Obessions and Promiscuities

Azita Osanloo

The University of Montana

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OBSESSIONS AND PROMISCUITIES

By

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B.A. Oberlin College, 2000

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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Master of Fine Arts
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Birthday

"Hate lay like boredom over the evening ahead. I had committed myself: without love I would have to go through the gestures of love. I felt the guilt before I had committed the crime, the crime of drawing the innocent into my own maze. The act of sex may be nothing, but when you reach my age you learn that at any time it may prove to be everything. I was safe, but who could tell to what neurosis in this child I might appeal?" -Graham Greene

The morning Hannah's sister died, the sound from the apartment above had been a rickety-tick like someone running a nail along a fence. Opening her eyes, she felt a man's hand over her mouth, his fingers sprawled around her nose. Beside her he slept heavily, and the whistle of her breath between his fingers blew in and out. She lay still, thinking that if she could hold onto a smell like a memory, the way she might carry a picture in her wallet, she would carry with her the smell of his hand over her mouth.

She stepped out of bed and his hand dropped onto the pillow. A dead bug lay at her feet. A dust bunny swirled around it. An afghan lay folded over a television. For a moment she fingered it, thinking how
natural it looked, the antennae poking out through the holes, as though it lay folded over an armchair. His apartment was only the one room with an adjacent kitchen and bath. She could tell he worked from home. Piled onto the floor and laying atop his desk were stacks of aerial photographs: pictures of different cities, from various heights, each one separated from another by a cardboard square. Folders filled a black bookcase. Along the spines of each, written in black marker, read the names of the cities he’d photographed: Dublin at 700 feet, Chicago at 700, Sofia at 650.

Cold under a T-shirt that fell to the middle of her thighs, Hannah kneeled to pull out a picture from one of the stacks on the floor. Two cardboard squares lay on top of each other, with no picture in between. As she slipped the photo, which was of Berlin at 800 feet, between the folds of her coat, Hannah wondered if he would notice the two cardboard squares lying like ends of a sandwich.

Climbing back into bed she thought of her younger sister Callie. I have to go, I have to leave. Callie will wake up. She’ll see the shades still drawn. She’ll know I’m not at home. She’ll worry. The man’s weight next to her felt heavy and warm, cloudy. From above the nail against the fence rapped loudly again. Hollow.

Yesterday, her twenty-fifth birthday, Hannah had cooked breakfast for herself and Callie. They ate french toast with orange butter in Callie’s bed, spilling drops of syrup onto the white duvet. Callie sat back against three pillows. Her skin looked pale, reflecting the thin blue hue of the skim milk. When Callie smiled, her lips stretched, almost vanishing into her face. Her tiny face was like an animal that had burrowed its way into the mass of hair.

That evening her friend Louise and Christine wanted to take her out to dinner for her birthday. While she dressed, Hannah had felt
restless, like she wanted to stretch walls. She played opera while
pulled on her clothes. She found lipstick, put on perfume, spilled a
little on her sleeve. The music sounded tumultuous and whipping and
this, in a way, soothed her. Last weekend Louise’s brother had kissed
Hannah, jamming his tongue into her mouth. His lips had tasted like
onions. She checked her coat pockets for her gloves, found her keys in
Callie’s r’om. Callie had fallen asleep; her arm draped over her
stomach rose and fell. She slept with her mouth open. Hannah brought in
a glass of water from the bathroom, drew the shades, placed the glass
on the nightstand. A copy of Anna Karenina lay flipped over onto its
belly. Hannah’s copy. The painting on the cover showed a woman in a fur
coat looking back over her shoulder. The outline of her figure in the
dark coat faded into the black background, giving the impression of her
face floating. She whispered.

“Callie? Callie. I’m going now.”

Callie opened and closed her eyes. “Happy Birthday,” she
whispered sleepily.

On the local train into the city, Hannah sat next to a man who
was hunched at the window, writing what seemed like a letter in his
lap. As she settled into her seat, Hannah thought about how Louise’s
brother had kissed her last weekend. “West End Girls” had been playing
on the sound system. Louise had stood just a few feet away smiling at
them. Hannah had left after that: no thanks, I’m tired, Callie isn’t
feeling well, you know how that is.

The man next to her smelled like leather and apricots. Faint
lines like chalk marks etched his eyes. His hands, pale and blue,
covered the page he wrote on. At the next stop another man, elderly and
thin, came down the aisle and sat across from Hannah. He opened a
newspaper and smiled at her. She nodded and turned her head. While the
train pulled away the man next to her wrote quickly and resolutely. Hannah felt a muscle tighten in her back. Thump and scratch went the pencil next to her. She made out a sentence at the bottom that said. "I hate you."

She shifted in her seat and her knee bumped his thigh. He didn’t move. The worn vinyl groaned and sunk beneath her. The elderly man across from her looked up and smiled. "Do you know the time?"

A glance at her watch. "4:45."

He made a movement to fold his newspaper, but she turned to look out the window. A moment later she heard the shake of the paper as he resumed his reading.

The late afternoon was slushy and dark. On the train the light was no more than a gray streak that leaked past the opening of a curtain. The man next to her finished his letter and she saw out of the corner of her eye that he had signed the bottom of the page, "Henry."

Henry folded the letter, creased it carefully along the middle, and placed it inside his coat pocket. He brought his hand to the curtain and turned. "Do you mind?" he asked no one in particular. The man across from Hannah didn’t look up from his paper when he shook his head. "Mmmnn," he said.

Henry peeled the curtain back and rested his cheek against the window. Wet snow fanned away from the wheels of and landed softly in clumps along the track. The train moved swiftly, churning past endless rows of shacks: identical, lopsided, and anonymous as bruises in the snow. When the train idled for a moment Hannah watched an old woman who sat on her porch facing the train. The woman sat knitting with her bare hands and her feet in the snow were buried to the ankle. Her hair flew loose from underneath an orange kerchief and into her face. Hunched over her knitting the woman appeared oblivious to the train. Surely
this noise, this rattle, had tunneled its way into her consciousness and the morning she awoke to silence would be the morning she would know she had died.

Henry pressed his fingertips to the glass. Hannah sat up in her seat. The orange kerchief blew like a war flag. The train moved on and his fingertips lay against the window, the blue veins quivered.

A moment later he turned to speak, "Sorry. Do either of you know which stop lets off near Miles Hill?"

The elderly man across from Hannah looked up from his newspaper, keeping his finger on the page to mark the spot. "Miles Hill? Isn't that where they buried that famous actor? About three or four months ago?"

"Sorry. I wouldn't know. I'm late for a funeral."

The man smiled kindly, "I think he was in his nineties. Name was Church. Or Churchill."

Hannah spoke up, "it's the last stop before we reach the city."

"Thank you."

"Is it a friend?"

"Excuse me?" He looked at Hannah in surprise. "Yes."

"I'm sorry."

The elderly man jumped a little in his seat. "Churchope! That was his name, Matthew Churchope."

Henry ignored him. "Do you know how long before we get there?" he asked Hannah.

"Maybe five minutes. But you'll probably want to take a cab from the station." Hannah paused, "If you're not sure, I could get out with you. Just to tell the cabbie directions."

The man muttered again, "Churchope." He glowered at Hannah and she noticed how his voice combined all the elements of irritation,
resentment, and disapproval. She thought he should give his newspaper a
violent shake.

"I only thought I could help."

Henry caught her eye, "I don’t mind. In fact, it would be very
helpful."

Together they stepped out into the chaos of the station. At the
curb while he hailed a cab, Hannah touched his shoulder. “I’ll just
give the cabbie directions. I’m sure he’ll find it.”

"Will you go with me?"

"Excuse me?"

"I don’t know anyone there. I wouldn’t mind company."

"But you’re going to a funeral. I’d be out of place."

"We’ll stand in the back. No one will notice." He paused, "but
you have other plans. Of course."

"I’m supposed to meet some friends for a drink and then dinner."

"Will they mind?"

She bit the inside of her lip, "I don’t think so."

In the cab he thanked her.

When they arrived the service had just ended and people were
beginning to disperse. A woman splashed through a slush puddle, soaking
her nylons to the calf. Men shook hands and carried their wives’
purses. Hannah eyed a young girl, whose green ribbon was about to fall
from her hair. The girl stood with her feet flat and her legs apart,
her eyes transfixed upon an open tube of lipstick she held in front of
her.

Hannah touched Henry’s elbow, “You missed it. I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.”
A man in a gray coat stood alone. He had huge round ears, like wet coins and on their way out, people kissed his cheek or put a hand on his shoulder, passing by him as though feeding a meter. He acknowledged their gestures with a nod or a brief smile, idly fingering a button on his coat. Hannah thought he looked like a dog.

Fingertips at the edge of an open book.

Hannah doesn't remember whose idea it had been to have Callie move in with her. Her mother's? Callie's? But on the day they moved her things into the trunk of Hannah's car Callie lay napping in the backseat. She had been shivering. Their mother ran in to find an extra sweater or a blanket. When the belongings were packed, the car warmed up, and while Callie fluttered in and out of a catnap, Hannah first hugged the cat, then her mother who leaned over a table, resting her fingertips at the edge of an open book, keeping her profile to Hannah. A moment later Hannah stood at the car, its engine running, her hand poised at the handle, and turned around. The intersection of the windowpane centered at the nodule of her mother's shoulder, its lines spread out over her mother's body. Hannah separately took in the separate parts of the picture: the base of the neck, to the cat on the floor, to the shake of her hair. A sudden jerk. Her mother snatched and tore at the page upon which her fingers had rested. Hannah stood on the driveway watching the rips, the jerk of the elbow, and again, the tick at the shoulder. Crumbles of torn paper on the ground. The cat, its belly low to the ground, slunk away.

Then surprises. As children Hannah and Callie almost never fought. Just once, Hannah grabbed at Callie's ponytail and pulled until their mother pulled them apart. Though she could never recall the argument, Hannah always thought back to the tender flesh at Callie's
temple, slightly blue, that pulled away from the hairline and the tears that welled up in the corners of Callie's eyes. A stinging pain. And now, though Callie slept most of the day and couldn't make it down the stairs without help, there was a startling ferocity about her. Like a tiger, Callie fought and grappled with her hands.

Every morning when Hannah came in to open the shades in Callie's room, her sister's hands, like spiders, danced under the cover of the blanket. One morning while Hannah was leaning over to straighten the bedsheet, Callie brought her hand out from under the covers and pinched Hannah. Another morning as she was helping Callie to the bathroom, Hannah felt a grip at her wrist and Callie's fingers pulling at the little hairs on Hannah's arm. Hannah had held still. Later, at each pause of the day: on the train to work, paying for her coffee, washing her hands in the bathroom, Hannah would study the spot where a few hairs had been pulled out, a red spot on her forearm, an inch or so away from her wrist. She was fascinated, not by Callie's ferocity necessarily, but by the lines and the skin of her arm, the pain of the pinch, so much that tears had welled up in her eyes. The acuteness of the pain, its intensity had felt like relief. Three nights later a pinch at the back of her neck when she hugged Callie goodnight. Another time it was the flush of the toilet while Hannah took her shower. A safety pin poke at the back of her hand when she placed a glass of water on the nightstand. And that, on her arm, was a new freckle from the sun, and that scar, at an angle on her wrist, was an old burn from the woodstove at her grandmother's house.

Hannah stuffed her hands in her pockets, realizing she'd left her gloves on the train. She imagined the skinny old man catching sight of them at the crack between the seat cushions. Sneering, he would probably fold them into his newspaper on his way out.
Henry touched the collar of her coat, "Hannah? Tell me again what you were doing for dinner?"

"I have these friends I'm supposed to meet."

"What?"

She shrugged her shoulders, her hands still in her pockets, "These friends?"

He rubbed his eyes and invited her to dinner.

At the restaurant she had a steak with onions. She ate quickly and when he left to go to the bathroom she ate big bites off his plate. When he returned, she tried to make conversation, "That was the first funeral I've ever been to."

"So your mother and father are still alive?"

"My mother is. My father died when I was in college. I thought I would get to leave for a week or two, but my mother thought the funeral would upset me. I got to skip midterms though." She paused and scratched the empty plate with her fork. She sipped her wine and said, "I wouldn't want to be cremated."

"You want worms then?"

"I think so."

On the wall in his apartment there hung a map of Moscow. Next to it was an aerial photograph of the same city, where in the corners it blurred.

First he danced her around the room, gripping her at the waist, deftly stepping over and around the piles of photographs on the floor while she struggled and stumbled along. Kicking over a pile, she freed herself from his arms to put the pile back into place. He kneeled down to her and began asking her questions. How did she feel? Who were her friends? What did she think of that old man on the train? To all his questions she answered with the most convenient response she had on
hand. "I’m not cold" and "I’ve known them almost my whole life," but to this last she blurted out that the old man had wanted to speak with her, but she had turned away after telling him the time.

"I turned toward you and you opened the curtain, and there was this old, really old, woman. She was sitting outside with her feet buried in the snow. She was knitting. And I swear, she wasn’t wearing gloves or anything."

At her outburst he smiled tenderly and lifted one finger to indicate he’d be back. On the floor two ants rummaged around the edge of the rug. Past a doorway and into the kitchen she saw him run his hands under a faucet, plunge them one after the other into a canister of flour. He shook the excess off and asked her to close her eyes. She felt his grasp onto the back of her neck and for a moment they stood, he with his hand crusted with flour gripping the back of her neck, she with her eyes closed. Then he rubbed his hand against her skin, until the skin grew raw, letting the damp crusts of flour fall down her back and shoulders, having them stick to her waist.

That very morning Callie had complained about her hair sticking to the back of her neck. "I hate my hair," She had said while they ate french toast in Callie’s bed. "It’s itchy and hot and it sticks to the back of my neck."

"What do you saying?" Hannah had asked, "It’s nice."

"It’s a mop."

So after breakfast Callie sat at the edge of the bed swaying a little while Hannah cut her hair into a short bob. Later, Callie climbed back under the covers. Hannah swept the hair into a pile with her hand. She worried that the rich breakfast—french toast, orange butter and syrup—would be too much for Callie’s stomach. In the next room the phone had rung. The pile sat in a corner on the bed. Callie
breathed quickly, the sounds full of rasp and mud. Little hairs, like matchsticks, stuck to the dried spots of syrup.

And now his hand on the back of her neck felt brittle and cracked. "That woman," he said, "her hands must have felt like this." And after that night, Hannah would see the old woman everywhere. At the other end of the crosswalk, standing at the window, staring over a magazine in a coffee shop. She imagined the old woman climbing underneath her bed at night, a wet shadow that whispered. As a child of about eight, Callie used to swear that an old woman, heavy and mean, would sit on her stomach while she slept.

She opened her eyes and saw that he was staring blankly at her chin while his finger traced the outside of her ear and went down the line of her silver earring. Before he could pull away she turned to kiss his hand. He held it there, cupping her face, and, softly she ran her tongue along the inside of his wrist. Long and slanted like a feather, the light hairs on the small of her back bristling, she held still as he kissed her shoulder and traced his thumb along her collarbone. In his bed, she felt like swimming. The hair on his knee raked against her thigh. Her hands on his back, were small, stiff, and cold.

She stayed in his bed that night, sighing off to sleep with the sound of the running nail. The night shook. Henry gave her a t-shirt to sleep in. His smell of leather and apricots. A tree branch hit against the bedroom window. Hannah remembered how she used to be afraid of trees.

In the morning she listened to the sound of running footsteps in the apartment above, rickety-tick. A woman yelled, "Andrew! You stop that running! Dan? Dan, make him stop." When Henry awoke his leg, heavy and hot, slapped against hers and the sweat between them felt like a
shared skin. He sat up on his elbow and peered at her. She didn’t want him to ask her to leave.

“I have to go,” she said.
“I’ll call you. Next week?”
“Sure.”
“You’re listed?”
She nodded.

Outside his door she rolled her scarf into a muff for her hands. Walking down the hallway it occurred to her that she’d never finished cleaning the cut hair off Callie's bed. The phone had rung and she'd left to answer. She took the train home and no one sat next to her. It looked the same, it could have been the very same train as yesterday, but it was unfamiliar to her. What was that smell? Something like wet paint. At the station Hannah stood at the platform pressing the scarf into her stomach. A man approached her, dirty and full of the stench of soot and urine, his nose was bulbous and his cheeks red. Hannah thought, this was the dirty peasant in Anna Karenina, the man in Anna's recurring dreams who mumbles to her about pounding iron between his fists. The man took a step toward her and she felt he could see into her, that somehow Henry had sent her as some kind of offering to him. Feeling around in her pockets, she found the photograph of Berlin at 800 feet that she'd taken from Henry's apartment. She dropped it at his feet and ran away, her scarf trailing from the ends of her fingers. His laughter mingled with the noise of the train and together the sounds grew louder and rhythmic. Today Henry would wash linen and make coffee. He would either mail his letter or rip it apart. He would think of Hannah only as debris in a windstorm. She was the something that had flown into his hands while a sad smile blurred his face. He could shake
this off, not much harm had been done, it need go no further. "Thank you," he had said to her at the door.

Hannah walked out into the foggy morning street. When she got to her apartment building she stopped beneath the window to Callie’s room. The shades were already pulled up, the window open. Then her mother—did she have a key?—the white duvet in her hands, leaned out of the window and called to Hannah. Her voice rose as she repeated Hannah’s name over and over. In her head Hannah heard the whir of wheels against the tracks mingling with the bemused laughter of the man she’d met at the station. Mocking. Her mother, wispy and gnarled-looking, her arms blue lines against gray sky, shook out the white duvet. And as the cloth unfurled, a clump of Callie’s hair, a dustbowl, the pile Hannah had swept into a corner with her hand, broke loose and clung. Dropping. Her scarf hit the ground, Hannah pressed her fingers to the back of her neck and dug the nails in. Behind her people marched. Ants marched. A bus flared.
Valentino’s Ghost

"APPENDIX FROM MORONIA"
PREJUDICES, SIXTH SERIES (1927)
R.L. DUFFINGTON

By one of the chances that relieve the dullness of life and make it instructive, I had the honor of dining with this celebrated gentleman in New York, a week or so before his fatal illness. I had never met him before nor seen him on the screen. I began to observe Valentino more closely. A curiously naïve and boyish young fellow, certainly not much beyond thirty, and with a disarming air of inexperience. To my eye, at least, not handsome, but nevertheless rather attractive. There was an obvious fineness in him; even his clothes were not precisely those of his horrible trade. He began talking of his home, his people, his early youth. His words were simple and yet somehow very eloquent. I could still see the mime before me, but now and then, briefly and darkly, there was a flash of something else.

I incline to think that the inscrutable gods, in taking him off so soon and at a moment of fiery revolt, were very kind to him. Living, he would have tried inevitably to change his fame—if such it is to be called—into something closer to his heart’s desire. That is to say, he
would have gone the way of many another actor—the way of increasing pretension, of solemn artiness, of hollow hocus-pocus, deceptive only to himself. I believe he would have failed, for there was little sign of the genuine artist in him. He was essentially a highly respectable young man, which is the sort that never metamorphoses into an artist. But suppose he had succeeded? Then his tragedy, I believe, would have only become the more acrid and intolerable.

Here, after all, is the chiefest joke of the gods: that man must remain alone and lonely in this world, even with crowds surging about him. Does he crave approbation, with a sort of furious instinctive lust? Then it is only to discover, when it comes, that it is somehow disconcerting—that its springs and motives offer an affront to his dignity. But do I sentimentalize the perhaps transparent story of a simple mummer? Then substitute Coolidge, or Mussolini, or any other poor devil that you can think of. Substitute Shakespeare, or Lincoln, or Goethe, or Beethoven, as I have. Sentimental or not, I confess that the predicament of poor Valentino touched me. It provided grist for my mill, but I couldn’t quite enjoy it. Here was a young man who was living daily with the dream of millions of other young men. Here was one who was catnip to women. Here was one who had wealth and fame. And here was one who was very unhappy.

One—The Piano Lady

Maggie cut the string that held the rosary together and watched the beads scatter onto the floor like prying locusts.

Without the feathery string holding them together they looked like any other beads—smooth, round, the color of russet bricks. This was the rosary she’d taken from the funeral home where Valentino’s body lay in state. The crowd had swarmed in, wild and intent upon catching a glimpse of the dead actor. She’d gotten close to him, and had watched when a woman fell to her knees before the catafalque to kiss the fringe of the draped cloth. Then the crowd had cheered as a young girl clambered atop
to press her lips to the glass enclosed coffin just above his. That was the moment she chose to slide the rosary into her pocket. A heavy incense had perfumed the room and at the small altar a statue of the Virgin was framed by scented candles, a tooled volume of the Vulgate Bible and, the rosary.

In truth, Maggie didn’t give a damn about Valentino. His acting, it seemed to her, had been largely confined to protruding his large, almost occult eyes until the vast areas of white were visible, drawing back the lips of a wide sensuous mouth to bare gleaming white teeth and, of course, flaring his nostrils. It had been the piano lady who played accompaniment to the silent films who had urged Maggie to go with her. On the day his death was announced the piano lady stood next to Maggie with a gleam in her eyes, plucking, with staccato beats, the little hairs that flew above her bun. “Did you hear?” she asked.

Maggie’s job was to stand in the shadow of the piano lady, a little behind and to the left of her, following the music with her eyes, and then stepping forward to turn the pages. A respectful apprentice. The piano music went on for the entirety of the film without pause, only with the necessary variations to indicate changes in mood. Positioned between the audience and the screen, the piano lady acted as a kind of menacing hostess and Maggie liked her role as a handmaiden in this world. Under specks and scratches of dust, the film might depict a romance, a fight, a murder in shadow, all to the garish tinkling of the piano, like ragtime gone awry. Actors on the screen constantly hugged their bodies, twisted and clenched the muscles in their face, men swung on ropes and climbed rickety ladders, women tusselled about feet that looked as though they had been bound. A flick of the wrist could alternately mean the beginning of a dance or the end of a bar fight. Eyes were clenched as mouths opened wide, but all the while no human sound would emit from their mouths. The audience, if they looked toward the direction of the only sound would see a tiny woman, her face half-
lit by the small lamp atop the piano, resolutely mastering the instrument, relentlessly urging the movie on.

The piano lady liked to tell the story of the summer the field behind her house had been attacked by a plague of locusts. Neighbors would stand at the threshold to her backyard just to listen to the sounds—clicking, chirping, spinning radiating from below the ground, from inside of trees, from somewhere seemingly in the far and distant future. The piano lady spoke about the crater size holes in her garden, the torn pieces of linen scattered in the bushes, and, when she went to collect the dog, the wings swarming through her hair.

When a locust nymph in the solitary phase matures in the presence of many other locusts, it will change toward the gregarious phase, which will widen the wing span, darken the colors, making them more vivid. If crowding is sufficiently dense and of long enough duration, a migratory phase will result, making the locusts restless and irritable. The locusts have a physiological response to violent fluctuations in the environment and, once developed, a locust plague is almost impossible to stop or control. The piano lady, who seemed to know about such things, added to Maggie that the once solitary nymph would never go back to its original harmony, would always seek a new swarm for migration, its wing span habitually stretched for long distance flying.

In the streetcar on the way to the funeral home Magie tentatively held onto the piano lady’s arm as a daughter might for her elderly mother. The car bounced and people squeezed tightly into the narrow aisles and Maggie read the newspaper. There was an article reporting on suicides of three women who had jumped off the side of a building, holding hands and calling out Valentino’s name, a fourth poisoned herself with a mixture of different cleaning solutions. Another article spoke of the distraught Pola Negri, Valentino’s fiancee, who couldn’t leave her house for long periods of time for weeping. And, after all this, someone thought it a good idea for the public to view his body for five days.
When she stepped out of the streetcar, guiding the piano lady before her, the beginning of a camera's shutter noise made her head jerk up. A few yards away a man lifted a camera in her direction and—driven by the instinct if a handmaiden—she ducked. When she looked up the man had lowered the camera and nodded slightly. A lean face with hair cut short. If anything, he seemed calm in this universe. The beginnings of the crowd murmuring in the background, the cars flaring past, the piano lady reaching behind to grasp onto her wrist. His finger rested on the camera's shudder button and she imaged the weight of the finger on her own cheek.

Maggie tried to picture how Valentino would look in the coffin. At first she imagined him the way everyone else did—smooth, svelte, and brooding. But as the piano lady clucked on about the dead man's lasting beauty, Maggie began to play with the image in her head, adjusting it in small ways as a painter might add on to an otherwise finished portrait, playing with the different changes until the finished product looks far from the original intention. She added a torn suspender to his outfit, put on several pounds to his face and even a few to his girth so that the buttons of a dress shirt stretched to reveal the white of his belly. In her image, the skin is gray, his eyebrows knit together as though a thought troubled him. His mouth slacks open a little. In the movies, his face was lean and the eyebrows sharp, but in death she imagines his face has swelled, one might go so far as to call him chubby about the cheeks and around the jowls. As though mopped back with sweat, the sides of his hair stick to his ears. The top is unruly and falls back toward the crown and Maggie thinks of him a boy scolded and sent off to bed. In a dream the boy would wrestle with the sheets and call out, but, not too loudly.

Two—Legends

They said life to Valentino was indistinguishable from the movies. He believed everything about them. Once he had been seen arguing with
Pola Negri when all of a sudden his face grew pale, his eyes protruded in a wilder stare than any he had managed on the screen, and his whole body commenced to quiver. Pola threw herself at him and began beating his chest with her fists. It was all too much for anyone. Pola Negri who may have been the most colorful star ever to appear in silent films was actually a superb actress, though she is mostly remembered—if remembered at all—as the nutcase who flung herself onto Valentino's grave. The headline the day after his death read POLA FAINTS, FAINTS, FAINTS. And the article?

Tomorrow will bring Pola Negri to New York to attend the funeral of her great lover, Rudolph Valentino.

Pola is heralded as the screen's greatest emotional actress. Anyone who saw her yesterday won't doubt it. Our only regret is that the kliegs and cameras were missing. No acting Pola will ever do upon the screen will compete with the performance she gave before the mob of morbid curiosity seekers who haunted the portals of her home yesterday.

As a car pulled up Pola, dressed in her specially designed mourning costume, emerged from her front door. Pola the actress; Pola the emotional, Pola the Slav. Pola was everything she has been reputed and, for some reason best known to herself, a little bit more.

A weeping Pola, resting upon the arms of her maid and secretary, stepped through the gateway to her waiting audience bunched in excited, neurotic groups.

Pola saw the people.

Pola hesitated.

Pola screamed. Pola fainted. She did it well. Why shouldn't she—the great emotional star?

Water.

Pola revived.

Pola screamed.
Why not? There was her mob of the morbid hanging upon every
gesture.

Still screaming, Pola was guided to the waiting car. The car
carried her to the studio. The same studio where her reputed fiancee
spent the last of his carefree days.
Pola entered the lobby.
Pola fainted.
Pola fainted into the arms of her maid and publicist.
It is fortunate for the great star that her maid and publicist
were there. The floors of the studio, like floors anywhere, are hard
when fallen upon. More water. Pola felt better. Pola was taken up to her
dressing room on the third floor. Five floors below her Rudy’s.
The blinds were drawn. The star demanded that. She desired
darkness for her sorrow. Well, why not? Racked from her emotion she fell
limply into a chair. Well, why not? Who wouldn’t be tired after half an
hour of screaming?
Somebody said the press was waiting to see her. The Polish
importation threw her hands imploringly forward. "The newspapers!" she
cried. "Why? Why won’t they let me alone in my sorrow?"
Pola is left alone with her sorrow.
Tentatively she emerges from her sorrow and peeks out into the
hallway. Nothing. She calls a taxi to take her home. The taxi is
cancelled. Another is called. That too is cancelled.
Pola wants to go.
Pola doesn’t want to go.
Pola is having hysterics.

Hysterics of movie executives were more grounded as they were
bravely facing up to what until then had been a traditionally
catastrophic problem: moving pictures starring dead actors and actresses
played to empty theaters. The superstitious public apparently believed
it was indecent to watch dead people perform in their full vigor. And
since there were at least several million dollars tied up in Valentino’s
last two pictures it was decided the time had come to educate the
public, to guide them, for the sake of the industry's economic future,
into their worship of a newly created deity.

The pomp and circumstance of a deluxe funeral, preceded by five
days for the public viewing of his body would cash in on Valentino's
mysterious image. Throughout his career people speculated on whether he
was superficial or deep, kind or cruel, stupid or smart, male or female.
He might be anything, anything at all. That was his gift. Furthermore,
the Italian-born actor bought expensive cars, moved into a house he
called "Falcon's Lair." He carried on torrid romances. He married badly.
He quarreled with his studio. And, in what would become the ultimate
payoff, he died young and tragically. At thirty-one, the cause of his
death had been a ruptured gastric ulcer complicated by acute
peritonitis. Studio executives, however, did nothing to quiet the
increasingly more glamorous rumors that Valentino had been poisoned by a
jealous lover. The sober announcement of his death called it the
industry's loss of a star and the world's loss of a lover. But—take
heart—heaven had gained an immortal. Would the public prove their
ability to deify a dead film star? It would be more than the movie
industry with all its money and ballyhoo had ever been able to
accomplish.

Everything was put into place to insure that the laying out of
Valentino would prove the most impressive in the history of necrolatry.
Expert cosmeticians and a skilled barber plied their scented arts. There
had been a feeling among all those involved that great burial history
might be made if Valentino was confined to rest in one of the movie
costumes he had made famous. An Arabian burnoose was ruled out
immediately, but they kept changing outfits to decide what fit best. A
bullfighter costume. A full dress tuxedo with an unlit cigarette poised
at his fingertips. It was too bad there was no distinctive national
Italian dress save that of the Fascisti Black Shirt, and since that did
not seem appropriately romantic, why not bury Valentino as a gaucho or a
torreador? He could wear a dark shirt livened up by touches of red or gold. It could only improve Latin American relations. Finally they decided upon a custom tailored backless formal evening suit with the sartorial niceties—handkerchief and pinky ring—to make the dead actor as impeccably clad as possible.

There was a problem with his face. Though the ravages of his illness had been cosmeticized into a semblance of repose, it was still possible to see the drawn lines of pain around the mouth and eyes. And so, they arranged the chapel lights to shadow what the final illness had done to the idol of millions of women and girls... as an added safeguard they turned his face to give viewers only the three-quarter profile. Two days later they would top his face with a hastily molded wax mask. It was, considering the pressures of time, a reasonably good likeness. Should people comment on the abnormally smooth and glossy features of the figure in the coffin, it would no doubt be attributed to either the severity of Valentino’s final illness or, as the daily newspapers hinted at, his poisoning by arsenic.

In the early morning hours on that first day a crowd began to form outside the funeral home and a policeman had to telephone for reinforcements as disputes were erupting everywhere over who had arrived first, who was shoving too hard, who was stepping on whose feet. Still, for the most part, the throng was cheerful as its members spoke animatedly about their loyalty to Valentino, his wonderful pictures, and which were their favorite roles.

On that first day potted palms and luxurious ferns were arranged around the catafalque; a single red rose in a gilt bud vase supplied a touch of color behind Valentino’s head. Because on that first day, floral offerings had not yet arrived in quantity, appropriate bouquets and wreaths were moved in from the florist’s shop next door.

Newcomers continued to arrive, many of them carrying thermos jugs, sandwiches, collapsible camp chairs. Newsboys and shoeshine boys appeared in strength and neighborhood urchins raided the local stores
and markets for wooden boxes and crates, which they sold for quarters to those standing in line. People from nearby apartment buildings began to sell fruit and sandwiches. A bustling trade in soft drinks, ice cream, and lemon ices developed. Platoons of hot dog vendors exhausted their stock.

By afternoon the crowd had grown to such an extent it became increasingly difficult for policemen to control it. The police on horseback kept repeating that the doors of the funeral home might not open until six in the evening and everyone had best go home. But the crowd treated this news with hoots, hollers, and obscene gestures.

A slight diversion was provided by the arrival of a floral wreath from a woman claiming to have been Valentino's childhood love. A young girl, who could not spell her name for the reporters laid a bouquet at the door. The quasi-celebrity, Mrs. Heenan arrived. She was the mother of "Peaches" Browning, who was married to "Daddy" Browning. The life of Peaches, age sixteen, and Daddy, who was fifty-two, was being featured in an upcoming film advertised as "a piquant recital of exciting adventures amidst the magnetic enticements of love and riches."

Mrs. Heenan gave her autograph and promised her daughter's as well to anyone who would have them.

The first arrivals had been women and girls, but more and more men joined the crowd and reporters remarked on the increasing number of men sporting bolero jackets and gaucho hats. Many also wore balloon trousers, spats, and the silk hair and long sideburns made possible by Valentino. As mourners they presented a strange assembly.

When it became evident to the police that the mob could not be dispersed, efforts were undertaken to at least bring some order to the spreading chaos. Pushing, threatening, cajoling, using their clubs, the officers harangued the crowd, trying to maintain order. Go home, be patient: everyone who behaved and cooperated would see Valentino. People were packed so tightly around the funeral home and had become so truculently determined that no one that no latecomers would usurp their
places that it became increasingly dangerous for anyone to attempt a
breakthrough. Later the officers would reveal that although some were
elaborately distraught, the mourners on the whole appeared curious
rather than unhappy.

In the early evening, to the initial delight of the police it
began to drizzle. Minutes later it was raining steadily and the people
massed in the vicinity of the funeral home chanted in unison for the
doors to be opened. Those fortunate enough to be near the doors began to
beat their fists against the bronze and glass as they demanded
admission.

Finally, psychologically blind, emotionally drunk, intoxicated by
the steamy human contact, increasingly defiant of the impotent police
force the mob, transformed into a human juggernaut, stormed the doors.
It shouted, screamed, cried out in an ecstasy that transmuted pain into
joy. Three policemen and two women fell through a broken window. Others,
as the crowd continued to surge forward, lay stunned or unconscious. To
save the fallen, mounted policemen charged desperately at the crowd, Men
and women were trampled by the horse's hooves as they attempted to duck
under the animals' bellies.

In the first mad rush police officers were swept along with the
milling crowd that knocked over potted palms, chairs, and other
furniture. In the mounting confusion yowling men and women clawed at
each other, kicked and spat and struck out blindly, as they hurled
themselves forward. No one seemed to hear, or see, or care that men and
women were being dangerously trampled as they surged into the room and
toward the catafalque, where for several terrible moments, it appeared
as if the draperies and casket would be spilled to the muddy floor.

Police, attendants, even some reporters and photographers fought
to expel the mob wielding clubs and charging on foot and horse,
desperate to hold back the cursing mob that had already made profitable
use of its time by sacking the parlor for souvenirs and mementos—
flowers, leaves, and ferns had been stripped as if by locusts. Outside
on the street people vied in a triumphant exploitation as they displayed a flower, a petal, a leaf, tassel, fringe. Women wept, crying that they had been felt up or robbed. Mothers yelled for their lost children. The injured cloistered in a group against the wall, and outside the pavement was littered with umbrellas, shoes, purses, torn clothing. To add to the hapless disorder, the rain continued to fall steadily. People began to fight for shelter under the few umbrellas.

What confused the officers and inhibited their decisions were the circumstances of the disorder. Most of the swarming mob was made up of people who had never before been and might never again be connected with any disturbance. They weren’t here to lynch, burn, protest, but to pay last honors to a movie idol. They had come because the newspapers had said that Valentino wished the fans to view his body. Radio stations entreated their listeners to pay personal homage to the dead star, to dedicate one day of their lives as a tribute to the dead actor who had given them so many hours of love, affection, enjoyment. Italian-language stations carried little else but funeral dirges and these stations urged, as a matter of national pride and religious grace, a pilgrimage to his body.

The funeral showmen had five more days for the gala presentation. Meanwhile the bewildered police braced themselves for action, the newspaper presses worked overtime, and Pola Negri’s wardrobe trunks were packed with three thousand dollars’ worth of widow’s weeds. After all, she had to be as well-dressed as the man who lay in the casket. The public, those people who created stars and deities, demanded it.

Three—In the Cavern of Locusts

Within the chaos Maggie lies underneath a horse, her shadow curled beneath her like something spilled out of a bottle. The horse with its stature feel like a guard though she knows one movement from the mounted police officer will send the animal flying. In that first onslaught
she'd been swept with the crowd—pushed, pelted, elbowed, until finally she’d crouched onto the floor.

Five minutes later, she rolls onto her side and pushes up with her hands as though creeping out of a hole in the ground. She stops when she is totally out from underneath the horse and moves slowly over the gritty floor on her knees. She lifts her head and looks up to the knees and hips and dangling purses rushing past. A woman holds her baby to her chest; a group of girls stand together in an anxious huddle. She has almost forgotten the danger she’s still in when a pointed heel digs into the back of her hand and the pain sends a shudder of nausea down to her knees. The smell of incense lies heavily, mingling with the damp smell of wet clothes and the exhaust from the street.

Then a crash and darkness. Someone yells something about the kids smashing the light bulbs with the ends of umbrellas. Maggie stops, not sure how to move, feeling like a thief. She tries to scurry like an alley cat to the nearest wall. Behind her someone has begun to pray in hushed tones.

A flashlight beam, like something sprayed out of a hose, lights up the room and she pauses once again in mid-crouch. She lifts her hand to push the hair back from her forehead.

There. That same man’s eyes on her, his lean face, his camera gone—lost or stolen or broken. His finger on the shudder button. And he has seen, she knows, even though now she is kneeling, the same woman he tried to photograph earlier in the day, for by accident she has the same expression on her face, half turned in surprise in the light. The beam sweeps up into a corner of the room and disappears.

Then there is blackness again. She doesn’t know whether to rise, whether to call out. A crouching thief. Should she move her hands out to embrace—towards the man across the room?

As though bidding its time the mob grows quieter until all that can be heard is the rustling of movement and muffled crying. She waits for another moment of light. When the beam shines again, the face that
emerges out of the dark is still an arrow upon her. The light moves from
her face down onto the floor, and then touches and slides over once
more. The beam is right in her eyes, so she can no longer see him. But
she sits back onto her heels and reaches into her pocket. The rosary is
in her hand and she points toward the direction of the casket for him to
understand where she got it. Then she is in darkness again. She hears
his laughter from across the room, neither derisive nor mocking, perhaps
a little teasing, but gentle, and she is aware of a kind of agreement
with him. No words, no hint of irony, just a contract, the language of
understanding.

Losing sight of the piano lady had begun to set her in this
motion. In the ensuing chaos of the day they had gotten separated and
the piano lady had pushed her way to the front. Through the gaps in the
crowd Maggie could see her and tried to make her way through. Someone
knocked her in the side with the handle of an umbrella. Another yanked
her back by the hair. The rain pelted down and she could see the mass in
front beating against the glass window demanding entrance. Step, by
step, by step the policemen in front gave ground, until, with a mighty
surge, the mob trapped them against the large plate-glass window. Then a
terrible snarl, violent and intimate came out from the crowd. A shudder
ran through Maggie's body like a path of electricity. The piano lady,
her fists hidden into her chest, was pushed against the window.

The mob had turned into a single creature, a giant wave that
paused, gained a crest, and broke until the glass shattered, raining
razor-sharp shards over the struggling people. And the piano lady, her
eyes wide with shock, her yells absorbed into the mob, her neck flipping
this way and that as she tried to escape seemed a character in one of
the silent films. And then Maggie could see nothing. The noise of the
rain of the broken glass sounded like music—ragtime gone awry—and Maggie
covered her ears, trying to run the picture in her mind without the
awful sound of her music.
As the crowd surged, she swam along. A rag doll, she was flung against the small altar where a statue of the Virgin was framed by scented candles, a tooled volume of the Vulgate Bible and, a rosary.

When she slid the rosary into her pocket the beads felt cool like pebbles dug up from the river. Only then could she leave. She crouched brushing the floor with her fingertips and looked around the room, seeking anything that resembled a back door, a forgotten exit. On her hands and knees she crawls a few feet away from the altar thinking she could survey the room better if she moved away. Her hands crept quickly along the hard floor. She imagined the clambering of locusts in her hair—she understood then how the piano had thought, searching for her swarm. Just then a mounted policeman charged desperately into the crowd. Maggie ducked, hiding her head into her arms and, for a moment, she lay beneath the underside of a horse. Her shadow, curled beneath her, was like something spilled out of a bottle.

Late that night she pushes open all the windows in her bedroom so she can hear the noises of the night. She undresses, rubs her palms gently over her neck and for a while lies down on the unmade bed. The noise of the trees, the moon on her like skin, a sheaf of water. An hour later she is up again, cutting the string of the rosary and watching the beads scatter onto the floor. Her room is in a quiet apartment building, one among a seeming endless row of quiet apartment buildings. And through the screen in her window a passerby might catch a poster image taped to the wall, something she'd just gotten out of the newspaper that night: just a photograph of a movie star, his shirt casually unbuttoned at the collar, the light at his temple. He leans forward a little as though in polite conversation, his gaze a little bored. His manner, slightly preoccupied. Though she would always see the mime in Valentino, there was a flash of something else, something unforgottably bound to the piano lady pushed through the glass window, to the man with the camera.
She bends to retrieve the beads off the floor and begins to move the pieces along the image on the wall. The picture was a kind of map and the beads would show where she had been: at the neck below the ear, at the curve of his cheekbone. There, I have been there and there and there he stood at the far end of the room. Gentle laughter, no clatter of footsteps as he walked toward her, not a sound on the floor, and that had surprised her, was somehow familiar and comforting to her, that he could approach her in this way without the noise of the crowd. And as he passed through the long beam from the flashlight flung his shadow forward ahead of him. She sat very still, the rosary beads back in her pocket as he came up to her and crouched down with her and together they listened as the noise of the swarm grew, radiating, from below the ground, from within the walls, and from the restless beating motion.
An homage
to devastating Brits,
beautiful parents,
and birds that don’t really exist.

In The English Patient, the actor Ralph Fiennes plays Count Almasy, the character in Michael Ondaatje’s book who begins the novel as a loner, but ends with his life inextricably tied to a married woman, Katherine. In this woman’s presence he is forced to reveal another part of himself, one that is both emotional and physical, but the character is one who loves things at their most reduced state, their most primitive. He is a lover of the desert. The producer of the The English Patient, Saul Zaentz, also produced the 1988 adaptation of Milan Kundera’s The Unbearable Lightness of Being. And perhaps Kundera’s own illustration of the paradox between love and burden was what drew Zaentz to these two novels.

The heaviest of burdens crushes us, we sink beneath it, it pins us to the ground. But in the love poetry of every age, the woman longs to be weighed down by the man’s body. The heaviest of burdens is therefore simultaneously an image of life’s most intense fulfillment. The heavier the burden, the closer our lives come to earth, the more real and truthful they become.

An orgasm has been described as both a little death and a cry, like pain. And so Ralph Fiennes has described Almasy as “a bit of an
outsider, I mean I think he’s quite ill at ease in moving among these kind of people, this Cairo set. I imagine he’s someone who always wants to get back to the desert, to get out, to get away...The journey he goes on in the role, in the story, from being a loner suddenly having to, and someone who probably doesn’t extend himself emotionally to other people, suddenly finds himself in this kind of presence."

At one point in the movie, before their affair has begun, Katherine and Almasy dance in a benign, slightly sterile ballroom in Northern Africa when she accuses him of predatory behavior.

She smiles at him, almost laughing, "Why did you follow me yesterday?"

"I’m sorry. What?"

"After the market, you followed me to the hotel."

"I was concerned. A woman in that part of Cairo, a European woman. I felt obliged to."

"You felt obliged to?"

"As the wife of one of our party."

"So why follow me? Escort me, by all means. But following me is predatory, isn’t it?" With a shake of her head, she holds her smile, willfully teasing him. But Almasy’s stare gains intensity. When he leans into her, he is almost glaring and she can’t hold his gaze. Slightly she hunches her shoulder, her eyes are troubled, and she looks away, beyond his shoulder.

When discussing the role, Ralph Fiennes called attention to this scene and revealed that while playing the character he held the image of a bird in his head, a predatory bird, one whose feathers aren’t quite real.

In August, the weather in Chicago runs cyclically and predictably. The heat and humidity reach sweltering levels that break in a thunderstorm every four or five days. In its wake, the storm leaves a period of wet relief for a day, or at least a morning, before the
temperatures rise again. During a visit to my parents' house this past August, I awoke in the middle of the night to one such storm. When the sound of the rain reached me, I awoke immediately in the dark room, feeling suddenly alert and awake, like I'd bypassed that half-sleep listlessness we all feel when first opening our eyes. I got out of bed, stepped into the hallway, then halted. Beyond a corner, a few feet away from me, I saw my father sitting on the steps in the dark with his hands over his eyes and forehead and both elbows tucked into his stomach. He hadn't heard me, and he couldn't see me, so I watched him. My father, a man of comfort and routine, to my knowledge, had never once sat on those steps. He bought special chairs to support his back, piled pillows behind him when he read, put his feet up while he watched TV. From my vantage point in the hallway, I could see his outline behind the thin columns of the stair railing. He arched his back. He ran his fingers through his hair. He sighed. He picked at his toe.

When my father was twenty-two years old, he spent eight months in jail in Iran. With sixty others, he'd been arrested for organizing a protest rally against the Shah. In a rare moment of sharing his past, my father once told me how he looked back at that time with great happiness.

With no small amount of intentional irony, the name of the jail had been The Prison Palace. In a square cell, sleeping shoulder to shoulder, sharing a pot of food once a day, my father spent eight months with his closest friends. They were allowed instruments, but no books, they walked for a half hour each day, and talked endlessly. They discussed religion, poetry, politics, the future of the country. My father learned how to play chess and my mother, who had a crush on him, brought him a chess set she'd bought from an old man who sold chess sets in the middle of a forest.

My mother exercises for three hours everyday, insists on washing the kitchen floor on her hands and knees every night, throws her gum at
people in movie theaters when she’s bored, and irons the crotch of her underwear after they come out of the dryer. She washes them in very hot water, runs them through the dryer for exactly forty-five minutes, and then painstakingly irons each one to "kill any leftover germs." When my mother speaks of germs, she scrunches her nose and I can almost hear her eyes speak. Blech. Germs became an issue when she went into the hospital this last August. Out of bed she wore gloves and refused to eat or drink anything served by the hospital. She explained to me that "even the air has germs." Grimacing, she sucked on the tip of her pinky finger and spit into the air, a gesture defined by her as showing disgust.

When I was young, she tucked me in every night by making me hold onto the headstand of the bed while she pulled on my legs yelling, "Come on grow! Six feet tall!" She never pulled so hard I was in pain. Though I always kissed and hugged her goodnight, my last memory before sighing off to sleep was the scrunch of her forehead and determined wrinkle between her eyebrows. For most people, mothers grow old as they grow up, but when I was a child, though she was only in her early forties, my mother struck me as almost old. Not until a few years ago did I notice how beautiful she really is.

Ralph Fiennes, when playing Count Almasy, held the image of a predatory bird in his head, and now, after reading countless interviews with him, I can say that Ralph always returns to his imaginary birds. Whether it’s conscious or not, I don’t know, but the birds creep up time and again whenever he answers a question about his preparation for taking on a role: "When playing Almasy I held the image of a bird in my head, a predatory bird"; "And then I spotted Charles Van Doren, spotted him like a rare bird"; "I like to think of Amon Goethe as a kind of vulture, a kind of writhing, scavenger bird"; "The dragon wasn’t all evil, I kept thinking of him as a magical and ancient and horrible bird"; "Richard II was a kind of pigeon, all made-up, fighting with eagles."
So, when I think of that moment when it struck me how beautiful my mother really is, I like to imagine her as a rare bird. A colorful kind of bird that stands motionless while drying outstretched wings. She stood in the kitchen wearing a bright purple vest, her skin gleaming vibrantly. I couldn't stop myself from touching her shoulder. It was smooth, creamy, and smelled of perfume. I took a mental picture, making sure to trap the light in the background so it perfectly captured the collarbone bridging the V of her vest. In my picture she had one hand at her waist, the other resting on the countertop.

My father, on the day he was arrested, stood among 462 protesters, more than half of them medical students, all of them members of the illegal Nationalist Front Party. They marched along the main street toward Tehran’s downtown, about a mile from the university. People stood outside shops, the protesters linked arms in an attempt to create a solid mass. Many carried signs that pictured the benign face of the ousted prime minister, Mohammad Mossadegh. Several burned American flags. My father floated through the crowd. He nodded at people standing outside shops, he helped a woman cross the street. He was 5’9”, 130 pounds. He wore a black overcoat, the inside stuffed with leaflets and pamphlets for the Nationalist Front Party.

After World War II, during the onslaught of the Cold War, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles voiced his concern that if potentially rogue nations “were not with us, they were against us.” Mohammad Mossadegh, desperate to enact nationalist reforms, replied that Iran stood alone and autonomous. “We are allied with no one.”

At the time, politically conscious Iranians were aware that the British government derived more revenue from taxing the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company than the Iranian government derived from royalties. In November of 1950, the Nationalist Front Party, headed by Mossadegh, rejected a draft agreement in which the British had offered slightly better terms. Oil production came to a standstill as British technicians
left the country and Britain imposed a worldwide embargo on the purchase of Iranian oil. In September of 1951, Britain froze Iran’s sterling assets and banned export of goods to Iran. It challenged the legality of the oil nationalization and took its case against Iran to the International court of Justice at the Hague. The court found in Iran’s favor, but the dispute between Iran and the British remained unsettled. Under U.S. pressure, Britain improved its offer to Iran. However, the excitement generated by the nationalization issue, anti-British feeling, agitation by radical elements, and the conviction among Mossadegh’s advisors that Iran’s maximum demands would, in the end, be met, led the government to reject all offers.

The United States came to accept the British view that no reasonable compromise with Mossadegh was possible. By working with Iran’s communist party, Tudeh, Mossadegh was making probable a communist-inspired takeover. Mossadegh’s intransigence and inclination to accept Tudeh support, the Cold War atmosphere, and the fear of Soviet influence in Iran shaped U.S. thinking. In June 1953, the Eisenhower administration approved a British proposal for a joint Anglo-American operation, code-named Operation Ajax, to overthrow Mossadegh. Kermit Roosevelt traveled secretly to Iran to coordinate plans with the Shah.

The Shah, after the successful overthrow of Mossadegh, attempted to create a political elite that would remain loyal to his crown. The newly created government drew its membership almost exclusively from a younger generation of senior civil servants, Western-educated technocrats, and business leaders. Initially, membership was limited to 500 hand-picked persons, and it was allowed to grow very slowly. In time it came to include leading members of the bureaucratic, professional, and business elite. Even in the late 1960s, when trade unions and professional organizations affiliated themselves with the court, full membership was reserved to a limited group.

In late 1962 the Shah put forth the Status of Forces Bill, a measure that granted diplomatic pardon to the United States
military personnel serving in Iran, as well as to their families and friends. In effect, these Americans were granted full immunity for the crimes they committed on Iranian soil. For Iranians, the bill illustrated the humiliating capitulatory position created by the Shah’s government. Ayatollah Khomeini, who had recently been released from house arrest denounced the measure in a public sermon before a huge congregation in the city of Qom. Tapes of the sermon and a leaflet based on it were widely circulated and attracted considerable attention. Khomeini was arrested again in November, within days of the sermon, and sent into exile in Turkey.

January 19, 1963 was the day my father was arrested for protesting the Status of Forces Bill. In his black overcoat, stuffed with leaflets and pamphlets, my father floated through the crowd. Military police arrived and protesters urged each other to break up into smaller and smaller groups, so as to continue the march. My father marched in a group of twenty, then fifteen, then eight, then four, then he walked with just one other. They had five blocks to go when, again, they had to separate. My father squeezed his friend’s shoulder, then ran for three blocks. He paused at every corner, hurriedly passing brochures and pamphlets to anyone who asked. Two blocks from the goal, he could hear the demonstrators chanting in the square and the Nationalist Front leaders speaking through microphones. He walked one more block and stood in front of an office building with a small crowd of onlookers. When a military jeep pulled up, my father edged backwards, trying to mix with the group of onlookers. Three men pushed the group aside and extracted my father.

That night he and other demonstrators were taken to the SAVAK headquarters for questioning. SAVAK was the feared secret police organization hired and maintained by the Shah for his personal protection. They beat the demonstrators and shaved long crosses in their hair: one long stripe from forehead to neck, another from ear to ear.

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My father once told me that if I ever married a Brit, I would no longer be his daughter. And this is sort of funny because I have a minor obsession with Laurence Olivier. If I won the lottery, my first purchases would include a vintage 1939 movie poster advertising William Wyler’s Wuthering Heights. In the particular poster I have in mind, Olivier’s face, dark and shadowy, is half-obscured by Merle Oberon’s pale profile. He glares with one cyclopean eye and the slogan running across the top read, “I am torn with DESIRE...tortured by HATE.” At the time, Olivier had become a star in the fully-fledged Hollywood sense of the word. His Heathcliff hit a responsive chord with younger audiences who he entranced with his broad lowering brow, his scowl, his churlishness, the cold tenderness, the bearing, the speech, and the manner of the demon-possessed.

Vivien Leigh, Olivier’s wife for many years, made a discovery in her own acting around the time of Olivier’s success in Wuthering Heights. The discovery was to stalk her ambitions and eventually upset her emotional balance for the rest of her life. She found that she inhabited her characters so much that a role she had just played was coming between her and the next one she had to assume. Whenever she had committed herself to a part over a lengthy period, one that caused her stress and drained her physically, even precipitating intemperate outbursts at work or after hours, then she found it hard to shake off the experience, get it out of her mind, even erase the dialogue from her memory. In later years—so some of her closest friends believed—she overlaid the roles she played so that they accumulated like different identities, stacked out of sight and mind while times were benign, but suddenly and uncontrollably repossessing her in some cycle of crisis.

Among my first and most steadfast of fears is the image of an old woman suffocating me in my sleep. I remember hearing a story about Bloody Mary, the unloved queen of England, who haunted mirrors. If you awoke in the middle of the night and caught a glimpse of her in your
bedroom mirror, she would step out, possess you in your sleep, then crush you in bed. Every night, after my mother pulled my legs, kissed me goodnight, and turned out the lights, I would lie in bed with my eyes shut, playing a sick kind of game with myself. I willed myself to keep my eyes shut for fear of accidentally catching sight of Bloody Mary. Every time I felt the urge to open my eyes, I would squeeze them shut, as tight as I could manage, or I would slap the heels of my hands over my eyelids. Turning over to bury my head in the pillow wasn’t possible because the only thing I feared more than Bloody Mary crushing my chest was having my back exposed to her. To this day, I have an irrational fear of mirrors in the dark. When I use the bathroom in the middle of the night, I instinctively avert my eyes from the mirror and if I can help it, I’ll never hang a mirror in my bedroom.

Similarly, Ralph Fiennes, as a child, had an unsettling fear of some monster sitting on the landing outside on the roof of their house. He always kept a night-light on and even remembers hearing a groaning noise. Though his mother tried to convince him it was an uncle snoring, Ralph continued to have the same dream of something outside his childhood bedroom that he has described as “some terrible malevolent force coming in on you, pressing you down, so you can’t get up. You can’t fully awaken, and then suddenly you do wake up.” In the newest Hannibal Lector film, Red Dragon, Ralph Fiennes plays a psychopathic killer and during filming, the adult actor was reminded of that oppressive force prowling around his house at night. Every morning, the child Fiennes would look down under his bed, only to find shoes, lost things, and dust.

On the same day that my father was arrested, unbeknownst to him, my mother and her sister were attacked by a group of American teenagers, sons of military personnel. And that is the image I grapple with when I think of my parents. I don’t know much; I can’t say what my mother and her sister wore, whether they called out, what time of the day or
evening it was. My mother never told me; she doesn’t know that I know. Over three years ago, I overheard her on the phone to her sister talking about it. I can only approximate how badly they may have been hurt, I don’t think very much. I think of how actors and writers seem to hover in the same worlds. I imagine our relationship with the characters we inhabit is much the same as any actor’s. I look for everything that can keep my imagination going for the character in question. At first it’s a little as if the character is at one corner and you at the other end, and your work, as an actor or writer is to bring closer these two entities until they are one. In this case, my parents stand in one corner, I at the other, and I have to meet them somewhere in the middle.

Sometimes, though, it’s easier to imagine my mother reminding me that had it not been for her audacity, for her temerity, I would be somewhere in Iran right now, wearing a chador, and praying to Allah. My father, she insists on reminding me, never wanted to stay in the U.S.; he wanted to move back to Iran; he couldn’t legitimize his move, his eventual citizenship. My mother, her first time in a supermarket, turned to my father, pointed to the floor emphatically with one finger and said, "If you want to go back, fine. I’ll be right here." It’s easier to imagine my mother dancing in our kitchen to Tom Jones or Puff Daddy, playing some silly prank on a neighbor she dislikes, hating my sister’s fiancee. All these are easier to imagine than trying to picture her from a time when her life wasn’t inextricably tied to my father’s, on a day when she walked down a road with her sister and a group of boys crept up behind them.

Many have asked Ralph Fiennes how he plays such horrible characters, how he plays a psychopathic killer in Red Dragon or an SS Commandant in Schindler’s List. In response, he explains that his job as the actor is "to give the appearance of being that person. Part of this job is elbowing away any judgment of the man because you’re being the man and you have to be inside his head, looking at the world through his
eyes. So, forget that Amon Goethe is evil, is terrible, is sadistic, is a monster. Forget it. Who is he? I think that that kind of extreme violence is latent in all of us and it's probably much more near the surface than we think so it's quite frightening to discover how one could see how someone could find that kind of behavior attractive and want it to be part of their job."

In 1949 when Vivien Leigh played Blanche DuBois in the London stage version of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, she was already deeply enmeshed in her own neurosis of trying to understand where the lives of her characters stopped and her own life began. Sometimes the lines she had to say sounded to her inward ear like maliciously apposite comments on her current problems or state of mind. She had the feeling of being viewed askance, of being judged. She had to repeat the part nightly for the length of the play's run and repetition dinned the lines into her like an autoconfession written by her accusers. When her mind was at peace, she could refer dispassionately to these other voices that spoke through her, criticizing and chastising her. It was as if she were being forced to externalize her own guilt, heartbreak, or what she had come to fear most, insanity.

Two years later, in the movie adaptation, her scenes with Marlon Brando form a pattern of seduction and repulsion leading to rape. The pattern is modulated by Blanche's alternate piteousness—her trembling removal of the posy pinned to her shoulder, her teetering little scurry past the brute that lurks inside Stanley, her tendril-like appeal to her sister's sturdier nature—and her precarious seductiveness in which she is, if anything, more effective and disturbing. She brushes against Stanley, hoping to coax him into a semblance of courtesy. She fishes for compliments. She thrills to feel Stanley's rough fingers awkwardly doing up her dress at the back. She sarcastically tries to shame him and his poker friends into paying a lady some dues of politeness. And finally, she utters a naked cry of horror and disgust as his beer bottle is crudely ejaculated over her dress. The psychic wear and tear she
suffered did not show on the screen: it was to erupt later in notes of delirium and despair, which echoed the very text of the madness she had embodied so brilliantly. Many, including Tennessee Williams, considered the movie a finer work than the stage production.

Vivien Leigh spent February and March of 1953, almost two years after winning an Oscar for her role in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, in India filming *Elephant Walk*. On one of the final days of on-location shooting, her latent mania showed itself. She insisted on staying up all night with her co-star and lover, Peter Finch, but she paid for it the next day when close-up camera shots became impossible. Her behavior could no longer be ignored as it was beginning to cost the film company money. The producer, Irving Asher, appealed to Peter Finch for help, but even Finch became "unsettled" when Vivien started calling him "Larry."

Asher sensed the impending breakdown and shot around Vivien, but when they didn’t send for her to come to the set, she grew suspicious, then resentful. On one of the final days of shooting, she berated Peter Finch in ribald language. Irving Asher couldn’t face filming that day’s scene with Vivien and a giant, though de-fanged anaconda, and he called for a retreat to Hollywood. As the aircraft took off for the extremely long flight, a disturbed Vivien was seen battering at the windows to be let out. Days later in Hollywood, Peter Finch was sent to break the news to Vivien that the producers were replacing her with Elizabeth Taylor. Vivien sat in her dressing room and listened, not showing any sign of understanding. He faltered. In a moment her face contorted, her teeth clenched, she flew at him and in the Mississippi accent she had mastered for Blanche Dubois, she snarled the terrifying lines from *Streetcar*: "Get out of here quick before I start screaming fire."

Laurence Olivier arrived a day or so later. In his memoir, he summed up the scene as if he were directing on stage, perhaps only thus was the tragedy bearable to him. It was like a grim reenactment of *Romeo and Juliet* twenty-five years on. Vivien waited on an upstairs balcony, staring into space and speaking, Olivier said, "in the tone of halting,
dream-like amazement that people in the theater use for mad scenes when they can't think of anything better.

Two years later, in 1955, Olivier directed himself and his wife in *Macbeth* and *Titus Andronicus* at Stratford. Noel Coward found Vivien's performance quite remarkable, "with a sort of viperish determination and physical seductiveness which clearly explained her hold over Macbeth. Like the Macbeth's, Larry and Vivien were prodigiously ambitious: they fed each other. Macbeth was the active partner in the relationship, but his wife was feeding her own mania into the tragedy in the making. She was mesmerizing." Macbeth was a play that put the daggers, so to speak, in Vivien's hands. Macbeth begins the tragedy on the heroic scale, but is then diminished by enfeebled will and cornered indecisiveness—and all the while his wife grows in blind audacity. The role appealed to a part of Vivien's nature, which disregarded consequences. As Macbeth is paralyzed by guilt, his Lady is galvanized by opportunity: something of the Olivier's natures was already contained in these roles and the way they played them. This *Macbeth*, friends recalled, illustrated the usurpation of one partner's conscience by the other's willpower—the partner who has been exhausted morally and physically is taken over by the one who take on the guilt, the one who is tireless, and even walks in her sleep.

In the spring of 2000, Ralph Fiennes returned to the London stage to star in a production of *Richard II*. Fiennes's Richard was a mercurial autocrat. Entering enthroned, he soon revealed the flawed being underneath all the ceremony. He stuck his tongue out at the corrective John of Gaunt, seized Gaunt's lands with arbitrary zeal, and skipped off to the Irish wars as if going to a fashion parade. According to reviewers, Fiennes was at his best in the deposition scene when Richard gives his crown up to the future Henry IV. Ralph exaggeratedly cocked an ear as he cried: "God Save the King" and hugged the crown to his chest as if it were a favorite toy. Stripped of monarchy's protective dignity,
this Richard became poignantly aware of his own wastefulness and other people’s cunning. In Richard II, more than any other of Shakespeare's plays, a key conundrum is posed. The king is God’s deputy on earth, untouchable. He is also a man, fallible. One reviewer commented that “notwithstanding the rather peculiar yellow cycling trousers just visible beneath his shimmering gown, Fiennes’s Richard looks and sounds every inch the monarch. But he proceeds to step down, and then and often afterwards we sense the volatile blend of weakness, bitchiness, smugness, sarcasm, and folly that eventually loses him his throne.”

I think of my mother, on an August day when she was still in the hospital. That day she was able to sit up against a pile of pillows and she looked almost regal, white against white. Her face looked wan and emaciated, but sharp and alert. At home she collects little figures of angels, and so, I brought her a little plaster angel that perched on the side of the nightstand near her bed. She reached for her purse and in the movement knocked over the angel and broke off a piece of the angel’s hand. I picked up the piece and rolled it between my fingers while I flipped through evening talk shows and news reports. Now Larry, now Wolf, now an angel with a nipped hand.

The thunderstorm began early in the evening and I had to stay until my mother fell asleep. She wouldn’t agree to go to sleep without the windows wide open for fear of what hospital germs do in the night. So I waited in the corridor until she fell asleep, then tiptoed back into the room to shut out the rain.

Later, in the night, when I suddenly awoke to the sound of the rain and found my father sitting alone on the steps I gazed at him as though staring at the outline of the ghost he will become.

The only time he has ever been back to Iran was 1979, the year after my birth. He stayed for almost a whole year, desperate to find some permanent location for his wife and children. He sought out his old friends, the ones with whom he’d been imprisoned, but they were all in hiding, terrified of the Khomeini government. The ones he did find lived
in dark shacks. Sickly and depressed, unable to communicate with family
members or friends for fear of being caught. On the telephone, he once
called them "the dead trees."

After a year, he returned to find that my mother had filed U.S.
citizenship papers two weeks after he'd left.

Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* urges Catherine to haunt him. "I
know that ghosts have wandered on the earth. Be with me always. Take any
form. Drive me mad. Only do not leave me in this dark alone where I
cannot find you."

In that hospital room, when I tiptoed back into the room during
the thunderstorm, my mother slept peacefully while the almost-old woman
who haunted my childhood memories stood at the open window, her eyes
closed, rain drizzling down her cheeks and onto her lips. Her fingers
warmed her fingers. Her fingers moved up and down her palms. Her fingers
made circles on the back of her hands. As I closed the window, she
opened her eyes to place her fingers on my sleeping mother's reflection
in the glass. Then she turned, to tell me about pigeons.
The Poet

Evening December 28, 1925

This is his terrain. She appears to him barefoot at a window, standing as a horse with one foot poised in front of her, the big toe resting on the ground. Her gait is at once graceful, smooth; then stiff. Her arms hang straight at her sides, reminding him of drapes that hang straight from the curtain rod. He sits on the edge of his bed; he is open-mouthed, as one who in a moment will crack into a smile and whisper, "aha!" In one fast movement, he steps to the window and lifts it open. She wears a loose-fitting white shirt with large airy sleeves, something like a man's night shirt from the century before. Through its thin material he sees the sprinkle of dark freckles spilling from her collarbones. She pauses. He is expectant at the window and raises his hand just above his head. In this hallucination he is the photographer and she the model. Look at my hand and hold still. Snap!
He leans over. Resting his hands on the windowsill as a dancer might rest fingers on a barre, he leans in close to study the lines of her ribcage. He hears a rustle and a scraping on the ground. He whispers aloud, *Shush now.* In a moment he will wrap his hands around the delicate ribcage. His thumbs will meet at the sternum; his hands and fingers will wrap around the two wings and he will hold her up that way. It will be as butterfly upon butterfly.

She breathes in once. The thin shirt flutters gently and shimmers blue. He closes his eyes. *Ah, the darling.* She leans over and touches his forehead with the top of her head. Her hair hangs over her face and he inhales deeply. It smells of milk and hay and honey. Like this she gently pushes him away from the window.

He falters, trips, and lands on his back. On that spot, in the hotel, on a wooden floor, he falls asleep: bangs fall to his eyebrows, thin suspenders fit over compact shoulders, white shirt is midway undone, sleeves fold to the elbow, pants brown and baggy, feet bare, toes cold.

He awakens sometime later, during the same evening, which is now night. He sits up, drinks from a brown bottle standing on the floor next to him. The liquid rains into his belly and he feels its warmth spreading upwards to his chest. He imagines the liquid evaporates to smoke, the smoke is an odor, the odor is rancid currants: bitter, putrid, scathing. He grimaces; holds; the muscles of his face relax; he nods.

On the nightstand few personals lie. He surveys them briefly and chooses the small penknife. Resolutely, though quickly, he plunges the knife into the short, fat index finger of his right hand. The deep gash darkens and he rushes to the west wall of the room, taking care to hold
his hand palm up so as not to lose any blood. He faces the wall and composes a poem.

Good-bye, friend, good-bye.  
Dear one, you’re in my heart.  
Mused partings  
Promise a future meeting.  

Good-bye, friend, without hand, without word  
No grief, no sorrow in your brow;  
In this life, dying is nothing new.  
But living, of course, is no newer.

After he composed this last poem in his blood, the poet hung himself from the water pipes in the icon corner of the hotel room. His full name: Sergei Aleksandrovich Yessenin. The Soviet paper, Pravda, lionized him and called his suicide a loss of “the people’s poet.” In Leningrad, of course, no icon hung from the icon corner. The hotel attendant sent in to check on the young poet, who had not arrived for supper that evening, knocked on the door three times before entering. He saw the blood on the wall first. An old man, he crossed himself, bowed his head and pivoted to face the eastern icon corner. After his short prayer, he lifted his head and gasped.

Among the literary elite, there seems to have been a mixture of sorrow and resentment. The poet Anatoly Mariengof said, “If Sergei decided to leave us, he must have somehow come to doubt his own creative powers. There could not be any other reason for his death, just as he had no other aim in life save his poems.” The poet Mayakovsky wrote,

. . .No, Yessenin, this is not deridingly,  
I see your cut-open hand maddeningly,  
swings your own bones like a sack.  
Isn’t it really absurd? . . .

Someone, perhaps the same attendant, lifted his body from the
water pipes and laid him out on the bed. A photograph of him amongst the hotel's embroidered coverlet appeared in Pravda two days later: the skin on his face is gray, his eyebrows knit together, his mouth slacks open. The poet is thirty, but looks younger. His face is round, somewhat chubby at the cheeks and around the jowls. As if mopped with sweat, the sides of his hair stick to his ears. The top is unruly and falls back towards the crown. All together the individual details of his face give the impression of a boy scolded and sent to bed. The boy wrestles with the sheets, calls out, but not loudly. He is halfway through a nightmare, partway to sleep.

Morning February 5, 1916

I feel as though I have bathed in a vat of molten tar, he writes to his sister from Petrograd. Sergei moved to the city a year earlier from the village in which they grew up, believing it to be the literary capital of Russia. In his words, his excitement was keen, his dismay tangible. Peter the Great had built the city in the sixteenth century as an international trading post to the west. Almost four hundred bridges connect small islands to make up the city. From the east, wind comes from the river Neva, and from the west the Gulf of Finland pushes wind into the city. Water damage from the floods of the nineteenth century is visible on palaces and cathedrals like scars or tissue damage from a burn. Sergei imagined that the city reminded one of how Rome might have looked before the fall. The magnificent buildings stood, but were dulled into shadow.

He wrote the letter on the train traveling back to Petrograd from Moscow. He had met with a group of poets celebrating the publication of his first book of poetry. At the end of the letter he writes, Just realize what wonderful things images are. Words have become used up,
like old coins; they have lost their strength, a strength that is at once primordial and poetic. We cannot create new words. But we have found a means to revive dead ones, expressing them in a dazzle of poetic images. This is what we poets have created. We are the inventors of the new.

On the train he falls asleep in his clothes, curls up on a small cot, an upper bunk that is ten inches from the ceiling; under his head is a pile of playing cards. He stretches his legs and pushes his boots against the wall to feel the vibration of the train car tickle the bottom of his feet.

The boots are tight across the ankle. He fumbles with the knot, releases the lace, and pulls his feet from the boots. He sits up to massage the ankles, feeling a slight rhythmic pain as the blood rushes back to his toes. He thinks that amputees must feel like this for some time. They feel the nerves pulling tight, winding together to form a rope that travels up somewhere to the brain, the heart. The phantom pain is felt so acutely, they look to make sure the limb is really gone.

It’s early and the train will pull into Petrograd in two hours. The light is no more than dusk that leaks past the opening of a curtain. The train moves swiftly; he hears only the snow fanning away from the wheels of the train and landing in soft clumps along the tracks.

He peels the curtain back and rests his cheek against the cold glass. Like tea gone cold, the frigid window startles at first, then surprises him with its refreshing touch against his face. He watches as the train passes by endless rows of shacks, identical with steel colored rooftops that lie lopsided over gray wood-bruises in the snow. He glimpses an old woman sitting on a porch step, which is more like a
piece of old wood set in front of the door. She knits with bare hands and her feet in the snow are buried to the ankle. For the moment he sees her, a wind blows her gray hair into her eyes. He touches his fingers to the glass, wanting the train to stop. That night he splashes his hands into a basin of cold water, then pushes them into a bag of flour. He claps and shakes the excess off, grabs his lover by the neck, and whispers into her ear, *These were her hands: cracked, dry, and weathered.*

*Afternoon, August 6, 1902*

The boy stood hidden among the trees as a rush of wild horses passed him. The herd was glorious, beautiful, frightful to the child. He stood with his knees locked, trying to bite all ten fingernails at once. The field was vast before him and he had seen the coming of the herd from far off. Wild horses, though known in the area, rarely ran through the village in such a herd.

In the distance, through the legs of the horses, he saw the uncles standing in a group. Seven men; they had short beards, stout figures, broad shoulders. Like a trenchant soldier, the boy dropped to the ground and crawled low along the earth. He rolled into a mud puddle and in frantic movements, he spread the dirt over his limbs and face and hair. He watched as the uncles strode forward towards the herd. The largest of the men carried a length of twine widely looped at one end. Two others carried sheets of net. The last four walked towards the entangle of trees where he hid.

He buried his face into the wet mud. Though he could not see, the boy listened as the uncles trapped a horse. He heard the neighing, high and loud, hysterical. The herd had passed him and their rhythm died; in their wake was the erratic, wild stomping of the trapped horse. He
heard the footsteps of his uncles closer; he heard them calling his name. His muscles tensed and he held his breath. Perhaps the uncles would not see him, would pass him.

In his dreams for many nights, he would hear their burly laughing when they found him. Look here; there is an ostrich in the mud. He felt the air around him suffocating, as though the heavy laughing had dirtied the air. In the dreams the laugh would turn into wind, the wind into smoke like heavy blankets falling one over the other onto his face.

He stood to run. An uncle grabbed him by the neck, another tore off his shirt. They said not a word to him, though their laughing continued, almost to hysterics. They lifted him by the legs and carried him over their shoulders to where the other three uncles held onto the wild horse.

His eyes clenched tight, they placed him on the horse's back. An uncle cuffed him on the shoulder; he held onto the mane of the horse. Through the rush of the hooves flying over the grass and the echoes of deep-throated cackling, Sergei listened as his heart thumped. In his mind his veins started at his hips--bucking from the speed of the horse--and traveled up to his chest, naked and burning under the sun. The veins ended at the corners of his eyes that remained tightly shut. Colors of orange and red and green came into the landscape of his mind, the blood pumped rapidly at his temples. He thought to himself, if I die, I will die because the blood will burst at the sides of my head. This landscape will burst from my ears and I will see black. That's how I know I will have died: when the colors of this landscape have spilled out and all I see is the black.

At the patch of trees, the circle of uncles stood. With their hands in their pockets and their feet turning over patches of burnt
grass, they paused in their laughter. They listened keenly for the hooves to come back, for the cries of the boy to reach hysteria, for the sizzle of their merriment to fade away.
Posing

You pose nude for an artist living on the other side of your town. She sent you a bouquet of daisies when your daughter was born and a bouquet of white roses when your husband died. She sits in a wooden chair that has wheels but no arms, while you stand or sit before her. Sometimes she frowns, gets up from the seat, and circles you. She'll give you a small look, a "may I?" look. You nod and she touches your breast or the inside of your thigh. Her touch is cold, cold as a doctor's but soothing because you're flushed. A heat that began between your breasts climbs up your clavicle and wraps around your neck. It's not a sexual heat, but something feverish, making the little hairs stick to the back of your neck. A damp film stretches past your neck and down to your back; suffocating, it seems. You watch the artist's pencil scratch intently at a corner of the pad. Your lips purse and you blink twice when she looks up from the drawing, but she ignores the unsounded plea for a blast of cool air. Just once she cupped you in between your legs. You jumped; her cold palm a block of ice and painfully searing.
Sometimes you imagine your husband has come into the room. He's a distinct presence, curling himself around you in a soft, tightly secure embrace. Standing in one place for so long, your thoughts and the pictures flashing into your head become thrilling. You think of telling the artist your thoughts; she can paint them, and then you will see how truly ridiculous they look. You imagine holding your husband's head, almost balancing him between your knees. It gives you a feeling of warmth, as his soft hair brushes against the insides of your legs. You imagine posing with him; he standing behind you, the sharp points of his chest pressing into your back and his penis poking through your thighs.

At the end of each session the artist leaves, giving you a chance to dress yourself alone. What is the point of privacy now that she has touched you and drawn pages and pages of you? Sometimes she shows you the drawings herself, and other times she leaves them lying open on a table. While dressing, you leaf through the portfolio slowly. Often she has drawn you in a completely different position than the one in which you posed. It seems odd, but you never say anything.

On your way out, the artist kisses you gently on the cheek; she hands you a check and perhaps a bag of fruit, or a pie, or a box of cookies. She insists they are for your daughter, who has waited at home long enough for her mother. In the car, though, you eat half a box of cookies, or an entire apple from the top down, or a section of pie with your bare hands.

In the picture she has drawn, a child lies at your feet wearing shorts and a T-shirt, almost doll-like, the child—whether boy or girl you cannot tell—lies on its back and stares up with wide round eyes. At your side lies an old woman; she's drawn with slithery gray strokes, her eyes rolling back into her head, her mouth hanging open, her breasts sagging to her sides. A ghost-like arm reaches across toward you and rests on a nipple. You, like the child, lie on your back, your head facing up, your arms straight at your sides. Your face in the picture is terse, serious and tight; your mouth is rigid, as if you were
clenching the muscles in your face, withstanding a pain and refusing to cry out; your eyes squint, either from the imaginary pain or because you are trying to see better. In the picture the three figures are off to the left of the page, leaving a large blank on the other side of your figure. You wonder if this artist has planned to put another figure in the picture or if she has intentionally left the open white spot.

The old woman with her slithery gray curves and the hand resting on your nipple, attracts your attention more than your own figure or that of the child's. Her head is bare, only a few wisps of hair straggling from her bald head. She lies on her side and you notice her belly, which looks like a sack; wrinkled; so alive it silently moves independently of the old, almost-dead woman. Giggling, you wish you could push your hand into the soft warm sack, which sucks, slurps, greedily pulling more: up to your elbow, up to your shoulder, until, taking a deep breath, you bend and dip in your head.

At home your daughter has fallen asleep on the couch. You pay the baby-sitter, saying you'll call next week. Your daughter awakens and you give her whatever is left of the treat. She kisses you.

In bed you sleep with the door open in case your daughter wants to climb in next to you. You hold a pillow to your chest and open all the windows so a breeze can caress your face and the slope of your neck. Often you wake in the middle of the night with a curious urge to scurry and shut the windows or to pull your daughter's tiny warm body closer to yours. When you dream of your husband, you can see his face; his lips move, but you're not sure if he tells you anything. On this night, you lie on your side rigidly, as if frightened into stillness, not wanting even to pull down the pajama pants that have bunched around your waist. You wait for the night noises to stop and the morning to come.

You wake with a start, hearing a child cry out. It's a dream; your daughter lies silently next to you, her breathing short and slow as a baby's. In the back of your mind you still hear the child crying,
only the voice grows deeper, deeper and softer, until it becomes the muffled sobbing of a grown man. Careful not to wake your daughter, you pull the covers back and tip-toe into the bathroom. You sit on the closed toilet; the tile floor is cold, but you like the chill against your bare feet. You feel fat tears roll down your cheeks, but you still want to slip your hands in between your legs, knowing that will leave you red in the face and panting, but still, chilled, hollow. You whisper to yourself, chanting words you won’t remember having said tomorrow.

Your voice sounds raspy to you. And you begin to cry raspy tears, wishing your body had been put together from clumps of sand, so all you would have to do is rub your arms together, rub your legs together, rub your chin against your shoulders. Gradually your body would lose its shape; one shoulder gone, one leg down to the ankle, the other leg rubbed off to the knee. The insides of your arms would go first; your hands wildly scratching away until you’re lumpy and unrecognizable, and the floor ankle deep in sand.

Sighing, you lean forward and steady yourself by placing your hands on your thighs. You get up and open the drawers at the sink, checking for a box of tissues. The second drawer from the bottom is neatly filled with a man’s toiletries. A drawer you’ve somehow forgotten to clean out. The scent of him wafts towards you from the collection of cologne and shaving cream. For a moment you allow yourself to picture him before this mirror: a tired morning face, the sharp line of his jaw tilted up as he shaves, the folds of a bathrobe you’ve given him reaching down to the middle of his calves. Heavy and warm, the odor quickly fills the bathroom. You stand in the middle holding a can of shaving cream, either drunk or dizzy. You are tempted to heave the can at the mirror; so comforted are you by the imaginary sound of glass breaking all around you.
This afternoon, the artist stood behind you; you felt her jeans scratching the soft skin of your backside. She reached around and slapped the tops of your thighs, not hard, but enough so a little blood rushed to the skin, turning your thighs a bright pink. She quickly turned back to her seat, her hand with the pencil moving quickly, darting along the page from top to bottom. She stopped after a few minutes and frowned. You froze your body, waiting for her “may I?” look. Without looking at you, she kneeled down so her head was at level with your thighs. She slapped them, this time harder than the last, forcing you—out of surprise more than anything else—to stumble backwards a few steps. On her knees the artist moved forward a bit until, again, she squatted just inches from your thighs. She smiled up at you, somewhat shyly, before slapping her hand on your thighs again. She slapped back and forth, using the back of her hand as well as the palm, moving her hand as if it were the head of a mop. Soon, your thighs began to burn and the skin became painfully sensitive to her touch. You tightened the muscles on your face, trying not to blink your eyes. The artist looked up at you; she smiled again, broadly, and backed up toward her seat. Tentatively, you took a few steps forward until, like always, you stood before her on a circle of rug while she sat and drew you.

This time the picture was almost all the way to the right of the sketch board, leaving a large white spot on the left. Again, you’re lying on your back with your face tightened, your lips pursed. Your hands lie rigid at your sides and your eyes are unblinking. She’s shaded your thighs with a touch of gray pencil, enough to show a slight blush. Your breasts are full, she’s even drawn slight wrinkles at the edge of your eyes. At your right is a figure in shadow, a full-bodied silhouette that lies on its side facing you. Whether male or female, you cannot tell; there are no breasts, the head is simply round and bald. The figure is sexless and young; its legs seem to kick at your legs, its feet small and tender-looking. The figure, though, still seems menacing and almost sickly. Its round bald head rests against
your shoulder and a long black tongue hangs past your breast; looking almost like a dead animal.

For the first time in months, your daughter asks, "where's Daddy?" You know the question has been coming, you've even tried preparing for it in front of the mirror. You explained right after it happened, but you were sure that wasn't enough. The girl, really just a tiny thing, knew something was wrong, had known for awhile. Why else had you moved from the other house? Yet the moment she speaks the question you've been waiting to hear, the base of your neck begins to get hot and you feel the little hairs start to get damp. You think of the artist's cold hands; you almost wish you could feel their chill on your neck or even on your thighs, gently this time and cooling, like a salve. Maybe though, it's good that your daughter has finally asked.

That night your daughter sleeps with you, curling into you and breathing deeply. You know she has fallen asleep and that is a good sign. You are left alone, awake, not feeling the relief you expected to feel. Restless, you move in and out of sleep, taking care not to move around too much.

A dream: the artist notices a scar on your left side above the hip. Though it is small, you're surprised she hasn't noticed it before. She fingers the small scar, the tip of her finger like ice melting on your skin. As she reaches to embrace you, her clothes scratch your skin; she kisses your cheek and gently leans your head against her shoulder. You close your eyes. Her fingernails run down your back, gently pressing and soon you feel the red lines heating onto your back, though her hands are still cold and you feel your nipple rise up almost painfully against the chill. You press into her if only to hide or warm yourself, believing if you push hard enough, you might push past her body and step into her skin.

She holds you tighter.
You pull away for a moment, tired of standing in one place for so long. The artist leads you to her chair, where you sit. She kneels before you and rests her chin on your thighs. This is something your husband used to do, rested his head on your lap while you stroked his hair. Your hands stay still now as you try to invoke the image of him. Instead, though, the image of the artist stays with you: small, delicate and vulnerable. Somewhere outside the dream you wonder from where she came and you find yourself wishing to take her into your arms. For the first time she is young, soft, almost blurry.

You awaken next to your daughter, your arm about her waist and your chin gently cradling her round head. As your eyes adjust to the darkness, you make out the curl of her eyelashes, the lines of her cheekbones, and for a moment it’s as if you see her father in her place. She sighs in her sleep, opens her eyes, closes them, and turns onto her stomach.

Gently without waking her, you slide out of bed and walk to the window. You feel a dull ache in the back of your head and realize your hair is still bound. You release it and run the strands through your fingers. They feel damp and you wonder how long it’s been since you’ve washed your hair. You rest your cheek against the window, its chill is refreshing; slowly you roll your head and stand there with your forehead against the glass and your arms hanging at your sides. You listen to the sound of leaves brushing against each other. You listen closely, so closely the sound becomes rhythmic; a quiet rustle that grows louder as if racing toward you, like a train that races so fast you can barely hear the whir of the wheels against the track, curving along with only the echo of its whistle that sighs to let you know how far away you stand; so you press harder against the glass, hearing only the sound outside, frightened that if you don’t listen hard enough, you’ll miss the whistle, the crescendo, the sigh, the blast of wind that will blow your dirty hair into your face; and from afar, the artist will draw you
as a figure within a frame: the lines of the windowpane crossed over your body, your forehead pressed against her pad, and your daughter, a tiny dot, sleeping in the background.
Preparation

"May God allow me to be born once, to marry once, and to die once."

The man looks down meaningfully at his daughter who sits at the table on his left side with her hands folded in her lap. A cheerful, neat young lady, the man’s daughter takes in a breath and holds it. She wears a ruffled white shirt trimmed with red ribbon; a wide black belt holds her snugly at the waist, and a glorious white skirt of orange and red falls chastely to her ankles. She is unadorned.

The man loves his pronouncement so much he repeats it in a loud booming voice, "May God allow me to be born once, to marry once, and to die once." Again, he looks down at his daughter: a single braid pinned tightly snakes at the top of her head in an elegant pattern. He smiles with his eyes and falls back into his chair. "Well, what do you think of that?"

Six people sit at a rectangular table. At the head is the man who sits back in his chair waiting for a reply to his pronouncement. Smiling with his eyes, he takes his daughter’s hand and rubs her palm with his
thumb. On his right side sits his wife who has said nothing, but
alternately stares first at the kitchen door then at the vase of white
roses sitting in the middle of the table. Next to her sits an old woman
wearing bright red lipstick; her skin is pale with jaundice and her
wide, unblinking eyes reveal the stained, molten yellow of the whites.

"I think you have a buyer." The woman smiles broadly and places
both hands on the tabletop, fingers splayed.

The man looks sharply across the table to two men sitting opposite
him: an older man with a curly gray beard and a younger man, perhaps
thirty or so, cleanly shaven. He had not expected the mother of the
young man, Desna, to speak. An hour before, when he had welcomed the
visitors into his home, Desna had pursed her lips and held onto the arm
of his wife. Now that she had spoken, the deep resonance of her voice,
its unwavering smoothness, startled him. Had he closed his eyes he would
have imagined a priest reciting in Latin with neither a break nor a
stutter.

"Desna speaks more frankly than we wish, please forgive her."

"Maybe some tea?"

The old man speaks through his beard, "What you say, what you said
about God. I want to believe that. We believed that when we were my
son's age, no?" As he speaks his hands are as withered claws he holds in
front of him. They begin to shake uncontrollably and the man's wife
looks away from the kitchen door and stares curiously at the long
yellowed fingernails.

The man smiles with his eyes and nods to his wife. Without a word
his daughter slips out of her chair and follows her mother into the
kitchen. Desna sits straighter and watches the girl's movements over her
shoulder. In the kitchen the young girl leans her head against the
corner to feel the wall on both sides of her face. She begins to count
aloud in tens. Patio lights from the house across the short field shine
through the kitchen window; the girl turns her head and squints her eyes
to see if she can see the family inside the house.
Mr. And Mrs. Noel built the large modern house across the field in this small, quaint community at the foot of the mountain. The two families divide the shared field between their houses by silent, mutual agreement. Mrs. Noel often watches the family through the windows and wonders about their quiet ways. She is a pleasant woman who everyday dresses in slacks that maintain an iron crease down the middle of each leg; on top she wears snug sweater sets in pastel colors; thin silver hoop earrings dangle just above the high collar of her cardigan. After her son catches the bus to school and her husband retreats to his basement office, she bikes into town with a large satchel in the basket. In town she pays for groceries with cash, buys fresh flowers for the kitchen, and browses in the bookstore.

"They haven't come to welcome you to the neighborhood? Is that what's bothering you?" On a particular day, Mrs. Noel surreptitiously dropped a question about her new neighbors while the florist wrapped her orchids in plastic. "They're just a quiet family. I wouldn't think too much of it, dear."

"Do you know them?"

"Not really. Relatives or friends, I think, drive in for dinner once in awhile. The wife comes in or sends her daughter to pick up a bouquet."

Such an obnoxious family, such a dirty little boy they have. It's a wonder we all don't go crazy with them across the way. As she paid for her orchids and walked out of the shop, that is what Mrs. Noel imagined her quiet neighbors saying at dinner. But the quiet family neither said nor thought this. They knew nothing of their new neighbors other than that they had moved in a few months ago after buying the lot across the field and building their house. Many young families moved into the area, either commuting to the city or working out of their homes—as Mrs. Noel's husband did. The construction often made a lot of noise, but after a few months it was over.
No one would have guessed Mrs. Noel’s painful curiosity for her neighbors. Once, she spied the family’s daughter, their only child it seemed, emerge from a door at the back of the house. She wore a breezy ivory blouse and a long blue skirt with lace trim on the bottom, her brown hair was wrapped in a bun that sat at the nape of her neck. Mrs. Noel watched her as the girl sat on the ground pulling out tufts of grass; she’s like something from a hundred years ago.

Tonight there is noise on the street like a chain that wraps around and shakes. Just as Mr. Noel emerges from his basement office and climbs the stairs, Mrs. Noel slaps her hands to her ears and flashes an accusing glare toward the window facing her neighbor’s house. “I hate all this noise!” With every push of a breeze, a tree branch hits against the living room window. The Noels’ young son finds it scary, “it’s an old man with a long arm trying to get in!” At this moment, Mr. Noel appears in the living room and smiles at his son, “what if it’s your grandfather?” Mrs. Noel blows her nose then tells her husband to “just cut the damn branch off” because she can’t stand the “knock-knock, hit-hit of it all.”

The young girl stares at the Noels’ house as her mother arranges teacups on a serving try. She watches as a basement light turns off. A few moments later, she sees the man join his family in the living room. Just once she spoke to the man and she smiles at the memory. She had watched him walk across the field toward her house. Her mother had left to buy groceries in town and her father had been napping in his bedroom upstairs.

She threw open a window and called out, “Hello!” She smiled brightly and man with his hands in his pockets leaned back slightly and smiled. He wore a button-down pink shirt and his blond hair ruffled over his eyes.

“Well, you must be our new neighbors.”
"I saw you move in with your family last week."

"You live here, then, with your parents?"

"My father is sleeping. You’re the first real neighbors we’ve had. Your lot was on sale for years and years. I’m not sure anyone even looked at it before you."

"We like it here very much."

The girl’s mother pokes her in the side, "Isabel, we’re ready. You get the sugar."

Isabel follows her mother and places the sugar on the table near the young man, "We have honey, if you’d prefer." She returns to her seat and smoothes out invisible wrinkles on her lap. The young man to whom she has just spoken looks up and smiles. His father looks up sharply, and Desna hides her smile.

"It’s not too early?"

"Eighteen? We discussed age on the phone before you came over."

"This mountain used to be the best kept secret, but now the town grows everyday. She can’t stay here forever, can’t stay our daughter forever." Just as soon as she speaks, the girl’s mother sets her lips in a firm line and nods to her husband. She turns to Desna, "you need sugar for the tea, it’s too strong otherwise."

Desna’s husband gestures with his shaking hands, turning them palm up. "I married Desna when she was only nineteen. This is our youngest son."

The man turns to his wife who is stirring sugar into Desna’s tea. "We can be ready in six months? Maybe eight?"

His wife nods. Isabel bites the inside of her cheek. The old man stands from his chair to shake hands with his host. The young man’s cheeks flush. Desna makes a gagging noise and vomits into her teacup; the liquid splashes onto the table and Desna wipes it into her lap.
Months pass. Though Isabel regularly sees Mr. Noel at the window of his basement office, she has no more interaction with either the young man to whom she is now betrothed or to his father. Instead, Desna arrives almost everyday with a seeming entourage of women who invade the quiet home with dishes of hot food, bolts of fabric, and plastic bags of fruit. Something strange begins to happen around the young girl who has never before spent time with such a large group of women. She sits on the floor at Desna’s feet, slicing apples and oranges, peeling pomegranates, and listening keenly to the conversation of the women. Her mother, for the first time in recent memory, is the center of the group, animated and lively. Before the women leave in the late afternoon, they eat the hot food and the fruit. Ever afternoon at the same time, the young girl passes the bowl of pomegranate seeds to Desna, who dips into the bowl with her tongue to finish off the last of the fruit.

It is the day before Isabel’s wedding and she stands in the middle of the kitchen with an almost-finished white shawl draped over her shoulders. Her mother and Desna and two of the other women circle her, murmuring to each other. Though she can’t see him, the girl hears her father enter the room.

A few minutes later, the girl and her father are sitting in their old car, taking a drive down a scenic highway along the foot of the mountain. The father had entered the kitchen, smiling with his eyes, asking if he might take his daughter for a drive. Though reluctant, the women let her go with her father. Outside the father admitted he was tired and magnanimously allowed his daughter to drive. In the car, Isabel holds onto the steering wheel with her left hand and pushes a tape into the tape deck with the palm of her right hand. The tape deck spits out the tape; the girl pushes it back in. The deck spits out the tape a second time. In the passenger seat next to her, the girl’s father dozes. His bald head presses against the side window and his right hand wraps around the seat belt strap running across his lap. Isabel can hear
his steady breathing and lets the tape sit halfway in, halfway out of
the deck. She pulls a tissue out of the front pocket of her skirt and
quickly leans over to wipe a line of drool from her father's chin.

Forty-five minutes later the man awakes with a start and pulls his
head away from the window. A small red circle appears on his head from
where he had leaned against the window.

"I'm hungry," he announces. The man runs his fingers over his
head, pressing a finger onto the cool pink spot. He notices his right
hand wrapped around the seat belt, stretches the hand in front of him,
and studies the finger with one eye closed.

Isabel leans forward and squints her eyes, "That sign up there
says a Mexican restaurant is at the next exit. We could go there."

"No Chinese?"

At the restaurant the man orders one taco, one burrito, a side of
refried beans, a side of Spanish rice, and a Margarita. Isabel, looking
curiously at the sombreros hanging from the ceiling, orders one taco and
one side of Spanish rice. When the food comes, they both eat quietly,
but hungrily. The giant wall clock in the shaped of a bright tomato
tells the girl that soon Desna will fold the last of the pomegranate
seeds into her tongue and curl them back into her mouth.

"I'm going to the bathroom." The man finishes the last of his
margarita and licks the salt around the edge of his glass.

After he leaves, Isabel picks up the empty margarita glass and
peers at her faint reflection. She smiles as the sides of the glass
stretch the contours of her cheeks and eyes and mouth. She puts down the
glass and fingers the check the waitress placed near her. Two boys who
had been sitting in a booth smoking since before the girl and her father
came into the restaurant walk over to her. She looks exactly as on the
day she became engaged. This morning, before the women arrived, she had
pinned a single braid on top of her head, showing off her unadorned
ears. The white shirt with red trim ruffles along the edges, showing off
the cool and brilliant line of her collarbone. Beneath the tightly cinched black belt falls the glorious skirt awash with different hues of orange and red. Both boys are about her age, perhaps one or two years older, perhaps twenty. One boy has fine dark hair and olive skin; the other is blond and pink-skinned.

The olive-skinned boy speaks first, “Sorry to disturb you, miss, but Sid and I would like to ask you a question.” Isabel looks around for her father. The pink-skinned boy, Sid, grins, “We were wondering what relation that man is to you.” Isabel swallows, then smiles broadly as she had seen Desna do so many months ago. “He’s my father.” Sid laughs, “We thought he was something else.” “So that man who just walked into the bathroom is your father?” “Yes, that’s right.”

The olive-skinned boy smiles charmingly, “I don’t see a resemblance. If you’ve got a father, people have got to see some resemblance in your face, right?” He sits down in a chair next to the girl and places a hand on the back of her seat. “Why did your father bring you here?” Though she rips at the corner of the check, her voice does not falter. “We were hungry.” The boys mimic her, “We were hungry!”

Sid moves around the table and sits on the other side. He picks up the margarita glass and runs his finger along the rim where her father had licked off the salt. In a single, sudden movement he puts the glass down and presses his forehead against hers. At the same moment, the olive-skinned boy places both hands at the nape of her neck. He whispers, “Why don’t you let your hair down for us?”

The girl hears a stirring inside her chest and thinks back to a recent time, weeks ago, when she had danced in a circle with the entourage of women. In the background Desna and her mother sat in high-
backed chairs clapping like queen at a christening. With each clap, their hands met only at the edges of their palms so as to create a deep, hollow beat. The pounding in her chest is muffled at first and the girl imagines Desna has magically appeared somewhere in the restaurant: an empty fruit bowl in her lap; her yellow, unblinking eyes growing rounder and larger with each clap, each muffled pound.

The pounding echoes in her ears. Without moving her head, Isabel lifts her eyes to see the margarita glass bounce onto the floor. Her father has hit the table once with his large fist. The boys step away from her and step backward from the table. Isabel’s father lays cash on the table, helps his daughter from her seat, and drives home with her sitting next to him.

That night as her father sleeps, Isabel stands in the field outside her house among the entourage of women. The evening is warm and breezy and the women shuffle through the grass around and behind her. This is the last, the most important of the rituals before her wedding. Her hands tremble slightly and she lifts her eyes toward the Noel house. Though she cannot see Mr. Noel, his basement office light is on and she imagines him typing away on a computer. A floor above, Mrs. Noel sits in the living room near the window. Isabel can make out a book in her hands with tall gold lettering. Can she see me? A shiver of both embarrassment and pride runs through her. She looks back down at her feet. Her father had not said anything to her in the car on the way home from the Mexican restaurant. She does not think he told her mother or Desna what happened. What had happened? What would have happened had her father not shown up? At the moment her father had pounded his fist on the table, Isabel had been on the verge of some kind of action. Just what exactly, she didn’t know. All she could remember was the muffled pounding in her own chest and the hands clasped at the nape of her neck.

A moment later, Desna and her mother who sit back on the soft grass begin clapping out the familiar muffled beat. The women form a
circle around Isabel and one woman steps forward to unpin her hair. The woman gently drops the long braid until it hits against the small of Isabel’s back. There are perhaps six, no seven, women who surround Isabel and yet she closes her eyes and imagine all the women are one: a mother, a sister, an older wife, leading her through this last stage. The woman steps up to Isabel, unplaits her hair, unbuckles the wide black belt, tugs at the ties of her skirt. Isabel opens her eyes. The breeze that so enrages Mrs. Noel whips Isabel’s loose hair around her shoulders creating a whirlwind that tickles her neck. Isabel lifts her eyes toward the Noel house. Spotlighted against the window, Mrs. Noel stands with her hands splayed and pressed to the glass. With every push of the breeze, a tree branch knocks against the window, blocking her face. The basement light goes off.

Click. Mrs. Noel has kept the door to the basement open and hears her husband turn off his desk lamp. For a moment she turns her head away from the window and listens for his light tread coming up the stairs. She looks back to the window. The branch knocks against the window at the level of her eyes. The girl out in the field turns her back and Mrs. Noel rattles the window with her splayed hands as if crushing maggots within her view. Though vague, she hears the clapping beat of the women in the field. Tears well up in her eyes; she doesn’t know why; she longs to run up the stairs, grab her sleeping little boy, show him in the window. This, she believes, will calm the high-pitched breeze that rings in her ears, that pushes the gnarled branch that slaps against the window. She stifles a scream and steps backward, wanting an escape. Her heel touches the toe of a man’s shoe and as she bites down hard onto her lip, she feel her husband’s hand in her hair.
To Remember the Feel of Falling

When Connie got home, her father was not there. Dinner sat on the table. The garbage had been emptied, a fresh bag put in the trash; but the house sat empty. Standing at the doorframe of the kitchen, Connie began to understand the different degrees of a home's vacancy. There is the empty house where someone has just run out on some kind of errand, the kind where someone isn't home yet as opposed to an emptiness when no one will come home at all. And Connie, standing in the doorway, had the acute feeling of standing before the opening of a vast and dark cave: the doorway into the kitchen, a gaping mouth that would swallow; the bones of her shoulders and hips echoing as they bumped down the tunnel of a vast and airy throat.

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Usually there is noise on the street, like a chain that wraps around and shakes. A wife slaps her hands to her ears and shakes her head, "I hate all this noise!" There is a tree branch that hits
against a bedroom window with every push of a breeze. A son finds it scary, "an old man with a long arm trying to get in," he says. The father tells his son that it could be his grandfather. His wife, though, tells him to just "cut the damn thing off" because she "can't stand the knock-knock, hit-hit of it all."

*****

Connie stood in the doorway to the kitchen. Though she knew her father would not join her for dinner, more specifically that he would never join her for dinner again, she didn't know quite what to do about it. She moved away from the doorway and tentatively walked into the kitchen (she imagined the cavernous mouth closing, trapping her in the kitchen; the floor, a tongue: slippery, unsteady and oh, so ready to curl back, throwing her down the chute). Wisps of steam rose from a large bowl of rice (just exactly when had dinner been served?). Once it stops steaming, rice cools quickly. So Connie dished some onto her plate (noticing the table had been set for only one). She cut a slice of chicken from another serving dish and began her dinner.

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Sometime after the affair, when the days had drifted back to evening walks, morning runs, noontime antiphonies of ringing phones and clicking answering machines, it occurred to the neighbors how curious it seemed that Connie had instinctively known her father was permanently gone. What, with dinner sitting on the table, steam rising from the bowl of rice, and the girl just knew the man was gone. True, she'd been a polite, precocious teen; a sweet, instinctive young woman. Yet Connie's bizarre surety, her doomed albeit precise instinct about which she had a tranquil disposition, unsettled her neighbors. After
her mother walked out, Connie left college to care for her father. No one remembered calling her to tell her that her mother had left home. Certainly her father hadn’t called; he’d sat at the kitchen table, not quite crying his eyes out, but making the appropriate sounds. Two neighbors had been sitting with him—stirring sugar into his tea and murmuring to themselves—when Connie walked into the kitchen. She had newly cropped her blond hair so it hung close to her ears; her cheeks had a healthy flush from the fall air.

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Connie finished her modest dinner, glanced before her and realized the two serving dishes held more food than one person, even two, could manage. Carefully, Connie dished more rice onto her plate, chose a hot piece of chicken, and slowly ate her second helping, then third, until she ate every sliver of rice, every bite of chicken.

After Connie finished her dinner, she stretched out on the chair and unbuckled her pants. She enjoyed this full feeling: her stomach stretching, pushing against her jeans, and filling her entire gut. Ah, ha, see if you can swallow me now. She rose from the table, walked into her father’s bedroom (formerly her mother’s and father’s bedroom), and curled up on the bed. She rested her head in the middle, between two pillows, feeling as though she was falling head-first down the chute, hands clenching, then releasing; her elbows brushing against the slippery narrow sides, waiting to stop with a small cushion somewhere in the middle.

Now, click: Connie’s mother pushes a screen door closed. She walks to the reservoir barefoot, wearing a loose cotton shift that is unbuttoned down to the start of the sag of her heavy breast. At the
reservoir she will walk into the water to her waist; she will bend her head in and then flip the wet hair back. Looking up, the chill reaching her fingers, she will let out a yell, loud and even, a note of an aria. For a moment, the cotton shift will tremble over her stout body, though she doesn't shiver. The strain in her voice, in her scream will carry two streets over where the wife will hear it, glare at her husband; her son will start to cry again. All three will be caught: a piece of food stuck at the back of your throat, tripping its way back up or down, a tangled yo-yo, until the note of the aria stops, until Connie listens to the whistle that is the sound of her falling, until the branch cracks through the window and a pair of wide flat feet dry off on the grass.
Catch if you Can

Grandmother had been the first to smell smoke coming from the house across the field. She had stepped out of bed and leaned against the edge of the window, strangely calm and curiously watching. She threw her leg up onto the windowsill and crossed her arms over her chest, unaware of the shapely curve of her calf and Grandfather watching from his side of their bed. Comfortable, Grandmother watched the spectacle below: the crowd of neighbors all standing in front of a neighbor house that burned. Through the thick window, Grandmother could hear the crowd’s yelling, a rather absurd muffle that sounded so similar to the noise of the radio or television coming into her bedroom from the downstairs living room. The neighbors threw their hands into the air, and thrust their chins forward when they yelled especially loud; their movements seemed a strange ritual dance under glaring red lights.

She saw her own daughter walk toward the burning house, making her way through the crowd. Kelly wore a crimson silk robe that she tried to tighten around her body against the nighttime chill. The window pane seemed a gaudy stage with her entering on cue from stage left.
Grandmother shook her head; twenty years old and she didn’t even know to wear something more when she went outside in the middle of the night. Grandmother cracked each one of her knuckles, stretching each finger to the side until she heard a soft pop.

“Stop that noise, you know I hate that.” Grandfather sat up. He had awakened to the feel of her weight shifting as she stepped out of bed.

“Sorry.”

“What’s happening?”

“The house across the field is on fire; everyone is outside in front.”

“Fire department there?”

Grandmother paused; yes, circling red lights from a fire truck and an ambulance were responsible for the red lights outside. Sirens blared, but they seemed very distant, as when she sometimes awoke in the middle of the night to the sound of a falling high-pitched wail that passed into a dream or became muffled by blanket and pillow as she rolled on back to sleep. “Yes, fire department is there. But I don’t think they can do much.”

“No?”

“You know that old house, with all those floors. The house will collapse from the bottom before they can get to the top. They best they can do now is to contain it.”

“Anybody still in there?”

“I don’t know, but Kelly’s outside.”

“Want me to go get her?”

“No, she’ll come in soon. She’s fine.”

“Come on back to bed.”

“Don’t want to. I’m comfortable here.”

The crowd grew. People huddled together with heavy coats over their nightclothes, yelling louder, so loud it seemed their noise didn’t sound as distant. The people gesticulated with arms upward toward an
open window; their ritual dance so exaggerated, they were now a Greek chorus, dressed in plaids and flannels. And Kelly, standing near the middle in her crimson silk robe.

A small pale face and long dark hair flashed quickly in the high window. Only a moment, but Grandmother realized the fire had trapped someone in the house. All that beautiful hair, she thought; the tiny face was almost a small animal that burrowed into the mass of hair, not really mattering at all. When she appeared in the window, the crowd grew louder still. Had there been no fire, the woman may have been a princess, a Rapunzel of sorts, cheered by her admirers. A moment later and the dark hair flashed again; the crowd, hysterical now, raised their arms toward the window. Grandmother caught a glimpse of her daughter stretching her arms upward, straining, clearly on tip-toe, to reach over the others. "Come on, come on," Grandmother found herself whispering without knowing why. She looked closer still, uncrossing her arms from her chest and placing her hands on the glass. A chubby white object flew from the window, the white cloth waving behind it. The crowd moved in, gathering tightly and opening their arms to catch. Kelly, a bridesmaid at her girlfriend’s wedding, pushed forward, practically lifted by the crowd. The white bundle fell, plop, into her. Distantly, vaguely, Grandmother heard a strained cry.

When her daughter ran up holding the crying white bundle, Grandmother stood waiting on the front porch, her hair loose, her feet bare, no robe covering her white gown. The crowd’s noise sounded sharp to her and she wished for the muffled rumblings she’d heard from her bedroom, instead of the unmitigated chaos outside.

Do you hear your mother talking? I almost hear my grandmother. I lean my head against the corner and feel wall on both sides of my face; it’s cold and feels fresh against my cheek as I trace the lines of my quilt and listen to Mother rock her chair against the wall in the next room while she spoke on the telephone. After Grandmother’s wake this
The quilt I've just finished looks clumsy and uneven. My stitches are large, weak, not small and tight the way Grandmother taught me. I lean my head against the corner and feel the wall on both sides of my face; it's cold and feels fresh against my cheek as I trace the lines of my stitching and listen to Mother rock her chair against the wall in the next room while she spoke on the telephone. After Grandmother's wake this afternoon, the house has a strange hollowness, my room and Mother's the only two showing any life. I almost hear my grandmother, Do you hear your mother talking? On Sunday nights Mother calls her psychiatrist in San Diego and talks from 8:30 to 9:30. Before she got very sick, Grandmother would nudge me toward the chest where together we would huddle in the corner and listen to my mother through the wall. I never heard very much, an occasional word maybe or mother's feet when she scratched the wall with her toes. I pretended for Grandmother, who kneeled behind me in the dark, wrapping her arms around my neck and pressing her cheek against my back. Do you hear your mother talking? Has she said anything about me yet?

And now, this quilt I've just finished looks clumsy and uneven. My stitches are large, weak not small and tight the way Grandmother taught me. She sewed most of these patches herself out of table napkins after Grandfather died. Together they had pilfered the napkins one at a time from all of Grandfather's favorite restaurants. He believed the quality of a restaurant lay in the aesthetic value of its napkins: the better the restaurant, the less need to spit anything into your napkin and thus, the restaurant could afford fancy, expensive table napkins. Faithfully, Grandmother accompanied her husband to restaurants where, upon his word, she would slip the table napkins into her purse. Excuse me waiter, the busboy seems to have forgotten our table napkins.
After Grandfather died, Grandmother made quilting squares until she ran out of table napkins. She carefully wrapped each square in tissue paper, placed the square into a trunk with a flat top, and gave the trunk to my mother. My mother, in turn, kept the squares in the trunk, never wanting to finish the quilt. Their all just different shades of white. Mother moved the trunk into my playroom after I turned five and placed her collection of stoneware teapots on the flat surface of the trunk. By the time I turned ten, the number of teapots had decreased from seven to two. The spring after I turned twelve, I ran into the room to grab a book for my homework, my knapsack slipped from my shoulder and hit one of the two remaining teapots. It fell to the wooden floor with a thud a broke into two neat halves. I sighed and wondered where I might find some glue, when Grandmother rushed in clapping her hands together.

"I thought I heard something fall. Did you break a teapot? Oh, that's too bad." In a quick motion she picked up the two halves and hurtled them into the large tin wastebasket. In another quick motion, she snatched the last teapot and hurtled that one into the waste bucket. Before I could react to what she had done, Grandmother pulled me by the elbow and then kneeled down to open the trunk.

Once mother came home after jogging. She smirked when she saw me kneeled over the patches. What are you doing? You're not an old lady yet. Anyway, their just different shades of white. She pulled off her sweaty clothes and stood naked looking out the window for a moment. Then left the room, striding confidently; damp smell of her clothes filled the room.

* * * * * * * * *

I wish I remembered what it like to be falling. When I was younger, after I had learned from Grandmother what had happened, I would stand at one end of my bed hugging a blanket, and let myself fall. People said it had been a miracle, a miracle that neither the fire nor the fall hadn't killed me. I wonder what her hands felt like, my first
mother’s, how they felt at the moment she pushed me out. I imagine she held me in one hand, then gently, but forcefully pushed with the other, like a volleyball. I don’t think she could have just tossed me out the window, I wouldn’t have traveled far enough away from the fire. Her hands; I suppose they were long and pale. I’ve heard she was rich, so maybe she wore a large ring. Perhaps the moment after I’d gone, the second before the floor gave out from under her, she regretted not tucking the ring into my blanket, so I would have a piece of her. And then, what did it feel like to fall? While I flew from a mother’s hands, from the hot smoky window and into the cool air, she dropped down, a short fall, or maybe longer if she wore a nightgown that billowed around her as a parachute. I flew like some kind of shooting star, plop into my mother’s chest, my face cool against her silk robe.

I close my eyes and trace the quilting lines with my finger, trying to imagine how a blind person would learn how to quilt. They wouldn’t learn from me. My finger traces a sunrise and I cringe as I feel two humps instead of just the one. I remember Grandmother’s laugh, “We’ll just tell them it’s a camel standing in front of a sunset. Wait, give me your finger and the Dresden plate, do you feel how perfect those stitches are? It’s the Dresden plate and that’s good because it means you have an eye for nice things, fancy things. Then, she left and her giggle, whimsical and beautiful echoes in the room.
Roaming with Duke.

Duke is a sun-kissed blonde from southern California, a Russian Language student finishing his doctorate at the University of St. Petersburg where I met him five months ago. A rule of thumb in a cold
foreign country: any man whose favorite food is an avocado and teriyaki bean sprout burger is just enough California to warm any homesick heart. Duke spent his childhood learning to surf in the Pacific, his high school days writing poetry in Baja. Now he is tall, angular, with wavy hair that tosses. He wears jeans and a black turtleneck under a dark coat with an upturned collar. He has long muscular fingers, beautiful eyebrows, and I suppose I have a crush on him.

Duke and I pass a camera back and forth, snapping shots of each other in front of St. Basil’s Cathedral. We make our way behind Lenin’s granite mausoleum where a gravely path leads toward the burial ground where, in two long straight rows, are buried the dead heroes of the former Soviet Union. The burial sites face forward, each marked by a bust that rises out of the tombstone the way a statue might rise out of sand. At the end of the first row, half-hidden by trees, the bust of Stalin stares out over Lenin’s Mausoleum and beyond it to the domes of St. Basil’s. The bust is intricately detailed, right down to the crow’s feet at his eyes and a slight hollow in the cheeks.

Except for the eyes. Having finished the head, thick eyebrows, heavy square shoulders, it’s as if the artist had abruptly decided to leave Stalin’s eyes blank. No pupil stares out, no iris, not even an evil, half-treacherous glint. The entire eye is white and those whites stare out maliciously. Unlike other busts, which have a stern yet benign air, this one is a mythical creature, half-ghost, half-snake. When Stalin died in 1953 Soviet doctors developed a more advanced method of preserving his body for display. Unlike Lenin, he would not need monthly maintenance. Stalin and Lenin lay side by side until Khrushchev unceremoniously buried Stalin in 1961. Imagining how Stalin might look now, almost forty years later, I shudder slightly and whisper my gory thought to Duke. He squeezes my wrist and pulls me along to the bust of Krupskaya, Lenin’s wife. He bends at the waist, and presses his lips to the cold granite of her forehead. I smile, still thinking of Stalin. And part of me wants Duke to leave. Stalin’s blank pupils are sharp as a
cat's. He'd been an old man when he died. They asked him what he wanted for dinner, but he didn't seem to hear a word, didn't raise an eyebrow. For an answer, he yawned and left by the door.

We leave along a narrow path. The surrounding quiet, like a monastery, hopeless and enchanting. We make our way back to St. Basil's hoping to find someone to snap a picture of us. In front of the cathedral Duke tightens the scarf around my neck. A few yards away a deaf man sells books of old communist stamps and I wait while Duke jogs over to him and motions with the camera towards me. The deaf man looks over. I wave. He laughs his understanding and gestures for the camera. Carefully he sets his books down while Duke steps over, places his arm around my shoulder, and turns to face the camera.

I stare at his eyes. A cloud lit up from the inside, suddenly light and mysterious, the hour when behind a chance look, a single image is revealed. I'm confused. Duke's eyes reflect an orange light that is quite wrong. It's too early for sunset and, anyway, we're facing southward. I turn and stare at the deaf man, who smiles, stoops and steps backward, waiting to click. Then I stare beyond him: a man has lit himself on fire in the middle of Red Square. The man has begun to scream. He howls, snorts, screeches and the sound is muffled, as if
someone has thrown a blanket over him, only the blanket is a rag, and the rag is a fire made from kerosene and a match and newspapers stuffed within old clothes. Someone, an old woman, pulls at the deaf man, turns him around, and he falls to the ground clapping his hands to his ears as if he has just now begun to hear and these screams are the first sounds to register. I turn to Duke. Neither of us has taken a step. We're frozen, ready to smile and say cheese. Duke doesn't blink, doesn't take his eyes off the flame. I keep my eyes on him, tuning out the screams as if I have traded my hearing to the deaf man in exchange for his silence. Dimly, dimly the eye of the clockmaker will burn. He will spread his hands, his heart will wheeze and groan. I keep my eyes on Duke, whose sooty and grimy hair I will hold back twenty minutes from now as he vomits in a subway car. I watch the fire in his eyes, as if watching a silent movie, clipping along, a silent movie whose reel just has to run out.
My Kidnapping

Chuck lets me off with a wary grin. "You’re sure you’ll be okay?"

I punch my fist to my chest and speak in a funny accent. "Yah. Big wide desert make me big strong guy." Another wary grin and Chuck is off. When I hear his jeep fade away, I unfold my chair, leaving the spotting telescope in its bag. On the neat form that Chris gave me, at the top of the page, inside the little box next to the words "Day one," I’ll fill in the number thirty-seven. I’ve volunteered to take part in the yearly desert bighorn count and though I’m supposed to actually count the number of bighorn sheep that come into the waterhole, Chuck already estimated that I would see anywhere between twenty and sixty in a day. And so, thirty-seven sounds reasonable. Tomorrow I’m think forty-six, and for the day after, twenty-one (a slow day). I haven’t thought beyond that, but I do have to plan for six days. I suspect day five will be high—maybe fifty-seven. I’d like to think I’m exciting and unpredictable in my numbers, but I never want to be considered unreasonable.

When I tell people I work in a movie theater, they inevitably ask why I would give up all my evenings. But what they don’t realize is that there’s plenty to do in a movie theater during the day. For instance, I
go through each theater and pick up miscellaneous articles of outerwear: scarves, coats, sweaters, sometimes socks. Then I separate them into men’s, women’s, and children’s piles. I mix the popcorn butter, which is not, as they say, “vegetarian.” Once a month I don bleached towels on my hands and feet and then crawl into this hanging apparatus that the management had fitted for me. While one of the younger employees mans the controls, I sweep from side to side, wiping down the screen.

This is my job. I’ve worked at this job for five years and sometimes I like to change things around just a little. Last week I thought it might be nice to tape fun and cheery signs to the backs of the seats. For each of the 465 seats that we have, I made a little sign that said things like “Please speak in the lowest of whispers!” “Does your popcorn have enough butter?” “If you’re not enjoying the movie, please express your views to the management. We like to know what you’re thinking!” The signs, alas, could not stay, but I still like to think it’s okay for me to try out these new ideas.

Right now, lying back in the sun, surveying my kingdom, I am supposed to be at work. I haven’t called in sick, didn’t tell anyone I wouldn’t be in today or tomorrow, or the whole of next week. Yesterday at the end of my shift, I waved and said “See you tomorrow!” I haven’t told anyone about Chris or the bighorn sheep, but early this morning right before I left, when the sky was still dark, I threw a jug of milk and broke a window. One of the glass shards cut my hand a little and squeezed drops of blood in different places throughout my apartment. With my new pocket knife, the one I got special for this desert expedition, I slashed open some of the cushions on my couch and pulled out the stuffing. I threw a couple of chairs over, knocked some books off the shelf. I danced wildly about the apartment, thumping into the walls, throwing myself onto the floor. Lastly, before I crepted out the fire exit, I screamed as loud as I could out the window. Oh, I also kicked the phone off the hook. I rode the brand new bike I bought yesterday to the diner where I was supposed to meet Chuck. Because he
offered to buy me breakfast, and because I didn’t want him to think I 
was taking advantage, I only ordered a bowl of cold cereal with a little 
fruit on the side.