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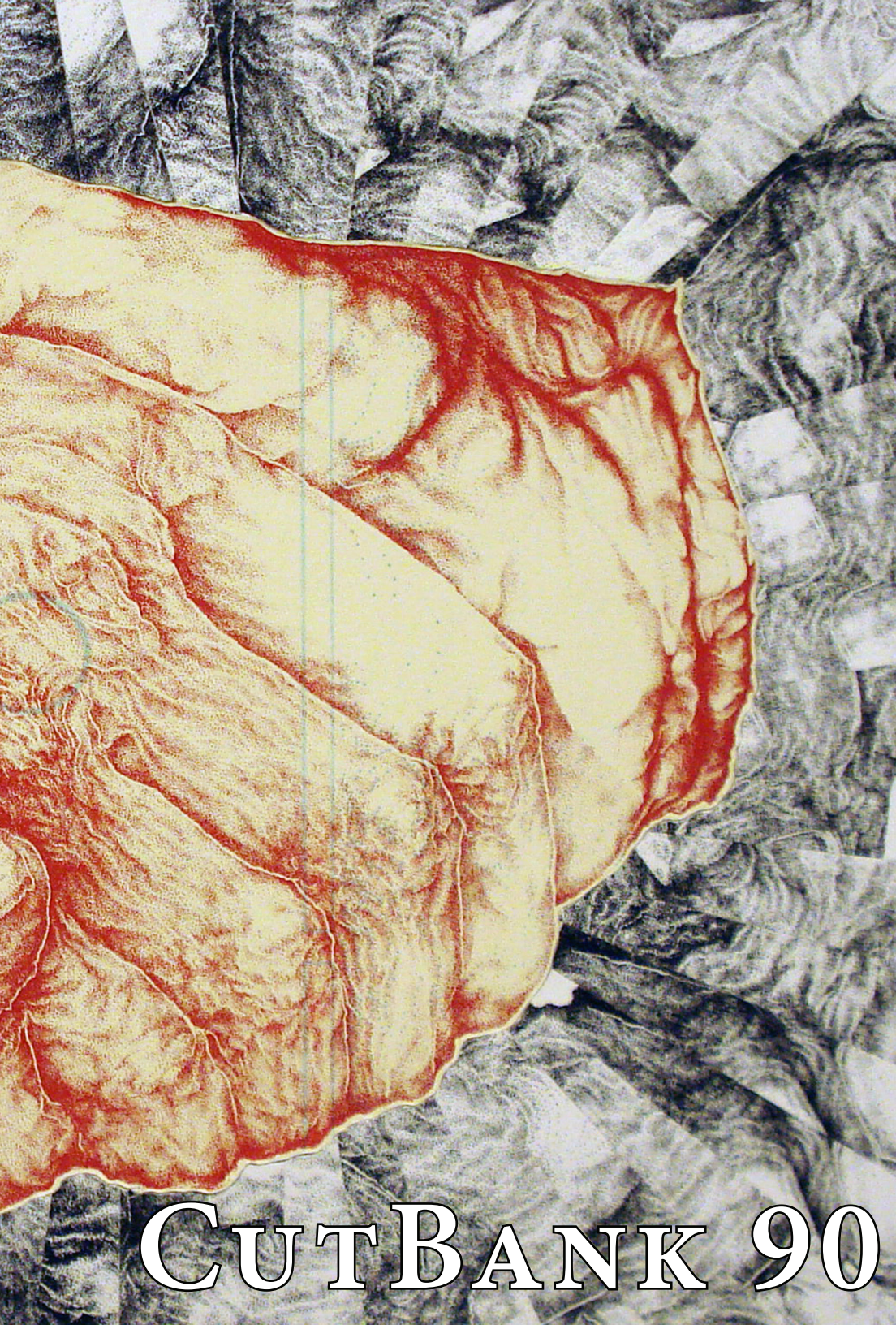
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CUTBANK 90

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90

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DANI BLACKMAN

FEMINIST BOOK CLUB

WE WERE READING the poet. And we had to be reading her, right then, so I couldn't skip the meeting. It was my week to hide Lucy and I didn't know what else to do but bring her along. Lucy didn't know the women in book club and they'd hardly heard of her, and I preferred it this way—these canals of my friendships separated by years and interests and different discernible versions of myself

When it came time for introductions, Lucy instructed me to say that she was “staying in my basement,” which was much more acceptable than “hiding.” What kind of woman leaves her three children and her husband, the good husband, often believed to be the best? Lucy didn't leave space for the women to ask. She shook their hands and walked past them. She pulled an extra chair up to Michelle's table. A long twenty minutes went by before she said another word.

Feminist Book Club had met every month for almost a year. We went the first three months without a name. At first, we were sheepish about our gatherings. Of course we were. We felt a certain disgrace, then a push to dissolve our disillusionment, and finally a need to move more.

We thought of how our mothers spoke of their revolution and then we

understood: if we could get through the next four years, then everything would change, and our longing for change would expire. So the women marked the first Wednesday of every month, checked in with their husbands on their shared calendars, and arranged for babysitters. Jill, my wife, always let me go.

Early on we'd decided that Michelle would always host book club. She lived freely in her house, despite how much she handled each day. At Michelle's, we never had to worry about keeping quiet, or clean. We could throw our coats on her couch. We never removed our shoes.

Between the chaos of hugs and hellos, Michelle put out the food. She hardly folded back the foil. If we wanted to eat, we'd reach for and unwrap the dishes ourselves. Lucy tilted her head toward the cheese board and I handed her a knife and watched the women watch Lucy cut large chunks and load her plate. There was a bottle opener on the table. The rest of us started with wine.

We opened our books as soon as our glasses were full. We flipped through the pages. The women loved the poet and we had her in our hands—the poet, the speaker—and we searched for who she'd been before being buried beneath the two titles. But then we didn't dare get her. I was sure to leave certain words untouched. We let the wine settle.

Soon I will stop speaking in the we, and I assume it will be much harder to tell the story from there. But that's what had sustained me—the we, and the assumptions that the we is what we were all there for, the we with the same urgency and certainty for what we were supposed to feel:

enough anger and passion to stand for something bigger than our children, to do something bigger than our children, to be something bigger for our children.

Lucy pointed to the smallest poem. "Let's start here," she said and cited the page number. "What did everyone think about this one?"

Lucy hadn't read the book. I knew that. We all knew that.

"Lucy," I said.

I was still mad that I hadn't been the first friend Lucy ran to when she left her family. I had always been the one to take her in on all those nights during all those years. With the lights off Lucy used to tell secrets, and I knew all of hers. One night, after meeting the bodies of three different men, Lucy joined me under my blanket and put her head to my chest. She smelled like old pennies. She said, "This is so we're not afraid."

Before book club, Lucy and I had shopped for more than one extraordinary dish to bring. We were running late and Lucy paced impatiently, waiting for the window washer to finish cleaning the front door before we could walk through.

The window washer looked like a traveled farmer, a wanderer in suspenders and a khaki ranger hat, with a faded snake coiled on his neck.

"He's you," Lucy said. "But shittier."

"You know, if you want to talk about things," I said, "I'm here."

"What things?"

"Like how you're feeling. Like why you left?"

"Why do you need a reason?"

We watched the water run down the glass. Then came the soap, and Lucy noted how the man steadied his hands, evening out the water until all the streaks were gone.

I drank a glass of wine. I poured another. I picked at the cheese on Lucy's plate. "What about these words right here," Lucy said, returning to the poet.

Darkness had hit early. November arrived with all its expected rain. Before book club, we exchanged emails in which we asked the same questions, again and again: "Was it just last year?" "What else can happen in a year?" "How many more years?" But the tracking of time was what had us edging toward trouble.

I sat across from Jackie at Michelle's kitchen table and tried to keep my eyes above hers, my eyes to the window, watching leftover daylight scrape the night clouds.

At home, I had a kid waiting out this almost-black sky without stars, waiting for my return. How was I to picture him then, curled up against Jill, both of them warm in our bed, unbeknownst to him that if all went well, I would not be back until morning. And, of course, it killed a small part of me to know that he might've stayed awake begging for more books, for one more minute, until his eyes were no longer able to focus. And Jill, who must've been holding him tight and then tighter, who I imagined stroking his hair and saying, "Stay, and sleep, and dream."

"I want to say something," said Jackie. "But what is there to say? I'm still just so depressed."

So much about Jackie made me believe I'd moved past the glib attractions I had in my twenties—the desiring of the unattainable or the coveting of qualities that I believed exceeded my own—and toward something worthy of the risk.

Jackie wore purple glasses with thick lenses. Her smile revealed a small amount of fear. But her lips could never be ignored. That much she knew. Jackie wore a fringed scarf that might've been a blanket, and the wool covered half her face and all of her mouth and yet whenever I had the chance to stare, I did. Her eyes were down, on the tacos or wine or the book of the poet, but never straight ahead.

Michelle's fat hound was asleep under the table. His paws were at my feet and I was afraid to stretch my legs and disturb him. His snores sounded like seconds ticking away on the clock. I only wanted to drink and drink. I wanted Jackie to finally face me.

“I'm getting hungry,” said Lucy.

“Then I think we should eat,” said Lisa, who never wanted to be rude.

We passed the plates and scooped helpings of soft, organic sides. We ate in silence.

“What's wrong with us tonight?” asked Michelle.

It was 8 PM and I was exhausted and I hated myself for that. I ran through unwritten lists of what had to get done. I'd never lived with more timers: the sting of the sounds from the microwave telling me my coffee had reheated, for the third or fourth time, until the cream became a film on top that I had to pull off with my fingers; the beep beep beep from the

stove that let me know my son could emerge from his timeout; the sand timer his preschool teacher gave Jill and me, to turn and turn, until he was compelled enough by this new toy to listen to us. And now the poet herself, nudging us to move along.

Lucy played the role of uninvited guest, and it took only a few more glasses of wine to get her going, to craft the small talk that made the women lean in a little closer. “Blake and Barrett are the twins,” Lucy said. “And Lacey’s my girl.”

“How do you think they’re doing?” Lisa said.

“You don’t have to be afraid to get right into it,” Lucy said. “What do you think I’m losing? Or lost? I’m here. They’re here. There’s just a little more distance between us.”

“That’s what you decided,” Lisa said.

“I saw that my life didn’t look like it was supposed to look. And that had to change.”

And now one of us would have to speak.

When we didn’t, Lucy said, “So what did we decide? About the poems, not about me.”

I wanted to say that I thought the poet positioned us perfectly, right here, spiraling as we stand. Instead, I decided to dream of Lucy back in her house, completely content for some unseen reason, sharing her space with all of us for next month’s meeting. I could see Blake and Barrett and Lacey stomping down the steps with such fierce purpose, as they tend to do. I could see all of us stopping to look at their small faces, their curved

shoulders, their hands stiff against their legs. And then I imagined Lucy, understanding why she had to return, knowing that maybe we all had something to do with it.

“How did we personally relate to the poems?” Michelle said.

“If you make me talk about my life,” Jackie said, “I will claw my fucking eyes out.”

“I have to go to the bathroom,” I said.

“Use the downstairs one,” Michelle said.

“I have to go too,” Lucy said. “Wait for me there.”

• • •

MICHELLE WORKED WITH spray paint. I mean, that was the key element in all of her decorating and every piece of hard furniture in her house had been sprayed the same color. The paint on the picture frames in the bathroom was grey too, and one frame already held Michelle’s annual family photo. There they were on the beach, standing inches away from the breaking waves, and I wondered how long the photographer held out for the surprise of water splashing against their heels, how long she waited for the screams. In this picture, they are not screaming. Michelle’s two daughters are standing tall with their hands on their hips. I imagine the photographer told them to look proud.

“She wants to fuck you,” Lucy said when she finally joined me in the bathroom. She had also noticed Jackie. She had seen the lines that crossed

between Jackie's eyebrows. And there was more about her features, sure, but that was what got Lucy—how old Jackie looked, much older than Lucy had thought based on the description I had given. Lucy wouldn't let me leave the bathroom. Her back blocked the door. *So foolish, so juvenile*, I thought, but it made me want to whisper something in Lucy's ear: like how much I missed sex or how loose Jill's arms had always felt on my body, and how unsure her hands were, sliding from my shoulders to hips, her hands that spent so much time measuring what they could hold.

"I want to come again," I said without feeling regret. "I want it to be so good that it hurts under my eyelids."

I'd once shocked book club by revealing that since I'd met Jill, I'd never fantasized about anyone else. The women met my statement with laughter, and maybe even some pity, then clear jealousy. I'd stayed attracted only to my wife, attracted still, which even I recognized as some kind of feat. I had made desire and kept it alive. And until I had said it, the statement was entirely true.

Now when I think about desire, I think of the hours spent stepping into leather straps, and adjusting myself, and showing Jill what she could always have—me ready to just give and give and give, even after she stopped wanting to receive. Me, unnecessary of her hunger.

"She really wants to fuck you," Lucy said again. I kept my hands on the cold of the bathroom sink. Maybe it should've been Lucy, like it had been on so many other nights, when we were young and unaware. How much safer would it have been to stay with her in the bathroom, to parade her

around the kitchen table after we were done? That would've been being a good friend, because that's what the women were waiting for—the first of us to crack so the rest could follow.

• • •

A NEW BOTTLE of wine sat in the middle of the table. The women wanted to know what had taken so long in the bathroom, but I didn't answer. I walked to the kitchen and returned with two more bottles. I did this as a dare, but no one responded.

"It's getting late," Lisa said.

"That always means you should stay for one more," Lucy said.

"Easy for you to say," Lisa said and refilled her glass. "You have nowhere to go."

"I have therapy in the morning," Michelle said. "Then I take Madison to therapy. So you're right. We definitely need another glass."

"If I go home now, then I have to think about tomorrow," Jackie said.

"If you had a day to do nothing, what would you do?" Lucy said.

"Maybe get high and binge Netflix."

"Really?" Lucy said.

"All day long," Michelle said.

"We wasted so much time when we had nothing to do," Jackie said.

On Fridays, I live for many hours without my family. After dropping my son off at school, I drive around the city, listening to my favorite albums

from college. The first time I did this I began to think about Jackie, to remember possibility. How easy it became then, to transport myself back in time, to undeclared love and all uncertain things and desperation disguised as courage and a lover lifting the hair from my neck and holding my twisted strands in her hand and pulling me closer and keeping me there and wanting me to stay because we weren't supposed to be together, not then, not ever. If I let the music play, if there's more stretch of road to drive, I can reach that sensation that feels like floating, like freedom, like space that has yet to be occupied. And I'm twenty again and present, and even oblivious, for just a second, to how life unfolded before me.

"If we had a day to ourselves, don't you think we should do something really good?" I said.

"Like what?" Lucy said.

"I don't know," I said.

Lucy pushed away her full glass of wine. "Of course you do," she said.

• • •

WE CLEARED THE DISHES. We scraped beans and rice and half-eaten slices of chocolate cake into the compost bin and stacked our plates in a pile next to Michelle's sink. Lucy and Jackie and I offered more help, offered to wipe the wine stains off the table. We lingered. But Lisa had to leave. She picked up the poet, bent the corners of the pages she wanted to return to, and closed the book. She hugged us all, even Lucy, and said she'd see us soon.

“Fuck the dishes,” Michelle said when she closed the door behind Lisa.
“Just sit down.”

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“I want Michael to see the mess when he gets home,” Michelle said.
“This is the weapon I use against him now. Dirty dishes. This is how he’ll know I’m mad at him.”

“What are you mad about?” Lucy asked.

“I don’t know,” Michelle said.

We moved to the living room. The hound surrendered his space when he saw us, took the big leap off the couch. We kept our bodies close to one another. We sat for minutes without speaking, heard nothing but our thick exhales, exorcised energy, descending but remaining. Then came the banging from outside, a scream, glass shattering against the pavement. Then we were back to ourselves.

“What the hell was that?” Lucy asked.

“Stupid kids,” Michelle said. “They’re out there every night. They were supposed to have cleaned it up by now. The halloween carnival. All the neighbors have been complaining about it on the community blog.”

The one drawback to Michelle’s had always been her proximity to the park, because even when we were without our kids, they were still there. All kids sounded the same. At each month’s book club, we could hear the laughter coming from across the street, the glee from a successful head-first slide, the cries from a slip off the drawbridge. At least once during every meeting, Jackie had to cover her ears.

Jackie was drunk. She stretched across the sofa with no regard for where she put her head, which ended up near my leg and across Michelle's lap. Her arm dangled inches from the floor. I watched her fingers trace the lines in the wood. I knew she could be close to great reveal.

A few weeks before, I had convinced Jackie to cancel her class just minutes after I had canceled mine. We left campus in almost a run, before any students could catch us. We settled at a bar only a few blocks away and asked the host for a patio table, despite the dropping temperature. The sun was still out. Jackie didn't want to eat. She let me order our drinks.

There was perceived danger that day, in the way that danger presents itself at this point in my life—with one beer after the next, with me and Jackie exchanging stories that boasted how bold we once were or could be again if given the chance.

She said, "Tell me the worst thing you've done."

I said, "It's so much worse than you think." The sun formed a long square of light on our tall dark table. I said, "What about you?" and I waited for her to answer.

On Michelle's couch, with her feet and eyes toward the ceiling, Jackie finally said the poet's name, mumbled some of her best lines. Before this night, when I imagined what I could do with Jackie, I always had her against a wall, with her arms raised in submission: there, down a dark hall, with little light, we are quick. We are greedy. There's no time for tenderness. She leans back into me. She gives me control and I take it, take her, harder each time.

"Some music might save us," Lucy said. She never did well with long

pauses.

“Yes, music,” Michelle said. “I don’t want you to go. Michael will be home soon. Not that that’s bad. But still. He’ll ask me stupid questions. I’ll give him stupid answers. Then he’ll want to talk about the food we ate. And how much worse does it get than that?” Michelle stood up and began scrolling through the playlists on her computer. “When I was in grad school, I lived on two Quiznos subs a day. Every day for almost a year. Just Quiznos. No one had to know that, I didn’t have to report it. Michael’s a good guy, but.”

“But what?”

“Marriage,” Michelle said, as if the word were a ball she had just tossed to us, as if we were supposed to catch it and throw back our equally trivial, but unwavering complaints.

“I’ll stay,” I said.

“She stays and I stay,” Lucy said.

“What do you want to listen to?” Michelle said. She started some music before we gave requests. “The girls love these guys. They’re new. They’re local.”

“They’re terrible,” Lucy said.

“I know,” Michelle said. “But I was going for something less obvious.”

It didn’t take long to get used to the music. We didn’t need much. Crackling beats and long whiny melodies were enough to get our fingers tapping on the arm rests. We thought we could hear the hound in the kitchen, howling along.

“This sounds like that one band we saw,” Lucy said to me. “Remember? You know. When I had to hold you back from charging the stage. You loved them so much.”

“I loved everything when I was on Ecstasy,” I said.

“You never looked more beautiful,” Lucy said. “I fell in love with you that night.”

“Because you loved everything when you were on Ecstasy.”

Michelle stared into her grey bookcase, her grey armoire. She stared hard into the wall as if an unfamiliar image had just appeared before her. “What should we read next month?”

“Does it matter?” Jackie said.

“I have some recommendations,” Lucy said.

“I mean, what are we really doing?” Jackie said.

“We’re doing this,” Michelle said. “We’re doing something.”

“I know,” Jackie said. “But even here, it’s just noise. It’s the kind of noise my kids make. And Sam makes. It’s the kind I hear all day. There’s no substance or meaning. Just a constant grating static. Makes me feel like I’m going crazy.”

“We all feel that way,” I said, but that wasn’t true.

“There’s anxiety when I wake up and there’s anxiety when I go to sleep,” Jackie said. “My life’s become a tightness that I can’t shake.”

“That’s normal,” Michelle said. “Look at what’s happening around us.”

“I should go,” Jackie said.

We still didn’t go. Lucy fell asleep upright on a chair, and Michelle gave

in to the dishes. Jackie and I stayed on the couch. In Michelle's absence, my lap was Jackie's new place to rest her head. And I found my hand on the back of her neck and then in her hair. Without thinking, I did these things. Then I thought about holding Jackie. Just holding her.

"Is there anything to say?" Jackie said.

"No," I said. "Not really."

She pulled me from the couch and led me down the hall.

In the upstairs bathroom, which was not grey at all, but a worn and survived pink, there were affirmations taped to the mirror: *We will be grateful. We will not hurt each other. We will see one another, and we will see love.* Jill and I had tried this once too, per our therapist's suggestion, after we'd spent an entire session listing what we'd grown to despise about one another until insult after insult uncovered our anger and sadness and fears. And our therapist said, "Isn't the truth beautiful?" And I said no and Jill said yes and our therapist actually threw up her hands, a gesture cementing our fate.

"I can't be in here," I said.

"Me neither," Jackie said. "But I need something to happen. Right now."

We entered a bedroom where magic had never lived, where a bed had stayed unmade for days, maybe weeks. Laundry was scattered across the sheets—dirty or clean, I couldn't tell.

Jackie moved us from the doorway. We stood in front of the full-length mirror, and Jackie looked straight through. I wanted to know what she faced, but I didn't look up. I turned around and when I stepped toward

her, she stepped back. She pulled down her pants. She grabbed my wrist. “This is what you wanted,” Jackie said. She pushed my arm between her legs. “Isn’t this what you wanted?”

The answer is easy. The answer is automatic. Because this is habit forming, once again, and landing all over the page. And this is the space in which I choose to write about wanting, albeit a more confined space, with little room to understand what any of us means when we talk about desire.

My mouth moves across Jackie’s chest. My mouth sets teeth to bone.

Lucy, I think. My hand stays in place.

HELENA CHUNG

CHINK

In small towns too, lines dictate
my feet's course, the glottal
rain gathered against the curb. I live
in awe of other people, their body-moves
through grainy scenes, how time crosses
quick on a bridge. The trains pass
underneath without ceremony, clouds
a net uncast, leaves all *sak ksak ksak*, only
in rain do they obstruct. The confusing
thing is both what the stranger said
and why. Admiring the arms
of a woman who'd helped reinvert
my umbrella, I noticed late. Water
between us, what made me
not hear, though I'm almost sure
I did. I don't remember the face, how
long before my shoes felt dry.

JESSICA MARTINI

SHINING

EVERYTHING STARTS IN the mountains. It's a bright day, the river shines cerulean, the road north is desolate save one determined Volkswagen shouldering the curves above a rocky vertical ledge. The music is somber: a dirge split by dissonant plucks and the sounds of remote wild. Leaves are turning yellow, we're peering through lens flare on the screen and a tacky teal font. The family is rising into the peaks where the snow is already on the burial grounds.

I say I like it: the dissonance, the warning, the inevitability that the car will arrive someplace with a dark message for them, for us. I'm eager to be frightened by the film. You seem to think I will be.

The camera enters the Colorado hotel yielding a set that defies dimension, a palace with M.C. Escher optics and Native American art on the walls. It's one-of-a-kind, secluded, eerie, and baroque. Not like the hotel they built in my Arizona mountain town a couple years ago: a corporate, cookie-cut brick building striking its shadow on the older hotels downtown—the ones known to be haunted—obscuring the view of the San Francisco Peaks, the

burial grounds where people ski.

On the screen we see Jack wearing a green tie. He's interviewing for a job that he cannot be denied. A superfan of the film has made a meme that zooms in on the tie, and I will find it later on and think he's right: the green pattern *does* resemble the hedge maze—the trap where Jack's wife and child are laughing, lost, where he looks over them like the hotel's giant, sovereign god. The interviewer glibly warns Jack that a caretaker once went crazy at the hotel in the winter, snapped from the isolation, and turned on his family and himself. Jack is unfazed. You can rest assured. *That's not gonna happen with me*—Jack is a man who knows his limits. The kind of guy who thinks it's unfortunate when a child is harmed, but if the kid takes a blow, he should have been standing further back. He smiles. Is this a story about cabin fever? No, this is a story about men, you say.

You think the dead blond girls are the scariest part of the film. Artifacts of the unconscious. *Come play with us*, they invite. I laugh—this doesn't frighten me. The cherry Kool-Aid splashing all over the walls, flooding the hallways, doesn't either. The first time Jack raises his voice at his wife, I flinch—this isn't the kind of frightened I was hoping for. She has stepped into his typewriter trance, his hard and important work, offering to bring him sandwiches. He puts her in her place—anywhere but his domain.

I'm watching you with the same eyes I'm watching Jack advance on his

wife, *light of his life*, his whole form stalking her, possessing her. *I'm not gonna hurt ya*, he says, *I'm just gonna...* I say I don't like it. We shut off the movie before she strikes him with the bat, something I'll find out tomorrow, when I watch the film the whole way through, after I decide I'm not afraid anymore.

• • •

YOU APOLOGIZE FOR choosing a movie that could be triggering. You know that men raising their voices can be triggering for women. You understand. Your father's temper always frightened you, that wild track of violence, but this film's a favorite. You don't ask me where my fear comes from.

Instead, you ask me to listen to your story, so I stay longer than I intended. You confess to me that you raised your voice with your ex-girlfriends. You know it's scary when a man gets angry like that, but the thing is, they provoked you. They taunted you. Laughed at you. One cheated on you. So, of course you raised your voice. I don't get a chance to ask how loud because now you're crying, and I'm reassuring you, saying, "It's okay, I'm not afraid of you."

• • •

I'M DOWNTOWN, WALKING home beneath the shadow of the big hotel, past

the spot where I saw a police officer looking over a man struggling to get up, a Native man. I remember seeing the man's backpack leaned up against the wall, seeing him asked to leave and not come back.

Now, the windows are lighting up with the televisions in the lobby, each one flashing bold black letters beneath serious faces: *Kavanaugh Hearing*. I hurry toward the intersection, wondering how long I can avoid the news. Hearing a man raise his voice is triggering, even when he says, *I'm innocent*.

Imagine the hearing they'd hold for Jack. Someone tips off the Washington Post, says they know Jack is the one who built the hotel on sacred burial grounds, he is the one who decorated the ballroom gold, he is the one who designed the maze and trimmed the hedges, and he is the one who whacked his loved ones with an axe: the caretaker. Picture a man wearing a green tie on all of the lobby televisions, saying he has never hurt a woman or a child in his life. Picture the president chiming in to say, *my good man is incapable of a violation*.

There is the scene where Jack vents to the glassy-eyed bartender in the Gold Room, and it sounds like something I've heard before. *Women. Am I right?* Jacks takes a pull from his drink and says, *That bitch. As long as I live, she'll never let me forget what happened. Coulda happened to anybody*.

Well, did you do it? the bartender asks.

I like beer, he replies, *don't you?*

• • •

YOU'RE A TEACHER, TOO, and in one of our first conversations you say you teach your students about bodies, about consent, about the right of a body to be respected. In my class, I teach the story about the woman who goes home with the man she barely knows, the one who, in the end, sends her a one-word text: *whore*. A student raises his hand and points out that the woman in the story never gave clear consent. The room is silent for a moment. The lesson of the day is that sticking one's tongue down another's throat is an act, not an accident. It's unfortunate that we all seem to agree that dating is like a job interview, and sometimes a man shows up in a green tie and expects not to be denied.

You say yours is a progressive classroom, you don't shy away from tough topics, either. No means no.

One night we go to the swing set, play like children under the stars and share what it was like to actually *be* children. You say you never knew how being a child was supposed to feel, but you hope, as an adult, that you can find out. I say I'm beginning to, laughing upside down in the swing, my

boots linked into the chains. We hear the noise of movement around us in the forest's shadows, but I feel safe with you.

On another night, we sit on the floor under the flicker of Christmas lights until late, talking about all the wounds we share and how the past keeps haunting us, and I wonder how it is that we seem to know each other so well, so quickly. I tell you about the ones who used the language of love as camouflage for control. You say you know that experience well, that you're sorry they hurt me. We look into one another's eyes for a long time without flinching. I think you can see gold shining in me.

• • •

STORIES AND NAMES AND soundbites continue to pulse around me like persistent spirits I can't shut out, so I finally give in and turn on C-SPAN. It's the first time in my life that I have sat in front of cable news for hours. Being told stories this way can feel practically oppressive, but I can't stop watching this one play out. There is a hero on the screen glowing with a bravery not often seen in the spotlight.

She was gentle and young and smart. She was swimming that day. She was itching in her bathing suit. She was going to an acquaintance's house. She was being friendly, she was being the quiet one as usual. She was being

pushed into a room where there was music playing and a bed. She was underneath him. He was laughing with his friend. The two boys were the only people in the room. A hand was over her mouth. *Here's Johnny!* She thought she would die under that boy. But she didn't die. She went on, terrified. Two front doors. Other side of the country. He went on, rising, ascending to the place where his honor would be known. She tells her story after so many years, ready for someone to notice there is a woman in the room—there is another person in the room.

Between the testimonies and after, the news anchor takes phone calls from people watching around the country. Democrat line: *I have been assaulted, too.* Republican line: *I have been assaulted, too.* Independent line: *I have reason to think that our country is in the toilet.*

If it's a hearing, this might be the time to listen, America.

I say you should always listen to a woman's pain-story.

You tell me that, for you, pain is being told *no*.

• • •

ALTHOUGH I SAY I'm not afraid of you, you believe I am because I'm quiet. The movie has piqued a kind of horror I didn't expect. Not the surrealism—the realism. Not the Kool-Aid blood—the violence, the all-American dad losing it on his child, the husband preying on his wife, the boy burdened by the demons of the world. A fast reel of made-up scenes runs through my head, scenes in which a man snaps and takes it out on the person closest to him, in some of the scenes that man looks like you, but, it's not real, I think. I don't know whether or not I am afraid of you. You interpret my silence as an accusation. You say it's not fair. It's not fair for me to feel scared.

You explain that sometimes rage is warranted, that you feel justified for all the times you fought back, for breaking the screen on your phone in a moment of anger, for raising your voice, for correcting your exes' stories. But no, you haven't harmed anyone. You would never.

A scene from the movie flashes into my thoughts, the one where the wife and the son are playing outside, aglow with innocence, and Jack is watching from inside the hotel, looking over them through the window, his face darkened and fixated, like a predator. I think of you, minutes ago, offhandedly saying, "Imagine someone you love looking at you like that." My mind goes gray.

We could still finish the movie. You say, "What if I promise you that the

wife and the child escape in the end?” That the predator freezes in the hedge maze? I say not tonight. At the time I don’t know it, but tomorrow, I will be ready. Tomorrow, I will be compelled, even, to watch the movie through to the end, and over again.

We’re all good, right? No hard feelings. It’s late, and I say I’m tired. You invite me to sleep over, and I’m relieved not to have to drive home drowsy.

Everything ends with confusion: confusion about why once I close my eyes you are touching me, why I say nothing then, why I don’t know if this feels good or bad, why soon you are on top of me, why this feels like I’m giving you something you expected from me, why when you finally speak you mention that you have a condom, and when I say no, let’s not go any further, why we fall mile markers apart in the bed, and after I say I feel bad and you say that you don’t, why you ask me to leave.

• • •

YESTERDAY I WAS scared of the movie and its real horror, but today I’m watching the rest of the film in my apartment where I’m alone and the Christmas lights strung on my wall are gold though it isn’t winter yet. I need to know that I can look the predator in the eye without flinching.

The soundtrack crackles under 1934 jazz, mockingly jovial and spirited,

the camera moves in on a black and white photo hanging on the wall, a wide-smiling man in the center of a splendid party. Looks like a page from a yearbook. The iciness of consequence and the wild of violence both twist a smile, don't they? The gramophone in the ballroom perpetuates a gilded layer of merrymaking over the place where a man's rage has been born and reborn and will be reborn.

The credits roll as the song jingles, *midnight with the stars and you, midnight and a rendezvous*. I return to the beginning, the contrast of the brilliant landscape and the macabre omens on the drive north, the bright light that would give anyone confidence that they could survive the coming cold. I'm watching again because I think this message you told me I would find here, the message about men, is a message about you, about America, a message that has been incarnating and reincarnating in ways that I can no longer avoid, or fear.

I watch anger explode from an isolated mind, and I wish you weren't so angry. Knowing the ending now, I stop again before the bat lands on Jack's skull, this time a feeling of bravery in me.

I switch to CNN—a clip of two women stopping the senator in an elevator. I expect to watch this without flinching, too. But I hear the woman cry out, *Look at me when I'm talking to you. You're telling me that my assault doesn't*

matter! That what happened to me doesn't matter! and something breaks in me. Something that feels ancestral, not just mine. *What are you doing, sir?*

• • •

WHO WANTS TO testify to the ghosts of the past? Even when they are living, present, impossible to ignore?

I am here today not because I want to be. I am terrified. These words ping around the internet to the response of thousands of *me too's* and too many wishes that she would just keep silent, keep her pain-story far from the important work of the men in Washington. Brave truth-telling beside anonymous artifacts of rage. Something about the woman sharing her story has stretched a nation out the extremes of empathy and hate, threatening some sort of snap. The anger being released has me wondering what figure lurking nearby might be thinking: if another woman speaks into this wilderness, we'll all have hell to pay.

There was a time I felt terrified with a man, didn't speak because I was afraid of what would happen if I did. This time, I want to say something, I feel compelled even.

In a message, I begin by saying last night felt bad.

You say you know you messed up.

I say the word *violation*.

You deny it.

You believe you are incapable of it.

I remind you that once you said that consent mattered, but last night, you seemed to forget that I was another person in the room.

Setting my phone aside, I decide to go downtown with friends, to a bar in a hotel where I can dance and forget the stories that are haunting me.

I wear a blue dress and hide my key in my left boot. I dance to tracks mixed with the music of Aretha, who asked only for a little respect, and I forget best I can. You appear in the doorway of the bar. I think the girl who is your friend, the one who tapped me on the shoulder, must have told you I was here. Maybe you are here to apologize in person. You follow the blond girls downstairs to get beers, and I wait for you to come back, to make things right. I keep glancing back to the doorway, not seeing you, the songs keep turning and I'm dancing with strangers after my friends have gone, until the

DJ announces that the night is ending. You're not here. I leave before the last song fades out.

• • •

When I don't contact you, you send a message to say that a woman's silence is triggering to you.

I say I was disrespected, that I am disappointed, that even when you could have been present with me in my pain, you chose not to be. I say this is not how I want to be treated.

You send me texts attacking me, everything short of *whore*. You leave me voicemails, your voice flat and deriding. You forget to say my name. You twist my story into something new, a plot in which you have become a victim. You rage; you bring back the accusation that I had been afraid of you—fear was not something I was allowed to feel. Even as I listen, I wonder if I am paranoid to lock my door, my windows.

Though I have shared only my experience and my feelings, you understand my truth as your character assassination. You say you're ashamed you got to know someone like me. Someone unsafe—a threat.

I ask my therapist, do I respond?

She says it would be like arguing with Trump. Or one of his friends.

• • •

EVERYTHING STARTS OVER in the mountains. I'm on the road in my Honda, heading south, the sky is slow-migrating silver; it's been storming for a while. The pine trees are a silent audience along the aisle of slick blacktop, their austere watch welcome. Red and yellow flags of autumn split through the still-wild glistening of mute green. I'm leaving town, briefly, to remember a larger world, one absent of human fights and hostile politics.

The music is resonant, acoustic, the beginning of a celebration that happens softly in a time of distress. I'm thinking about a man who mistakes his loved ones for obstacles to be bulldozed. He meets innocence, the land, the truth, all as what's standing in the way of what he could own and possess. He wants nothing to threaten his honor, or his version of history. Familiar track of violence, I picture my own father raising his voice and his power over whoever was standing closest.

My mind switches tracks to an image of truth-telling playing out on every hotel lobby television. I think I sense the spirits of witnesses who believe

her story, my story.

Arriving beneath the mountains, I pull over and slip between the junipers. I sit on the red earth where the sun has just offered a soft presence, revealing itself shyly in the after-storm. I can pretend the world is as peaceful as this hiding place, but I know I will have to return to the storyline and to the soundtrack of bitter rage.

I make a confession, one only the earth can hear: I have been unsafe and may again be unsafe. I am powerless, after all.

Still, could I choose not to be won by fear?

The air's chilling. Quiet now, the peaks look over the copper valley, ancient land that has witnessed years of conquest and human-erasure, waiting for the coming cold, knowing it will be layered, soon, with a desolate white.

This winter may drive a few men crazy, if they don't know their limits.

• • •

I AM ON THE swing set after midnight, blocks from the bar, alone in a blue

dress in this place where you recently told me the secrets of your isolation. I think now that when I was here last, laughing and upside-down, I had been in the middle of a maze under your darkened watch.

But this time I don't feel naïve for it. Don't feel ashamed of myself for being unsafe. I am swinging like a child, higher, until I am horizontal under the stream of stars, aware of the veiled peaks over my shoulder in the dark.

By now, I have watched the woman and the child escape, watched them survive. I've seen the survivor on the Senate floor, bold and broken but not silent. She says she is haunted, but even haunted, she is strong.

It's you who tells me this is a story about men, and I am listening, trying to understand what compels some men to erase a woman's experience, what leads some men to erase a woman. Last time a man twisted my story into a tale of his own, changed the words to confirm himself innocent, I felt powerless. I feared that any chance I had to ever know the freedom of childlike joy was taken from me. Like Stephen King wrote, "Monsters are real, and ghosts are real too. They live inside of us, and sometimes, they win." And sometimes they don't. There are effects that linger long after violation, but even knowing that, now, I am swinging, like a child, I feel the night in my body like a power of my own, and now I am laughing, because I *know* I am not afraid of you, now I am shining.

PATRICK WHITFILL

ADVICE WITHOUT ANY EXPECTATION OR RELIABILITY

To be talked about to the point of abstracting the self, but less, say, sheet to a ghost, and more salt in a sugar jar full of sugar. That sweet. Heroics more of an acquiescence—dropping the glass *because* of its shatter, not in spite of, not in regards to. And then the whole floor feels splintered with shards we can't tiptoe around enough, so here we are again, on the couch, pretending this is some kind of an arrival. I made you soup earlier, and while the water boiled for the noodles, a wasp dropped onto my shoulder. I'd like to say something about agitation and expectancy, some good line where the two are given equal measure, cause and effect running down hallways together, giddy on champagne. Can you feel it, the way I breathe underneath my sweater? I have so many adjustments to get to, so many tweaks to pinch so I can for once claim to appreciate delicacy. Quickly, quickly. I think it's interesting, how neither one of us will sweep up the slivers on the floor because we're worried about what we can't see cutting into us, being driven in its

miniscule way straight into our hearts. No matter how we say it, or to whom, because given all the tendency toward falling apart, it will sound more significant than it probably is, but soon, it's going to get darker earlier. What about using tweezers? What if one of us scoped out where the other could kneel, tweeze out the glass lines we're sure are there? What if we took turns? One on the couch, the other running the long side of their hand over the floor, hoping whatever electricity the skin has will help us find whatever we can't see. To spend a night like that is what I meant to say to the wasp after I flicked it off my shoulder, into the sink, and drowned it there. Whatever that might feel like. More of a wish than the sound a body makes when it moves, not to say those aren't exactly the same thing.

BROOKE SAHNI

A NATURAL HISTORY

HANNAH WANTS JOHN to tell her something that would surprise her, to feel that whatever this is, they are, is built on newness. Now, she craved only novelty. He turns on Dave Matthews, the only band out of a mix of dated soft rock that she can tolerate if he turns it down low.

“They are called prickly pears,” John says. They look out on an expanse of field. Except it’s dark, so they’re looking out to blackness and they could be anywhere.

“No comment?” he asks.

“Nope,” she says, watching the smirk curl up his face. Hannah had come from Michigan for college, and in the short four months she’d lived in the West, the prickly pear was one thing she could identify without him. They’re silent for a while, still against a low rumble of thunder. Then John begins to tell her a story about a time he brought a woman here—not here exactly, but somewhere nearby—and they had hiked all afternoon, drinking mouth-warm beers, tossing a ball for Leo, the black lab.

“We went off by ourselves, and when I found her she was butt naked, squatting over the creek, cupping tadpoles in her hands, letting out these weird, giddy sounds. She was so beautiful, but what the fuck, man? It was

like, our first date.”

“Maybe you should stop dating little girls, John,” Hannah mocks.

“Oh, Hannah,” he trails off, laughs, their usual back and forth repertoire.

In the car (*this is a truck, damn it*—he always says when she calls it a car), she contemplates *nontraditional student*, the term he’d tossed around four months ago, like an answer to the question, *why is a forty-something in the fresh-bodied space of twenty-somethings?* The question was never asked, never aloud at least. During their three-week college orientation in the backcountry, the group was not bothered by John’s age. They all shared the commonality of choosing a “nontraditional” college—all about the environment, inclusivity, and fostering a deeper understanding of the world—so it would be un-PC to call attention to difference of any kind. They accepted him the way one might take in and shelter a child: this older man with a wide-eyed look, the one who didn’t seem to understand how, given all the routes his middle-aged life could have taken, he ended up in a forest with a bunch of hippies.

LIGHTNING FLARES, THE sky is orange, lit from within. It’s a school night, she left the lamp on, she has to read exactly seventeen more pages before tomorrow, and she’s with him, their bodies silhouetted by blackness: behind the clouds, the moon.

John releases Leo from the truck bed. He offers her a beer, and she takes it, then a Mexican blanket even though it’s not cold, and she takes that too, wrapping it around her shoulders. No, she imagines him thinking.

She can practically hear the sound of him gritting his teeth at the sight of her covered, where seconds ago her shoulders had been bare and perfectly orbed. The blanket is rough, smells of pine. It's early November in the high desert; she can feel their small town going silent in the distance. Behind her, John leans against the tailgate. She gets out of the truck and wanders down a slight ravine, twice stubbing her foot on a rock. But she can feel his eyes on her even when she's out of sight, attention she both dismisses and is learning to rely on. For entire minutes, she is mindless, taken by the damp smell of approaching rain—swept, as though there is nothing ahead or on either side of her, except for that small awareness of him, like a ping.

“Once, when I was a little kid,” she'd told him a few days ago at the pub, “I told my mom I wanted to eat a leaf for dinner and without missing a beat, she plucked one from the tree, poured all these condiments on it. It was one of those moments when someone totally surprises you, you know?” Silence hung between them. John smiled and said, “That's so adorable, Hannah,” in a slow, genuine way that made her feel like this story wasn't meant for him, like he'd just absorbed a part of her.

It's not the number, Hannah tells herself. Less about his forty-five to her twenty-one and more a matter of their shapes, the nuances of their bodies. His gray hair, wrinkles threading around the eyes, the neck, the faded tattoo on his forearm from his Navy days. She contemplates his legs, which are perpetually tan and muscular from routine mountain biking. What if his whole body were like those legs, she thinks before quickly dismissing the thought. There's nothing to reconcile. He's told her that he loves her hands,

her hair, and she laughs it off, or sometimes, sometimes she says thank you.

Now they are in the new wild of the day. What did he say this place was called? The lightning has stopped, but the rain presses on, so she hugs the blanket closer, for the smell, mainly.

He sees her before she sees him.

“I’m in here,” John calls out from inside the truck bed. Hannah sticks her head inside the camper shell.

“Should we go?”

“This is so beautiful,” he answers.

Climbing in, whispering, Leo, Leo. The dog crawls a guilty crawl across the bed, lands his damp head on her lap. “You remember what this is?” John stretches his arm through the cab window, holding up the datura skeleton that hangs always from his rearview mirror. It’s you, she thinks. Already a relic of him, of the West. Same for the white GMC with maroon velveteen seats, datura, dead, hanging from the mirror. The truck that carried them, a month ago, to witness the flowers unfurl under the moon—*devil’s trumpet*, *jimsonweed*, he’d instructed—all a metaphorical limb to the body of this new life.

Rain bears down like a beaded curtain. He’s on his back, hands behind his head. She’s happy. She thinks about her body, rigid against the window. No matter what, she won’t lay down.

“I love how we can hang out in silence together,” he says. She doesn’t want to say, “me too,” but does.

ON SATURDAY, JOHN picks Hannah up, and they head out to Sycamore Canyon, a place she's never been. They talk about school, reflect back on their three-week orientation at Walnut Creek, when he'd gone to sleep early and the rest of the group stayed up late, laughing, sometimes at the silly things he'd said that day.

"You were such the old man out there, sneaking off with your cot at 7 pm."

"You should have come found me," John flirts.

"You're stupid, John."

They hike down into the canyon. It's the first cool day of fall, and the air has a crispness she hasn't felt since she moved in early August. He shows her Redrock Cabin, tells her tales of Geronimo. Together they suck on mesquite, spitting the pods along the trail when they become dry and fibrous. They take their time, tossing pinecones for Leo, aware of their steps.

"Do you want to get married?" he asks.

"To you? No." They laugh. She walks ahead a little.

"Seriously, is that something you think about?"

"No, I don't think about it. I'm twenty-one."

"Shit, I was married when I was nineteen." He pauses. "Did you know that I was married?"

"I didn't know."

At the river, they relax. He tells her about his ex-wife, a once-young bride whom he loved and still does. "I never fall out of love," he explains. "That essence is always there."

As John offers this brief history, Hannah imagines he could be trying to tell her that he loves her. The possibility flourishes, and she takes it in like an essential nutrient she didn't know she was missing. She wonders if he just means, I'd still fuck them. But perhaps she's being reductive. She's only been in love once. Not to her boyfriend back home in Michigan, but to a boy from high school. She had yearned for him for a solid three years after their departure. She still tries to replicate that feeling.

"I haven't been head over heels in a long time," he says before trailing off again. Don't say it, she thinks.

"I guess I haven't felt that way in a long time, too," she succumbs.

"You will," he promises. He allows the silence to stretch. She thinks of the way her poetry teacher described the white space on the page: imbued with quiet meaning.

"I wish I could take you to Alaska. It's. So. Beautiful."

"It's so beautiful here," she says. He says he'd like to take her places that only he's touched, that even in the vast, open spaces of the west, you can always find tracks, small pieces of garbage, memos of civilization. She rolls her eyes, takes a sip of beer, her way of keeping whatever this is at bay.

Riparian corridor, she thinks to herself, taking in the loveliness of the words, the chilled water at her feet. He's off somewhere in the aspens, gathering, she assumes. In their orientation, the group would chuckle when, while hiking, John would hand her a small log, a random flaking leaf. "What do you want me to do with this, John?" she'd laugh, throwing the object back where it came from. But sometimes he had surprised her with

something cool, interesting in a way that made her want to keep it, tuck it inside her pack. She even cataloged these nature-gifts in a notebook, titled it “John’s Gifts: A Natural History.” Next to each, she’d drawn a little picture, shaking her head at his child-like nature, his silly flirtations, nothing more than a joke, he, the old man of the group.

“I can’t believe I just found this.” John emerges from the woods, hands Hannah a slender, blue-black rock, so long and smooth it looks manipulated.

“It’s obsidian. The tip’s been carved to look like a bird.” It’s warm, practically pulsing. At the end of it, a beak, two pools for eyes, looking more like a skeleton of a bird.

“Do you think—”

“I really want to kiss you, Hannah.” Suddenly that man-look on his face: boyish desire. His US Navy hoodie is touching her knees. Earlier, he’d noticed her goose bumps. The thought, I can’t kiss him in this sweatshirt, surfaces from deep down, and the obsidian burns her hand.

“I’m not going to kiss you, John.”

“Shit,” he laughs.

Her refusal isn’t moral. Certainly it isn’t because of her boyfriend a thousand miles away, that habit she knows she needs to quit. More the way he’s looking at her as if he realizes what he has given her, the gift of the vast and the foreign. It’s his size, the bulk of his body, not out of shape, but uniquely adult, matured, the twenty-four years between them spreading out like a chasm, how time had charted its slow course along his skin.

On the car ride back to town, it’s not uncomfortable. It’s as if all the

time spent together was inevitably building to this, and now they'd both gotten it over with, knew where they stood. She believes he can recover. Even though she'd heard that *men and women can't be friends*, and throughout her teendom had found this to be true, John was not a boy, and part of her believed they could remain in their current standing. She knew she wouldn't, couldn't fall for him, never fully, and this fact alone, manifested as a particular kind of comfort that comes from being a prized thing and not caring one iota if you're dropped.

Inside his house, she sits. She appreciates how minimal it is—the kind of place one could pick up and leave in an instant. He starts dinner while they talk, also minimal: some rice and vegetables simmering in a pot. Half-naked women fade in and out on the computer screen. Hannah gives him shit for it every time.

“Your screen saver is so gross. Offensive, really.”

“They are beautiful,” he says.

“It reminds me of something a teenager would have. No, a prepubescent.” She shakes her head. The dog begs for something from her with his eyes. “I don't have anything for you, I don't have anything for you,” she sings.

She talks about her writing classes, how in love she is with all of it—the books, the teachers. From behind the kitchen counter she catches his eye. She loves the urgency with which he looks at her, this hidden power that comes with not caring how it ends. His marine ecology classes aren't as inspiring, he says he might drop out and move to Alaska.

“I won't drop out because you're here, Hannah. Don't worry.”

“Oh, I’m not worried, John,” she jokes. He joins her on the couch, hands her a beer. It’s dusk. The front door is open, so she can see the butte, and it appears to be glowing from within: the town’s holy monument. They stare straight ahead at the light show outside, the fall’s changing shapes, elongated shadows. And the dusk, without trying, pulls something out of her, a nostalgia for past rebellion, for her teenage lover. She remembers when they’d sit on her roof, hued with some unnamable anticipation, a longing. The newness of the desert, with its own innate lust, pulled, stirred her. So when she says, gently, “this is my favorite time of day,” she knows what she is doing, how it will bring him into it, how he’ll fall a little for that, and then all she has to do is turn her head to her right, where he is sitting beside her, because from here their eyes will meet, and the rest will be implied. So she turns. Just to see what it’s like to be here with him.

They take their time. It’s been years since she’s kissed anyone besides her boyfriend, and after several seconds she allows herself to enjoy the ease with which they fall into one another. “We should check the food,” she finally says. They eat and talk. Around ten, she insists on walking the mile home to her apartment. She steps out into the night. *Fuck*, Hannah thinks when she thinks about their mouths and how, together, they used them.

• • •

FOR TWO DAYS they hang out and don’t touch, and then, on the third day, they kiss again. Every time now they kiss—only kiss—like two adolescents

satisfied with the newness of such physicality. Once, on a Tuesday, when the night felt particularly thick and enveloping, they'd returned to the field she can never remember the name of, with the galaxies of prickly pears, talking, joking, testing their footing against the dark earth, and when they were brimming, each in their own way, they kissed, his hand groping the warmth underneath her shirt, whispering, in a voice she'd never heard: "Where did you learn to kiss like that?" And then: "I've never been touched like this before," as though she is Woman and he, a schoolboy. Inside she feels that power break away like a ball of lava freed from its source.

Months pass, energized. The sweet winter days, still day-warm. From time to time he tells her he loves her, but he has always said that, handling the term with equal casualty and genuineness. And like before, sometimes she believes that she could be in love with him because she confuses the song of the places they go with a love song for him. They kiss and touch and every time she pulls away, stops herself, says or does something friendly, unsexy. She awaits the moment when they'll have to acknowledge the terms of the relationship. She can feel the masculine dissatisfaction coming off him like an odor, the unsightly term, tease, cresting on his mouth. I'm not, she thinks. She just doesn't want to see his dick.

THEY DRIVE TO visit John's sister in Sedona. In the truck, he offers to fix some things she has that are broken—a loose car bumper, a faulty garbage disposal. As they drive, this new ruby planet appears. It surprises her every time, how without warning the landscape turns to ember, suddenly aflame.

He reaches for her leg.

“Is it our ages?” John asks.

“What do you mean?” Though she knows. She fixates on the landscape. There’s nothing better than this.

“Do you think we would be together if I were younger?”

“Yeah, maybe,” she admits. “I don’t think I could ever introduce you to my family as my boyfriend.”

“Isn’t age just a number?” She knows he knows it’s not. *Because of your body*, she thinks. Because of how, lately, in the darkness of the truck, he guides her hand to his cock—the uncharted mass—the silent gesture like a perversion of the night.

“Beth really liked you,” he says after they’ve all shared a meal in a hole-in-the-wall casino.

But I’m not your girlfriend, she thinks. “Does your sister think it’s weird that you hang out with young girls?”

“You’re not a girl, Hannah. You’re a woman.”

They park at the base of one of the copper-colored mountains. Drunk, they have sex in the back of his truck, and it feels like the least sensual activity they’ve been part of, together. How to tell him that she only wants part of him and not the rest? We’re both adults, she imagines him thinking, when he thinks about the natural course of things.

“I’M GOING TO that party at the storage units,” Hannah tells him a few weeks later. She circles a juniper tree like a cat. In the sky, a white daytime moon.

“You are?” He slinks around, tries to grab her by the waist. “You’re going to hang out with all those kids? Those hippies?” John’s disdain for the college, for the *kids*, is becoming intolerable.

“They’re my peers.”

“Maybe I’ll go, too.”

“Yeah, you should. Get out a little.”

ARTIFICIAL COLOR OF hula-hoops and tie-dye, vivid and bursting against the natural brown landscape. Hannah, too, emblazoned: a floor-length sundress, printed with women’s faces, Technicolor, illegible writing in a sixties style bubble font. She arrives with Eleanor, and the two make their way through the maze of storage units. Students masked in face paint lean against cinderblock walls, roll cigarettes. Others sing bluegrass. The vacant units are open, and in one, Hannah sees shirtless men handing out free homemade beer and veggie chili. In the common courtyard space, she sees him. “I’ll be right back,” she hears John tell his friend. He approaches slowly, with caution.

“Oh my god. You look awesome,” John says.

“I thought this might be the only time I could get away with this dress,” Hannah says, patting herself down. “You know, so I’d fit right in with the hippies.”

“Except you shower and smell good.” He reaches for her a little. Hannah scans the party. People toss fire into the air. The sun is setting. From the corner of her eye, she sees the abs of a shirtless man: he looks like Tarzan.

“I’m going to go get some food with Eleanor, I’ll talk to you later.”

“I’ll come find you,” he says, but already, she’s gone.

“WHAT’S GOING ON with you and John?” Eleanor asks, her mouth full of chili. Hannah had wondered why no one had asked until now. She knew they noticed: she and John, out together every weekend, even spotted out in the brush once, in the wilderness that grew instantly smaller at the discovery of classmates. She had come to enjoy the mystery they carried together, the way she’d never let John touch her in public to ensure their friends would never have anything solid to chew on.

“We’ve just been hanging out a lot,” Hannah says, passing the soggy end of a joint to Eleanor.

“He’s so old, dude. He likes you.” The women sip their home-brewed beer, tangy in a way it shouldn’t be—sharply delicious.

“We’ve kissed,” Hannah finally confesses. “Just a few times,” she lies.

“Holy shit,” Eleanor says flatly. Hannah contemplates continuing, divulging their clumsy sex, but there’s nothing to say anyway, nothing to report.

“You know he’s going to fall in love with you. That would be so John of him.” They sit with the facts Hannah cannot refute.

“We just get along so well,” Hannah says, and this, she knows, is the most honest confession she can make.

“Dude.” Eleanor exhales smoke to the sky.



MORE FIRE THROWERS now and people tossing poi, carving sacred geometries out of the black. All the light tonight, an offering. From behind, someone snaps a glow stick around Hannah's neck. The stranger's body is lean and tan; the fire illuminates a slender matrix of muscles beneath his skin. "It's you," she says. "You're Tarzan. You're beautiful." Silently, Tarzan threads a pink glow stick through her hair, takes her hand, and places a warm bottle of beer there. She looks at him, then at the teem of bodies, thinks, these are my people. And she doesn't count John among them, wonders if he is watching her.

All night, John and Hannah circle. So many people, so unlike their usual realm of quiet and mountains. Two oscillating bodies, one hungrier for the other. When they find their way back to one another, they stand in a circle with friends from their orientation group, glance at each other with an understanding. Listen to all this nonsense they're talking about, she can hear John think. We have something, she says back with her eyes. She's not sure where Tarzan went, but John is right there and Hannah feels *good*—the fire, all the bodies, lighting her from within. So, with her eyes, she gives John permission to kiss her. Let them see—an offering for him. Right there, they kiss, the only time there's so much noise she can't hear the wet music of their mouths. Then, just like in the movies, he says, "Let's get out of here."

In his house, the top of her dress is down to her waist, and she studies his body on the bed, graphs it like a carcass, the slices of skin old and young.

Young: forearms, hands, legs. Old: Stomach, face, cock with its shroud of gray hair. Even in her drunkenness, she knows that the lights and the music, the youthful flesh, the rarity of their public display brought her to this point. She cannot move.

“Come over here,” John says, rolling onto his back. His cock follows, landing limply on his leg.

“Why do you always want me on top?” Hannah asks. Leo licks her leg, and she turns him away violently. “Get out of here, dog.” She pushes his face.

“Always? This is only the second time.” His eyes leave the points of her nipples. He turns onto his side, an uncomplimentary posture that jolts Hannah to sobriety. “I didn’t know we had an always,” he says, his voice hued with an unfamiliar tone.

“Oh.” Hannah reaches for the other half of her dress, pulls it up, covers herself. Too cold to get into logistics, not in the mood for rationale.

“Don’t do that. Don’t *do that*,” he says. But Hannah can barely absorb the sudden desperation in his voice because there’s the awful squeak of plastic coming from the giant pool toy that is his bed. He’d sold his regular mattress—“downsizing”—and the sight and sound of him getting up off the air mattress, the rubbing together of plastic, the folds of skin, the struggle of movement is all too much. She could vomit. Or laugh. Instead she nears the front door, gathers up her things.

“Have I told you you have the most beautiful tits I’ve ever seen?” He has.

“I don’t like being on top,” Hannah says, looking him in the eye.

“I guess I’m afraid of hurting you, Hannah.” She imagines him on her, enveloping the whole of herself, this magical man-weight, unaccounted matter—yes, he could literally crush her.

“I think I’m going to go,” she says, reaching for her phone. “It’s almost two.”

“What? Really?” He slides into his Navy sweats, rubs his face. “I can drive you.”

“No, it’s ok. I’ll be fine.” And like the first time they kissed, she steps out in her neon dress, shivers against the cold, and walks the mile home.

THEN IN THE spring, almost a year since they’d met, he tells her the owners of Walnut Creek—the place where they’d spent three weeks in a group of fifteen, hiking, cooking, learning, practicing yoga, getting to know their bodies—have asked him to do some maintenance work, and will she come and join him. And although it’s spring, the air has a crispness and a certain hue of light more akin to fall. Nostalgia, an ever-lingering longing to be among this wilderness, to be with the person who showed her, moved her, once again, to say *yes*. John removed the camper shell so they could hang out in the open air. This is where Hannah sits, writing the words, *here again, back where we started*. John fixes an old lawn mower; the work streaks the clean air with the smell of tools and manly chemicals that seem to go hand in hand with handy work. She associates the smell with her father, quickly dismisses the thought, buries it.

Inside the barn where the orientation group had eaten dinner, Hannah

sits, and when John meets her at the edge of the table, she succumbs, lays herself flat. And just like the first time, she feels, more powerfully now, that their bodies weren't made to harmonize in this way—where their kissing had unfurled volumes about the nature of love and sensuality, time, rhythm, and place, their sex feels perverse. And on the table she realizes this fully, that all this time he was waiting for her to surrender, to give in, to be his girlfriend, his wife. He'd marry her, she knew this for certain, just as she knew she never would let herself be anything at all to him. She is young, and he wants it too deeply, and she does not want or need his love. That night, curled against him, against the wind, she tries to explain this, but doesn't have the words.

SHE'D SEEN, DURING the monsoons, the way it took endless days of rain before the cracked earth began to pool back into itself. She herself was overflowing with John's neediness, with few openings for absorption. He started talking more seriously about dropping out. "I'm so sick of this school's fucking politics," he'd complain, while Hannah fell more in love with her studies, her poems, and her books.

For days, she doesn't respond to John's messages and calls. After one week, he leaves a card on her windshield. On the cover, a glossy photo of a scrawny ponderosa deep inside a hidden crevasse they'd visited together, lit by the sun:

Hannah, I feel as though I have dropped and smashed something beautiful. Our friendship is unique, delightful, painful, scary, and loving all at once. I

think it can be fixed if we collect the pieces and rebuild. I miss you, my friend.

She tucks the card away.

Before he moves, they meet in the evening, in front of a fire he'd built at his friend's farm. Alone, they ruminate over the course of things. For Hannah, it's the natural course, the obvious, inevitable end. He needs her permission to add her to his list of great loves, and she will not grant it. He says some harsh things, things like, "You're so fucking immature, like a child." Does she need to say that she is the same age of his own child, the kid he'd confessed one night that he'd had, but never met?

John drops out, leaves their small desert town and moves to Alaska, where it is beautiful but void of her, as she finishes her studies, allowing their aftermath to sink in—a revitalizing dose of vitamins. At times, she tells herself she'll never talk to him again—it's the only way to pull away from one another—but every so often, when she's feeling particularly moved by a landscape, an image, a time of day, she sends him a brief message: *hello*.

"DO YOU REMEMBER the spot we buried Leo?" John asks one night while they're on the phone.

"I do," Hannah says.

"Maybe you could go there. I'm curious if animals have found it."

"I remember what it looked like, but I don't think I could find my way back to it."

"Don't worry about it," he says. "Are you still writing?"

"I was writing before you called, actually," Hannah says.

“What are you writing about?”

“I’m trying to write about the desert. This small desert town of ours. Well, I guess it’s not yours anymore.”

“Am I in it?” And then there’s that long silence. This time she is afraid to speak, as if it would fracture some very fragile understanding to pieces.

“No, you’re not in it,” she lies, that forgotten manipulation.

“Well, you’re ruining your chances at it being a best seller.”

“Shut up, John,” she says.

After, at her desk, she looks at her story. Too close to home, she thinks. This isn’t right. She changes his name to a name of a man she doesn’t know, but that doesn’t seem to solve anything, so she changes her name to something else, something plain, like Sarah. But the pieces are unchanged, the imagination a frivolous thing, she thinks. And how can she write a desert story absent of him? How to write him out of her?

Hours go by as she tries to reshape the narrative, avoids familiar shapes in the dark outside her window. She takes out the prickly pears and canyons, the mountains and pickup trucks, the creosote and datura. The monsoons. She replaces them with Alaska’s icy rivers and the bone-on-bone sound of antlers against trees. In the story, her heroine emerges from an ice-tipped cabin, to find snowmelt; the man walks out behind her and together they lift their faces to the sun. Only then can Hannah see, finally, how things could be different. Only then is it no longer their story.

SARA RYAN

THE LIZARD THAT LIVED FOREVER

- Winner: *Big Sky, Small Prose Flash Contest* -

I HATE TO SAY that I dream about men, but I do. about men who have gone off and married other girls. moved to other colonial houses in Virginia. it is like strapping the tree branch to my bicycle and riding until I become concrete.

•

Monday drew a circle around me and lit it on fire. Wednesday learned my name and spit it onto my lap.

•

I scrub an opal earring with a wire brush and it turns to gold in my hands. I have dug it out of a dead woman's pink jewelry box. I was born in October, and I feel like I need to polish all of the opals that ever existed.

•

this morning, a man walks into the store where I work and tells me he is an ordained minister. he asks to see an antique straight razor and cradles the carved handle in his hands like a small bird.

•

the truth is, my sister will not feed the pet lizard so the crickets jump around

our house like small flickers of light. they sing to each other. the lizard jumps from our palms as though she has never been afraid. when she dies, she curls under a rock and turns to dust. we bury her in the backyard as though we loved her.

•

when the man at the store tells me what he thinks of my body, I want to tell him that I haven't been touched in three years. maybe I am lying. maybe this is the struggle he speaks of.

•

I think about my sister's lizard. how we named her a name I don't remember. I think about how she lived longer than all the other lizards. I think about the strange scars left behind on my body; their pale and vicious takeover. the part I do remember: applying medicine every night, peeling off the scab in the morning, and doing it all over again. and again.

•

I see the man again. and this time, I shrink into a hummingbird. I try to laugh at his jokes and show my teeth. what he doesn't know is that I feel all the poison. I smell it on his skin. on his scabby arms. his combat boots are laced tight and tall as though they have never left his feet.

•

maybe a stranger is someone I have never met. maybe he takes a picture of me without my permission. maybe he is 5 beers deep and reeks of smoke. maybe a stranger owns my body, in some sick and unfair way. he knows what will make me move down the bar. he knows what will make me shift

in my seat until my dress becomes a chrysalis.

•

this is to say: I have never forgiven myself for the times I smiled when I should have screamed. for the men who asked when they knew the answer. the last time I saw you, I ran through the parking lot like a deer caught in the line of fire. of course, I could just take the blindfold off. of course, I could just let you shoot me and it'd all be over.

•

before the overgrown lawn. before the man. before all the men. before I buried my trust in the sea. before I ate a fig for the first time and it felt like a universe found its way into my mouth. I never knew survival like that. how to say thank you but with needles in your teeth.

•

in the end—all dust. the lizard. the rusty razorblade. we have all known too many cheeks. we have all known too many men who will tell us what they think without caring at all.

•

I will never forget what you said to me when you left: you begged me to stop speaking. you begged me to stop saying your name.

RUTH JOFFRE

CONCUSSION

- *Runner-Up: Big Sky, Small Prose Flash Contest* -

HE ALWAYS APPEARS in the corner of my eye: a pale figure with a long black overcoat and a bloodless face. My doctor says this is common—that after a traumatic brain injury it is normal to experience symptoms like mine (auditory and visual hallucinations, sensitivity to bright light and loud noises, and an overwhelming desire to sleep—which, she says, is the brain’s way of healing itself and restoring equilibrium). I’m standing at the kitchen sink when he appears, his black eyes and sunken cheekbones hovering in the doorway, as if requesting access to my mundane life, but I refuse to look up at him. There are bubbles in the sink, and my wife is tottering in the backyard, her graceful limbs weaving between chairs and flowers as she picks up after our party, collecting cigarette butts in the shallow of a wine glass. She’s giggling about something, either the table she nearly tripped over or the diamond bracelet she pulls out of the stone birdbath, when the glitter of the jewels in the porch light reminds me of that moment just hours before when our friend tossed the diamond bracelet over her shoulder and said, “Fuck him,” of her soon-to-be-ex-husband. “It’s over. It’s in the past,” she said with the confidence of a woman who has never once walked down to the beach in the middle of the night and decided to shrug off her life—to

throw herself into the waters and let the current carry her where it may— only to return in the morning, shamefaced and sober, and ask of the clothes folded tidily on top of a rock, “Are these mine?” I wonder every day if this is indeed my life, if there isn’t something I’ve forgotten about my wife and my love for her that my brain is trying to draw up from the murky waters where I hit my head against the rock. In the corner of my eye, I see that pale specter shaking with fury, mouthing the words I know I need to hear, but I cannot bear to listen to him. When my wife comes back inside, she puts the bracelet in a drawer, “In case she comes back for it,” she says, though we both know the bracelet will stay there, untouched, for years, until one of us opens the drawer and I, at long last, remember.

ELIZA SMITH

RAPTURE

- Runner-Up: Big Sky, Small Prose Flash Contest -

MY UNCLE SAYS the world will end when I am thirty-one years old. Or the world will not end, but the son of God will return and rapture the faithful, and either I will not live in the world anymore, or the world will not be the world. It will be a dark and frightening place. Something about gnashing of teeth.

I am eleven when my uncle makes this prediction: only twenty years to go. After school, I tell my mother that I don't want to be a veterinarian anymore; there's no point. I will die when I'm thirty-one, I say. Or I will cease to exist. Or I will levitate into the sky. Or I will be gnashed by teeth. I am supposed to be happy about my uncle's prediction, but I feel cheated. I want a whole life, even if that means I have to die at the end.

My uncle delivers his prediction on a white board during Chapel. Chapel is on Tuesday mornings at the church school where he resides as lead pastor. On Tuesday mornings at church school, I am required to wear a long khaki skirt with a navy or white long-sleeved button-up shirt, brown or black shoes, and a brown or black belt. There are no rules about my hair, so long

as it's a natural color.

I am generally relieved to go to Chapel because it means we get a break from the cubbies where we do our work independently all day out of little books called paces, as in *I am working through my paces so quickly, I'll graduate when I'm sixteen*. But one Tuesday morning we're held up, something about a plane in a tower where New Yorkers go to trade things. My cousin rolls a television set into our room and turns on the news, and no one goes through their paces anymore, we just stand in our skirts and ties and watch the burning of a city that has only ever existed to me in theory.

Eventually, someone decides we should move to Chapel, so we file to the sanctuary and pray until our parents pick us up, the same time as always.

“Did you gas up the car?” I ask. My mother doesn't understand so I say, “the terrorists!” and she thinks I'm saying something about a sleepover, so I yell “THE TERRORISTS!” and turn on the radio. My mother is a night nurse, she's been asleep all day, and I watch her face as she processes what the world has been processing since morning. I imagine it's a bit like the face I made when I discovered the world would end when I was thirty-one, or maybe it's the face I would have made had I learned that information the night before my thirty-first birthday.

My mother stares through the windshield and her face grows red and the

corners of her mouth begin to shake, and she stares and stares and stares at nothing, or our future, or our future of nothingness, and to this day she has never seen New York City as it is, as it exists now, it is always on fire in her mind. I try to tell my mother the city is beautiful, but what do I know? I've only seen it twice and I have four years left to live.

ELISA KARBIN

STOP CONSONANT

I, having walked myself through the work
of mapping this disappointing Mobius figure
eight of skin & skin & skin, arrive nightly
at the juncture of the question mark's dark
hook—the meaning of me, blinking through
the crave of the bursting fricative woman
I meant to become—& move embolismic
through the unlit house, baiting the oil-moon
to leave its stain. As if some kind of cocktail
napkin, my body, all its useless flam & flesh,
is only meant to absorb & glut, or, like some
weatherclock, some dumb & frightful socialite,
announce *it is cold; he is nice; it is good; he seemed nice*
it got late & I shouldn't have but couldn't not.

HEATHER HECKMAN-MCKENNA

TILT

GREEN AND RED construction paper Christmas rings mom and I make together line the room. Hands sticky with glue stick. A surprise for dad when he gets home from work. We hang the rings around the room, mom and I. After, I pull out Candy Land. She draws away when I bring it over, but my longing look brings her back. Our pieces sprint around the board. I narrowly avoid Molasses Swamp. *I do not notice that I am winning today same as I do every other day.* I feel light as a cloud that could float right over Gumdrop Mountain, so buoyant I don't even need Ice Cream Floats to get across the wavy river. *I do not notice the lines of tension that must be etched in mom's face as she rises to go to the bathroom shortly after we start our second game.* I walk on all fours like a cat and play with our sweet black and grey tiger-stripe kitty, Nefertiti. After a while, after quite some time, after no time at all I tell Nef that I will be right back, that she should keep playing with the string on her own until I get back, that she should not let her brother Garc steal the string as he would take it as his own and he did not like to play with me. *I do not remember how long it is before I go to check.* I ask her please to not lose the string as I don't know where to find another. I remind her that I'm scared of Garc's scratches if he gets the string. I feel

slightly heavier as I walk like a cat to the bathroom door, almost as if I'm on a leash that pulls me down and down and down.

I hear a choking sound coming from the bathroom, a sound I have not heard before. I do not know if I should open the door. I do not know if I should open it.

I am proud of how quietly I open the door. Mom, curled in a tight ball on the floor. Mom, sobbing silently into the Charlie Brown towel she used earlier to dry me off. Mom, curled in a tight ball on the floor. Mom, choking that scary choke sound into the towel.

I look at her for a long time.

I am proud of how quiet I am.

I tiptoe inside. She startles, draws in a loud breath like a stuck vacuum. I curl up on the floor next to her. Her eyes shine sad. I am scared, but I reach out my hand and touch her. I do not know what I will find when I do, but she is still solid enough for now.

I curl closer. I hold her so tight my arms go numb.

Dad arrives some time later. Mom and I are on the couch. Mom watches TV and I watch her. I do not touch her. I do not think I can touch her. I wonder if I can touch her. She smiles at me. Dad cooks, and over dinner he marvels at my paper ring workmanship. Mom's eyes twinkle. I used to think this was happy, this familiar look, but now I think it is happy and sad in a way I've not noticed before.

"Mom?"

"Yes peaty?"

“Nothing.”

“What is it, honey?”

“It’s okay.”

• • •

I SIT ALONE in a dark room. Outside my one window, I watch coniferous branches swaggering in the dusk the way they do in winter, as if in lack of deference to all else surrounding them. I am alone, but I feel the sway of danger from below, downstairs. But perhaps the sway I sense is merely the rocking of my own body as I sit on this daybed, searching the world outside. I do not think. I do not feel. I rock and I watch. Even if I wanted to, I would not be able to stop the ceaseless rocking of my body. I do not try.

How long ago was it now? Five minutes? Twenty? Three hours? Seven? Time has little relevance to me since the moment, however long ago it was, that I told my husband to do it.

“Do it,” I said. “Pull the fucking trigger.” I remember saying it quietly. Soft, like you might sing a love song. But of course I can’t really know.

I remember his face, stunned. I remember the warm trickle of blood in my left ear from where he struck me with the side of the gun, the liquid sensation surprisingly warm and comforting in contrast to everything else. I remember the almost atavistic sense of loss I felt, and I remember the depth with which I accepted that loss. Nothing mattered. He would

do it or he wouldn't, and that's all there was in my world. Life or not life. The Kimber .45 pressed against my left cheek, and I, glaring at him, for the first time in my life entirely unworried about whether or not I would survive this moment.

I called him out. I told him to fucking do it. *I always told him to fucking do it.*

He always did.

For the first time. For the first time he didn't rise to it. My taunt.

I remember his face, open-mouthed, stunned. I remember his big wide eyes, like a cartoon Daffy Duck. He lowered the .45. He tossed it on my childhood bed the way you might toss an errant sock. He walked out the door of my childhood bedroom. He closed the door softly behind him. The lacquered wood grain patterns on the door looked like they shimmered for minutes.

Now I sit, rocking and watching the world outside my window. Nothing matters, with the possible exception of those quivering pines. It is irrelevant to me whether the trees are quivering, or I am. The perceived beauty is the one thing in all the world that matters to me now.

I can see it, I think. I can see how pretty it is. For the first time in days or weeks or months. I see color. My world no longer gray and flat. I did not know I ceased to see. Those pines. The only green in an otherwise sparse and beautiful world of white. If I could only stop rocking for even a moment I might be able to cry. Because how beautiful. Because how vibrant. Because how alive.

Because I did not know I had lost it. In these months of violence and terror.

What else have I lost, I think. What else have I lost that I do not even see?

• • •

I FIND MOM in the closet again, wrapped in blankets up to her neck. It is a good sign that today her face is uncovered.

“Are you hungry?” I whisper into the dark space.

She doesn’t respond.

“Thirsty?”

She nods. A thrill rushes through me at this level of responsiveness, and I sprint fast as I can down those tan-carpeted stairs, Scooby-Doo my way around the oak-floored corner, mad-dash to the blue-stenciled kitchen, and nearly drop the glass I select in my rush to get water inside of it. The glass tinkers off the faucet, but it does not chip. I run back upstairs, fast as I can without spilling.

I hold the water out to her, an offering outstretched.

“Can I come in?”

“I don’t know. Can you?” Her voice is steadier than I expect. Then I realize I have this thought every time I find her in here.

“May I come in?”

She shrugs. I hand her the glass and slip in beside her. It’s a tight fit,

even though, as mom reminds me all the time, I haven't even yet hit the doctor's growth chart for seven-year-olds.

"I think we need bigger closets."

She laughs, soprano voice rising and falling in her pretty melody, but I realize I do not know why she laughs. *I don't know yet that everyone's mothers don't hide in their closets. I don't know this, though I've somehow instinctually known never to tell a single person.*

"I'm sorry today is hard." I feel embarrassed when I say this. Like I don't understand something I should, and I just failed the test.

"Every day is hard."

"Why?" *I almost don't ask. I almost know there's no answer. Or at least no answer I'm ready to hear.*

She makes that choking sound that happens sometimes. I can tell she would push further inside the closet, if there were more to push into. She wants me to leave, I know.

"I'm sorry today is so hard." I speak louder than I mean to. She pauses. Looks at me.

"I would if it wouldn't hurt you so much." Her voice a stuttered reluctance.

I still don't understand, and I feel my face grow hot, because it's clear now that I really should. I can tell she would say more, but her hysterics rise, a pitchy keen. Usually this is a good thing. Usually it means there are only a few hours left before she emerges from her cave.

Today it does not feel like a good thing.

I wait for seconds or minutes.

I allow myself a noisy breath in. I sip at air.

I finally ask. "Hurt me?"

"I should never have had children. I knew I shouldn't." Her voice an echoing descant in its common refrain. A refrain that hardly registers anymore, though the familiar sting prickles like when I stepped on that sea urchin on the Rhode Island ocean floor. The hot sting rises from the pit of my stomach into my chest.

This time she continues past the refrain: "I knew better."

I feel like I might get sick on the floor. "Knew what?" I finally ask.

"I'm sick, peaty."

I know she's not saying she's got cancer or anything, but I get a little shaky all the same. I try to stop the shaking, gripping my hands harder, tensing my body tighter, but I notice that my body starts to curl inward, and she always cries harder when I curl up.

"I know how I'd do it," she says.

Do what?" I'm shaking now, hard, and I acquiesce to my body's inward coil.

"There are two ways."

I look at her. My eyes feel too big for my head and too thick to keep open. I keep looking at her as I rub them.

"It depends on if it's here or somewhere else." She pauses. She waits. I don't know what she waits for. I feel my heartbeat in my palms so hard they hurt. I sip again at air.

“I hurt, peaty.” Usually this term of endearment tells me she loves me, this inversion of “sweetie peaches” to “peaty sweeches.” Today it feels strangely barbed. My palm hurts so much I turn my hand to look at it.

“What can I do?” I ask.

Another long pause.

“If it were here, I’d do it with no mess.”

“No mess?”

“If it were here, it would probably be my pills. But I couldn’t. You couldn’t find me. I couldn’t. Don’t worry. I couldn’t.”

She is not the one crying anymore.

It is hard to keep my head raised. I stare at her face. I stare so long it hurts.

“And anyway it would take too long.”

I reach out to grasp her hand, but she is wrapped tight as a corset. I pull on her blanket, but she doesn’t release an inch.

“It would be at a hotel, I think. I would buy a big shower curtain and lie on it in a bathtub.”

Here I go blank. I don’t remember more from this moment. I recall too much from others.

• • •

MY FACE TINGED red and hot from impact and warm gobs of berries. I feel heat grow on my skin like a burgeoning field of poppies, smudges

of red here, globs of it there, predominantly converged around my right ear. The ear took the brunt of the impact when I saw what was happening and turned my face fast to the side. Looking at the spectacle around me, one might wonder why I felt less protective toward my ear and right-side-hairline than I did, say, my nose or my mouth or my front cheek. My ear certainly doesn't seem to appreciate the underlying sentiment of its less-than-front-of-face worth. There is a single blueberry crushed in the ear, popped inside out like a tiny stepped-on cockroach.

My left hand remains out before me, as if still holding the plate with my breakfast. Embarrassed, I draw it down into my lap. I jab myself in the thigh with a fork I didn't know I was still holding, more out of curiosity than anything else. The pain throbs a dull, far-away sensation, like sympathetic pangs I might feel if I watched someone else jab at their own leg with a fork.

I glance around. Remnants of smushed blueberry pancake and maple syrup stick to the wall, dark and thick and sparkly in sunlight. Probably fortunate that the drywall is burgundy. Shattered remains of a ceramic plate lie behind the couch. The plate had enough speed toward my face to leave a not insignificant confluence of green and blue and white ceramic daggers in the drywall, and I wonder if my astrophysicist father would be able to determine the plate's top velocity based on the mass of the plate and the mass of my face and the mass of the drywall and the mass en-total of the shards. The etched-in-wall evidence (not yet memory, still quite there in the real world) ricochets me back to the time he smashed

my forehead off the B&H Oil wall-hanging calendar. Stars glittered in my vision's periphery for hours after. I wonder, does he consciously look for such places in which evidence remains clandestine, or is it merely to his fortune that his destruction tends to be so well hidden? To be sure, remains of violence have always been detected so much later that those discovering it shake their heads in perplexity. *"Anders, have you noticed this circular indentation in the wall here?" dad asks, lifting the calendar and pointing. "Hub! I guess I coulda smashed a SCUBA tank without knowing it?" Anders answers.*

Of course you did. A SCUBA tank carried at my skull's precise height.

I find myself standing, though I don't recall having risen from the couch. Berries and shattered ceramic fall to the woven rug. I wonder if I'll be able to remove all of the brittle fragments from the rug's thousand little crevices. I don't want the cats to get cut. He falls to his knees, wincing, reaching up to touch many tiny wounds on my face, and I almost laugh at the drama of it before I stumble away. I don't remember walking to the bathroom, but that's where I find myself, door latch locked, curled on the deliciously cool tile floor, head wrapped in arms, ears making "Waaoh, waaoh, waaoh" sounds in a decidedly beautiful rhythm, almost as if I have my very own tiny drummer trapped inside my head.

He speaks through the locked door: "Babe. I need to see your face." "Babe. You're bleeding." "Babe. I need to see how bad it is." "Babe. I need to know you're okay." "Babe. Babe. Your face. Your poor face." "Babe." "Babe." "Babe."

I turn my blueberry-blocked right ear in his direction. His rising shouts morph into a fringed buzzing. It's like listening to a fly struggle against a window. My face warms from a rogue stream of sunlight slipping through the shuttered window. I feel wasps sting wet on my face. I open clenched eyes to warm red pools growing beneath my face. The cool tile soothes my body, and I decide I will rest for a long while. Rest until I am no longer tired. Rest for a long, long time. I will rest.

But then I remember. I remember what happened. I remember how it started. And because I have to, I rise.

I will call my grandfather. At this moment, he drives from Rhode Island with my uncle. He is probably already on Interstate 95 heading into Maine. I will call him soon, before he gets too much further away from home. I cannot leave the house in this condition. Today's home inspection in Damariscotta will have to be rescheduled.

Cool porcelain sink. Crushed blueberry juices drip down my ear canal. I touch inside my ear. I look at it in the mirror. Dark purple/blue melds with fresh blood bubbles creating a new color I've never quite seen before. (Berry-Blue-Blood? Very-Berry-Blue-Blood? Very-Berry-Blue-Blood-with-Flecks-of-Off-Yellow-Ear-Wax? Perhaps I'll take a photo and make a new color suggestion to the folks at Crayola.) I turn my face to the mirror. It reflects back pink and red. I am more grateful than ever for my hockey goalie reactions and my instinct to turn my face as I did. I bleed heavily from a few spots, and I don't know yet what to do about that, but the bruising will mostly surround my jaw and hairline. It will be easy enough

to cover with my two-foot-long hair.

I pluck the berry from my ear. It makes a sloshing sound, as if juice squished from a fresh, ripe lemon. Some internal pressure sucks the stinging juices deeper into my ear. Anders still speaks, more quietly now, outside of the door. I unlatch it, then grab a yellow facecloth from the cupboard, one of the ones the neighbors gave us after the house fire. I have to think my parents won't notice just the one gone. I wet it with cool water from the sink, compressing it to the side of my head as I hear the doorknob turn. Large looming presence behind. I do not look in his direction, but I feel him staring at the red pools on the floor. He approaches. I watch through the mirror. The waaoh, waaoh, waaoh heavier in my head. He takes the now-orangish facecloth from me. His touch gentle. He washes blood from my face.

I cry. I nuzzle. I collapse into his big, hard chest.

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STOP. STOP! *STOP!* Everything stops. The world stops with the final wisping thread of a scream (a wisp of a scream turned whisper, yet still that wisp lengthens and widens, a penetrating gray, perpetual and ceaseless, and I don't believe it will ever end). (The endless rotating tilt of the world—or is that merely the tilt of the globe in dad's library?—permanently ends, for us at least.) They don't know how to help her anymore, her providers. The med cocktails didn't work. The hospitalizations didn't work. The many

rounds of ECT didn't work. Mom urgently yearns for a freedom I can only imagine.

I can only imagine.

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THERE ARE STILL times, many, despite the days and weeks and months and years since I last saw him, when I want to find him, when I want to pull back on the days and the layers and scratch at his stupid skin, when I want to scream FUCK YOU right in his fucking ear, when I want to tell him of all the confusion and pain and exhaustion he's caused me. I feel, I feel, I feel, but perhaps I can't quite define it, perhaps I don't know how I feel, or what I feel, or maybe there just isn't a word for it, maybe there isn't a word to describe the utter loss and confusion I still feel when I think of what he took from me. Or, maybe better described, when I think of what I allowed him to take from me. Because I did, I allowed it, so maybe I want to scream FUCK ME too, maybe I feel that I'm more to blame than anyone else, him included, maybe I wonder why I'm even here now, why I let myself be so humiliated and then when it was far too late fought back and screamed no and screamed why and screamed and screamed but even that didn't really happen even that was in my head. I walked out the door, that was it, a simple moment, with him begging me not to go to work, and I could tell that if dad hadn't still been home he would have grabbed me and forced me, but he couldn't because dad was nearby, and I took the

opportunity and I walked away, I walked and walked so far, I walked at least fifty feet to my car, and I got in and I drove away, drove and drove and drove so far, drove at least three miles to my job in the same town as my home, and I sat at my desk and I turned on my computer and I felt nothing and I started my work but that's not really true I stared at my email and I stared out the window and I stared at my work list and I shut my eyes for long moments and stared into myself and I didn't know what I was doing but I knew I had to keep walking, so I did, I left the office and I walked and walked and walked, walked into the woods behind the office, oh at least a hundred yards away, and I sat under a tree and I didn't cry I had no tears I had nothing left to give even to myself so I played with the brittle pine needles and I looked up into the tree and I listened to chirping birds and barking squirrels and I even broke some pine needles and put the sticky needles under my nose and tried to infuse my whole being with their sharp fragrance but that didn't work and nothing else worked either so I got up and I walked back into the office and I sat at my computer and I sat there and did nothing for minutes or hours I'm not sure but it really doesn't matter. So FUCK YOU that's what I have to say to him and I mean it more than anyone else in the history of the world has ever meant it. *Fuck you.*

But then of course I have to come back, I have to come back to me, to find me again, to realize that I didn't know what the hell I was doing, and I didn't understand, and I didn't mean to hurt anyone, least of all myself. And I walk the streets here at Webster Lake, and I watch the lake, I watch

the ripples rippling, and I watch a pair of ducks that glides across the ripples making new ripples, and then another pair of ducks gliding past those two intertwining sets of ripples creates yet more ripples in another direction and damn, it's dumb, it's a lame analogy, I know it is, but I sit on that dock and I cry because I see how easy it is for ripples to ripple one another, and man my life was easy to fuck up and man it was easy to fuck others' lives up. And then of course a stupid little tear drips into the water and ripples a new ripple and it starts the whole damn thing up again and I have to walk away. So I do I walk away just as resolutely as I walked away from him but that time I felt so empty and this time I feel so full and why do I feel more full now than I did then why do my boots feel so heavy my stomach sinking into them so I decide to sit down but then I look around and I realize I'm sitting in the street right in front of someone's lawn and I may be crazy but I don't need the neighborhood to think so too so I get up and I force my iron boots to walk a few hundred feet forward by where the dead-end road circles then I sit in a patch of trees in the shade where no one can see me and I sit there and I feel everything and I feel nothing and I wonder everything and I wonder nothing and I hug my arms around my neck but the pressure around my neck reminds me of how he put his arms around my neck but it wasn't a hug and my breathing would become so labored and my kicking and punching and panicking and I remove my arms from around my own neck because I can't even hug myself without remembering him choking me and the pain sears in waves then nothing and I feel the gravity of my own tide pulling me under and

I close my eyes and I don't know how long they're closed but a car honks at a passing pedestrian and they are talking and I rise and they nod to me but there is an odd look to their eyes and I can tell that I am on the inside now and unreachable and they are uncomfortable so I keep walking my boots heavy on the ground and I feel his heavy boots on the ground as they stomped toward me in his rage and I stop and I close my eyes and I hear the cars on the road but it doesn't matter and I see his stiff and brittle face rising toward me brittle with his razor edge and I would punch out at him but that never helped that always made it worse not that it made me stop trying to fight him off I always tried and always lost and he was sure to humiliate me in my loss me who was more than one hundred pounds lighter and a foot shorter but that made no difference to how hard he went and I am walking again and my thoughts rise and fall with my heavy boots and a tree branch whips across my face but actually my face walked into a tree branch because I am not looking where I'm going and I look up and I realize that I walked all the way around the island and now I'm walking through the woods on the other side of the island and I'm moments from being on the water again and I don't want to be on the water but apparently something in me does because here I am again by the water again so I sit in the dirt and play again with pine needles and I watch the ripples. I watch them.

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THE CUSTOM KIMBER .45—the companion he bought and gave to me as a gift, one serial number away from the Kimber he threatened me with mere months ago—weighs heavy, cumbersome in my hand, warmth penetrating already searing skin. Its one cold eye stares from below into my face. I fold pale fingers around the grip of the .45 and lift.

I stop, hand enwrapping the pistol, lifted quarter-way to my face. I grip tighter still.

I remember mom's eyes, calm as old sticks floating.

I sit in my blue, blue room. Always my favorite color and now I surround myself in it. It does not make me feel better anymore. My blue room with blue ceiling and blue paintings and blue trash basket and blue stereo and blue clothes scattered, though admittedly the trim around the single window and the lacquered oak door with the crisscrossing grain is an off-white named “Autumnal Equinox.” I chose it not because of the color, but because I loved the name. Isn't that funny why we choose things. Autumnal equinox. Night crawling longer as it claims day's light.

Mom's eyes shimmered cold as calm.

Winter has always been my favorite season. I love the cold. I love that winter's arrival signifies that the cold will end again, some day, when chilled fractals drift imperceptibly into frigid drizzles.

I wish I could believe the cold will end again.

I have a glass painting, blue, directly in front of me. There's a purplish-blue tapestry that hangs to my left as I sit on my penguin-patterned blue-sheeted bed grasping my .45 so hard even my hand looks

like it might revert to the blueness surrounding me. I glance at my blue candle, burning low, overpowering me with a scent that seems now to underwhelm dulled sensibilities. *(Where was I supposed to turn when the problem-solving methods I'd always been exposed to all involved an ending. Or the threat of an ending. Always the threat of an ending. A permanency that cannot be mitigated or undone.)* My room has lost its soothing sway over me, yet I love my blue room.

He cried, my father, begging her. Closed door, but it made no matter. Such an insignificant barrier.

I grasp the grip of my .45 tightly. My sweaty palms make the grip slick. It is difficult to grasp. Self-loathing rises as lurid bile in the back of my throat.

I did not open the door to my parents' room. I rolled my eyes and turned away.

I clench my .45.

I imagine: the cartridge explodes in action as I pull the trigger, muzzle held directly to my overwarm face. As I pull on the large piece, my small index finger angles strangely on the stiff trigger, causing my hand to shift slightly upward. *(I felt it happening, as if a supernovic collision of my mother and the violence I survived. Violence I survived alone. Violence I survived because my parents sunk more than a hundred thousand dollars into us. Into him.)*

I imagine: the trigger releases the sear, which drops the hammer on the firing pin, and the pin punches the cartridge containing the powder

and the pretty metal projectile. Upon impact of the pin, the powder ignites. (*Violence I survived because it started two days after we were married, and what the hell else was I supposed to do. Violence I survived—silently—because my mother always spoke with such derision of “those women.” Violence I survived because I’d always survived before, alone, and I could do it again, surely, and I could not let my family down.*) I imagine: the energy, naturally seeking the path of least resistance, detonates toward the opening where the projectile is held ready in the chamber. The hollow point bullet fulminates outward through the barrel pointed just slightly diagonally upward in front of my nose. (*Since I didn’t know what else to do to reclaim myself and my spaces after such violence, I turned back to the places where violence occurred. I worked to reclaim those spaces precisely by returning to them.*)

I imagine: the bullet tears through the near-diaphanous layer of skin from my nose to the fringes of each upper cheek, ever-so-slightly rouged from the effort, mere seconds before, exerted to hold myself, if only for one more instant, from pulling that trigger. (*So I went back to the place in Rockport where he smashed my face against brick. I sat there, on the secluded side street sidewalk. I sat by the corner where he smashed my face, and I bounced a bouncy ball I bought in a gumdrop machine nearby off the brick, because I had to create some new memory there, but what the hell else was I supposed to do to reclaim a brick wall around the corner from a favorite restaurant?)* I imagine: the bullet erupts forward, mushrooming through everything in its path. The skin parts easily for the bullet, so readily in

fact as to be almost willing, as if a velvety red theater curtain opening to an excited audience packed tight in their seats at the season premier of some renowned Broadway musical (let's call it *Next to Normal*). The theater curtain provides a momentary red flicker, a pause before the show's beginning; the skin curtain opens ceaselessly. Ceaseless as far as the skin will be concerned. Viscous red pouring will be its last experience before the skin disintegrates into the nothingness it came from. Or is it the somethingness. But it won't matter to the skin anymore.

Mom lay prone again on old floor. I could not see her face. I dared not look further into the closet.

I imagine: the curtain opens to a skull that lacerates upon the bullet's impact. Fractured fragments levitate and separate only briefly before shattering entirely in the bullet's reverberations. The bullet receives the brain. It ribbons upon contact, ribbons then shrivels in a final defense against the unexpected blitz. (Unexpected? Is that even possible?) (*The next New Year's Eve, I watched the movie Miracle again, and I ordered from the same Chinese place, and I sat in the same seat on the same couch, and I opened the same DVD container, and I recreated everything just the same, but this time I watched it alone, and I cried again, and there was no violence, and I tried to reclaim this movie—an important one on levels far transcending my fucking ex-husband—and I cried this time for a different reason.*) I imagine: the brain ruptures and tatters, gaps in flesh overflowing with blood, but not in a defensive response. The blood has nowhere else to go after the bullet rips every vein and capillary in its path, brain matter choking,

spurting, drowning. The heart pumps, either unaware of the assault or in a final desperate measure for self-preservation (utterly unknowing of its owner's intentions—self-defense on the most primal level), but the frantic beating only forces blood through the gaping cavity faster and faster and faster (ironic considering the heart desperately attempts to hold its owner to life), cascading out of me until I'm all but crusty inside.

Eyes drawn down further, despite my efforts to the contrary, as if by magnet. Mom lay on the floor again. Recurrent. As if planned. This cycle. This cycle without end.

I can feel it, though I haven't yet pulled that trigger. Gratitude rushes, a sticky warmth like falling blood. The .45's weight substantive in my hand. *(And I nestled my face into the blue floral couch, the one directly in front of the fireplace dad installed just a few years before, and I held myself on that couch for long minutes, and this time I was not being shoved and choked and suffocated into it.)*

I grasp my .45 tightly once more, grasp and lift, lift to my face.

I saw no evidence of mom's breathing. No subtle rise and fall of the chest. I dared not yet draw closer.

I am parched. I need something to wet me. I need my room's blueness to cool me off. I need to feel saturated. Saturated with anything but these unbearably hot waves of dithyrambic stuffiness, congesting every empty cavity of my anatomy. Saturated with sticky warmth, like freshly baked cinnamon buns sliding down my lungs and receding further, from my heart and liver and into my stomach and through the large intestines,

ebbing into each organ, systematically, one by one. *(But what do I do with a gun and my own childhood bedroom? How does that space get reclaimed? Shower curtains in containers large enough for a body rise to mind. Because that's what happens with guns. You press them to your skull, or someone else does. It really doesn't matter. They're pressed against your head all the same.)* There's still a choice. The stainless barrel revolves subconsciously in my hand, and it catches a glint of sun from my open window. Its winked affirmation.

Sunlight through the window lit the calloused soles of mom's feet. The rest mere shape in shadow.

I will not shoot myself through the temple. I refuse to swallow down the muzzle. I will shoot myself straight on. My face will be obliterated into the nothingness it came from, to the nothingness mom almost went to, and I want to do it in my blue room. An echoing moment, though not for me. Mere triumph, ever unknown.

Mom's dark profile. A puff of breath. My eyes widened. I inhaled sharply.

Over myself. Is it a triumph? My brain may passionately believe so, but every particle of my body vehemently disagrees. The moment that bullet rips through skin, every neuron instantaneously reverts to survival mode, regardless of what the brain thinks it wishes. Or wishes it thinks. The conscious brain does not control the body on that fundamentally basic level; on the contrary, the body's primary purpose, and the subconscious brain's role, is to ensure its own survival. *(I vacillate from light to dark. From reclaiming to wracking desolation. Euphoria to blanket*

closet hiding.) The brain's control centers compel us to breathe, for instance, even when we don't wish to, to maintain our hearts' rhythmic jigs long past when they should stop, a ship already half sunk beneath a tidal onslaught. My brain the same blood-and-oxygen-infused substance, the same dead star matter that constitutes the rest of my body. Despite trauma and fear, how can the brain *want* to end itself?

Mom puffed again, a startling gasp, as if pulling insignificant oxygen from an adamantine atmosphere.

But does my brain seek a self-inflicted end? The brain's neurons send messages of shock, the blood attempts to clot, chemicals release their signal of *painpainpainedangerdanger*, the brain attempts to scar, to heal itself. It doesn't know what you know, what you believe, what you've experienced, despite the fact that it holds this information and the means to process it. (*Can I only think of one thing to do to reclaim my bedroom because it is what I have long seen and lived in the shadow of? Or am I really so terribly sick, like my mother?*) The brain clings to its own life, a solitary mountaineer on some remote glacier clutching a lone handhold with seventy feet of empty air below. It is made of the same stardust as every other body system, yet the brain is the very cause of agony and strife that incited all this to begin with. Does the brain know what you know despite the body's ignorance? Or are you missing out on something the body knows by instinct?

I stared at mom. Only longing. Prone body quiet then. Still.

I lift the .45 and turn it to my face. I place my right thumb on the

trigger. I pull the trigger slightly, then release. A first real smile in weeks. I pull again and release the tension just before engaging the sear. I marvel at the balance of this pistol that so exquisitely fits my hand, despite its formidable size. I quiver slightly as I pull again, tenderly drawing toward me the immense power of the machine I grasp so tightly. Feel myself all the more powerful for controlling it. Controlling myself. Maybe for the first time.

Mom whispered something from shadow. I remained rooted as a redwood, and just as immovable.

Sleek flat black grip with a light aluminum trigger, stainless hammer and barrel, black Cyclops eye staring back into my own. Steel melts into the patterned black. The intricate crisscrossed pattern imprinted on the grip is slick from my sweaty palms, but this makes the pattern all the more prominent. The slide moves fluidly back and forth, though it takes a substantive effort to pull it back so it can chamber a round to ready the shot. The Kimber has thought of this and designed itself accordingly, the slide with six dull serrated edges, three to the front and three to the back, to ensure appropriate traction. The safety is off, red dot showing.

I sat nearby on the floor. I watched the quiet. I receded. In silence, I receded. I watched mom breathe and I receded.

The red dot is showing. I lift again, eyes closed now, and feel the barrel against my upper right cheek, the pistol suspended diagonally to ensure the bullet makes a jagged trajectory. Cold metal juts against hot skin, and the pressure on the trigger increases by the second. My blue room closes

in on me reassuringly, a soft cool blanket, heavy like a straitjacket. I grasp tighter. Shove it harder, feel a dark imprint of the muzzle growing on my cheek. Thumb pulsing with lactic acid as I hold, hold and pull, pull yet further. The trigger is almost to the point. The sear is just engaging. My grip tighter still. My blue all around me. I pull my trigger slightly more.

I release.

My .45 slips from my hands to floorboards with a resounding smash. Concussions course through me.

I lie on the wide pine floor.

My blue room encases me reassuringly.

I intake one more cool blue breath before I scream.

TREVOR J. HOUSER

GIZA

WHEN DID I first hear of Dr. Haas?

The woman I kissed outside the hospital on 99th and Madison told me.
Her son's brain was trying to kill him, too.

It was close to midnight two summers ago. She was probably in her late thirties like me except with gray, almost white hair, and incredible green eyes like two gobs of Burmese jade. She shared her last cigarette with me and talked about Dr. Haas as if he were from a distant planet put here to alleviate the immense, deep sea pressures of cerebrospinal fluid in our Earthling children.

Except he was from Austria.

For some reason, I liked the idea of someone named Haas. Haas who was from Austria.

He seemed real. He seemed like someone who would shake your hand in a firm but friendly way, then calmly look over some CAT scans as he lit up his meerschaum pipe.

I imagined Dr. Haas fly fishing for trout in the northern Bohemian forest when he wasn't figuring out rare brain diseases. Maybe that's all he saw out there. Tangled webs of cold mountain streams. Blue-gray fistulas

gurgling, and swirling down-current, forming life-threatening eddies and unwieldy rapids, all of it rushing off to somewhere vital and heartbreaking.

Then I kissed the woman on 99th and Madison against the wall of the hospital. Or maybe she kissed me.

It happened very quickly.

Afterwards she went to her hospital room with her sick boy and I went to mine.

CARTOGRAPHY

I HAD HEARD Dr. Haas lived on a remote volcano overlooking a lake in the Guatemalan Highlands of the Sierra Madre de Chiapas, and that he sometimes performed his surgeries in the open mountain air.

I also heard he had been chased out of Austria. Then somewhere in Africa for practicing medicine without a license.

Some call him a murderer. Others call him a saint.

The woman who I kissed on 99th and Madison drew me a map on the back of the New York Post, showing me where he was. As she drew it against the wall of the hospital I watched her cigarette dangle from her mouth in a surprisingly elegant way. It was about to rain. A summer storm from the vast, gimlet-eyed Atlantic.

“The roads are pretty bad, but there’s a train, I think,” she said, handing me the map. I noticed she had good penmanship, which in some way comforted me about the future in general. I imagined my four-year old son and myself on the back of some rickety bus, climbing through the cloud

forest. Green, green, blue, dark green. Not long after that the woman kissed me.

Or I kissed her.

THE VIEW FROM OUR DECK

I WAKE UP IN the middle of the night and walk down to the kitchen to find some Old Fitz, or a little sherry. I pour some and check on my son who is fast asleep. Outside there are clouds and the moss and the werewolves hunting my son's cerebellum. I bend down. I kiss the part where his little shoulder meets his neck.

I put on a big Pendleton blanket and go to our deck.

Moonlit roofs peek over the dark trees like shrinking blue glaciers. Our lumpy backyard goes out to a small thicket of rhododendron and sticker bushes where my son has a fort made of old trellis with little six-penny nails sticking out. Past that is the Hendricks' place. A tall stand of oak. Then beyond the trees and Padilla Bay is Guatemala.

It's just a bit of water and then Guatemala is there, waiting.

My son's life as a tax attorney or stunt driver lies somewhere out there. Somewhere in the jungle, just below the volcanoes and the jaguars and the tamarind trees.

PALM SPRINGS

MY WIFE KNOWS about Dr. Haas, too, but she's not a believer like me. After one of our blowups about Guatemala and experimental surgery with

questionable Austrians I tell my wife there's a conference I forgot about and leave the next day. I tell her I'll be back before her trip to Palm Springs with her mother where they happily curse my existence over bottles of midlist chardonnay.

I buy a train ticket to Seattle and sit next to the window.

I watch the early morning trees and the mist go by, the car filling with smells of black coffee and wet newspaper.

The woman from 99th and Madison is waiting in the lobby. Her gobs of green jade are watching me as I walk up to her not sure what to say.

"Hi," I say.

"Hi," she says.

"You want to get a drink?"

We drink at the hotel bar in a high booth. Back home my wife is packing for Palm Springs. Sticker bushes and sogginess pressed against the storm windows. There are three other people drinking at the bar. Maybe one of them has a child like ours, I think, slowly dying somewhere faraway like Bismarck or Lake Charles. Or maybe their sons are normal and they're just having normal drinks. Sometimes I can remember what normal feels like, but usually it feels just out of reach, like an old photograph of you at some dinner party you don't recall, but you're there in the photograph eating some sort of quiche, so you must've been there.

The woman from 99th and Madison and I talk about Dr. Haas and our sons and keep ordering drinks until it is late in the evening. In between drinks I catch her drawing a map of Guatemala on her cocktail napkin.

She's a believer like me.

Believing in things is rare and powerful like uranium.

She tells me she has a room for the night so we order dinner up to her room. I call my wife from the hall and say, "I won't be home tonight after all. Just having drinks with some colleagues then I'll crash at the hotel."

The two of us go up to her room.

We eat dinner and then we turn off the lights and get into bed. We drink Old Fashioneds and look out the big windows at the nighttime city of Seattle, twinkling like a luxury cruise ship.

The woman from 99th and Madison lies her head on my shoulder.

"Do you ever feel like what you do isn't really you, but you keep doing it anyway?" she says.

I want to pull the covers over us so our bed would turn into a submarine that we can ride in to Guatemala together. Our sons would become fast friends. At night, we would turn on the floodlights and watch the krill and the goblin sharks, and I would hold her just like this, and take one more sip of my drink before leaning over her in the darkness.

THE ANNA MARIE II

THE SHIP IS white and looks like an upside-down church. The deck is like a sacrificial altar to the Western Pacific. The captain, who is my oldest and least sober friend, is drinking sanctimonious light beer with me, surrounded by old ropes and sun-blasted piles of fish guts.

I open another light beer.

I am waiting for Guatemala to happen.

My wife and son are currently surrounded by juice-fasting retreats, self-hating yogis and an insatiable death-heat. My mother-in-law is making a second round of margaritas about now.

They are talking about how I have a tendency to be antisocial, or that I'm drinking too much, as the bone-white desert pulses and melts all around them.

"Did you see the skeleton of that horse?" says the captain whose name is Marty. He is on acid again. "It looked like it was trying to get up, but something was wrong with it and it didn't get up," he tells me, looking off into the middle distance. "Like it hadn't planned properly, you know?"

"I think my son is going to die," I say.

Marty throws his beer at a seagull, or maybe a star.

"Will you help me?"

"Help you what?"

"How long does it take this thing to go about two-thousand miles?"

Marty looks at the ship, then takes a deep breath like he just saw someone bet their mortgage on black.

MOUNT VESUVIUS

THE DAY AFTER they return from Palm Springs I tell my wife I want to take our son for a haircut so we say goodbye and get in the car and drive away. I look at the house in the rearview mirror. I look at the lumpy yard and the trees until the ground rises up behind us and everything disappears like

Pompeii.

“Where are we going?” my son asks.

“The ocean,” I say.

“What about mom?”

“She’ll probably meet us later,” I say looking straight ahead so the lie seems more casual, easier to accept somehow.

We meet Marty at the docks and climb aboard his upside down white church. As we slip out of the harbor I feel the breeze on my face. I smell the kelp and the mermaids washing their hair down below.

“This is some of the nicest water you’ll see,” says Marty. “It reminds me of my ex-fiancée’s inner thigh.”

By lunchtime we push through the Strait of Juan de Fuca where we check into our rooms of the North Pacific. We have courtyard-facing views of Cape Flattery. The king-sized waterbed stretches out for miles in every direction. From room service I order up a peanut butter and honey sandwich for my son, and a corned beef for myself. We eat together, watching the birds swoop and the water churn. Deep down I’m afraid my son is dying. When he stops breathing he will not look at me as I hold his face up against mine. His cheek against my cheek. He will just lie there. He will be gone. I will cry in someone’s kitchen or hallway. I will cry in an Uber.

“Feast your eyes on that Anna Marie II!” Marty shouts. “That’s open ocean my love, stretch your lovely legs!”

PEACEFUL SEA

The Anna Marie II creaks and heaves over the white caps. I watch my boy's face pointing towards Guatemala like a rare and beautiful compass. He's healthier on the move, I think. We all are. Velocity. Evolution. It's good for the blood.

"Are we going pretty fast?" asks my son.

"We are," I tell him.

"Do you think we're going faster than a motorcycle?"

"Oh yeah."

One time, far above 99th and Madison, one of my son's doctors took me aside in a waiting area near a candy vending machine. It did not smell of sea air. There were no birds or tiny puffs of cloud overhead. Just a woman slumped in a chair softly crying behind us. The smell of warmed-over hospital food swirling under a gale of code blues.

"This morning your son underwent a combined transarterial and transvenous embolization of his VAGM," said the doctor. "The catheter access was achieved by passing the microcatheter from the arterial side into the recipient draining vein. We used Onyx, a liquid embolic agent to occlude fistulas comprising the malformation. We estimate about eighty percent occlusion has been achieved. Do you have any questions?"

"Yeah," I began, "when will he and I be able to go scuba diving off the Grand Banks?" "When will he do this crazy spin move that no one sees coming and sack the rival team's quarterback thereby cementing his chances with the homecoming queen? When will he be able to take off that shitty

hospital gown and put on his Captain American PJs and eat frozen waffles and watch whatever the fuck movie he wants in our bed back home? When will I stop eating avocados over the sink, and sort of smooshing them into my mouth while crying uncontrollably?”

But I didn't ask any of those questions.

I just looked at the doctor and nodded.

Then I went up to the ICU to feel my son's hot breath against my cheek.

PSALM 23:4

CORTES BANK IS a shallow seamount of sandstone and basalt, ninety-six miles southwest of Los Angeles. It is renowned for producing some of the tallest waves in the world. A crystal blue valley with stunning 70-foot cliffs crashing off in the distance.

No islands in sight. Just a couple small boats and jet skis and surfers swimming out toward the walls of water that crash and rise up and crash all over again.

Marty yells out to the surfers that he wants to join them, but they tell him it's too dangerous and basically to fuck off.

“Goddamn it,” says Marty. “You can't learn anything by being scared.”

He puts on his swim trunks and jumps in.

“Where the fuck are you going?” I say, but he can't hear me.

“Is he really going out there?” my son asks.

“He'll be back,” I say, not entirely sure.

I look out at our own private valley, a dusty emerald green at the edges

then transforming into shifting molten blues, dark at first, then ultramarine, then Egyptian blue, followed by a burst of intense cobalt around our boat.

“Let’s go,” I say, giving his head a fatherly rub. “Not way out there. Just into this water here. This might be the most perfect water we’ll ever see.”

We get in slowly.

Mostly I hold him and we laugh in that nervous way you do when you’re in the middle of the ocean. I wonder about hammerheads and white tips. Occasionally we stick our heads underwater. It’s clear visibility to about 80 feet. Darting schools of silver mackerel and sunny green surf grass swirling like Nebraska cornfields. A wave, not of fear or elation, but of jealousy comes over me. None of the fish had ever heard of Vein of Galen. Not one sea lion ever had a future ex-wife doing interviews on the *Today Show* about how she always knew there was something “off” about him.

I realize the ocean is full of death, but no fear.

I realize this as our legs dangle high above the giant undersea canyon that plummets and stretches out to Tokyo and the graves of a million Malaysian fishermen.

But then I let the jealousy go.

There’s too much to think about already so I just let it recede out of me like low tide back in Padilla Bay when all the busted crab traps and goose-barnacled moorings got exposed like old scars.

I lie back into the water and tell my son to do the same.

He struggles at first. The water keeps going into his mouth, or he starts to sink, but then I get him to relax. I tell him to pretend he is the lightest

thing on Earth. He starts to get the hang of it. Then we just look up at the clouds together. Big, layered pearly puffs rolling out like a never-ending honeycomb high up in the stratosphere. In the back of my mind I worry about the hammerheads and the white tips, but I don't tell him that. I just hold his hand tightly. I just breathe in and out.

GUATEMALA

GUATEMALA IS A country in Central America bordered by Mexico, Belize, the Caribbean and the Pacific Ocean. It has an estimated population of 16.6 million people, 8,327 species of poverty, and seventeen pelicans with some form of depression. When you see it you think to yourself, "This is Guatemala." You don't say it out loud. You just think it. You also think about jaguars and volcanoes and other kinds of non-depressed pelicans. You think about shitty whisky. You think about hotels where they still wear white jackets. My son's rare diseased brain is in Guatemala although Guatemala's rare diseased brain population is at present unknown.

"This is Guatemala," I say to my son when we arrive in Guatemala.

EL PAREDON

HERE WE ARE in the waiting room of Guatemala.

I am at a train station in a phone booth overlooking the ocean. The sky is blue except for one massive cloud like one of those wall-sized paintings you find in a nice public library.

I call my wife.

I want to tell her what is happening, but I don't know how.

"Hello?" she answers.

The feeling (love? something similar?) she had for me before the thing with the diagnosis is somewhere else now, underwater maybe, or floating in the clouds over Machu Picchu, disoriented, lost. You maybe never know when the feeling first goes away, but when it does you can never get it back no matter how good looking you are, or how much money you have tied up in RV parks in Tennessee, or even how many times you talk to her about Tom Cruise without laughing. You could say, "I want to move to Oslo with you," and she would answer, "On the computer," which will make you wonder whether or not you took life seriously enough. Did you laugh when she suggested bi-weekly family budget meetings? Did you talk about the capital gains tax in a focused, yet casual way at dinner parties that made other people simultaneously fear and respect you?

"Is that you?" she says.

I tell her I still love her, but not out loud.

She sighs, and hangs up.

WEDNESDAYS

ONCE YOU SLEPT next to your son in bed wondering how he would die. What hospital room? Would he stop breathing while looking at you? Would his hand sort of grab your hand while looking just over your shoulder at the light or some section of sky out the window? He was born the same way you were except there's too much blood in his head and that means

you might not be able to have Thanksgiving together when you're older. It means there's a part of you that nature will exploit.

Everything will be different one day, you think. No family. No Guatemala. No ice cream on the boardwalk at dusk in Maui.

The hospital will sound like a forest.

Your loved ones will talk like glaciers.

You will have on a World War II documentary while putting on pants in the late afternoon and then stop in the middle of putting them on.

"This is life," you will say to yourself, eating a half-smooshed avocado as dive-bombing Stukas light up the black-and-white ford behind you.

CARY GRANT

I MEET THE woman from 99th and Madison on the twelve o'clock train to Antigua. We order lunch.

"But are you glad to be here?" she asks. "I'm glad to finally be here. I think I hate everyone back home."

"Why?" I ask.

"They always look scared, but pretend that everything is OK. You ever notice how scared everyone looks?"

"Are you scared?"

"A little."

I try to kiss her, but she says, "Not right now. I'm too distracted. This whole thing is very distracting."

"OK," I say.

The porter comes in with two steaming trays.

I pay the porter.

We eat trout amandine and drink Gibsons.

“Do you think Dr. Haas will be there?” asks Katherine, playing with her cocktail onion.

“I hope so,” I say.

“Sometimes it doesn’t sound real.”

“Nothing sounds real if you think about it.”

“Are you scared?”

“Sort of. I used to be more scared because all I was doing was thinking about it and not doing anything. Now I’m doing something.”

She sits next to me and orders another drink.

“Where’s your son and that friend of yours?”

I tell her they’re sleeping, but I can’t sleep for some reason so I’m here instead.

“You’re lucky to have a friend with you, a partner,” she says.

“What about your husband?”

She laughs a little into her drink as she looks out the window, then she stops laughing and breathes out slowly while looking at the clouded sky.

PLACE OF FLOWERS

VOLCAN DE AGUA, also known by the Mayans as Hunahpu, or “place of flowers,” is a stratovolcano that towers 12,340 feet above the Pacific coastal plain to the south and the Guatemalan Central Highlands to the north.

The volcano dwarfs the nearby landscape, it's northern apron spreading out black-green like the great bruised pyramid of Giza.

Volcan de Agua is popular with coffee growers on its lower slopes and above the cloud line is often frequented by fathers and mothers and their sons whose brains are trying to kill them.

If your son was dying you would go there, too.

The only other places you would go are 99th and Madison, or your water-logged backyard to crawl into the bushes and never come out again.

But those places are hopeless.

Those places have nothing to look forward to except for barberry stickers and squirrels, the smell of heated canned corn and people who haven't showered in three days, weeping next to vending machines.

Volcanoes look out at the world in every direction as if saying "hello" to everyone at once. Volcanoes are like the host who spins in the front hall with the overcoats and a bottle of bubbly. They're quite welcoming for something that has the potential to fry your face like Fontina.

It's good to remember the best time of year to ascend the volcano is whenever you're there.

Lava doesn't care about things like seasons.

Jaguars, monks, your friends and relatives. None of them give a shit either. They have their own lives and your tragedy is just a random news bulletin to ruin their breakfast, or trip to Disneyland.

You and the volcano are on your own.

You will be the only one to see his little socks for the last time.

You will be the only one that decides what song should potentially be the last one he ever hears.

Volcan de Agua is where we are now.

CAMERON MCGILL

41.9740° N, 87.6782° W

I'm less the buildings I used to live in
& more the strangers passing in their windows—
the woman dancing with her baby holding him high
a man carrying laundry to the bedroom with a beer

I return your shadow
to where I found it in me beside chimneys
on Damen Avenue in an alley piling breath into January

I live in too much silence—
there needs to be someone in the car the room the bed The world
in its heartbreak of mastery wants me undone

To come here knowing nothing
should want to speak except the wind & frost on the grass
in shadows of trees on Winnemac This all starts to sound the same—
the city the block
my assurances The deficits they make of memory

Yesterday I met the woman I'd lived with for years
My remembering a bath
her knees islands in the cooling water I'm afraid
describing things ruins them That's not true It was me
who asked what the body wanted & didn't
listen for the answer

JENNIFER JORDÁN SCHALLER

ORIGIN STORY

“THE DOCTOR TOLD me to push. I said, ‘You try to push you son of a bitch. This baby is stuck.’”

The first time I remember hearing this story, I was five and living with my mother and brother in Hightstown, New Jersey. I remember sitting on the front stoop of our apartment complex as my mother attracted a crowd, a small one including a couple other moms, their kids, neighborhood children who dug in the dirt as she set the stage for a story she would retell (a story I would retell again and again).

The details of that first retelling are blurry, but I remember feeling like I was on the outside of the story. She said, “I told the nurses and doctor, ‘I can’t push anymore!’ I kept passing out. I was in labor for sixteen hours. Sixteen hours!”

Faces in the small audience looked astonished as my mother said, “That’s when they brought in this big woman, a nurse with shoulders like a football player. She’s the nurse they brought out when babies got stuck. I had already punched the doctor. Helga got up on top of me anyway. I said, ‘Get the hell away from me,’ but she wouldn’t listen. She pushed my baby out of me.”

I was enraptured.

She continued, “I didn’t get to hold my baby because she wasn’t breathing. I thought my baby girl was going to die.”

What would happen to that baby? Then I realized she was probably talking about me. Her nickname for me had always been Baby Girl.

“I didn’t get to hold her. I said ‘Where’s my baby? Give me back my baby!’ They took her from me, and worked on her for a while. Then she started breathing. When they brought her to me, I didn’t know what to think. She was a dark, dark purple and had a big, old conehead.”

I was not, nor had I ever been, the color purple. How could I have been purple? Was she even talking about me? Maybe this was my brother’s birth.

She said, “I told the doctor, ‘You have made a mistake. That is not my baby. That is an ugly baby. Get that ugly baby away from me!’”

The crowd laughed, and so did I. Her delivery was on point. It always was. The joke is about humankind, how we can be neatly divided into two groups: those who believe all babies are beautiful, and those who believe some babies have a face not even their mothers could love. My being ugly was a tragic twist of fate in this story, where the protagonist pushed and pushed, all the pain she experienced, all that work, and she gave birth to the ugliest baby she had ever seen.

Sometimes when she told this story, she would add on little, extra details, for example, “When you were born, you looked like one of them coneheads from Saturday Night Live.” Or, “You looked like a raisin, a California Raisin, dancing in those commercials.”

My mother held the crowd in suspense for the sake of good narrative. Right when my upper lip quivered from doubting that she loved me, my mother turned, looked me in the eye, and said, “But they insisted she was my baby. She’s been my baby girl ever since.”

• • •

OVER TIME, I saw the humor in being born purple-skinned and ugly because when the most basic loves are absent—mother-love and self-love—jokes can be made! I re-told my mother’s story as I grew older, using her vivid descriptions to get a rise out of anyone—teachers, friends, parent volunteers at school.

In the third grade, I remember telling my friends, “And then she laid on eyes on me and said, ‘That is not my baby! Get that baby out of here and bring me my baby!’” I held my arms out, waved jazz hands, and captured the audience. I was betraying my own humanity. That’s why it was so funny. I would smile while saying, “She said I was ugly! ONE. UGLY. BABY!” Eyebrows raised. Mouths gaped. Classmates giggled. It defies logic to see a person ridicule oneself—and that’s why it’s so funny.

Demeaning myself meant not only cheap laughs, but also allegiance with my mother. I loved her with biologic ferocity, a thirsty mammal needing milk. Without thinking, I wore my mother’s persona; I saw myself the way she saw me. I never questioned an odd look or two because I didn’t care. I wanted nothing more than to be like my mother. I retold my own

origin story, the version my mother told me, until my mid-thirties because it was a damn good yarn.

• • •

ONE WEEK BEFORE my youngest daughter, Ruby, was born, I went to a faculty meeting at the college where I teach. I was thirty-seven weeks pregnant and my body swayed as I made my way down an aisle in an auditorium classroom. I was looking for a seat wide enough to fit me. I squeezed past knees and elbows, trying to look ordinary, while my waterlogged ankles bulged out in fleshy ripples. I had an extra chin, my nose gained weight, and my belly grew forward: a firm, oblong casing wrapped tightly around flesh, bone, and amniotic juices. I lowered my heavy body into a retractable theater seat. When I sat down, I felt like a lasagna pan bubbling over with freshly-hatched placenta. I was what people call *big*.

“You’re so big!”

Three words didn’t express what I really was--how about fountain of life? How about green pasture growing seed, supporting flesh, nourishing life?

No.

Big.

I was so large that years afterward, from my appearance at this faculty meeting, one woman still brought it up.

“I had never seen a woman as pregnant as you.”

“Usually we don’t go out in public when we’re that big. People stare. It’s humiliating.”

I told her my daughter’s birth was not so bad, even while pushing out eight pounds of human. I didn’t tear, even after I felt the ring of fire, what Roseanne Carter Cash’s song was really about: fire in your God hole. I pushed my child out, and it was true, what people said, that I forgot the pain once I held her. I even wanted to get pregnant again, that very night. Giving birth made me feel like I could do anything. I hadn’t expected to feel invincible.

I said, “Ruby’s birth was not so bad. She was healthy, and I healed quickly. I had always feared having a birth experience like mine. My own birth story is terrible.”

She looked me in the eyes and said, “Can I hear it? Birth stories are something I have done a lot of research on.”

I nodded and proceeded to tell the story I had told many times before, my mother’s story, which became my own. I toned it down for my coworker. I omitted the fact that my mother cursed and accused the hospital staff of mixing up her offspring, but I did explain how she yelled and assaulted medical staff. When I was finished, my coworker sat silent for a moment, and then said, “Having a traumatic birth can set a person back for life.”

Shocked, I said, “She was young when she gave birth. She didn’t have books like I did. I read so many pregnancy and birth books.” I made excuses, to which this woman replied, “Sure, those are a possibility, but the problem could also be your mother.” I had never thought about it this way. What if

the problem in the story was rooted in my mother? What if the problem was not that I had a big, old conehead?

For many of my adult years and all my childhood years, I saw my life and body through my mother's narrative lens. My birth story was family myth: my mother, the protagonist, entered a crisp, white hospital room in Passaic New Jersey, blazened the nurses, doctors, and orderlies with her expletives and her inability to push, and then I was born, misshapen baby, product of her battle. My father Ramon, not present, did not know I had a middle name until I was three. My mother told him my name was Jennifer, the name he picked out.

I was thirty-six years old when I started my split from my mother's narrative. My persona separated herself from the baby girl Helga pushed from my mother's loins. Whose story had I been telling? Who was I pretending to be? Who was my character in the story? What's her motivation? Also, I'm not sure I like her, and I am not sure she is likeable. My persona is a swamp monster rising from a fetid marsh. She has seaweed for hair. She is angry. She can be mean. She doesn't mean to be. She just is. She says and does the wrong things, all the time. She is not me, but I made her from me. I carved her from my ribcage.

STEPHEN D. GUTIERREZ

TONY THE SHADOW MAN

I HAVEN'T SEEN THE dude in a long time, it's just chance that I see him now. I can run. But he keeps me at the park, insisting I take a seat next to him on the bench and allow him to fill me in. I don't mind. I gladly pick it up where we left off, our friendship, which was real at its height. It was sincere and close and unvarnished. Years melt away. We just saw each other yesterday, or the day before, and can talk about anything.

Well, yeah, man, it's been a while, I tell him.

Too long, brother, welcome back to the neighborhood. See any changes?

They filled this park up with too many buildings. It used to be a park.

I know, ha? Didn't they? *Scout Hut. Senior Citizens Center.* Why don't those people just sit outside and enjoy nature like you're supposed to at a park, right?

You can't have green in L.A. It threatens the environment.

Good one. Nah, we got all this tax money we got to show for. They build shit to keep it coming in. The factories around here got it made.

I guess they do.

Hey, did I ever tell you about my life?

Yeah, a little bit, sure.

Want to hear the rest of it, the true story?

I've been waiting all my life for it.

It's a serious thing.

I know.

I think I pissed off God when I was born. He threw a shadow over me that wouldn't ever go away. He asked me to serve him in this way.

What are you talking about?

My life. I catch a whiff of booze on his breath. I can back up and start from the beginning.

The beginning is always a good place to start, I encourage him.

Well, I've always been good looking, ha? Just like I am now, right?

I guess so.

I was made in a laboratory in heaven.

All right.

They experimented on the big T, Tony the tiger, just to get him right. I'm old and tired, man. I know I don't look like I used to. You must see a beaten old man right here, even though we're the same age. You don't look so bad, dude. What do you do? Watch the diet and all that stuff?

Yeah. Work out.

But I look wasted, don't I?

No.

Older, though, right?

Yeah, for sure. I'm not gonna lie about that.

I got lines on my face that the mirror doesn't hide. But it doesn't show

my insides, like my soul or my spirit.

How do they look, Tony?

They're not there. They're gone. I guess the mirror does catch them.

Aw, man, Tony, that's not true. We all feel that way sometimes.

It's true. I'm not going to sit here and lie to you.

But things change, all the time.

Not for me, they don't. Don't interrupt me.

Sí, señor.

Or pretend you know Spanish. This is better than a telenovela. Only it ain't no fucking TV show. It's my life. Zoom in. Boy. Me. Young tiger on the prowl in the concrete jungle. L.A. County. City of Commerce.

He claws the air.

Older. Handsomer. Dangerous. But just as needy. Get me?

Yeah.

Then suddenly, well, slow it down. I was floating. I was aiming for Dora Rincón who lived on Travers in that brown house with the chipped birdbath out front. It always had too many weeds around it. Remember back then, elementary school? You probably don't.

I do. I remember her. She was nice. Kind of tall and lanky for her age. Kind of goofy, always grinning.

She wasn't goofy. You're goofy, dude.

Okay, okay, relax.

Get that goofy grin off your face. She was like, well, different. She got scarred. But she didn't get scared. She wasn't goofy, just unafraid. Most

people walk around with their fists up, protecting themselves. She let her hands hang at her sides, laughing with you.

She wasn't around here for too long, was she?

She moved away in the sixth grade when her parents got divorced and came back to that house when the old man died. He left it to them, anyways. I guess he messed up and tried to make it right. He was a drunk, with some properties.

Pretty smart drunk. Enter the tiger. You're batting away the weeds, dude. Creeping up to the pad. I paw the air myself. Watch out, Dora. He's gonna spring.

Nah, I was an alley cat limping on a bad leg, dude. Just shut up and listen. I'm just me, the big T. She's the big D.

He closes his eyes. She had the nicest smile I'd met in a long time, and this way of walking that put me at attention with her long legs. She wore this pair of gray slacks, and God I wanted to buy her a fur coat or something, like one of those movie stars wear, or a long leather jacket like a rock star. Actually she had one, a black one, but she hardly wore it. It wasn't broken in yet. I said break it in. "Help me," she said, "break it in," and twinkled.

That's a good sign.

That's my baby. She was a classy chick is what I'm trying to tell you. She was everything to me, everything I wanted in a woman in one. "Big Dora," I'd call her, joking around, and she'd nudge me with her hip and push me.

"Shut up, stupid." But she knew I loved her.

He gulps. She knew she was the one for me.

Like tiger, like, I don't know, tigress.

Whatever, dude. We were tight.

I can tell.

How can you tell? Let me tell my story. We're Romeo and Juliet without the headaches. It was like a miracle in Commerce that nobody ever knew about, the two of us. We're both kind of private, you know, and didn't have many friends anyway. People started splitting, like you. We had a beautiful thing going. Then a black cat walked in. That's the way I dreamed about it later.

That's scary. You working? Retired yet?

I collect social security and got the house paid off after a lawsuit. I sued these fuckers who set me up with bad chemicals without telling me, real harmful stuff I was taking care of in a warehouse, like a warehouse from hell, hot and with no ventilation. I got enough to live the rest of my life without punching in again.

Good deal.

It's all right. I'd rather be punching in if I had a life to live. I loved her, you know, before I met Evelyn. And she loved me. I'm talking about Dora, my goofy girlfriend.

Sorry, I said.

You're getting the big picture now, college man? While you were up north doing your thing in school, preparing for your future, I was down here making something of myself, a better Tony. Always on the move I am. I was. Like Dora. She liked doing things, with me or by herself, and especially

liked going out at night and walking.

That's how we first met again, on a summer night, Dora taking a walk and me just hanging out in the yard, looking up at the sky. "Tony?"

"Dora?"

"Yeah, me! How you been, Tony? It's been so long!"

We hugged and stood back and smiled at each other. She told me what was happening in her life.

"There's not much, Tony." But that wasn't true.

She had a pretty good office job, and a little car that was almost paid for, and her music that never let her down. She had about a hundred albums she kept organized in her room, her favorites she played over and over, real low on her stereo or just loud enough to hear. It was kind of her secret thing, I got out of her, one of them.

"I like to dance by myself late at night, Tony, sometimes in my underwear, in the sexiest clothes I have, like dressing up for God, I know it sounds stupid."

"It doesn't," I said.

"I just close my eyes and move when the house is real quiet and the rest of the world is asleep." She closed her eyes and swayed for me, as if I wasn't there. Not like I'm God or anything.

You're not? You're not filling in for his son down here on earth, like a good Catholic?

Don't kid around about that stuff, dude. I'm not God and neither are you. You can try all you want. I know who I am. It's not the Light. But she,

she was a poet-angel or something like that, a good person with words in her, the right way to say something, a poet-angel.

“And I feel Him hugging me,” she said. “Everything is all right always.”

I fell in love with her right there, I think. Shit.

That’s the way it happens. Bam! I punch the air.

Wham! He rocks back. She had it all in my book. She had an education, an A.A., and read fucking books. She had good manners. She had taste, like I said. High-class taste with a Commerce budget. But not flashy. She could put on something cheap and look like a million bucks because she wore it right. She brought it out or something. Not that she shopped at Goodwill. Just not Beverly Hills. I don’t know shit about it, fashion, but I saw it. Style. Elegance. You’re the word man. Give me one.

Naturalness.

Fucking dude, you got it. I heard you write some shit. Well, she was the shit. But she didn’t know it. “Tony, do I look all right? Can I go out like this?”

“Shit, do you look all right? No, you can’t go out like that, Dora. You look so fantastic they’re gonna mob you. You’re like a movie star on location!”

“You’re my planet, Tony. The only spot I want to land on.”

He looks away again. And she had a dog named Casaba that slept in her room and took up a lot of her time, too, a big gray dog, all shaggy and slobbery. I saw him looking out the window at me with sad eyes when it was over. But that was later.

This was now, dude. There were no sad eyes in our story. Her eyes were

bright and sparkly, and so were mine, she said. “Tony, are you in love with somebody?”

Shit. I didn’t know what was going to happen. I didn’t know anything about my life. If I could see ahead, I don’t think I’d have the guts to get up in the morning. I’m glad your God or my God or no-God doesn’t give us hints or anything about the worst. Not too many that we can figure out yet. I, I couldn’t get through the third part, dude, if I saw it coming.

You can get through anything, Tony.

I don’t know. Hold on. This is a three-part life story. We’re in part one or two. I’m in love with this chick I actually like. Yeah, you understand?

He wipes his eyes. That’s when the love rips you up when it’s gone, when you actually liked the person.

I nod some more.

Anyway, we didn’t spend every minute together, but after a while apart I’d call her. “It’s about time we get together, Dora,” I’d say. “Otherwise we’re gonna forget each other.” I’d be nervous like maybe she had forgotten me.

“I’m not gonna forget you, Tony, ever. You’re gonna forget me.”

“No, never. Why are we talking like this? I’ll be over in a little bit.” Then we’d go to the movies or out to eat or get on the freeway and head to the ocean just to cruise down the coast and walk on the pier and hold hands like really naturally and laugh and catch up seriously on a bench with the waves under us. It was pretty good, like all magical. We took a room when we needed to get even closer or just went home to Commerce if that’s what we felt like doing. It wasn’t all about the fucking but that fucking was a ten.

I got the beach thing in my head. What was the name of that movie?

Eleven.

She whispered things in my ear that made me stand up straight like a man, not bent like a scared kid, and gave me a reason to live. I'm not too high on myself at times, brother. You know that?

Not really.

She even wrote me a long letter on her best stationary once, with all kinds of fancy words but not like trying to impress me, just being herself, I could tell, and signed it. *Dora Diehard for You*. I didn't know. I didn't see it. She was on the skinny side but not anorexic or nothing. She didn't eat a lot. *Forever*. She put at the end.

But I didn't hear from her for a while. You lose track in the County.

Yeah, I got busted for a goddamn DUI, my third, and spent some time in the can, the *bote*. I stayed close to the *vatos* because, shit, I was Chicano and you got to get by. I threw blows only once, maybe twice, and got the fuck out of there as soon as I could, acting all good, doing what they told me to do.

"Yes, sir. I'm not going to drive under the influence." I didn't. I kept my word.

I haven't driven drunk since. Honest to God.

Congratulations. That's nice. Really.

But I still drink.

Okay.

I went up to her door first thing when I got out. I even brought some

flowers, a dozen red roses I bought at Food Giant, and her favorite chocolate. “Sorry,” her mother says, “she’s dead.” Like that. After I knock on the door and stand back.

She just stood there staring at me, between the crack in the door.

“She was sick, honey, didn’t you know that?” she said. “Real sick. She had it in her bones, all over.” She explained it to me. Then she said she was tired and had to rest.

She closed the door real slowly.

I put my flowers down on the porch, then I remembered where her bedroom was, around the corner, and I put them right there under her window, in the dirt.

“Rest in peace, Dora,” I said. I crossed myself. I split.

I hit the sidewalk and headed back to my pad trying to cheer myself up, thinking it was better for her anyway if she was hurting there at the end like her mom said she was. But I couldn’t shake it, man, I couldn’t shake it. It was too crazy, the whole thing.

“Goddamn,” I said. To myself. “Dead? How can she be dead? I just talked to her last time I was here, when I was out.”

But cancer had taken her. Dead. Like that. He snaps his fingers.

But that wasn’t the first time something like that happened to me. It was the second. Count them.

He holds up two fingers. The second time. You remember Arlene and how she got cancer and died? She was my first real girlfriend, my first serious relationship, I’d say, not puppy love. I was in eighth grade. She was

a grade below me. Suva Intermediate School. We were in it for real, sending notes and talking on the phone all night and meeting in the long, dark hall after school, the make-out tunnel, “the tunnel.” We put our names on the wall in red marker. *Tony plus Arlene equals luv*. We spelled it with a “u” for some reason. Dropped the “e.” You probably know about that.

Not really. It was some sixties thing, left over, I think.

We were fresh, anyway. We weren’t leftovers. We and all the rest of the kids got down to it, making out forever until the janitor came and swept us all out, with an actual broom in his hands, sweeping away. “Everybody out, lovers! That’s enough for today. Get home and do your homework. Out!”

We all spilled out of the niches in that big, stone building, remember?
Yup.

We held hands. She had me. She had those soft brown eyes and that split between her teeth, remember? It looked good on her, right. When she smiled, I didn’t have a chance. She made something inside me flip and get on its head for her. She ran the show.

He shakes his head in wonder, like still not over being knocked over. She kept me in line, dude.

“Tony!” She punched me in the arm and made me pay attention to what she was saying.

“Listen to me! There’s nothing over there. Just your dumb friends and that stupid girl who likes you.”

“I’m not looking at her,” I told her one time. “I just got to fart and don’t want to.”

“Tony!” Then she covered her mouth and started laughing. “That’s why I like you, Tony.”

“Why? Because I fart?”

“Because you make me laugh, Tony.” She spun me around and pointed to the bathroom. “Go and fart all you want. I won’t tell.”

We just cracked each other up. “Tony, you’re so stupid.”

“Arlene, you’re so smart.”

“You don’t know how smart, yet!” She gave me the pepperoni neck after the fall dance. Actually, we ditched it. We split and got lost in the neighborhood there in Bell Gardens. We ended up in an alley, going for a world record grind, me, with her mouth on my neck the whole time. It sure was worth it when I felt my boner up against her, you know, just kind of hanging over her shoulder forever. Only the next day one of you jokers made the homeroom announcement for the whole school and mentioned me, thank you. “And Tony, please return the vacuum cleaner to the office. It’s done enough damage on your neck.”

The whole school cracked up! I heard it, from my homeroom, with the door open. Fucking assholes. My friends, right. Bunch of babosos, like a step or two behind me.

Everybody envied you your neck, Tony. Pepperoni Man. Mr. Hoover. Señor Kirby. You had the look.

Fuck you. You guys were just jealous. I had the girl, Arlene! She had me. She said so. “I got you now, Tony! You’re mine!”

Cancer comes when it sees a smile is too bright or a body too happy, a

spirit too strong. I should know, right?

You've got some say in it.

Ronnie barely tackled her at their graduation picnic the next year when they were playing a football game. I was already in high school, first year. But I heard. She lay all limp in the grass with a broken ankle. He didn't even tackle her, just set her down on the ground, you know the way we played with the girls.

And she's crying, hurting. "Ronnie, it hurts."

They took her to City of Hope Hospital in Duarte, kind of far. I guess her doctor saw something he didn't like, when he tapped her leg or felt around and asked how she was feeling. He drew some blood. He sent her to that place, like immediately. It is a city. You been there. You saw it.

It's big. They're curing cancer, man.

I know. I know they're doing good for children. Arlene was just another one of them suddenly. She wore a blue gown and always looked a little woozy. She got there in an ambulance without a siren, she told me, no big deal, no emergency, but they already had the tubes in her as soon as they knew.

"They're sticking me all over, Tony!" she laughed when I visited her in the hospital.

"Well, it's good for you, Arlene."

"I guess. Come visit me when I'm out."

I did.

So did I.

Yeah, I know. We all went together sometimes. But I made like special trips on my own. I was just a kid but I knew something big was happening, something preparing me for my life. I'm still walking by your pad on Senta, on my way to her pad down the street. I'm getting closer to the end of the block where she lives by the alley, in the pink house with the porch painted white, a big tree in the front, and her dad's truck at the curb, the blue Ford pickup. Do you know what I really remember? There was a wooden swing under the tree that I used to push her in, softly, when she was well.

It was empty now. But she was inside living it up till the very end.

They had her in a hospital bed in the living room because her room was too small with her two sisters in there. It always had balloons and flowers around it. Lots of people loved her. I went over two days after the operation. They let her come home finally. She was drugged up, but still Arlene. She was like trapped, on the other side of the bars, the hospital bed fence. Then she stuck her tongue out at me, and lifted herself up, like doing a mighty pushup, like she was Super Woman, Chicana style or something, Super Teen Girl, and she was.

She was. I remember her. We were pals, Tony. We were all tight.

You know what she says? She says this. And she's hanging over the fucking rails. "Tony! Wipe that frown off your face, boy! It's only a *pierna!*" It's only a fucking leg, man.

I swear to God I got it or something then. I bit my lip not to cry. But I did anyway, and I didn't care that she saw me, my eyes. She was looking after me, not herself. She didn't give a fuck about her leg or her life, only

me and whatever I might have to go through in life. I swear to God I saw it in her eyes.

She was an angel in a hospital bed in Commerce.

“It’ll be all right, Tony,” she said. “Everything. Hey, don’t step on my foot! It hurts!” She got me again that time, made me hang my head with a little smile so she wouldn’t see my eyes. Her mom brought some cookies in and I munched out with a napkin under my chin, and split.

“Bye, Tony! Say hi to everybody! The gang!”

“I will! We all miss you! We signed you up for the Disneyland trip at the park.”

“Yeah, I’m gonna climb the Matterhorn with my one *pierna!* Meet you at the top, Tony!” She dragged herself up there, with a smile on her face. She didn’t throw in the towel. God grabbed it from her.

“God bless!” She was a Christian, you know, a Baptist, not a Catholic.

The months go by. I don’t know what happens. But when I go to see her one time her mom says, “She’s dead, Tony.” She snivels at the door like it just happened, drying her eyes with a Kleenex.

She’s wearing a cross. They’re all Christians. But they walk the walk. They don’t even talk the talk. They act and live like they’re supposed to.

Arlene’s mom pulled me into her family as much as she could. She liked having me around. She never put me down or warned Arlene about me because I already seemed like a partier, smelling of pot in the 9th grade. Between the two of them, shoot, the whole family, they let me know. Tony the tiger was an all right cat, yeah.

Always been.

I go bouncing up the steps and find out the truth.

Remember that summer? We were all at Camp Commerce for Teen Week not even thinking about Arlene, more like thinking she was going to live forever in that hospital bed. She wasn't going nowhere soon. We didn't have to worry about losing her. I stood there scratching my head.

"Do you want to come in, Tony?" her mother said. "Sit down for a while?"

"No, thank you, Mrs. Garcia," I said. "I better go home."

He pauses to take in the sky. It is faultlessly blue.

The tree above us covers us in shade.

Then the third one I don't even want to talk about. But you know. You know what happened to me a couple of summers ago. Yeah, everybody knows, he says to himself.

Little boy in the street. Trouble. Danger. Watch out. Don't blame Papa. Papa's a messed up guy like you. If you're anything like the people I know, Papa ain't no different, not much.

"I'm only fucking human!" I cried out to God, dude, after it was over.

"Only human like your son, on the cross, making my mistakes, but doing my best. I never gave Anthony anything other than my best. I'm not all bad."

"No, you're not. But I picked you to suffer," God answers me. "So buck up."

Did you hear him?

I heard you in pain, Tony.

Yeah, I'm in pain. I still look out the window in the living room and see where it happened. Evelyn split. It's just me and the pictures in the house.

That sounds terrible.

It's not so bad, except when I'm drunk, bouncing around. It's okay when I'm awake in the morning. I kind of feel them all there.

That's good. I'm glad you got some company, Tony.

Are you being smart with me?

No. I think things are going on around us we don't sense most of the time. I think you do have company.

I have some now.

You do.

It was baseball season. He was just playing catch with his best friend the way we used to in the street, too lazy to go to the park. Or it's kind of fun in the street, too, you know? Yeah, it is. It's like a cement field. Anyway, his partner threw it high in the air and he was backing up to catch it with his mitt up in the air. He didn't even hear anything coming behind him, I'm glad, at least. It happened so fast.

It didn't make any sense. It was not normal. Everybody said so.

"We know all the cars that pass on this street." They knew it like clockwork.

"There aren't many strangers in Commerce." But this was like a phantom car zooming around the corner out of nowhere and keeping its nose pointed straight ahead. This thing is just getting bigger on the road like in a movie,

a bad movie, getting closer and closer at full speed until it's done its job and nobody can see it anymore, and it's on Washington Boulevard and gone, a big black phantom, probably a fucking drug dealer dropping off a load at the bikers' pad.

I went over there and asked them after the funeral, loaded. I didn't give a shit.

"Who killed my boy?" I stood at the door and stepped inside on a mission.

"We don't know, man." They said it, no hesitation.

I checked them out, each and every one of them. They looked at me back and shook their heads, kind of sad about it all too, I could tell.

"Nobody knows, Tony, it wasn't anybody who came here. Put that piece away and have a beer."

It was stuck behind my pants.

"I'm sorry I bothered you. If you find out anything, let me know. He's dead."

I walked out of the room broken, not mean and dangerous like Clint Eastwood or some movie hero. Lee Marvin, you know, all tough in a black vest. It was just me, little old Tony, but smaller and older than ever, dead on my feet. I was unimpressed but a little scared of me. I knew what I could do. I would have coldly gone through with my plan a second ago if I had seen the owner of a long, black car sitting in that room, no questions asked. If I had learned that anybody had hidden him, I would have shot him in my son's name and done my time in the state pen without any regrets, brother.

I would have just asked them to let me keep my son's oiled leather mitt in my cell. It was brand new and he was breaking it in that season in the city league, you know, the fun league we played in.

Fuck yeah, we had fun, I tell him.

You know it, those years, with somebody's dad up in the bleachers, sneaking a tall can. My boy, he was a center fielder with his little cap on crooked, playing the ball all right, missing a few, having fun just like us, brother.

That's cool.

Waving at me, his dad in the bleachers.

Hold on to the good stuff, Tony. Forget the rest.

He doesn't know what's coming, not the next day or the next week, whenever. He just knows it's summertime in Commerce, playing ball.

He'll always be out there, Tony, smiling at you.

I interviewed the neighbors.

"Didn't nobody get a license plate number?" But they looked like they'd been run over.

"Tony, we heard a sound like...I can't describe," they said. "That's all. And then running and screaming, all of us."

My son is still waiting for me to come home in my mind, standing there at the counter, drinking a glass of Kool Aid in the kitchen. "Hey, Dad, I played catch today. I'm getting better with high flies." The animal who hit him isn't even in the picture.

Good. Let him fade.

But he tossed my son into the air like a plaything. He lay on the ground like a puppet, with a broken back. He's wearing his baseball cap and jeans. God's got his hands on the strings ready to snatch him up and make him walk again. But he doesn't. He can't. He can't do nothing for my boy, the Almighty. It's a joke, all of that stuff. He's left alone on the hard asphalt. Like a dog, I can't even pick him up and hold him. I figure he's still warm for a few seconds, breathing, and he needs his father. But I'm not there. Only crazy Louie, his best friend, is standing over him, in shock. At least he's got that face to look into before he fades, before he dies.

"Dad?" he says in my head, even though his is all fuzzy. "Dad? Where are you? I need your help."

He's dying on the street in Commerce, and I'm at work in a warehouse, zipping around on a forklift with his picture taped on the cage that protects me from the world, from some bad accident happening to me. It wasn't supposed to happen the other way. I had an insurance policy for him.

"I'm doing this for you guys," I had argued with Evelyn. "It's worth it."

I was doing better than ever at that time. I wasn't drinking so much and playing the big man with all the knuckleheads around here, all the partiers. I was working overtime. I was putting away some money. I was doing it all for my son, really. Anthony. Tony, Jr. And Evelyn. I was thinking things were going to be okay for all of us, our little family there on Elkgrove, not like when I was a kid with my old man all crazy on his *boracheras*, yelling at us all the time.

It's still going to be okay, Tony. It is.

Who knows? That's one thing I learned. Nobody knows anything about tomorrow, nothing.

Nah, they don't, Tony.

When I got home from work a big crowd is in the street crying, all shaken up, and they part for me like I'm a king. Without a word, they point me toward the house. I go inside, sure. Evelyn was there, and wasn't there, in the kitchen, so pale, man, and her eyes just like wet blobs. Like this, man, see?

He holds his hands in front of his eyes to indicate two blobs, or Oedipus ripping out his eyes, something like that. That's what it reminds me of.

"We'll never see him again," she says. I stepped up close to her, and held her elbows, just lightly, with all my love for her in my hands, and told her we had a beautiful boy.

"I know."

"And we made him, Evelyn. Don't ever forget that, for his sake. He's watching us."

"No, it's not like that, Tony. He made us." She took my face in her hand like she had never seen me before. Already people were crowding in the kitchen. I couldn't stay. I left out the side door and hit the sidewalk and kept walking like a madman, with my head down. I didn't stop until I got to the cemetery on Whittier Boulevard in East L.A., that far away, Calvary Cemetery.

I went through the fucking wrought iron gate where I got family buried. Like my great-grandparents who I never met, *de mexico*, they're

there. “Hola,” I said. I was crazy. I lay down on a hill under a tree and cried so hard with my face twisted so ugly and my heart so heavy inside me like it was going to explode until I couldn’t feel nothing, nothing anymore. I was just a shell or a husk or something, a rind, scraped clean, brother, by the hand of God. He scooped me out like a pumpkin.

That’s crazy.

Threw all my brains and shit out like when you clean a pumpkin for Halloween. Make a Jack O’Lantern. See my stupid face? There’s no light behind it.

There’s plenty of light there.

Nah, there isn’t. Don’t lie to me. My mug brings people down. I got my dead girls, though. I still hear Arlene, “Cheer up!” and Dora, “You’re still my one and only, big T! Forever and ever!” They check in on me and make me smile. Tony, Tony asks me to take him to the park to throw the ball around and get an ice-cream sandwich at the snack bar. He’s the one who makes me get up in the morning and not do anything stupid so I can meet him naturally. He’s the one cheering me on, brother.

“Go, Dad,” he says. Yeah, in my head. All day, all night. In the morning, too.

“You’re the man!” That was our little joke. Who was the man?

You’re the man, Tony. You’re still the man. You’re in charge of your life. God loves you. I’m a Catholic, right? We’re both Catholics.

God was gone that day in the cemetery, brother. He was only a whispering breath in the trees. I heard that in a movie somewhere.

I think I saw the same one.

I was finished. I rolled over on the grass on that hill with the dead around me, so peaceful, and rose like a ghost. It was over for me, life on earth, basically, as stupid as that sounds. Star Trek or something, I don't know. No, not Star Trek. Life Trek. I didn't have anything inside me, brother. It was lost, all gone. Whatever was inside me. Good and bad and in between. Sucked out. Say a prayer for me on the road.

I'll say a prayer for you now.

This has been a prayer.

It's been long, and true. But I'm sorry to hear about it all, Tony. I wish you didn't have to go through that.

I figure everybody has to go through something.

I guess.

But some people go through more than others.

That's for sure.

You know who I am, man?

My friend, Tony the tiger, clawing his way out of the jungle, ready to pounce on some fresh meat. I don't know what the fuck that means.

I don't what any of it means. But I got a name for me.

What's that, brother? I look at the trees against the fading light in the park, and the darkness that forms behind them.

I'm the shadow man, "Tony the Shadow Man," meant to take away your pain.

SUSAN JOHNSON

BACK ROADS

You decide to take the back roads,
get off this jeezless highway, take
a look, different part of your brain,
part of your past, mother mixing

porcupine meatballs with her bare
hands, the world skinnier then, all
you had to do was open a can, all
you have to do is rake memories

into piles and cart them to the curb,
past a store with tar paper shingles
closed for good, no not for good
but because everyone moved on,

moved out, the ocean rushing through
them on its way to flood plains, past
a maple with an enormous burl,
grandpa had a similar swelling

behind his ear, endlessly fascinating,
until it wasn't, until it was just an empty
chair, a TV test screen, rooms full
of people, people full of rooms,

spiders with front row seats letting
the wind lift them into a tangled night.

Cars may not stop, the crosswalk
tells you, but you knew that, knew

the world was a hive of corridors
and closets, each with a secret passage,
a place to venture so your head won't
explode, but still your head explodes.

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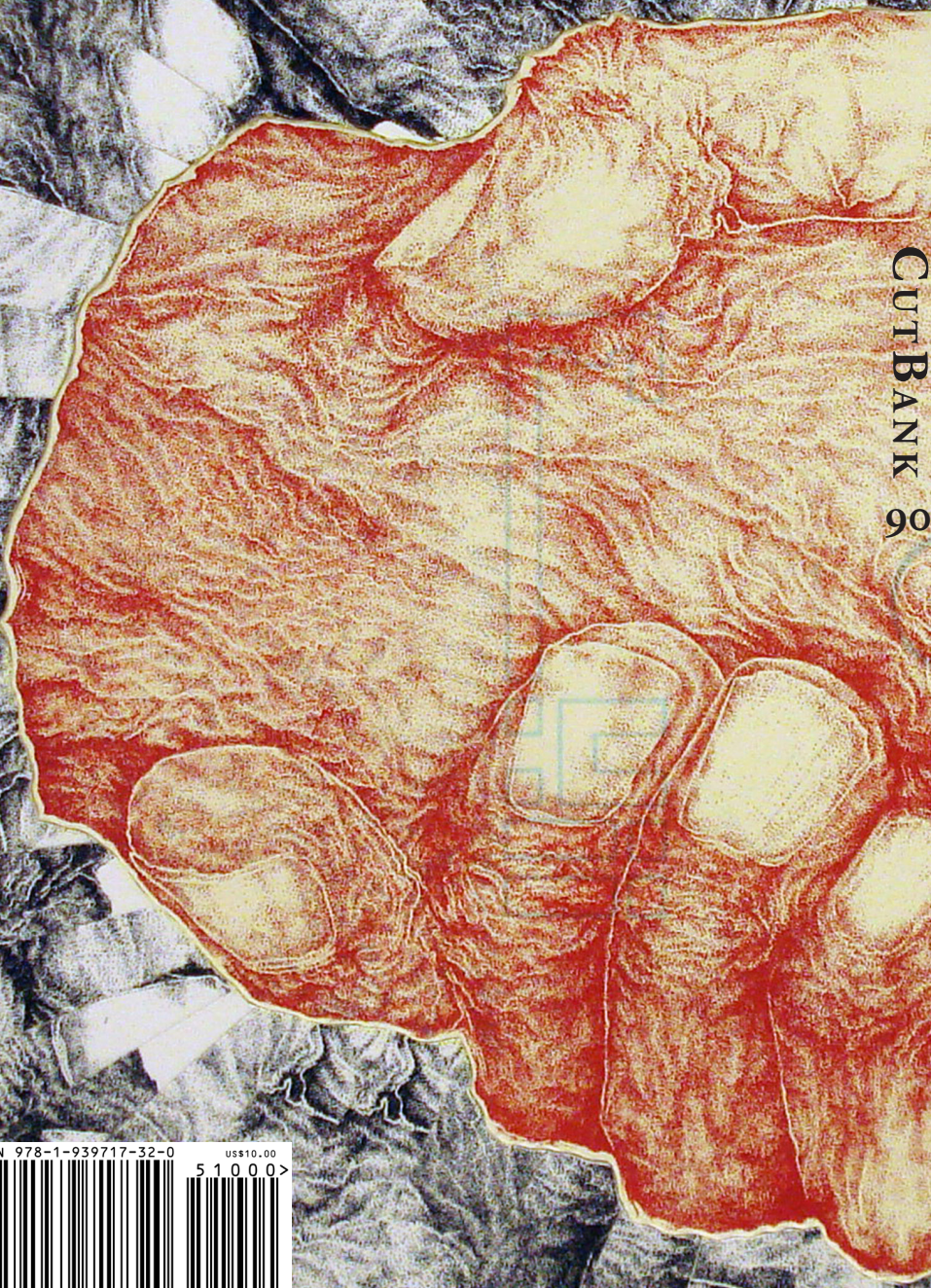
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