being that close together was foreign to me. I was taught to never lie next to a boy, to never let my knees touch his during a movie, to never let my breasts make contact with his chest during a hug. But I had watched Théa dancing in the darkness of the cafeteria, her hips gyrating against someone's groin, her slim arms above her head. I had heard her described as loose, even whorish. It was whispered that she was probably bisexual. There were rumors about her kissing a girl in high school, on a bus en route to a Confirmation retreat.

"We just kind of fooled around," Théa said, sealing the cigarette. "And then he grabbed my wrist and pulled my hand onto his crotch."

She lit her cigarette with a cupped hand, hiding the flame. I guessed she was telling me these things because she told everyone these things. She trotted out her stories like a gypsy selling wares, lining up each dark piece, theatrical, rehearsed. She unclicked her lighter. "Then he wouldn't let go of my hand when I tried to pull away."

Fucking gray fish, I thought. I curled my lip. "How disgusting. How dare he."

Théa looked at me surprised and let out a stream of smoke.

"Yeah," she said, looking away, "even I have more self-restraint than he does."

"No, it's wrong. I want to find him and tell him what I think about him." I stood up. "Imagine him taking your hand like that."

"Ah, sit down."

"But forcing that."

She studied me closely, and then she laughed. But some change had occurred in her toward me.

The next weekend I got ready with my roommates to hear a string quartet. Our suite was filled with teenage perfume and Philomena had let me borrow a dress. I looked like an Austrian shepherdess, I thought; it was a long-sleeve garment, itchy wool, the color of yew leaves.

Sasha, Philomena, and I dressed in the double bathroom, while Théa darted about as usual in the shadows of her corner. I stood in front of the bathroom mirror, pressing my fingers under my collarbone. One finger, two fingers, three. Finally, I said with anxiety, "Girls, I think my neckline is too low."

"I wouldn't give you a dress that was too low," Philomena said, pausing as she applied blush.

"No, no," I said. "It's just that I'm—bigger—on top, so the neckline drags down."

Sasha emerged from the toilet and overheard me. She came over and clamped her hand on my shoulder. "Honey," she laughed, with a shake. "Honey, honey, honey. You can't be serious." I attempted a shrug, but her fingers pinched. "You think this is low? Look at me." Her red dress was plunging, her breasts like two ostrich eggs, shining and white. "Philomena, you don't think this is too low, do you?"

Philomena glowered at me. "No."

"Théa, do you think this is too low? Théa—where are you?" Sasha dragged me out of the bathroom into the center of the room. "Théa, do you think this is low?"

Théa came out of the shadows. She was half-dressed, in a black bra. She looked at Sasha coldly. "Leave Brigid alone."

My captor started.

"I'm serious," she said. "Let go of her and leave her the fuck alone."

Sasha yanked her hand off my shoulder. Théa grabbed something and walked over to me. "Try this," she said. It was a scarf, cotton and bronze, and she wound the softness around my neck.

I suppose something changed in me that night, too; I turned toward Théa more and more. I let her in, but mainly in the sense that I let her talk. She started bypassing bonfires and boys and settled in at the end of my bed. She talked about growing up in the South among flowering orange trees, about being shunted between foster homes. She told me how her mother was beautiful, with eyes like a doe, and about how she would wake her up in the middle of the night and force her to eat peaches with rotting spots.

The other students said Théa was a liar, that she exaggerated for attention. She certainly talked with relish about her suicide attempt with a pistol, or about enjoying the sting as she swabbed her self-inflicted cuts. The only tale I ever doubted was her account of starvation—until I saw her First Communion photo. Her seven-year-old knees were knobby under the frills of the skirt. Her folded hands were bony, her eyes too large in her head. She had a wealthy family on her father's side, and during a brief stint with her grandparents she had eaten well. But her grandfather would make her retrieve a belt or wooden spoon, to "fetch her own instrument of torture." She said this with a laugh.

One night she woke up screaming. Philomena and Sasha took a while to climb out of their beds, but I don't even remember the time between waking up and being by her bedside. I was just suddenly next to her, taking her by the shoulders. She was thrashing, saying something about our room being flooded, and we had to get out, get to safety. I told her there were no boats, no cold water. It was just me, it was me, and she was fine, and then she woke completely and I gave her crackers and she slept.

She never showed this other side to the world. Surrounded by a pack of males, she was always tough, invulnerable. Rolling cigarettes, parsing Richard Wilbur's poetry, her chin would lift, her shoulders square, her energy turn firecracker-ish. I was always very aware of Théa's physical presence. She had a narrow torso, and her legs were as muscled as a marsupial. Her jeans hugged her hips and she wore tight shirts in olive, navy, and browns. She wrapped herself in an army coat and her teeth were discolored from nicotine. She rarely washed her hair, did not wear deodorant or make-up, but I liked her raw. I liked her large eyelids, so smooth and round like woodcock eggs. I liked the way she reveled in her own looks, the way she bragged that running eight miles to church every day had made her stomach flat.

One day she was lying on a ratty couch in the student lounge and her shirt was up around her middle. She had a black Sharpie poised above her navel, and then she saw me. "Brigid, you're an artist. Draw on me."

I balked.

"No, I want to be decorated. Do," she said. I took the Sharpie and drew spirals coming out from her navel, paisleys and florets and fleur-de-lis on her pale skin.

Then she asked me to design a tattoo for her. Two of them: one for each thigh. She already had one on her neck: a cross, and in Latin, *Love Is Stronger Than Chains*. So I designed two ovals according to her directions: the left tattoo was fierce, made of a circling dragon, with a galloping horse in the center. The right was an oval of two Japanese koi and a pelican in the middle to symbolize Jesus' sacrificial love.

I was working on the sketch one night, sitting up in bed, when Théa banged into the room. She slung her bag across the floor and fished a flask from underneath her bed. It was Friday night.

"Want some?" she asked.

I lifted a mug wryly. "Tea."

Théa laughed. She jumped up and sat cross-legged on my bed, her knee brushing mine. With each pull on the flask, her spirits expanded. She leaned in. "What do you feel deep-down, Brigid—really? You're effervescent. Do you feel bubbly down to your core?"

"Sometimes." I shaded another dragon scale. "I don't know. Usually I feel blank." Even though college had felt like a respite from my discordant family, I noticed that I was returning to campus more and more numb after each visit home. "You?"

She brought her flask to her lips. "Spastic, I guess. Manic." She wiped her mouth. "Up and down and out of control."

"At least you feel things," I shrugged.

"At least you don't." Then she laughed, and looked around at the empty beds. "Brigid, I just love our room." We had a bracing dynamic, she argued, with our leftist Jew and nice Philomena. Then there was us: Jezebel and St. Agnes.

I dropped my pencil and protested that I was no St. Agnes. Upheld as the paragon of chastity for Catholic girls, St. Agnes was martyred at thirteen because she refused to marry a Roman noble, having consecrated her virginity to God. She was so slender the iron cuffs fell off her wrists, and the executioners whipped her naked through the streets. She was beheaded, and is always depicted holding a lamb and a palm frond.

Théa wasn't looking at me. She touched a spray of lavender tacked upside-down on my wall. She ran her hand down the flowers, and I noticed a ring on her middle finger, a pewter snake coiling up to her second knuckle. "I first had oral sex when I was twelve," she said.

I confessed that I had only learned the phrase a couple years earlier, when I heard it on the news. I hurried to add that I had lost my virginity at twelve, too, though—to a horse. I was riding Ladybug and found a stain of red after a posting trot.

"Ah," said Théa, bolting her whiskey. "It's good to be St. Agnes. Because then you're not carrying a ton of shit, scared that a car crash will send you to the second ring of hell."

I told her that I *was* scared of that, though. I was always scared of that.

"You are?" Then the question I dreaded, "For what?"

I paused and thought. *Blood, give her blood.* I had studied the other students, trying to understand how human beings bonded, and the operation seemed a kind of transfusion: one person gave the other secret information from inside themselves, usually extracted with some pain, and then the other did the same, until a blood sisterhood was formed. But then the maelstrom entered my brain, whiting out my thoughts. "Stuff," I said.

Théa patted my knee. "This is just your humility. You're like this" — she raised her pinky finger and adopted a mincing voice, "I'm Brigid Keating, and I'm so imperfect, because four years ago my arm brushed against a man's at the grocery store, and I felt a spark in my elbow." She then proceeded to assure me I was every Catholic boy's dream. I had a snow-white soul. I would bake apple pies while my husband was out chopping wood, and I would serve the pies to our twelve children with whipped cream.

So then I tried. I tried hard to share something about myself. I told her, no, I burned pies. I told her I had primary amenorrhea and was unable to have children. I explained to her that boys idealized but did not desire me. Maybe I even felt trapped, I admitted, by the wholesome persona I projected. But none of this satisfied her. She was distracted and started looking out the window, at the students gathering in the darkness for a bonfire.

I watched her as she pocketed her flask. A medical diagnosis and some existential angst had felt like the best I could offer. Théa said goodbye and climbed out, giving a shriek that drew everyone's eyes to her. The bitter November wind blew onto my bed as I watched her strut out, linger on the dirt road, light a cigarette in her cupped hand, jump on a boy's back, waving the cherry in the air.

As winter pulled around, I switched to wearing suede skirts and woolen jackets. I noticed no one else wore turtlenecks and plaid jumpers, so I left those in my dresser. I still kept my hair parted in the center, braided down to my waist. I prayed a rosary and talked with Jesus every evening in the chapel. The chapel was unheated, with a low roof and a confessional built into what had once been a horse stall. It was chilly and smelled like frankincense and pine. I sat in the first pew, in front of the sanctuary candle, which flanked a box of balsam wood, housing the body of Christ. Sometimes I simply sat, and let him look at me, while my own eyes roved around the chapel. Next to the altar, there was a stand of polished brass with a horizontal Advent wreath on top: a ring of fresh evergreen set with four tapers. The altar cloth was purple, and the altar itself was made of golden oak. The front was carved with sheaves of wheat, clusters of grapes, and a pelican standing with its neck looped down to its breast, its beak between its feathers, piercing its own skin.

One snowy evening, I walked in and found Théa crying in the front pew. I genuflected clumsily and sat down next to her. I asked her what was wrong, rubbing my thumb up and down her back. She pressed her elbows into her knees and picked apart the spine of a hymnal, pouring out her darkest thoughts. I begged her to be gentle with herself, to accept God's radical, total love. Then I tried to make her laugh with my Sacrament of Reconciliation stories. This was easy because the tales involved complete self-degradation.

Soon she was choking with laughter. "You know what word I could never say in confession?"

"What?"

"Masturbation."

Someone squeaked open the doors and slammed them again. A drift of snow blew down the aisle. Théa pursed her lips. "I just couldn't say it."

I laughed. "I've been confessing that for years."

I even had the article number in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* memorized: 2352. "Masturbation is an intrinsically and gravely disordered action." I told Théa about my first time confessing this mortal sin. I was fifteen years old, pacing in the bathroom of a church basement, intermittently using the toilet because I was sick, then gripping the sink, staring at the mauve plastic flowers on the countertop. I finally worked up enough courage, walked into the confessional, pressed my lips against the screen in the dark, and, my heart pulsing, said this word to an old man. I joked about how many times I had repeated the humiliation, slipping it in really fast, thinking the priest wouldn't notice: "And for eating two bags of potato chips and for picking my neighbor's lily without asking and for masturbating twice and for coveting my brother's A on his test."

She asked me if I knew what else was hard for her to say in confession. "Incest."

Instead of laughing I stood up. The sanctuary candle swam in my view, the flame wriggling in the air. I told her that no, incest was not something to confess, it was something to go to the police about. It was a crime committed against her. I was standing all the way out in the aisle and Théa was watching me closely. Then she explained that she had been twelve and the perpetrator, her cousin, was only fourteen.

"No, I don't care how old he was. You were just a kid."

She smiled serenely. "I participated willingly."

I pressed my hands into the pew and insisted that a victim is often unaware of the dynamics of coercion. But she only laughed about how her cousin was now in the seminary and wasn't it ironic that her earliest sexual knowledge had come from a future priest. I didn't know why her voice sounded so chipper, and I finally slumped back into the pew. Théa surveyed me with satisfaction and I knew that without meaning to I had given her blood.

Over Christmas break, our roommate Sasha transferred to a more liberal college, and Philomena got engaged. In January, our freshman class went to Rome for a semester. We lived in a hotel run by nuns on the Gianicolo Hill. We ate every night at a restaurant strung with lights called Le Fate's. One night Théa decided she would get me drunk. She ordered white wine and invited me to drink one glass, then two. The glass was sweating, the restaurant was warm, the wine cold. She poured me a third glass.

"Just lean into it," she said.

"I'm afraid if I lean too far I'll fall over."

"You'll hold up," she assured me. "Let it take you." Théa was wearing a canvas jacket with an orange scarf around her neck. Her red hair was combed straight over her shoulders.

"I never let anyone take me," I said. "Why is the table sliding?"

"Just rock with it, like you're in a cradle."

I squeezed the table edge. "I don't fall asleep on planes. I can't pee when people are near. I never cry. And I can't get drunk."

"You're drunk now," she assured me. "And do you know what people do when they're drunk? They tell each other things."

"Now I can't catch my fork!" I pawed at the tablecloth. "It's running away from me."

"Really black things. It's a way to rip the gauze off and show the scabs."

"But you haven't drunk enough yourself," I said suspiciously. "You'll take advantage."

"No. See this?" Théa downed a glass of wine, then another. "Now! Which of us will rip first?"

I burped and covered my mouth delicately with two fingers. "I have nothing to tell."

"Everyone does. Just one thing."

"I can't think."

She leaned close and a tendril of her hair touched my cheek. "One little thing."

"But I don't know what you want to hear." I leaned away.

"All right." Théa adjusted herself in her seat. "Over Christmas break I went through my grandfather's desk and found arrest warrants on the charge of child molestation."

I stared. "Maybe it was just an allegation."

"No, I know him. So, now. Your turn."

"My father is an alcoholic."

"And?" pressed Théa.

"And?" I stiffened. "And everything that comes with that. What more do you want?" I put down my empty glass, my head was strangely clear.

"I knew it. From the first time I met you, I knew you carried unsayable things inside."

"Everyone does," I said dismissively, but I twitched. "Is the game over now? What a ghastly game."

"It's a beautiful game," she countered. "Tell me you don't feel lighter."

I paused. "Yes, I feel lighter. And like I've broken family loyalty."

"I won't tell anyone. That's also part of the game, Brigid—you don't tell anyone after."

In Rome that spring, I started wearing pants and dabbing eye shadow in the corner of my eyelids. Théa got her nose pierced, and lured me into getting my ears pierced. I tried a cigarette and threw up. I bought a sweater with a low scooped neckline that Théa said looked good on me. One night I slept with some friends in a playground on the Tiber River. The water was churning, milky, and we covered ourselves with newspapers to stay warm. I climbed a hill to a monastery alone, stopping under a mimosa tree to look out over a valley of olive groves. And after viewing the statues in the Galleria Borghese, a classmate asked me to paint her nude, and I did—her breasts like melons, her fingertips pressing into her chin. I painted Italian mothers nursing, nuns gardening. Finally, I decided to paint Théa.

I used a photograph I had of her, sitting on the windowsill in the New Hampshire campus library. I painted her reclining on the ledge of a castle window, her head covered with a bright blue headscarf, just a few wisps of hair showing. I spent hours on her face, carving out a tender temple, laying a violet smudge under her eye. I dressed her in a peasant's blouse, white with green tints, like iceberg lettuce. She had a perfect collarbone, and wore a tangerine sash. Then I lost interest below her waist, and gave her a long skirt of navy silk, haphazard with golden lilies. Théa's hands were folded in her lap; her smile curved just a little. An impudent smirk, someone said, smug. Knowing, I thought.

I propped the painting on my bed and looked at it. Then I took it back and added a hoop of embroidery at the girl's feet. It was resting against the hem of her skirt, with the needle stuck into the canvas. I took out my tiniest brush and, on the needlepoint's surface, painted a galloping horse and a pelican.

When Théa saw the finished painting, she told me we looked alike. "Our faces are round. We're both redheads."

I told her I wasn't.

"No, you're strawberry-blond," she insisted. "I'm caramel. It's funny," she added. "To see yourself like this."

"Through someone else's eyes?"

"No. I mean I just see you in it," she said. "I see you mainly in it."

I studied my portrait again: the girl was gazing at a coastline. In the setting sun, her face and neck were luminous.

"You know what I like about you, Brigid?" she said. "You fight for your happiness."

At the end of the semester, Théa and I were walking down the Via Pasquale Revoltella. It was a clear May day, the sky a pure blue. Laundry was hanging from balconies, and the stucco houses were

painted orange. Théa smelled of unwashed hair and was wearing a knee-length coat, cinched in the middle. She was eating a pale green gelato. She licked the side of the cone and asked if she could tell me something.

"Yes," I said, shrugging my backpack higher up my shoulder.

"I think we're cut from the same cloth."

"Of course we are." I smiled easily at her. "We're equals." I glanced away at the peddlers setting themselves up on the sidewalk. A magpie sat on the edge of a gypsy's cart, pecking at a silver scarf. A man laid out a dingy sheet on the cobblestones, selling purses and shoes.

Théa licked her thumb and clarified: "Don't be angry, but I think we come from the same backgrounds and just grew up having opposite reactions to it."

I was silent. I watched the gelato run down between her thumb and finger. She was right, but I didn't know how to tell her. I never knew how to put those kinds of things into words: the purple bruises on my mother, my father's drunken caresses while I was a girl. But for once Théa did not dig for information. She just threw away her cone and slung her skinny arm around me. "Never mind," she said. "I love you, Brigid."

"You, too," I replied. I watched a paper bag from a bakery scud across a gutter.

"I never tell anyone I love them. Did you know that?"

I looked at her. Through her hand on my hip, I could feel her gait. On impulse, I circled my arm around her waist. "I really love you, too."

"We understand each other." Théa dipped her head back and smiled up at the sun. Her hair was pulled back, and the shape of her ear was large, compared to the rest of her features. I suddenly thought it made her look dear and unprotected.

"Yes," I said, "we do."

"I don't think I have ever loved anyone so much—or felt so loved by anyone—as I do in this very moment."

The gypsy woman slapped the magpie off her cart and, with heavy flapping, it flew up and settled above our heads on an iron balustrade on the second floor. There were pots of lemon trees on the balcony, and as we walked beneath them, their white blossoms smelled both bitter and sweet.

ARTHUR SZE

Morning Islands

Squinting across the water at another island
formed by volcanoes above the ocean,

I hike into and across a crater, stop
at silverswords—palm leaves rustle

in the breeze, and what prognostication
is that for today? In moonlight,

a mongoose darts across our headlights:
we drive along another island's

coast to a ranch at a lava road's end;
wandering among boulders and streams,

I slip on a rock, mid-stream; sipping
kava from wooden bowls, we gaze

at surf below the cliff—I dive
without diving, standing in a *Wu Chi*

stance, inhaling as my hands rise
above my head, exhaling as they move down.

JOHN KINSELLA

Splendid!

Every *back again* is an invigorating disturbance
in the matrix of place I cart around with me like faith.

Mostly family, mostly birdsong, mostly the imprint of roos
across the block, mostly the continuation of trees through days.

And at night, the nighthawks and owls and the mice
across the ceiling, in wall cavities. But also the violations

of life I dread and tremble over — the gunshots, the housecats
being let loose to keep the old colonizations going by proxy,

enslaved to replica settler lifestyles. The southern cross
flying over tanned white bodies, the brutalities of "race."

It's not true the lattice can't be unpicked without
wrecking it all—in fact, it needs to be unpicked.

We are in the public domain, if secluded in our ways.
And the traumas of detail aren't ever offset, and the arrival

of a female splendid fairy wren, blue tail feathers vertical
to slant world against the bare dry, so drought-beholden,

is exuberance against the parsimony of hope. Not by appointment,
the splendid fairy wren is in the company of thornbills

and red-capped robins, a mistletoe bird and brown
honeyeaters, and there's something going down

that's as complex as desire and refusal,
as dire as such conditions of "hope," but also

the splendor of being here at all resonates
with the new story we're hearing—for here, *for here*.

ROBERT ANTHONY SIEGEL

Memory Loop

At the age of six, I struck a deal with the school bus driver: on the afternoon trip home, he would let me off at the stop where the mean kids got on. I wanted to avoid them, but that was only part of it; I wanted to be outside, in the world. I wanted to walk home.

I can't imagine why he agreed. Maybe it was one less stop to make toward the end of his run, or maybe he really believed that I could navigate the city on my own and saw no reason to cage me up in the dark and rattling bus. At the very least, he must have assumed that I knew where I was going.

I stepped off and walked to the corner. It had never occurred to me that not knowing where I lived might be a problem. My building had a green awning and a brass door and a red carpet leading to the elevator. The windows in our living room were covered by heavy green drapes that for some reason I associated with my mother. I would wrap myself up in them, or slip past them and stand in the narrow space between the fabric and the window, looking down at the cars and the pedestrians and feeling the intense mystery of her love for me.

This is a way of saying that I could feel my home's presence among the thousands of other buildings that made up the city, could feel a

path leading there as if through my own body. The light changed and I began to walk.

Everything around me was in motion, too. People sped in all directions, plunging in and out of stores, leaping into phone booths, yelling into the black phone receivers with great passion. I couldn't believe that all of this happened, invisible, while I was in school. That the world went on when I wasn't there to see it.

That's when I recognized the blue sign above Klein's department store, where my mother had bought me a suit in the husky department, a tan three-piece number with a vest and bellbottom pants. That suit was so elegant—I knew I was going right, that I would find my way home. I knew it, too, when I passed the Chock-Full o' Nuts, which had chromium stools lined up at the counter like giant silver mushrooms.

I passed Union Square and headed up Park Avenue, where the buildings were tall and the sidewalks always in shadow. I felt the temperature drop. I felt a lateness that had something to do with yearning. So much time had passed since the bus, since my parents in the morning. I stopped at an office building that had a small glass display case by the entrance containing maybe a dozen books with covers so ugly they were strangely beautiful. It had never occurred to me that books were made somewhere, but now I had stumbled on such a place, and it felt momentous. I read the titles out loud, under my breath, as if they were the directions I'd been waiting for. Then I pressed my hand against the building's dark granite façade and felt the cold stored up there and knew I had to hurry.

Three years later, when I was nine, my parents decided to buy an apartment in a building a short walk away. The movers were coming to get the furniture and the boxes while I was at school; after school, I would walk to the new apartment instead of the old one; my parents would be there, waiting for me.

All that day, I kept putting that thought in my head and then instantly forgetting it. I had spent my entire life in the old apartment,

and couldn't quite imagine us existing completely independent of its surroundings. My mother was, to me, the woman on the couch by the heavy green drapes; my father was the man standing in the entrance to the little kitchen, taking up the whole doorway. Those spaces gave them their shapes, their lights and shadows, mixed with the touch of their hands and the sound of their laughter to make them into the people I knew as my parents.

Walking home, I kept reminding myself that I was going to the new apartment, not the old, but the idea kept falling out of my head. There were all the familiar sights to make me forget: 14th street lined with bargain clothing stores, the racks spilling out the door and onto the sidewalk; Union Square, full of light; the shadows of Park Avenue South. I became completely absorbed in the flow of the city around me, propelled onward by the hidden current, and when I turned the last corner and came to my block what I saw in front of me was not the new building but the old, its green awning with white letters, its little flower beds with tiny white flowers. I felt pleasure and relief, all the feelings of home, and yet I knew that I'd made a mistake: this wasn't my home anymore.

It was then that I realized I had no idea how to get to the new apartment. I couldn't quite visualize the route, and I didn't know the address or the phone number or even what street it was on. It hadn't occurred to me to learn those things.

I felt a surge of panic, but at the same time a wave of exhaustion so intense my eyes began closing. My love for my parents appeared as something infinitely sad and beautiful, a form of nostalgia. What I pictured were the granite ledges, the iron grates, and empty dark basement entrances of the cityscape, all the lonely, useless places: those were me without them.

Not knowing what else to do, I opened the door to the lobby and walked to the elevator, keeping my head down so I wouldn't be spotted.

Up until that morning, the doormen had seemed like friendly extensions of the building itself, but now I was a trespasser, slipping like a ghost into the elevator, pressing the button marked 12, the number that to my mind had always stood for us.

When the elevator opened, everything in the hallway was exactly the same as it had always been: the same speckled wallpaper, the same little wooden table. I walked across the carpet, pressed my hands to our door, and felt my parents' presence vibrating on the other side. When I knocked, my mother would open up and I would be home: that was a wish so beautiful it was going to turn out true. All I had to do was make a fist and rap on the door with my knuckles, and my alternate, imaginary world would become real and let me in.

Instead, I turned around and took the elevator downstairs, stepped out into the street again, and began walking. The journey was haphazard, a question of feel. It took me past the drugstore on Third Avenue, which marked the outer perimeter of where I was used to going by myself, then a block more, past the delicatessen with red salamis hanging in the window and the florist with its humid green interior, and so on to a big brown building, a sort of terraced ziggurat, which I recognized with relief. I had no key, didn't know the apartment number, but when I entered the lobby, my father was standing there with some boxes, looking at me without surprise, as if he'd always expected me to show up.

Forty years later, my parents were still living there, in that building. My father was dying of Alzheimer's, and I stopped by one afternoon to take him outside for some sunshine. He had been a trial lawyer, the old-fashioned kind that quoted Shakespeare to his juries, but language was leaving him behind now, like a fading memory. He'd forgotten how to read, and simple speech was difficult, so we just sat on a bench in silence. In front of us was an esplanade of cracked cement, at the center of which stood a set of kiddie sprinklers that no longer worked.

"When I was a kid," he said, finally, "the sky was blue and I would run. I would run very fast."

I looked up. The sky was indeed very blue, luminous, endless. "I wish we could run away together," I told him, thinking about his illness, the way it had walled us in on all four sides.

"Yes," he said, nodding. "We would run home."

VICKY GRUT

On the Way to the Church

They had driven down from London late the night before. Even before they set out they were exhausted. All the way through the business of leaving their house—locking windows, switching off lights, carrying the bags and the howling baby out to the car—they had argued, bitterly, furiously, until they lost all notion of what it was they wanted from one another and only a sense of miserable, injured, short-changed grievance remained. Most of the five-hour drive passed in silence.

The weather seemed to pick up their mood and magnify it. Rain battered the windscreen. Gusts of wind shook the car. Sarah was afraid they would overturn and be thrown into the whirling, sticky blackness. The usual signs flashed by: Hungerford, Maidenhead, Bristol, Cardiff. Hard to believe such places still existed when they were in the middle of such darkness. For long stretches there were no lights along the motorway and then it felt as if the road itself had been abolished. They could have been driving under the sea or stalled, just a set of headlights drilling into oblivion. And through it all the poor baby slept in his cot on the backseat, unaware that his world was coming undone.

People found it bizarre that they should become parents now, after fifteen years of marriage. Why wait so long? they'd say, or, Whatever for? "It was an accident," she'd say. "We thought we couldn't." Most people laughed at that but some looked disappointed, as if they wished she'd invented a prettier story. Still, it was the truth.

Now and then the car wavered in its lane. Sarah felt John's strength falter and she understood the effort it took to keep the three of them on this road. She wondered, not for the first time, whether this was the cost of her choice to go ahead with the pregnancy. She was 43 and he 50—far too old to be having babies.

By the time they reached his mother's place it was one in the morning and the town was shuttered up for sleep, with only a few late-night stragglers stumbling home. Ann was at the door as soon as she heard their car, greedy arms outstretched.

Sarah and John put on a show of being on speaking terms, but Ann wasn't interested in them. "Give him to me," she crooned. "The babe, the babe. Let me hold him. Come to me, my precious."

The next day was freezing but bright, rinsed clean by the storm. To Sarah's relief, her mother-in-law set out early with one of the neighbors to be sure of getting good seats in church. Sarah and John got ready in silence. When it was time to leave the house John went ahead without a backward glance. Sarah followed with the pram. There was no traffic so they walked in the middle of the road. Fifteen years. His face was so familiar to her that she could hardly even see him, and yet lately he'd become a stranger.

She had given up her job in order to spend the first year with the child, but at times like this she felt she'd made a terrible mistake. She had made herself dependent just when John became undependable. There were moments of great joy, but she was always responding, always governed by the machine-gun tattoo of the child's needs or John's

moods, supplying whatever seemed to be required. Now. Now. Now. Some days she felt that "accident" was the most accurate description of what had happened to them and that everything she'd ever known and valued had been consumed in the wreckage.

A pigeon flapped by overhead and the baby gave a wordless exclamation of pleasure. That was new. She smiled down at him, admiring the curve of his head, the kiss-curl on his brow, those fat, perfect little hands fiddling with the tassels of his blanket. She leaned in to straighten the neck of his christening gown. He caught a hank of her hair and tugged it like a bell-pull. She laughed. The feeling of dread inside her lifted a little. It was 9:15 a.m. They had fifteen minutes before the start of the service.

She walked on.

Each street was much like the next, rows of two-up, two-down houses, mostly pebble-dashed and double-glazed. Outside Mitzi's Hair Salon, John had paused, waiting for her to catch up, though still with his back turned. He was talking to an elderly man with a terrier. Sarah slowed her pace, hoping that the man would be gone before she got there. She wasn't in the mood for small talk.

Now John turned around, beaming, as if no cross word had ever passed between them. "Sarah, come and say hullo. This is Rhydian. Rhydian, this is my wife. And this—" John looked down at the pram with a faintly surprised expression—"this is my son."

They all stood and gazed at the child. How could such a gleaming creature have sprung from two such worn and bitter bodies?

"I've known Rhydian all my life," John was saying. "I remember during the miners' strike, we'd be out in front of Woolworths collecting for them. Isn't that right, Rhydian?"

"Aye." The old man nodded.

"That's, what, twenty years ago, now?"

"Thirty, more like," said Rhydian, wheezing. "You were still a bit wet behind the ears back then."

John shook his head. "Terrible. All those pits closed in the end, just like we said."

"Aye," said Rhydian. "And Woolworths."

The baby had begun to fuss and wriggle under his blankets.

"We need to get a move on, John," Sarah whispered. To Rhydian she explained that Ann was keeping seats for them in the church. She nodded at the child. "He's being christened today."

"Mustn't keep you, then," said Rhydian, patting John on one shoulder. "Give my best to your mother."

They walked on. Soon the high street was in view. Groups of mostly elderly people in their best clothes were making their way up the hill toward the church. But John was looking in the opposite direction, down a side road.

"When I was ten I fell off my bike over there," he said. "Skinned my leg all the way from the ankle to the knee. And when I was older, sixteen or seventeen, I remember I persuaded this boy to let me try his motorbike along here. But he didn't tell me how to stop. I had to crash into a wall." The meeting with Rhydian seemed to have tipped him back into the past. "When I went up to the grammar school, I used to travel with a boy who lived on the left, there, Gareth Mason."

Sarah chewed her thumbnail. Somehow she had to get him to hurry up without triggering a row. Ann would be counting the seconds by now, eyes fixed on the door at the back of the church.

"Gareth Mason, eh?" She forced a smile.

"Yes, he lived along there at number twelve. He was abroad for years, working for one of the big oil companies, but he's been ill. My mother was telling me he's moved back home to recuperate."

Sarah kept the smile going though on the inside she was raging: that she should be forced to behave like an air hostess with her own husband, and worst of all, that John seemed to prefer this fake, grinning persona to her real self.

"Tell you what," he was saying, "I'm just going to knock the door and see if Gareth's in. Just a quick hullo. We've got plenty of time." He took the pram away from her and set off down the side street. Sarah hurried after him. What will we do after today, she wondered? The road keeps running into sand.

A gaunt-looking man answered the door. There was laughter and back-slapping, then to Sarah's dismay the two of them began to pull the pram into the house. Had John lost his mind? The service was about to begin. They had seven minutes to get to the church.

"A baby, eh?" said Gareth Mason, looking everywhere but at the child. He showed them into a warm, cluttered sitting room where a game of football played silently on TV. "I'll make some tea." He left the room.

"We don't have time for this!" Sarah hissed. She yanked the pram handles in her temper so that the baby gave a soft cry of protest.

John didn't seem to hear. He was kneeling on the floor, looking through Gareth Mason's vinyl collection, murmuring with pleasure at various albums he recognized.

Gareth came back and leaned in the doorway while he waited for the kettle to boil. "They were up in the loft for years," he said, nodding at the stack of albums. "Mam never throws anything out."

John pulled out a David Bowie album. "Unbelievable, isn't it, to think he's gone?"

"Shocking," said Gareth.

"He always looked so alive. So indestructible. Though mind you, he had a heart attack in the noughties, didn't he? He nearly died onstage." John began to read through the song titles under his breath. "Changes. That's him in a nutshell, isn't it? He reinvented himself so many times. So many lives he lived."

Gareth opened his mouth to say something, but the kettle whistled in the kitchen. He went out.

Sarah was lurching between panic and a white-hot fury. She began to turn the pram around towards the hall. "John, your mother is sitting there in front of the whole congregation waiting for us. We have to go right NOW or we'll miss the start and she will never, ever forgive us."

John had pulled another record from its sleeve and was running one finger lightly around the outer rim.

"Did you hear me, John?"

"Let's not rush," he murmured. "It's just a normal church service to begin with. The christening bit isn't till the very end." And then, almost inaudibly, "There's something I need to tell you."

"Oh." She let her hands slip away from the pram. "Right now?"

"There's never a good time, is there?"

A chill spread through her. I knew it, I knew it, I knew it. He's leaving. He's met someone who isn't constantly covered in baby sick, someone who finishes their sentences, who isn't always too tired for sex. She took a few faltering steps into the center of the room, then retreated to the sofa so that when it came—the end of the road—she wouldn't have too far to fall.

"Go on."

In the kitchen they could hear the ring of a spoon on china. Something metallic fell with a crash.

John put the record away. "So," he said. He scrubbed his mouth with the back of one hand. "You remember I had that hospital appointment last year about the deafness in my right ear? Remember? And I never heard back from them so I assumed…"

This was not what she'd been expecting. Not at all.

John was still speaking. He was using words like: "scan" and "tumor." Sarah wanted to respond but all she could manage was strangled noise at the back of her throat.

"…they put the result in the wrong pile, apparently, or they misfiled it, or lost it. Something. They should have called me in sooner," he

said. "But anyway, they're on the case now. And it's not too late. It's a slow-growing one, apparently. So they're going to open up just here." He indicated a place behind his ear. "And whip it out."

Sarah sank backwards into the sofa. Motes of dust tumbled in the stream of winter sunlight from the window behind her. She felt she might never get up again.

John came and sat beside her. "You mustn't worry, Sarah." He took her hand. "The surgeon does these operations all the time. I Googled him. He's world class." He laughed. "Funny, isn't it? All that time when you were pregnant, I was growing a tumor. Like a competition."

She turned to him in a daze. How long is it, she wondered, since I've heard him laugh?

Gareth Mason came in clutching three mugs in his trembling, skeletal hands. "I put milk in all of them," he said. "I wasn't sure."

"Good man." John's face was open and relaxed. You could see what he must have been like, Sarah thought, when he and Gareth Mason were friends.

Gareth gave Sarah her tea, then went over to the stack of records and fished out a cinnamon-colored album. "Remember this one, John? 1977, *Low*. Let me play you my favorite track." He bent down and fiddled with the stereo.

"It'll be all right, Sarah," John whispered. "I promise." And then, "Sorry about the things I said last night. I didn't really mean any of it."

"I love this one," said Gareth, dropping the needle onto the disc.

There was a brief crackle like bacon in a pan, then David Bowie began to sing "Always Crashing in the Same Car." Gareth Mason hummed along. John drank his tea. The baby rubbed his ear and grew sweaty and fell asleep. And Sarah closed her eyes and went hurtling into the welter of possibilities ahead, hoping that John would be right, that they would be lucky—luckier than the miners, luckier than Woolworths, luckier, even, than David Bowie with all his many, many lives.

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