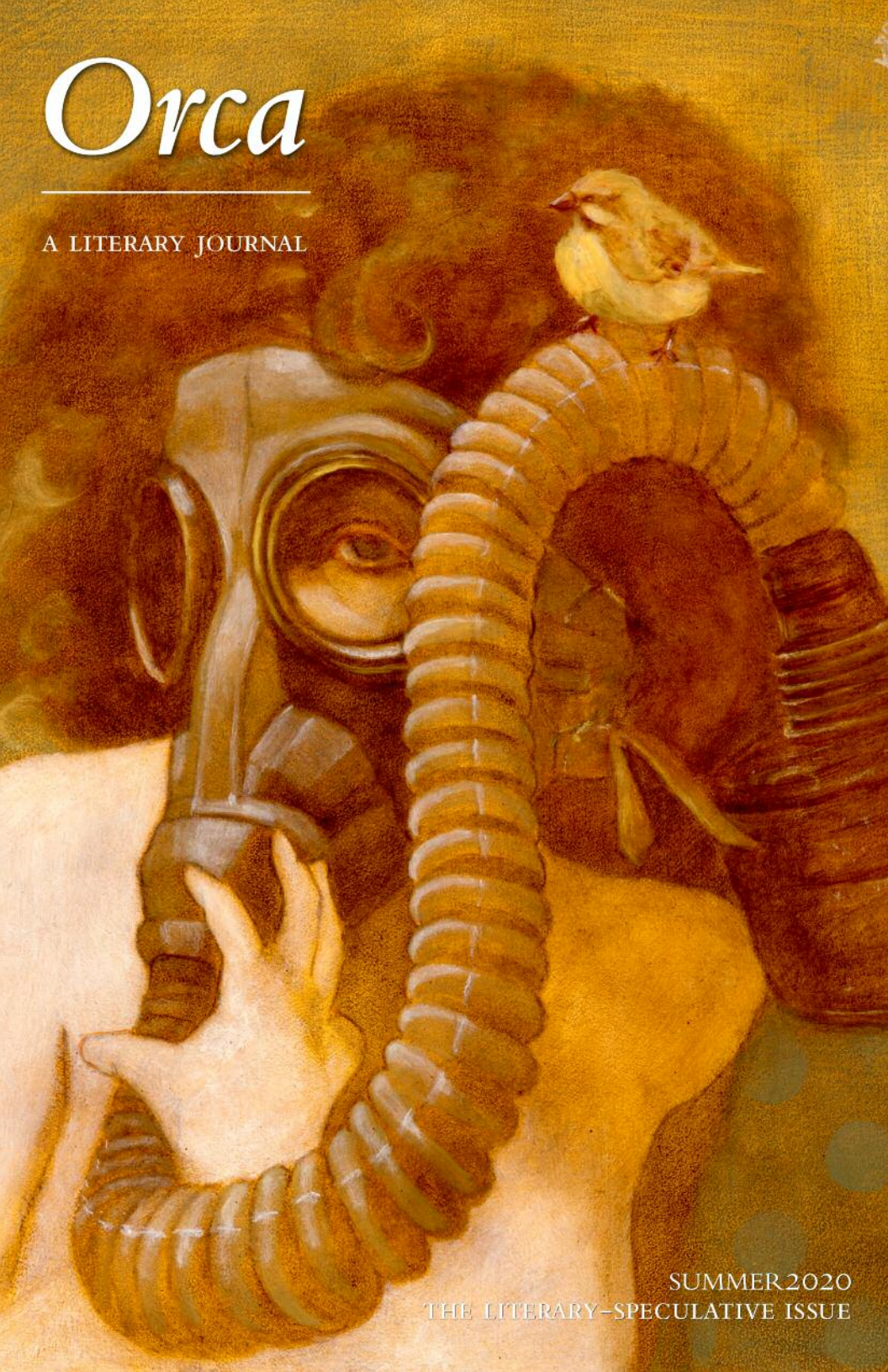
Orca

A LITERARY JOURNAL



SUMMER 2020

THE LITERARY-SPECULATIVE ISSUE

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Issue 4, Summer 2020

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The staff at *Orca* has always had an affinity for the speculative, those stories that exhibit imagination as well as literary excellence. In our first three issues we published a handful of primarily literary works that contained a touch of the imaginative.

Late last year, a writer named Rebecca Starks contacted us. She had a literary-speculative story that exceeded our word limit, she said, and would we be interested in seeing it? We read it, and it knocked us out. This, we said, is what the marriage of speculative writing with the literary style looks like. (It starts on page 132.)

It started us thinking. How many other writers could wow us like that? What if we dedicated an entire issue to such work?

We have not been disappointed. We received nearly a thousand submissions, and a vast majority of them were worth reading. It made our decision process more difficult than it has ever been. We accepted more work than usual, and we could have accepted many others, had the printing cost not been prohibitive. It's great to know that there is still a dedication to this kind of literature. The stories you read in this issue represent a variety of sub genres, from science fiction to fantasy to a touch of horror. What they have in common is superb writing and deep, thoughtful themes.

Now that we've published the Literary-Speculative issue, we're already looking forward to the next one. In the meantime, we will make room in every issue for this kind of work.

– Joe, Zac, Renee, David, Marci, Tommy, Zoe

Editor's Note: We have not Americanized spellings and grammar native to other English-speaking countries, but have left them in their original form in order to fully convey the voices of our authors.

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About the Cover

Our cover for this first-ever literary-speculative issue is titled "Gas Mask Girl," and it's by Los Angeles based artist Deirdre Sullivan Beeman. Like the stories in the issue, it blends a speculative imagination with a subtle commentary on the state of our world. And by the way, we chose it for the cover well before the Covid-19 pandemic became known. Prescient? Unfortunate? That's often the nature of the speculative.

Sullivan-Beeman is a self-taught figurative and contemporary surrealist painter who combines 14th century painting techniques and magic realism in her work. The subjects of her work are typically young, hauntingly innocent girls who seem to teeter on the border between naïveté and knowingness. She uses her personal dream journal to inspire her artwork, as well as an overt curiosity for the bizarre and the esoteric, especially alchemy and the tarot.

Sullivan-Beeman employs a time-intensive egg tempera medium in her paintings. Egg tempera was once the medium of choice for Old Masters, but when oil paint replaced it in the early

Snow White Girl

16th century, the technique was considered passé. She channels the medium's characteristically mystical qualities of illumination into dreamlike scenes. She explains, "The characters in my paintings—and their animal sidekicks, spiritual daemons—swim among my dreams. There, in the most ancient realm of the mind, I inherit stories. Like water, I draw my girls up from the deepest well."

The artist was recently honored as a finalist of the 14th International ARC Salon Competition. Her work has been shown at Corey Helford Gallery, La Luz de Jesus Gallery, and CoproGallery in Los Angeles, CA; Stephen Romano Gallery and Gristle Gallery in Brooklyn, NY; Haven Gallery in Northport, NY (Long Island); Phylogeny Contemporary, Seattle, WA; Greg Moon Art in Taos, NM; Merlino Galleria d'Arte Contemporanea, Florence, Italy; the Life Is Beautiful Music and Art Festival in Las Vegas, NV (for four consecutive years); AQUA Miami; and Art! In Vancouver, BC, Canada. She holds a BFA, in Cinema/Television Production, from the University of Southern California, and splits her time between Los Angeles, and Vancouver.

Moon Girl

You can see more examples of her work at http://www.sullivanbeeman.com/, https://www.facebook.com/sullivanbeeman, and http://instagram.com/dsullivanbeeman/.

Copper, Ink, Ghost: A Series of Etchings

M.E. BRONSTEIN

1/3 Copper

Maybe the Printmaker has spent too much time etching the forest into copper plate. All the bright brown leaves around her look like flakes of copper, and it's become so easy to confuse the two: the real forest and its flattened imitation. As the Printmaker paces between the trees, she tries to remember where she really is. She hopes that the Witch will not die this time.

And then, there she is—the Witch—curled up atop a bed of pine needles and blue flowers. The Printmaker does not awaken her; instead, she crouches, studies her from a distance, and imagines the contours of a sketch. It would be wrong to unsettle any part of the forming picture.

But then the picture changes, heedless of the Printmaker's wishes:

Ferns and weeds unfurl, blossom through the Witch's skin and then wither, grow brittle with rime. One eye rolls wide open and stares unseeing at the canopy, while the other socket hollows out

into a cavern, fills up with the melted gel of vitreous humor, then burgeoning nobs of fungus, then frost—

For a moment, the Printmaker remains transfixed by the shifting scene—"scene" is the word for it, as the Witch is no longer herself but part of the background, the earth, and the Printmaker realizes that yes, she has lost the difference between forest and artwork, and she is looking at the Witch like she is a portrait of decay. Like the old paintings and engravings of silver platters overladen with ripe plums and jewel-like lemons set in ribbons of cut peel, and then a putrid grape, a moldering crust in the corner. A *memento mori*. A reminder of death amid so much abundance.

That does the trick—the Printmaker remembers everything about the Witch that she would rather forget.

And she staggers away into a run. Back to the workshop, to fix that.

The image lingers. Both images: the sleeping Witch curled up atop a bed of springtime flowers, and the dead thing that was once the Witch, frozen over by winter.

The Printmaker bevels the edges of a new copper plate, polishes it until it shines like a mirror, her own chin, nose, and brow ambered upon its surface. She opens a jar of wax ground, coats the plate once, twice, until her reflected chin, nose, and brow disappear beneath a layer of opaque yellow-gray.

And then she starts with the bad image. The rotting Witch, the winter Witch.

The Printmaker's burin skitters across the surface of the wax. She picks out the outline of the dead leaves, the maggots, the Witch's bones. The trees that lean around the Witch, weighed down by a burden of snow, echo the arc of her ribs.

The Printmaker drops the plate into a basin where corrosive acid simmers against the hatch-marks she has cut through the wax, and the acid eats, it burns into the plate.

When the Printmaker fishes the plate out and rubs the wax away, they mingle: the Witch's features, etched into the metal, and the Printmaker's broken reflection where the plate has become

smooth and mirror-like again. The hatch-marks look a little like stitches holding their images together. Pieces of the Witch's outline woven into the Printmaker's.

The Printmaker wishes she could show the picture to someone who might understand, but everyone is gone. The Witch, the nearest town, the prospect of an apprentice or two. Depicting her has become a way of feeling a little less alone, at the very least. Even when the Witch's image seems to taunt her.

When the Printmaker ventures into the forest the next morning, she stumbles across the sleeping Witch yet again.

And the Witch rots—her bones glow as snow gathers across the earth—

The Printmaker runs—

And then a memory of the Witch bites into copper.

The Printmaker is striving after something. Another kind of image. The woman she would prefer to remember, as she first found her in the spring.

2/3 Ink

The Printmaker pushes a roller back and forth across a puddle of ink that is cloying and dark as forest muck. The Witch lies buried beneath the slick shroud of it.

Maybe it would be easier to leave her like that. But the Printmaker is a printmaker and she cannot leave her work half finished. She pulls a cheesecloth out of her apron pocket and scrubs the surface of the plate, removing as much ink as she can until only a few shadowy remnants cling to the lines etched into the metal.

The Printmaker sets the plate and a piece of paper down on the bed of the press. And then she goes to turn the great iron wheel and her arms strain as she forces the plate and paper beneath the central cylinder. On the other side, the Printmaker peels the paper away. Studies the print newly birthed by the press.

Her hatch-marks are dense, sheaves of linework coiling and writhing across the print, amounting to a forest and a Witch swallowed up in its depths. Light and shadow alternate across deep folds

in the drapery of her ragged dress, emaciated valleys of inked depth where there should be substance and warmth. And then there are the eyes, or the gaps where the eyes should be—the one clotted with moss and forest growth, the other full of nothing at all, a heavy absence in the very center of the print.

The Printmaker grunts and tosses the print aside.

She runs the plate through the press again with a new piece of paper.

The resultant impression is a little paler this time, but that non-eye still glowers at her darkly and she cannot bear that.

The Printmaker takes another sheet of paper, and then another, and runs plate and paper through the press. A new impression, a new print, emerges again. And again.

Frost is gathering in the woods and the Printmaker is running low on ink. She misses being able to visit the stationer's shop in town, but that way is barred now.

Silvered grass and leaves splinter like little bones underfoot. Her breath emerges as a thin cloud and briefly hovers across her field of vision, erasing things.

The world was different yesterday, the Printmaker is sure. But threads of time tend to tangle together in the forest, while her memory shudders in complaint and unsettles her grip on the seasons.

The Printmaker scrapes dripping bubbles of resin off the pine trees. She finds the grove where there were once blue flowers, their stalks now brittle and golden. She pulls handfuls of flax out of the earth and the round seedpods rattle a greeting. Later she will hang bundles from the workshop's rafters to dry, then press the seeds free and grind them through a hand-mill, until they bleed oil.

The Printmaker hurries, tears her nails as she pulls flax out of the earth. She does not want to linger here, for fear of what she will see next, yet again.

The very first time the Printmaker saw the Witch went like this:

She found her curled up in the forest. Wavering patches of light

roamed across the grass and flowers all around her. The Witch looked very small, huddled between a hemlock's roots, her shawl the same rough silver-brown as the tree's bark.

The Printmaker took her for a vagrant at first and pitied her. She asked her if she wanted to eat something, and the Witch said yes and followed her back to the workshop. Skittish, attention wavering over her shoulder every time a leaf stirred or a twig snapped. The Printmaker could see a scar on her face that she tried to hide behind a curtain of hair.

They shared a meal of bread and gooseberries and water. The Witch ate and drank, but otherwise held very still—except for her eyes, which roved over everything; she studied the plates and prints upon the worktable and drying racks, the ink stains upon the floorboards.

The Printmaker asked her why she had been hiding in the forest; the Witch would not say.

The Printmaker asked her if she was lost.

There had been a town back then (back before it dissolved into ash). A place to be lost from, in the Printmaker's mind.

No, said the Witch, she was not lost. Or she could not tell. She was hunted and had forgotten how to hold still. The meaning of words like "lost" felt hazy, worn out.

The Witch sorted through the Printmaker's etchings. Held them up to the light, studied the dense weave of hatch-marks.

She said that she had seen these pictures before. Hundreds of pictures now, stray reflections, replicating in the world beyond the workshop. The Printmaker had sold some of her plates in town and the images caught and spread from there, a contagion of likenesses.

I've seen your portraits of mothers holding their dead sons and daughters, said the Witch. Of widows mourning their husbands. Of the starving and the dead in their graves. What you are doing is important.

Back then, after proliferating pictures like sickness, the Printmaker ached for this kind of recognition. She needed some small proof that her work did more than make people ill.

No, no, said the Printmaker, shaking her head. What I am doing is keeping busy. That's all. These plates—they are mirrors. All they can do is reflect what is happening. They are not meaningful. They cannot change anything.

But I am not a thing in one of your mirrors, said the Witch, I am meaningful and changeable.

Or maybe she did not say that. But the Printmaker felt the thought.

You can help me. That was what the Witch meant.

But then the Witch admitted that she was a Witch, and even though the Printmaker had figured that much out already, she caught herself inching away from her guest.

The Witch asked to stay. Just for a little. When the Printmaker said nothing, the Witch begged. She clutched at the Printmaker's hands. The Witch had a scar across one of her eyelids that sealed it partly shut and made the other eye look too intent, like it would burrow into the Printmaker with burning sight and need if it could.

The Printmaker saw beauty in the Witch, and ugliness wrought by the fear that simmered around her wherever she went—and felt an itch to draw her, to capture that contradiction upon a plate.

The Witch worked as her assistant. She would go with the Printmaker to gather resin and flaxseed, hair covered and face half-hidden so no one would recognize her—if they ever met anyone, which they didn't.

She took over the mechanical tasks that the Printmaker found dullest: trimming sheets of paper, beveling and polishing plates, counting while plates sat in acid so that there would be no foul bites, acid eating where it shouldn't.

The Printmaker found her useful. She did not urge her to leave as she should have.

One day the Printmaker came back after gathering herbs and tinder in the woods and found a man before the door to the workshop, rattling the lock. He wore heavy boots and a hunter's hat, and so the Printmaker recognized him as a hunter, although that very first time,

he carried no gun, no knife. He had a pleasant face, laugh lines around the mouth and eyes, and he smiled as the Printmaker approached.

Can I help you, said the Printmaker.

Yes, he said, I certainly hope so.

The Hunter followed her into the workshop. And the Printmaker left the door wide open, so that the Witch would know that something had changed when she came back.

The Hunter stood and studied the press, the flax hanging from the rafters, the racks laden with drying prints—which he approached.

May I look? he asked.

The Printmaker nodded.

The Hunter sorted through her etchings and sighed softly as he studied one, then smiled at another, as though at a fond and distant memory. He meant to express admiration, the Printmaker knew, but she did not like smiles that did not reflect the lost and sad and lifeless things that inhabited her images. Some people had that ability to see only craftsmanship and un-see what it depicted.

The Hunter held up a print: a portrait of a frowning woman with a scar on her face and dark eyes. You could not tell she was a Witch just by looking at the portrait; the Printmaker had not figured out a way to suggest the strangeness of her: the starling sheen of her hair, or the texture of her skin, like a stone washed to smoothness by unseen waters.

Are you well, asked the Hunter, and the Printmaker uncurled fists she had not meant to clench, crossed her arms and hid her hands beneath her elbows.

I am well, said the Printmaker.

Who is she? asked the Hunter.

Who?

The Hunter held up the print.

That is no one, said the Printmaker. A beggar girl I met one day. I have not seen her in months.

I see, said the Hunter. Something like disappointment—or perhaps disdain?—curled a corner of his mouth. He turned,

surveyed the workshop once more. Then tipped his hat and left.

The Printmaker tried to knead away the grooves her nails had engraved into her palms.

First the Printmaker saw the ravens cut across the pale sky, their hoarse calls a bruise upon the surface of so much silence.

And then came the grey—it looked a little like when ink hits water and unfurls as wisps of lost linework. Smoke. It bled upward and drew itself across the clouds. And then something like yellow gauze veiled everything, muffled the sunlight and ate the shadows until all grew dull, stuck wavering between dark and light.

A scent of bitter, over-steeped heat. The acrid bite of ash.

The air filled with flakes of it and the Printmaker pulled her collar up over her nose, breathed shallowly as she waded through it. Pale motes, a very wrong kind of snow, brushed against her cheeks, clung to her hair. It would take days and days for the scent of smoke to leave off haunting her skin, her clothes.

Against the Printmaker's wishes, the Witch had insisted upon visiting town, to fetch paper from the stationer and etching acid from the chemist. It would be alright, she had said. If she covered herself well enough, no one would see, no one would fear her.

She had grown bold, eased by too much safety and work.

And then the Witch came back, empty-handed. She crossed the threshold and gasped, grateful for the cool air and shadows. She fell to her knees and the Printmaker glimpsed wet upon her cheeks. Whether because the wounding air had stung her eyes or for some other reason, she did not know.

The Printmaker thought for a moment about bringing her water, then backed away instead.

What happened? she asked.

It's all gone, cried the Witch. Everything.

Your fault—the Printmaker wanted to say, or ask, she was not sure—is it your fault? If I keep you here, will the fire follow you?

The Printmaker pictured the Hunter tipping his hat to her before he left, and the scream she would not let out rasped against her lungs, her throat.

★

The Hunter came back.

A shame about town, he said, shaking his head. He and his fellow hunters had seen it all, had picked through the remains for survivors. A tragedy.

He pulled a rucksack off his shoulders and took out a little blackened object, like and unlike the pieces of charcoal the Printmaker sometimes used when roughing out an initial sketch. Knobbed at one end, tapering at the other, as though to point at her.

You used to be on such good terms with the stationer, no? I thought you might want this souvenir.

The Hunter held out the thing, the splinter of smoked shadow, and the Printmaker did not move, did not touch it. She wanted to step away but did not dare.

She pictured the stationer's hands. Tried to imagine which finger the Hunter held.

The Hunter shrugged and put the bone back in his rucksack. Extracted a cigar in its stead and lit it. The cigar's glowing tip leered at the Printmaker. The Hunter pulled it out of his mouth and puffed a pair of languid smoke rings.

The Printmaker wanted to plead with him, but no words came out.

He stubbed out his cigar on top of her worktable. Let a burning maw eat at the woodgrain.

A word slipped free at last. Please, said the Printmaker.

The Hunter spoke softly, with sympathy, or a rough imitation of it.

You know what the punishment is, he said, for those who consort with her kind.

I would never, said the Printmaker.

She could not—cannot—tell whether her own revulsion was a performance or not.

If you give her to me, it will all stop, said the Hunter. No more damage, no more smoke and ashes. It will all be over. This is a change you can bring about, rather than a tragedy for you to capture on scraps of metal and paper.

And that kind of attack proved too much for Printmaker, who folded into herself upon the floor of the workshop and studied the lines in her own hands and the ink stains upon the floor and wished she could etch new shapes into them all and change everything. And then she spoke. Without looking at him, she told the Hunter about the places in the forest where the Witch tended to go, where she usually sent her. The stream. The pine grove. The flax meadow where the blue flowers once grew, where they would grow again come spring.

The Hunter left. The Printmaker followed.

They found her amid the flax. Gathering seeds. Her headwrap slipped as she looked up, and a tell-tale coil of hair sprang out. The vague white sunlight scattered a weird, greenish glow across the black strands.

The Printmaker would never sleep soundly again after that. The resounding gunshot always shook her dreams apart, rattled her awake. The burning hole in her skull, the oblivion where there had been an intently staring eye.

The Printmaker pours her linseed oil into a cauldron and lights the hearth. She stirs while the oil burns and blackens and the flames grow and crawl around the pot's iron belly like radiant, ghostly ivy, and sweat coats the Printmaker's brow. She melts chunks of pine resin into the mixture and folds and stirs the thickening ink. She stirs and stirs and stirs and lingers before the hearth while the ink cooks.

She dreads the right shade, wishes that the Witch would not stare at her, out of the cauldron, out of her plates, out of the forest, everywhere.

And yet still she stirs and the ink darkens.

3/3 Ghost

She cannot take the sting of it, regret engraved into her so indelibly, the Witch's line of sight become a burin, carving lines of memory through the Printmaker.

But she can ease the line a little. Lighten its weight. Bit by bit.

When the Printmaker was an apprentice, her master taught her to run a plate through the press again and again without refreshing its ink. Impressions fade. Until you come out with nothing more than a vague shadow of an image.

A "ghost." That final, faded print. Just a cleaning method. A way to remove the last of the ink on the plate.

The Printmaker knows all too well that this is how the mind eats away at its own history, too. Reminiscence has a way of fading the richness out of things, and so memories become ghosts after they are run too many times through the press of the mind.

But fading can be such a relief. Sometimes, the Printmaker needs to generate ghosts.

The Witch haunts the Printmaker. Her bones, her remains, have fed the roots of the flax plants, and the Printmaker can almost hear her speak out of oil, out of ink. The workshop is full of the scent of pine needles and her harsh voice.

She says, As long as my blood and bones stain your paper, you will not forget, no matter how hard you try to erase me.

That is not fair. The Printmaker has not tried to erase the Witch. She has tried to fade her dying. The distinction is subtle, but important. The Printmaker has run the Witch through the press and eroded the image of her death, the memory of betraying her, to escape precisely this: the dead woman speaking out of that frozen landscape, and what she would say to her one-time savior, how she would curse her. That is what her kind does, after all. They haunt and they curse. And that is why towns turn to ash around them.

The Printmaker has run the Witch through her press to reshape her into a gentler silhouette, so that she cannot see her rotting bones devoured by earth and snow and ice; instead she can imagine the flesh that once clung to her, the helpful hands, the frowning mouth, the scar. Her gratitude.

And yet the curse still simmers through the workshop.

The Printmaker feels so tired. Plates wear out, too—though more slowly than ink. And that is what she feels like now. A plate. A surface to bear a memory. And so every time she turns the Witch

into a ghost, again and again, the Printmaker keeps her company, she fades alongside her.

It is spring again. At last. A natural spring rather than one she has willed into being while turning the wheel of her press. And there are blossoms growing where the living and then the dead Witch once lay.

The Printmaker heats the last of her salt and vitriol, in an effort to cook her own etching acid. She should wear an apron and gloves, cover her face with a kerchief.

Out on the worktable, she has left old recipe books riddled with annotations and a map indicating where to find the stream, the meadow full of flax, and the pine grove.

Every now and then the outflowing tide of pictures will ebb back in and bring something from the outside world; now and then someone comes, who wants to be the Printmaker's apprentice and craft more images that can speak the faces and the names of the dead.

On such occasions this process feels a little more like a cure than a disease. The next Printmaker will draw oil from the seeds, mix it with resin, and the Witch's remains will live on in the ink that comes out of this place. The Witch will go on speaking, after a fashion, whether or not anyone wants to hear her, heedless of Hunters and fire and ash.

Perhaps some things are changeable, thinks the Printmaker, before she dissolves.

Back to TOC

Mr. and Mrs. Alien

ROSALEEN BERTOLINO

The aliens had a disturbing smell, a bit like cabbage; Min often held her breath when they came close. Their freakishness was compounded by their wrinkled gray skin, and the way their long ears flapped when they attempted human speech. Their speech! Only this morning Mrs. Alien had said to Min, "Will you pancake?"

They'd just finished breakfast, hadn't even eaten everything on their plates. She couldn't mean that they wanted more food. But what did she mean? Mrs. Alien showed her apricot-colored teeth, her ears flapping like mad. Their smiles looked like terrible grimaces. In the world they came from, apparently people smiled not with their mouths but with their ears.

Min cocked her head and held up her hands to indicate puzzlement. Mrs. Alien cheerfully grimaced and flapped her ears. Maybe she was giving a compliment. Even now, after almost a year of working for them, Min found them difficult to comprehend.

Mr. Alien's attempts at human speech were even worse than his wife's. Snorts and gurgles emerged from his mouth as from a stuttering machine, one about to explode. Today, his ears flapped in friendly supplication as he rose from the table and lumbered off to take his morning nap.

Other than their unintelligible speech, and of course their smell,

the two of them weren't bad to work for. They paid well. Their black, wet eyes were kind.

"I have eight anuses," Mrs. Alien said, dabbing her mouth with a napkin.

Min fled to the kitchen and turned on the garbage disposal to muffle her laughter. She didn't care what Mrs. Alien actually meant by that remark, could hardly wait to tell that one to Dot.

After his nap, Mr. Alien put on a cowboy hat and lumbered out for a stroll. He liked cowboy hats. Min had concluded that he wore them in order to seem like a regular guy, like one of the soy and quinoa farmers that came to town from the surrounding countryside, his way of attempting to blend in. But he would never blend in, not in a million years. The hat was too small and perched on his vast gray head like a joke, as bad as the spandex that covered the rest of his body. He wore no shoes, having hooves. There were jokes about that in the farming community.

Min understood that they, meaning humans, should be grateful to the aliens for saving the Earth—for cleaning the air, the water, the soil by means of their oxygen-rich exhalations and miraculous gel technology—but in fact many people weren't. They held secret meetings and plotted revolution, plotted to take their planet back. After all, the aliens had benefited, too. They were living all over the new, improved Earth, thousands of them, part of the new ruling class, and most weren't as easygoing as Min's employers.

The revolutionaries claimed that the aliens eventually planned to eliminate the human race, who, after all, had damaged the planet in the first place. But Min herself thought the aliens would have done that as soon as they'd arrived, if that was their intention. Who knew what was true? Opinions, lies, and reality all swirled into a muddy mess. People chose sides and believed what they wanted, despite any evidence to the contrary.

Mrs. Alien appeared in the kitchen in blue spotted spandex and a curly red wig, clutching her purse. "I go to bang," she said, giving a little wave of her leathery fingers.

"Have a good time!" said Min. Probably Mrs. Alien meant "bank" but who knew?

Perhaps she was having an affair. Min snickered at the thought. She'd heard that alien copulation took twenty-four hours and occurred only once a year. Aliens didn't suffer from the human handicap of incessant sexual desire. They led rational lives, inhaling carbon dioxide and releasing oxygen. Min's sexual partner, Tod, said the aliens were nothing more than ugly sentient plants. Combine an elephant and a flower and you had the aliens in a nutshell, although that made them sound more attractive than they actually were. Two-legged, round-bellied, with long, limber arms and bulbous heads—they looked like creatures out of a nightmare—but instead here they were, settled in suburbia, sprouting leaf-like protrusions out of their leathery hides.

Min washed and dried the dishes. She went upstairs and opened the windows of the bedroom wide to let the room air out before she changed the bedding. This was, honestly, the most unpleasant part of her job. The aliens shed profusely in their sleep—flecks of dried epidermis, thorns, dead leaves, a sticky substance like sap. She swept the detritus into a dustpan and tipped it into the trash, trying not to look, then crammed the sheets into the washing machine, selecting hot water and extra detergent.

Back on their home planet, the aliens slept on a self-cleaning gel, but Mr. and Mrs. Alien wanted an authentic Earth experience. Whatever was the point? No matter how hard they tried their experience would never be authentic, only as strange and silly and oddly touching as if Min decided to bury herself in a meadow in order to experience the life of a wildflower.

Mrs. Alien occasionally mentioned details of what life had been like on her home planet. Since her English wasn't to be trusted, however, the details couldn't be either. Despite this, Min couldn't get out of her head the notion that somewhere in the galaxy was a planet where, night and day, the sky was as pink and sweet as cotton candy.

"Are they better or worse or the same as us?" Min asked halfway through her beer.

Dot rolled her eyes. "They're different. Really different. It's not their planet."

On their way home from work, Min and Dot often met at the local cafeteria. They shared a jug of beer from the vender machine, put up their feet, and compared employers. Dot's aliens were younger, a family of two mothers and four children. One of the mothers worked at the atmospheric control plant, and the other stayed home and snorted at the children. Alien children didn't smell as bad as the adults and were almost cute (what baby animals aren't? Min thought), their ears like leathery petals, their black eyes large, their hides not quite so wrinkled. But Dot's alien children made cleaning the house a nearly impossible task. They clattered through the rooms on their hooves, boxing and neighing. They tromped mud everywhere and often cut one another so viciously that a milky sap oozed out. The youngest child, the size of a beagle, liked to wrap itself around one of Dot's feet and be dragged around as she vacuumed.

Min envied Dot's lively family. Mr. and Mrs. Alien were sweet in their way. But aside from the bizarre phrases that came out of Mrs. Alien's mouth, they were old and dull. They slept a lot. They sat on their broad front porch and rocked in the rocking chairs. Once a week or so, they had friends, always other old aliens, to dinner.

Min would eavesdrop on their dinner conversation and wonder what they were saying. Were they complaining about the inconveniences of Earth? Reminiscing about the good old days on the home planet? Ears flapped wildly and tears ran out of their eyes.

"Please mud the hair," Mrs. Alien had said to her last week, showing off her command of human speech to her friends, and Min, not wanting to humiliate her employer in front of her guests, nodded as if what she'd said made perfect sense, retreated to the kitchen, and brought out dessert. Chocolate pudding. The aliens snuffled it up straight from the bowl. They had terrible table manners.

"A little harder on the heel," Tod said, and closed his eyes.

Min was massaging his feet. Real feet not stiff, hard hooves, and nice pliable human skin, a pinkish brown. They were on the couch in Tod's APT on the Male floor of the Homo Sapiens Residence

Unit. Min with his feet in her lap, Tod lying back with his head on the armrest. Min's APT was one floor up, two hallways down from Dot's.

"They're growing us in labs," Tod said.

Yes, that's true, Min thought, as she squeezed his toes, and yet babies had been grown in labs decades before the aliens arrived. She herself was a lab baby from the Before, as was Tod. Like most people of their generation, they'd been designed—by other humans—to be sterile.

Tod seemed to read her thoughts. "But before we were in charge. Now they're the ones in control. Don't you see?"

Min did see—and didn't. She felt no nostalgia for the Before. Gas masks, rationing, fires, drought, climate change, pandemics, wars, and slaughter. It saddened her to think that humans had made such a mess of things. Yes, the aliens were in charge, but there was still a human elite, as there'd always been. High-levelers—scientists, engineers—and those so wealthy from whatever their ancestors had done or owned before the Great Collapse, that even now they remained privileged and above it all.

Tod also claimed the aliens were phasing out sexual desire. "The new generation!" he scoffed. "Docile, low-energy. They want to turn us into them. Mini-aliens. Next they'll be giving us faces like pugs."

"Okay, but how did pugs get faces like pugs?" Min slapped his knees. "Get me a beer?"

"Thirsty girl." Tod swung his feet to the floor and went to the fridge.

Min wished she didn't have the thoughts that she did. She felt disloyal to her race. She wanted to be able to think in black and white, like Tod, who worked for the sanitation district and believed in revolution, in turning the tables, and when the war was won, in keeping the aliens isolated, in camps. Not killing them, no not that, because their breath kept the air oxygenated and fresh, and their technological prowess was amazing.

Tod came back with two beers and handed one to Min.

"Why do you hate them?" she asked.

"I don't hate them. I just don't want to be exploited."

"You want to exploit them instead."

"I want the human race to survive," he said. "It's our planet."

"Can't we find a compromise?"

"Traitor to your race. Alien slut. Weed lover."

Their arguments went in circles. Sometimes she wondered if he'd be a better partner for someone like Dot, who was even more extreme and fantasized about an alien-free planet. The sex with Tod was great though. And he was confident, protective, and handsome, even if he put thoughts in her head that she would have preferred not to have—images of Mr. and Mrs. Alien crowded into a camp with hundreds like them, confusion in their wet, black eyes. Or worse, split open from head to hooves, oozing their milky sap, attracting swarms of ants and aphids.

Tod was bored by his dull job and that was why he said the things he did. That's what Min told herself. She doubted anything would come of all this talk.

"Witch vaccination?" said Mrs. Alien.

"Sorry?"

"Cue vaping?"

"I don't understand."

Mrs. Alien gave up and used her translation device. "Wil u cum on vacation???"

She showed Min the virtual brochure: "Amazon Adventure!" Red and blue birds squawked, monkeys screamed, snakes slithered into the jungle.

Generous of them to offer. Trips like this were long and outrageously expensive now that jet travel had been banned. But Min would rather stay. Her workload would lighten considerably, and she would still get paid. She looked forward to being alone in the large, clean house.

"No, thank you," she said.

"Trip like not? Us?" It was never a laughing matter when what Mrs. Alien said actually made sense. A tear trickled down her wrinkled gray face. Honestly, they cried over everything and nothing. How had they managed to take over the planet?

"Have a wonderful time," said Min, patting her leathery arm. "I'm sure you will."

Mrs. Alien blinked away tears and nodded.

Min lay on their bed, on top of the freshly laundered sheets, waiting for Tod to arrive. Mr. and Mrs. Alien had been gone three days, enough time that, with sufficient scrubbing and the windows wide open, their disturbing scent was almost erased. Done cleaning, she'd poked through their drawers, not finding much. Spandex and cowboy hats and alien nutrients glowing in clear little pots. A small pretty blue crystal. Min cupped it in her hand. There were c-eyes all over the house, of course, but Min knew exactly where they were and what they could see. They focused on the doors and windows, security against possible intruders. Not the dresser, not the bed.

The crystal's edges were sharp and slippery, cold. The way it glowed, she suspected it might be important, maybe dangerous. If she took it, her hair might fall out. Besides, they would notice if it went missing; their drawers were not exactly crammed full of stuff. She put it back.

Yesterday she'd watched some of the security footage. Light shifted, the curtains sifted, a fly landed on the front door and crawled around. So dull it was stupefying. Until she'd discovered the oddly moving footage of Mr. and Mrs. Alien's annual copulation.

They stood by a window in a dusty beam of morning sunlight. Naked, except for a cowboy hat and wig. Maybe they'd been pretending to be earthlings. Soon the hat and wig fell off. Blurry acres of wrinkled, gray hide. The occasional hoof stomp or clatter. Hours and hours of it. Min fast-forwarded again and again, looking for something more. As the sun rose higher, as the room grew dim, as the sun descended. A few seconds before the room went dark, it seemed to Min that she saw something. Where'd there'd been two, one. One body, literally. Her eyes were tired, and the footage was grainy, and maybe she wanted so badly for something interesting to happen that she'd imagined it. But she played the footage over and over and each time, there it was—the two of them silently dissolving into one. Then, as the room gradually grew lighter, from one figure

came two. She watched their foreheads emerge, their fingers. Quiet bliss on their wrinkled faces. It looked a million times better than human sex. Maybe alien sex was like the time she'd taken XtaC—and felt perfect and at one with the universe.

If she and Tod tried it, what would happen? Perhaps they would become kinder and smarter. If so, maybe they could teach others and generate a whole new movement. Peaceful and in tune with nature, like the pagans of ancient times. The Earth would become a better place.

"Spiritual Pollyanna pervert," Tod had said. He wanted to see the footage though.

The plan was for him to show up in his work uniform, although it was his day off, so that the c-eyes would pick up what appeared to be a repairman. And right on schedule, the doorbell rang and there was Tod in blue coveralls, wrenches dangling from his tool belt.

"The leak is in the kitchen," Min announced loudly, in case the aliens checked the c-eyes from the rain forest. "Come in."

She led him to the kitchen where he gaped at the colored gels behind the clear glass door of the refrigerator. "They eat this stuff?"

"Nutrients," she said, glad to be more knowledgeable than he was for once. She took his hand and led him upstairs. Nervous, she reminded herself that c-eyes were only at the windows and outside doors. At the security computer, she pressed play.

"See that?"

Tod squinted, unimpressed. "I don't get the turn on," he said. "They're just standing there."

"Watch it carefully." Min replayed the moment where Mr. and Mrs. dissolved. "See?"

Tod smiled and cupped her breasts. Min slapped his hands away. "Not like that."

"How then?"

Inside the aliens' walk-in closet, spacious and empty except for a shelf of cowboy hats and wigs, they undressed and he pressed his forehead against hers as instructed. But the sex rapidly devolved into the human kind—clutching, licking, grasping, thrusting. When it

was over, Min, who'd enjoyed herself considerably during, felt sodden and disappointed.

Human lust was the problem. Maybe now that they'd relieved themselves of it, they could try again—stand silently, foreheads pressed together.

But Tod had lost interest. He prowled the bedroom, ran his hands along surfaces, opened cupboard doors and drawers, delighted when he discovered the little gas-blue crystal. "Beautiful! What's it for?"

"I don't know. Don't touch it. They'll notice."

He snatched it up and put it in his pocket. "They're not coming home tomorrow. I'll bring it back." He wanted to take it to a chemist friend, for analysis.

"Give it!"

Mr. and Mrs. trusted her, but they wouldn't if anything happened to the crystal. What if Tod damaged it?

"It's a crystal! Hard as a rock."

"You don't know that. You don't even know what it is."

"You don't either," said Tod.

He made a show of putting it back in the drawer. But after he left, she got a feeling and looked and the crystal wasn't there. What if removing the crystal from the house somehow damaged Mr. and Mrs.?

Min phoned him. "I never want to see you again."

"I'll give it back to you tomorrow."

"I'll lose my job!"

"You work as a frigging housekeeper!"

This was true. But it was her job and she didn't mind it. She was an ordinary person, and even with the human population greatly reduced, decent jobs were hard to find.

"All right then," said Tod, his darkly patient tone that of a parent to an unreasonable child. "I'll bring it back tonight."

But first Tod took the crystal to his chemist friend, who thought he detected alarming levels of toxicity and refused to touch it further. The chemist speculated that the crystal could be part of a sophisticated machine, even an egg.

"An egg?"

"Okay, maybe a seed. Their physiology is nothing like ours you know."

"Tell me about it!" Tod told him about the security footage, how the aliens appeared to dissolve during sex. He enjoyed watching his friend's eyes bulge in amazement.

Later that day, Min got a d-message from Mrs. Alien: "Everything ok?"

Her heart lurched as she wondered what they might have seen. Maybe there were c-eyes in places she didn't know about. "All fine," she sent back. "Leaky faucet fixed."

Thumbs up, followed by an image of an enormous blue bird perched atop Mr. Alien's head.

Min sent back a smiley. She was growing fond of them, even though that was probably a mistake if the revolution came. Maybe she could warn them in advance, and they could flee to the rain forest and disappear.

Tod returned the crystal. They had sex in the walk-in closet again, and maybe got a little closer to dissolving, she wasn't sure. Who knew, maybe the dissolving wasn't even that great.

Mrs. Alien sent photos of monkeys and an obscenely moist orchid.

Min was touched and certain she'd be glad to see them. But, when they finally marched in the door on their clattering hooves, and filled the entryway with the stench of cabbage, she remembered why she'd been glad for them to leave. In a way, they reminded her of Nan, the woman who'd been assigned to Min as her grandmother. Nan's hugs had been vigorous, her enormous bosom soft, and her odor foul. She'd clipped bows in little Min's hair and fed her stale cookies.

Mrs. Alien offered Min a pretty bracelet of blue beads. "Win fat sin," she said, ears flapping.

"Thank you," said Min.

"Are plus cur!" She gave Min a warm, sulfurous embrace.

Mr. Alien had acquired some showy new hats. His favorite was a tall conical hat of turquoise feathers that, when Min showed Tod

a picture, caused him to laugh. He said it was a dunce cap. Unaware, Mr. Alien wore this hat all over town. Farmers nudged one another and winked as he clip-clopped down the sidewalk.

There were entire communities, Min knew, who regarded the aliens as gods. Their sudden arrival twenty-five years ago. The mysterious way the most powerful armaments on the planet instantly and mysteriously vanished—nuclear bombs, chemical weapons, cluster bombs, all gone. Humanity had united against them, but not for long. Civil wars ground to a halt. The air bloomed with oxygen. Too bad the Earth couldn't have been saved by a more physically attractive species.

Sunday, her day off. Tod was out of town, a retreat with the boys from work, so he'd said. He was a good liar but not perfect. Min kicked away the sheets and opened the window. A beautiful day. The sun was low in the sky, the morning air fresh and cool, the distant hills green. Coffee and q-cakes for breakfast. She planned to take the shuttle downtown, get a haircut, and afterward meet Dot for lunch.

She was washing the breakfast dishes when the explosions began. Five loud pops, an earsplitting boom. Her first thought was fireworks, until she remembered that fireworks had been banned ten years ago.

Outside a crowd had gathered. People streamed from the Residence Unit buildings. Min ran outside, too. In the distant hills, more explosions, and black coils of smoke in the sky.

"Probably a fire at the methane plant," a man said.

"Are you kidding?" said another.

Min sent a message to Tod: "?" and another to Dot: "r u ok?"

A copter twirled past, raining bits of paper. The adults shrank instinctively, but the children put their arms out and ran to catch them. "What does this mean?" a boy said, holding out a scrap which read: "The revolution has begun."

Immediately, Min envisioned Mr. and Mrs. crammed into a prison van, or worse, being slaughtered in their house, dazed and bleeding white sap. Yes, they were obtuse and entitled, but that didn't

mean they deserved to be killed. More explosions. More copters. No answer yet from Tod or Dot. She ran to the shuttle stop.

She waited and waited. Finally, a man with a machete rushed past and called out, "Shuttles have been commandeered."

She ran over the bridge. It was nearly five kilometers to the aliens' house and she might be making a mistake. If the revolution was successful, if she reached the house and tried to help them, she might not be regarded kindly by those newly in charge. Even if she was Tod's partner—though maybe she wasn't anymore. Shouldn't he have warned her what was coming? Then she realized he had. She just hadn't taken his talk seriously.

She ran through the shopping district, past the markets, the department stores, the music and paint shops, everyone either outside staring at the copters whirling past, or running like herself. As she passed the wig store, she recalled Mrs. Alien in the curly red wig, as cringeworthy and ridiculous as an overgrown child. They would never see their own end coming. The doorbell would ring and one or the other would cheerfully open it to the handsome young human in coveralls with the official-looking nametag. Out with the machete, slash, slash.

Having imagined their death, Min slowed her pace to a walk. She had a side-ache and dripped with sweat. Catching a whiff of herself, it occurred to her that maybe humans smelled as bad to the aliens as the aliens did to them. If they had a sense of smell. There were so many things she didn't know about them! Maybe she should be hiding deep underground. Perhaps even now command-central on their home planet had gotten word and was about to vaporize every human off the face of the Earth.

At last, she reached their wooded neighborhood, the streets wide and lazy, the houses shuttered and quiet, hidden among trees. No one stood and stared on the smooth empty roads. No one ran about with machetes, either. Perhaps the rich were as immune to helicopters and gunfire as they were to so many things, or perhaps the revolutionaries had done their deeds, had come and gone. Here and there a garage door gaped wide.

137 Woodmont Drive had a generous porch. Mr. and Mrs. had

relaxed in the evenings here in comfortable rocking chairs, breathing in carbon dioxide and breathing out oxygen, for all the world like friendly old grandparents. That is, if you paid no attention to your senses, if you were blind and deaf and lacked a sense of smell, then they could be the grandparents you'd always wished for. Because they'd been sweet to her.

Min approached the house cautiously. The front door was open, the c-eye above the door smashed and dangling. "Hello?" she called. "Hello?" No answer. It was impossible to tell if there was anyone inside the house due to the whirring of copters and ka-booms of explosions. She was afraid. Perhaps a touchy man with a machete was inside, waiting for someone else to kill after relentlessly hacking Mr. and Mrs. into pulpy bits.

She fell into a rocking chair, pushed her damp hair off her face. She began to rock, back and forth, like she'd been turned into a grandmother. A stone appeared in her throat, a familiar one, one that normally dissolved with a good cry. But she couldn't cry, didn't know what to cry about, and the stone remained where it was, uncomfortable and hard. She rocked and rocked. The far woods had caught on fire. Orange tongues licked the air.

Still no message from Tod or Dot, which made sense when she looked at her wrist and saw that she had no device coverage, none at all.

Her head felt too light on her shoulders, as if it might fly off. She edged her way into the kitchen and armed herself with a knife and a spray bottle of bleach. Drawers and cupboard doors hung open, their contents strewn—boxes of crackers, syrups, gel paks, flour, salt. Her formerly clean, perfectly organized kitchen. Whoever had done this deserved a little squirt in the eyes with the bleach.

"Hello!" she shouted, and advanced through the house. "Hello!"

No answer because the house, bright with daylight, was empty. She marched upstairs. Wigs, hats, and spandex in heaps on the floor. Doors and drawers gaped open. The little blue crystal was gone. Silence. Then she heard footsteps downstairs. The safest thing would be to sneak out the back. Heart racing, she crept down the stairs and just as she reached the back door, a voice shouted, "Hey!"

She shrieked and sprayed the bleach.

"Shit!" screamed Tod.

"Fuck you, too," said Min.

They spent the next few minutes at the kitchen sink, rinsing out his eyes.

"Strange, huh?" said Tod. He and Min lay on what had been Mr. and Mrs. Aliens' bed and now was theirs, for the time being at least. "Every single one gone. Like they had advance warning."

What if they had? thought Min, grateful that the aliens hadn't fought back. It was obvious that Tod, despite his bluster, was glad, too. The aliens had vanished instantaneously, every one of them, along with their mysterious blue crystals, not a single alien a casualty of the revolution. The entirety of the dead and wounded had been victims of friendly fire, like Tod's friend Nim and his handmade grenade.

Tod and many others were sure that the aliens had retreated only to plot a violent return. It made no sense that they would give up so easily. He joined a patrol that kept watch twenty-four hours a day, convinced they must be vigilant.

But Min was just as sure the aliens would never be back. She was glad they were gone, and she missed them, even though already people were saying how suspicious it was that the aliens hadn't been able to destroy such feeble weapons, that the whole thing from start to finish was nothing but an elaborate conspiracy—that the aliens weren't real, had never been real, that they'd been a mass illusion, just another clever way for the elite to maintain control. But the smelly detritus in the sheets, how could they have faked that? And Min still wore the gas-blue beads on her wrist. It was tiring and confusing, and not only that, she was out of a job.

The air wasn't quite as clean and full of oxygen as it had been, although everyone could breathe just fine now that all the fires had been extinguished. There were still little skirmishes between different factions, all to be expected in a situation where a new government must be created from scratch.

Min went to the walk-in closet. She touched Mrs. Alien's curly

red wig and tried to imagine what it would be like to have white sap for blood; what it would be like to be an unwelcome visitor on a strange planet; and what it would be like to be home again.

Back to TOC

Those Particular Histories

PETER ALEXANDER

Caught a crawler headed north to the front. Big guy, eighteen crew, six legs. Specially designed to ford the big icy rivers in Astelplains. Had to hustle to get it. Only heard of it two days before it was gonna pass by this town, Cronston. Out in the boonies it's hard to get anywhere. Swampy. We just finished a bit of ecodev, help control the floods a bit. Ditch digging, mostly. Heard they needed crews like ours up there just as we were getting done. Fine.

We wouldn't've made it if the crawler hadn't been late. Blew a gasket somewhere down the line. There we were, huffing and puffing into Cronston, and the thing wasn't due for hours. Boy we had a laugh about that, along with the other crews waiting for it. Ended up hunkering down with a couple fellas, Boris, Bjorn, and Bill. Nice guys. They did medwork around town here, "repairing people" they liked to call it.

I said there must be a big push up at the front if rooted guys like them were heading up. Bjorn said do you ever remember a time when there wasn't a big push up at the front? I grunted cause I couldn't remember but didn't think he was saying it right, anyways. Maybe we'll always be fighting up there. It's our duty, I think, to keep the work up. The revolution has to be for everyone or it isn't the revolution. If some fellas get it and some don't, then there is no

revolution. We'd be just like them. Or something. I didn't say any of that, though. They would've laughed. They always said to me, "Read less, do more, Shaska!" but I never listened. My e-reader was my most personal belonging, and I always felt my ego flare up whenever anyone else wanted to use it.

Anyways, none of us had any medwork techs. We were a bunch of ecodev and agridev fellas. Bill suggested, cause of how dangerous it is, that we'd want medtech. Him and his crew agreed they'd like to gift it to us, so we all rambled down to the Center together, figuring it would be a nice and productive way to pass the time till the crawler showed.

Now the Gift Center in Cronston is a big, beautiful building, slabs of concrete all folded in on each other and grown over with old trees and ivy. Lots of nooks and crannies in there. Crews running it were nice and helpful, the sweet fellas who always work in centers. They were real pressed at the time cause I guess a lot of other crews headed to the front had thought similar to us that now was a good time for swapping. But we found an open console and got set up.

I volunteered to go first, swapping with Boris. We sat down in the two chairs facing each other and I blushed and he laughed at that. Swapping with someone I didn't know so well always made me feel a bit shy but also excited. He had a thick, soft-looking beard. Someone helped us strap in and hook up and get it running, I don't remember who. I do remember how gently Boris looked at me when we made eye contact like you're supposed to as you slip into connection.

Oh there's nothing like the gift. Even when I'm at my lowest lows, I can think about it to remember that things can't be all bad, and there will always be new gifts to give and receive. Boris was giving me his basic medtech but said he didn't have any preference from me, so I relaxed and let whatever come out. It ended up being how to keep a vegetable garden, the way my mother taught me when I was a little fella, and improved over time with all my ecodev tech. Boris said later that he was real pleased to know it and he wanted to put it to use when he came back from the front.

Giving was good, and getting was good. His tech blossomed in my mind like a million million sunrises. There was the body with all its ailments, its strangenesses, its efficiencies and its inefficiencies, its boundless possibilities. There was where it often went wrong, and how to bring it back into harmony with itself and its surroundings. Stitching, setting bones, giving shots, amputations, small surgeries, giving pills, tending to sickness, cultivating health: these were the contents of the gift. It fit so perfectly with my ecodev knowledge; the ecosystem a body, the body an ecosystem. Once again the fractal beauty of the world and my role in it became infinitely clear and infinitely obscure. And there was Boris, and there was I. Sitting in our chairs, dizzy together, an hour later? Maybe less.

Next pair was eager to get started so we stumbled out of the way, past our crewmates' smiles. Someone offered us sweet juice and crackers. The world was bright and glorious and all its people were radiant and flowing together—this was always my perception after receiving a gift. Colors smeared and sounds were the melody and the rhythm of a song in which we all participated, singing every day of our life. Boris and I came down in a quiet corner of the gardens, talking sparsely of what we had shared and breathing together. Later we were joined by Bjorn and Clarke, fresh off the gift, and then Bill and Doko and all the rest who hadn't participated. If they wanted we would pass it to them when we got the chance.

But we were tired. The crawler would be here soon. When we were all recovered, we headed back out to wait for it. Our crews split up around then, cause Costis suggested we could refill our supplies while in town. Rations, fuel, tools, batteries, chems, meds. So we said our goodbyes to the three B's and hit the canteens, scrounging up what was left after all the other crews had picked stuff over.

Got out to the fields just as the crawler was coming in. They were sure hooting and hollering. Always a fun time to see a big mech come into town, don't know why it sets everyone off. Crawler fired off a few sparklers and flares, fellas beating drums and hollering welcomes. Crews sticking their heads out the thing and waving. Fellas working on the outside of the mech, hanging off it, catching fruit tossed up there.

Crawler had these big legs like towers each of 'em, always a couple of 'em swinging one way or other so as to keep the balance. Hooked around the middle of those legs was a big hold and bridge, so the legs actually kept going about a third their length above it. Top of there looked like turrets. When it stopped in the field, it squatted down till the hold was on the ground, creaking and scraping and shooting out all sorts of steam everywhere. We boarded, orderly-style, crew finding a spot to hunker down though it was already pretty crowded in there. Eventually it lurched back up and we were off, swinging round in the hold, nerves feeling a bit zappy now that we were on our way.

I talked a bit with Ronta then. She had been up at the front in another crew, years ago. She showed me a scar she got back then, told me how it happened. She said it wasn't so bad most of the time. But she also said that when it was bad, it was real bad. Worse than anything else. Well that didn't help me much. But she smacked my back and said I'd be fine. I asked her why she didn't go into commune after like a lot of vets do and she shrugged. Said she talked it out with a psych and just didn't want to. Liked the ecodev too much, liked working on the externals. Maybe later, maybe after this one. Okay. That gave me a lot to chew on and I piped down and listened to Clarke talk about viruses, which he loved. We were near a window, and a port that someone had cracked open, so I could see the countryside passing by in the sunset light. Nice to just watch it pass and be still for a bit.

Had a few days on the crawler. Lots of crewtime and chatter and games and rest. When I wanted I wandered around the camps and cargo cluttering up the deck. Loaded up some theory on my reader that I'd been meaning to get to and wondered about the world. Met a member of the crawler's crew, nice gal, and we talked a bit and had a nice time together. All this in the constant groaning of the mech, the distant thumping of its steps. On river crossings it stepped slowly, and we listened to the crash of the water against the legs and felt the beckoning current, *come away, come away to the sea, come away,* the river said. But we were headed north, to the land of pines and the dark Char mountains.

The mech stopped here and there, to let people on and off. Further north we went, more went off than came on. Passed a couple other crawlers, different makes, heading south, and we waved out the windows at the weary crews in those. We were supposed to get off at this big camp and see what the crews out there needed. But we never made it that far.

Crawler was stepping down a slope with tall pines, careful on the loose soil, when we got pinged. Front of us was a big open plain, and a silver river running snakelike through it. Other side of the plain was hills, behind them was higher hills, and on and on as the earth peeled up into those ragged shards that cut the sky, the Char mountains. We had got our first sight of them the day before when we got on top of the ridge. Things got a bit quieter in the hold then. We were at the front. Soon the last of the crews would leave the hold and the crawler would turn around and head back to the sunny south.

But we thought we were still too far away to see any real action. The ping surprised us, mostly. Not Ronta. It said, line's been breached, enemy's coming. One of the slave-soldiers. Said he might change course someplace and miss us but we should hunker down until. Side of a hill no place for hunkering, so the crawler crew decided to get us down to the bottom before we curled up and waited.

Meantime folks at the windows looking to see what's out there. Crews in the turrets swiveled around, trying to catch a visual. Only one of them, but that's enough to get us scared. Someone saw it in the sky, coming for us. And there we were, out on the hillside, legs all over. Shutters went down, windows got sealed.

Guns and their irregular rhythms. Quick pitter patter of the rapids, deep thumping of the heavies. Crawler lurched through evasive maneuvers, tossing us around the dark hold. A few vomited. Crews of soldiers shouted to each other. Our crew held together, close with ourselves, hoping the crates around us were strapped down well enough.

Then there was a ripping sound, and gravity was here and there. Crashing, sliding down the hillside, trees snapping. The guns went

quiet. We scrambled for the hatches, pouring out of the smoking hulk. Freshly turned earth all around us, the smells of battle.

Saw the individual, then. Only one I've ever seen. All alone like that, it must be awful. I heard they all live like that. It was luminescent, an overwhelming light, vague shadow of a fella inside. One of the brightest things I ever saw, brilliant and blue. So bright that it lit up everything, even the clouds for miles around. "Why is it so bright?" I asked Ronta.

She said its power source must have cracked open, and it was dying. Its screams sounded like they came through a broken radio. Close by was a pair of rocket mechs with two legs and lots of guns. They must have brought it down. Soldier crews approached it. The slave-soldier thrashed on the ground, sending out awful lashes of energy in any direction. Harmless, dying thing. Someone put a bullet in its brain.

There we stood on the smoking ruin of the crawler, its legs jumbled and shattered around us. "Lonely things." Ronta said. "Don't even know what they're missing. They think their tech makes them free from everyone else, but they die alone. Can't see the connections." She spat off the edge. "Revolution's coming to them."

I felt bad for it. Conscripted on the other side of the Char to pay off impossible debts, forever held in servitude by cybernetics it couldn't forsake.

But I didn't have much time for that. Not with all the hurt it caused. Folks were still coming out of the crawler. Lotta people hurt bad. Lotta people still in there, trapped. Our crew agreed we had to get them out. Awful work. Too many we couldn't help. Too many broken bodies. Too much bad luck and twisted metal and wasted life. But we helped a few.

Helped Boris outta there. I'll never forget that. Off in some twisty little hole, half-buried in dry soil. Shattered legs. Blood on his face, in his beard. Didn't find Bill or Bjorn. Passed him to medcrews set up outside and got back in it.

Think that might of been the worst day of my life. Saved a few lives with the medtech Boris gave me. Not enough, though.

Next day over the horizon came swaying a few graceful medmechs, all the way from the front to our little tent city in the shadow of the ruined crawler. They had legs like needles and insides that sloshed around with all sorts of chemicals and equipment for putting people back together. Walking hospitals, we called them. They would take care of the ones who had made it this far.

Those of us who could hiked the rest of the way to the front. Clarke had some bad fractures and stayed behind. Wasn't the same with just the five of us, and we were all mixed in with the other numb crews from the crawler.

In those days of walking, I asked Ronta if it was always like this. She said her last shift up here was all different.

Why were we even doing this? So far from the comforts of home, I was losing hope.

Ronta squared me up when she saw that. "Are you with the cause? With liberation? It's hard to see, sometimes. You and I, we can be as limited as they are in what we see. Trapped in one body, one history, one experience. But you gotta remember that we are more than that. We're part of the process of liberation. Someday, because of what we do today, no one will ever have to experience such suffering as we have had. Our work is for them."

That straightened me up a little, at least enough to get to the camp where psychs were waiting to help all us reintegrate. Once we got settled in I knew we'd feel a bit better.

Then it was on to the work, mostly just more flood control, agridev optimizing, route maintenance. Spent a few dull months like that but thankfully never again saw anything like the first day.

Crew didn't last long after the front. Couldn't hold it together. It happens. Not sure where most of those fellas ended up. I know Clarke went into commune first chance he got. I think Ronta's still out there in the boonies somewhere with a crew. Wish I loved the work as much as she did. Haven't seen any of them since we splintered off. But I did see Boris, lots later.

It's funny how time goes. Pass a few years and you're a different crew, a different city, a different person. I met a nice fella while I was bouncing around crews doing ecodev up north, and we decided to

settle for a little while, warm up in a southern city and join a domestic crew, have kids. He knew me like no one else did—but a lot of people have. Didn't think much of the change at the time, just wanted something new to do. But in the end those little decisions make us up.

I did love Ommercia, where the waves crashed against ragged rocks and young fellas raced sailboats across the bay. Those were easy days, when I wore my hair in a bun and worked in a garden like my mother taught me and rambled in the streets teaching words to my little ones. Our crew was four couples, usually a twenty-crew, adults and children together. Always stops me how big domestic crews get sometimes, bigger than the biggest mechs even.

I was walking with Denien, my older boy, when I saw Boris. Denien had come into an interest in some kinds of lizard, so we had taken the afternoon to go looking for them. Had lunch at our favorite canteen and an hour or so by the shore where I read and he turned over rocks and looked for the fellas. No luck, so we checked another part of town, up in the hills where they might go sunning themselves on the rocks. Up there it was every minute or so another round of "Ohhhhh! Mom! Mom! Lookit this one!"

Walking home in the golden hour we passed one of the oldest sections of the last wall. Commune had long preferred to expand elsewhere, to flatter parts of town. This neighborhood was a labyrinth of hills and narrow streets angling around outcrops of stone and sudden cliffs. In the distance I could see the cranes building new sections.

I could hear singing from the other side of the wall. I talked with Denien about the promise of commune.

"Why aren't we in commune?" He asked.

I laughed at the childish question. "Well there's lots of work to do out here. Right now, commune wouldn't exist without what we do out here. But someday it'll grow, and commune will be everywhere. Everything will be inside the last walls, and there won't be any walls anymore."

"But…" He squinted at some distant idea. "How will we hold the roof up?"

He was four, and soon he'd be joining an educrew to learn about the world from a proper teacher. Wouldn't be a part of our domestic crew then, but he could still sleep in our complex if he wanted. Kids didn't usually move away from their domestic crew until they were teens.

A fig tree was growing out of the last wall, and I picked fruit for us. Warm light stretched down the road, surrounding us and sticking to us like honey. Then Denien noticed the fella in the shadow and tugged on my sleeve.

He was all alone, surrounded by scrap building materials, knees pulled up to his chest and head tucked inwards. This was a quiet part of town, and there were only the three of us. For a moment I was afraid, but then I realized that Denien had probably never seen a fella like this before. Good chance for him to learn.

"You see that fella?" I said.

"Mmmhmm."

"That fella is Outside. Means he needs help."

"Outside what, Mama?"

"Outside all of us. Outside crews, outside homes, outside work. He must have slipped through the cracks somewhere. Maybe needs medwork, psychwork."

I got Denien's hand in mine and we walked over to where the outside fella sat, careful cause you never could be sure how a fella might act once he was outside.

"'Scuse me comrade," I said. "You look a little under the weather. Everything alright?"

When he looked at me it was like a bell ringing in my brain. I didn't realize why at first. This dirty fella with ragged fluffy beard and creased skin. Then it was those eyes. Gentle way of looking. I had looked at that face before. Fellas say you never forget the face of someone you got a Gift from. I never knew what that meant 'til then. Okay.

"Shaska."

"Boris?" I crouched beside, reached but he flinched from my hand. "You alright?"

He looked away and shook his head. "No. Not really."

"I could tell."

He laughed at that, pulled on his beard. Quiet for a moment, then, "That little fella with you?"

"Mmmhmm, this is Denien. Say hi, kid."

The kid said hi.

"This fella's an old friend. I knew him up at the front. Hey kid, show him your stitches." I told Boris how a little while ago Denien had been playing on the beach and sliced up his leg on a rock. "Lucky for him his Mom knows a thing or two about repairing people. I learned that from Boris here."

"Oh, would you look at that." Boris said. "You did a fine job there, Shaska."

"Well thanks, Boris. You ever put that gardening tech to use?"

He got all funny then, looking away and scrunching his face. He didn't want to talk about himself. Fellas outside wind up with all sorts of ways of feeling pain. For some of them, they get to a point where their selfness feels like a wound. You remind them that they've got a particular story no one else has, that they're stuck in their body and not dissolved in the universe, it's like jabbing a fella in that wound.

"Hey, how about you come back for dinner?"

"Oh, I don't know about that."

"Come on now. You don't gotta talk about anything at all. You can see the garden we keep there."

That won him over. We rambled home, Denien sneaking shy glances around my legs at the stranger as I talked his ear off about my life here in Ommercia and how I got here. Sneaky-like I slipped in a few sideways questions about him, yes-or-nos and those sorts.

Sometime after the wreck I guess he bounced out of everything, didn't get good psychwork and couldn't reintegrate. He had been in that crew with Bill and Bjorn for a long time. Fella needs good work after something like that.

He told me that he had become like that slave-soldier, the Individual at the front. All alone. Said that sometimes he had dreams where he was flying over that same silver snake river, fighting mechs

and killing crews. Said something was broken in him, leaking hurt out into the world, just like that soldier.

Cut off from everything, he wandered south, away from the cold and the war. Blending in with crowds, catching crawlers, trains, eating at mess halls. Pass for someone else's crewmember, no one sees you need help. Sounds so lonely to me.

We got back to the complex alright, met my other little fella in the courtyard. I introduced Boris to everyone else in the domestic crew, showed him around the garden we had growing there. He loved that, and we talked for a while about all we were growing, some for food, some for beauty, some for ecofunction. Boris loved that garden, I think. It opened him up a bit. Gave him the chance to connect with us. He talked about how he always wished he had a chance to use the gardening tech I gave him, how a few different times he had tried but it had gotten all messed up cause of circumstances. It put a deep sadness in me to catch glimpses of how rough his life had been in his years outside.

It wasn't too long before he couldn't take it anymore. The fella was still fragile, we could all see. None of us were trained to help him integrate, and we made all sorts of stupid mistakes, hurting all his secret wounds. When he couldn't take it anymore he took off in a hurry, stuttering and stumbling over his words. I don't remember what set it off exactly—I think one of my crewmates might of offered to put him up in here for the night. That was too much.

We talked a lot that night. They had already heard my one war story but I told it again anyways. We talked about fellas who wound up outside, about the costs of the war, and what we could do down here in the comfort of Ommercia. Plenty of survivor's guilt. Felt just awful knowing we had something he didn't, connection and crewlife while he was out there, outside, sleeping alone somewhere. Almost wanted to go and look for him but there's no sense chasing a fella. That'd only scare him.

Next day I went out and let a local care crew know about Boris, and they spread the word to keep an eye out for him. Went to talk to a psych crew as well about it. They sent a few nice fellas over to our domestic to chat.

Wasn't more than a few days later that someone from the care crew came by and said they'd found Boris. He was already getting psychwork. She said the fella'd probably go right into commune, no sense trying to get him integrated with a new crew out here. I guess what I told them helped a lot, the gardening stuff especially.

Seemed like Denien grew up in a hurry after all that. At a certain age he became one of those fellas racing sailboats in the bay, and found he had a taste for it. Eventually he got into a crew doing search and rescue. Liked feeling a hero, I think, bringing people into shore when they were way out in the shit with no hope. Couple years of that passed and then there was another big push up at the front and he went along with it, just like me at that age. Only he didn't make it. Killed in a little clash by a frozen river somewhere.

That was that for me. I couldn't handle the world anymore. I grieved with my crew, with my family, and then I asked to be integrated into commune. Took around a year for the psych crews to do their work on my integration crew. It's not like the rest of the world in there. They don't have crews—they're all one big crew. They don't have work, or they're always working. Things aren't really one way or the other in there. So you need some time to get ready for the change.

I never know what to say about commune. If I told you about the recipes we cook with, would you understand? I don't think so. Or the songs we sing, the activities of morning, afternoon and evening, the robes we wear, nothing gets it right. What is beyond the last wall is simply beyond. But we are lucky; we all have a chance to see it for ourselves.

In my old age, I find it funny to think about all the ways that death has touched us. Do you remember the epidemic a few years ago? How there was a body on every corner and fellas cursed the sky? Or when that storm came through? Took us years to get back to peak integration.

Can't get away from it I suppose, even here in commune. I know it gets harder for me every day. But that's no problem. Old things gotta pass for new to come around.

I miss them, though. Denien and all the others. I live for them,

keep them in my heart. But one day we'll all be gone and forgotten. Our particular selves will be dissolved back into the revolution, and we will be a little part of everyone. We will be gifted back and forth, our deeds rippling in the shimmering pond of the world.

In the end I saw Boris one more time. He was an old fella, but so healthy that he looked young and handsome anyways. He showed me the garden he had made in there, and introduced me to the others who helped him make it. I told them all how my mother had taught me how to do it, and how theirs was the most beautiful I had ever seen.

Back to TOC

DANIEL DAGRIS

I think I'm dead, haunting my past on shuffle. Caly is giving me more than I give back. Taking me in, flaws and all, deeper than I deserve to go. I'm getting married in two weeks, to someone who doesn't know me half as well as she does. There's plastic wrap around one of Caly's legs just above the ankle. She got that tattoo she'd always threatened.

I'm twelve again, and already tired of mowing our giant lawn. Pushing the lawnmower around reluctantly, I've decided to carve a yin and yang into the grass, for my own entertainment, but also hoping that I can leave the dark half long. While I cut the corners, my parents come out to see what I've created; its proportions surprisingly well actualized. They take a picture. I wipe sweat from my brow. They raise the blades up a couple inches and have me go over the rest of it as well. Something about them seems more real than the rest of this rerun. Maybe it's because they passed years ago and I'm just happy to see them, but it's like their forms have more definition, their eyes twinkle in ways that the eyes of the girl who loved me minutes ago didn't.

"Quiet!"

The word cuts through a silence paved by my palm slamming my desk. I can't hear the client on the other end of the call. My

coworkers, who were loudly celebrating their sales calls, are startled by my outburst. Everything about them is a half-life. Rehashing this memory halves them further. But not the other support guy, Terry. He seems more present as he rambles calmingly into his phone, on a call with a client, sweaty feet dangling out of our second floor window, pigeons pecking bird seed off them. He used to keep a frisbee of the stuff under his desk, and after a stressful call, he'd slip off his shoes, dip his feet, and smile while feeding the birds through the rest of his shift. Reliving this memory, the sales guys seem like drones now more than ever. But Terry and the birds feel like they're watching me, like portraits in a haunted mansion, they're part of the scenery, but wherever I move, breaking form with the replay, their eyes follow.

"Welcome back," Terry's voice walks atop the water of his conversation on the line. His mouth moving only with the past, but his words like a warm finger reached through the bars of a cage. "These were good times for me too." His body flickers. "You're not alone," Terry vanishes, then is back at his desk, falling back in line with my memories. My client's voice rattles on, my own voice responds without me. I step toward the elevator, feeling the pigeons watch me through the walls.

I'm climbing a tree near the road of my childhood home, its branches so plentiful and close together that my body must bend and twist to get anywhere. My best friend follows, eyes vacant as a mannequin on a Disneyland ride. I hear the cry of a car engine speeding, coming closer. I rush to get higher. Hand over hand, back-bend, leg-over, rushing, repeating these movements to break past the known, see the sky, run out of branches, escape the crash. I place my left hand over the left hand of the childhood me of this memory, as I circle upward again, the memory an endless loop. I find no escape. I hear the lazy slosh of water along riverbanks, beyond the edge of this place. I meet the gaze of my younger self. Buttons stare back at me, covering his eyes. The car crashes into the tree.

I'm back in Caly's bedroom.

"You'll always be mine," she says in my memory.

I chuckle and frown.

"You laugh, but I'll find a way."

"I bet that new witchy shop sells potions and spells," I hear myself tease.

"Sure, but a golem wouldn't fuck me half as well. It also wouldn't trick me into thinking I'm not alone."

I walk away from her bed and toward her window, where beyond I hear water flowing like trains that run through the night. Sounds you grow to forget. The closer I get, the more the window distorts, showing only what I saw in flashes from Caly's bed, now stretched and blown out. I pull but it won't open. I knock and hear a memory of glass singing. I punch, and my hand distorts, folding into two dimensions, along the glass. I press with my fingers until I merge with the beyond, as if entering a painting, and pull myself through.

Drowning, water cuts at my lungs. The shredding is real, not remembered. And then I'm six again, I can't swim, I've stepped a stride too deep in the swimming pool behind my neighbor's house. My cousins are jumping off a man-made waterfall. Others are gathering fallen apricots from the orchard yards away. The neighbor pulls me from the depths and scolds the others.

"The water isn't safe. Go inside."

The child me does. But the winds of this place press me elsewhere, and I let them carry me.

I'm in an intensive care unit. Impressionistic monitors read out in blurred color, brushstrokes that fade, splatter, and bleed. This is no memory. It's cold, like I've just been born and have never felt the air. There's someone in the bed but their lines are equally undefined. Their flesh is discolored, the reds, purples, and greens of battery. Still life pressure paintings of fruit on bodies.

A blur of light blue scrubs slides past me and I catch the word "crash."

A blur of pink scrubs passes through me and I catch the word "chill."

A blur of red scrubs hooks a clipboard to the end of the bed, and I catch the word "coma."

I lean nose to nose with the body and can only make out that I know this person. I try to smell their hair and skin, wondering if the body is my own or belongs to a loved one. I fade beneath the blankets, resting into this human casing. It isn't mine. Caly has been lying here broken while I've tumbled slipshod through memory. Now I'm her passenger, the driver still present. As I sink further into her body, I lose me and become we.

We remember the tattoo we got when he told us he wouldn't be ours, but he fucked us anyway. On one leg, above the ankle, an effigy of the man we love. Limbs sewn to torso. Eyes covered by buttons, so he could never leave. We remember how he loved us with the urgency of his hands, arms, mouth, and body, but never his words. We remember driving our car into his. "Just Married" in shaving cream across the back window. Smiling bride leaning against her groom, arm along his leg, her warmest smile glanced for an instant before the crash. We floored the gas pedal, performing the final sacrifice.

Here we will remain until the gas runs out, tethered together, with no coins for the ferryman.

Back to TOC

Aurora

NANCY KATHRYN WALECKI

We smell the eucalyptus before we see the house. We don't need headlights tonight; the moon is bright enough. We drive slowly, careful not to drown out the hoot of the great horned owl with the sound of our tires. Jed's hair is the color of red clay in this light, smoothed flat against his forehead from leaning against the window.

From this distance, the house looks the same as it did when we were kids. It reflects the moonlight back to us, its walls pale blue against the dark mountains. In the daylight, those mountains look undeniably prehistoric, oddly shaped rock formations growing out of them like eyes on a potato. I park the car next to the avocado tree and listen to the absence of our engine in the desert. Jed looks at me with bright blue eyes. "It's just like I remember it," he says.

Up close, the house looks like it's risen from the desert itself, out of dirt and yucca. The few intact windows are crusted with lime at the edges. Buttercups bloom between the spokes of a bicycle someone's left behind, and jimsonweed crowds around the steppingstones Mom laid. I never thought we'd come back here, especially not now.

Jed grabs the hand-held police scanner and puts it in his pocket. "Just in case we hear anything," he says. We lock the car and take

Mom's path up to the house, crushing the weeds flat beneath our feet as we go.

We don't need a key. Someone has already jimmied the lock on the front door. Jed hesitates before it, turns back to me. He looks uncharacteristically shy, as if struck timid by the nearness of the house. "Are you ready?" he asks. I nod. He pushes the door open.

The door leads directly into the kitchen. Only a diffused glow illuminates the house, like moonlight must look a hundred feet underwater. I can't see more than a few feet in front of me, but my muscle memory takes over, my left hand finding the kitchen counter. Mom used to keep our keys here in a tortoise shell from a dried-out riverbed.

Jed goes to the sink where weeds grow out of the garbage disposal. He moves soft as water over the linoleum, drawing in the dust on every surface with his fingertips. Dad used to say that the desert had its own special, saffron-colored dust. "Desert spice," as he called it, was so gritty and heavy it stayed in our sheets for days.

I feel my way to the living room on my right. Mom's velveteen couch, the only furniture left, blends into the darkness until I'm about two feet in front of it. Mom used to spend amber afternoons there, hemming my school dresses and praying the rosary with Father Ryan on the phone. The screen door next to the couch is ajar, as always. We never could get it to shut all the way. When the wind picked up at night, it sounded like someone was knocking, and I used to creep through the dark as a kid, barefoot with a softball bat, just to make sure it was only the door.

I can hear Jed walking down the hallway where Mom gave birth to him on a bathmat. The winds had been particularly strong that day, blowing desert spice into the house. Our neighbor, Mrs. Cisneros, gasped when she saw Jed's caul, a little sack of fluid stuck to his head.

"June," she said, getting so close I could smell honey on her breath, "your little brother is a caulbearer. Do you know what that means?" I shook my head. "This veil here," she gently peeled the sack off the top of Jed's head, "means he'll be lucky every day of his life. He can never drown, get burned by fire, nothing."

Mom heard this and named him Jedediah, so people would always know he was a friend of God. I bet Mom would've been shocked to hear that just yesterday her friend of God got carried away, pulled out a knife in a bar fight, and killed a man in front of a roomful of witnesses.

Jed and I meet back in the kitchen. He crushes a forgotten beer can on the counter until it's round and flat as a silver dollar. "There's a mattress on the floor in Mom and Dad's room. We could probably sleep on that," he says.

"No, come on, you know the deal," I say. "Two hours here and then we hit the road. You promised."

"But it'd be fun," he says, smiling. "We can sleep outside like when we were kids."

"This is the first place the police are gonna look." I chew on a hangnail I started this morning. "And there aren't even sheets for the mattress."

"Yeah, I think the maid forgot to leave those."

"I can get us a motel if you need to sleep."

"It's not about sleeping. I just want to be here longer," he says. "Two hours in Aurora is nothing after twelve years."

"Thirteen," I say reflexively.

"Thirteen. See, you've obviously missed it here too." He puts his hand on my shoulder like we're co-conspirators.

"Of course I miss it," I say, shrugging him off. "You're not the only person who gets to miss this place."

"Okay, so let's stay here tonight," he says. "You know you want to." He looks so bright and earnest that I almost tell him yes.

"No. Two hours and that's it. Then we keep driving south."

He sucks air between his teeth and looks down at the floor.

"Look, I'm sorry, but they're gonna find us if we stay a whole night. This isn't me being boring, it's me making sure you don't get arrested."

"Jesus, fine." He flicks the flattened beer can into the sink. "Let's at least take the mattress outside and look at the stars for a while." I sigh. Jed's always been good at finding compromises.

★

We drag the mattress onto the cement porch. Someone's left a lawn chair there, facing east. I wonder if they use it to watch the sunrise like Mom did. We wait for two tarantulas to scuttle away before we drop the mattress and dust off our hands. Jed falls back on it and stretches his arms to the sky, yawning. The tattoos on his knuckles don't look right in this sweet, quiet place.

"You're awfully comfortable for someone on a mattress people have done God-knows-what on," I say.

"No big deal. I've been on worse." He lets out a big breath. "Wow, I needed this," he says. He props himself up on his elbows to look at me. "Thank you for doing this. For taking us here. I mean it."

"Well you didn't give us much choice, Jed." The words come out harsher than I should have let them, but he doesn't fight me on it.

He laughs, still quiet enough that the rest of the desert can't hear him. "Really though, I'm glad you took us here, of all places. You're the best."

The moonlight makes him look younger. He's as pale as he was as a boy, back when he was afraid of the coyotes' yips at night. I don't know how to reconcile the two: Jed, six years old and scared, singing Dad's songs to drown out the coyotes, and Jed, twenty-two and high, stabbing a man he'd only just met. I don't know who or what to blame for that kind of change.

"I'm not the best," I say. "I'm gonna go get the blanket from the car. I'll be too cold out here without it."

"You're the only person I know who could get cold in a *desert*." He laughs and flops back onto the mattress.

I take the long way to the car and stop above the basin where the trailer used to be, near the stand of eucalyptus. We lived there one summer while we painted the house.

The night wind is starting up, but I can still feel the heat of the day through the soles of my shoes. As I reach the lip of the basin, I sense that someone else is here with me, even before I look.

Mom is sitting under the trailer awning mending one of Miss Conrad's dresses. The trailer door is open and Dad is inside, brewing

Ephedra tea and whistling. Jed, four years old and naked, darts between the eucalyptus trees. He tears off a handful of leaves and buries his nose in them, smiling at me before he turns and runs back into the grove. The sky is crow black with night, but Mom, Dad, and little Jed are bright as noon, lit by an invisible sun.

"Juney," Mom calls out, "what took you so long?" She's so real I could hug her. Even her upper arms are sunburnt like they always were during the summer. I can smell her pine deodorant.

"Juney's back and you're gonna be in trouble," Dad sings, dancing out of the trailer with his mug of tea. "Want me to sneak you into my show tonight? I'm filling in on bass at the Hideaway. Maybe you can sing with us." He still has his big red beard.

"Shush, Russ, I asked her what took her so long." Mom looks at me expectantly.

I don't know what to say. "I'm old now," I blurt out.

Mom and Dad look at one another and bust out laughing. "Are you?" Dad asks, taking a big gulp of tea.

"I'm twenty-six," I say.

"I know sweetheart, but that doesn't exactly make you ancient." Dad smiles.

"What on earth did you do to your hair?" Mom asks. Questions like that used to make me roll my eyes, but now I have a lump in my throat. I've missed hearing her care about every part of me.

"I cut it," I say. My whole childhood, she and I wore our hair the same way—long and thin, with bangs that grew down to our temples on either side—but I've kept mine in a bob since Mom died. I didn't want to think of her every time I brushed my hair.

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

"I guess we could ask you the same question," Dad says.

"Jed's in trouble."

"Hmm, trouble doesn't sound like your brother to me. Your mom named him Jedediah for a reason."

I exhale. "It's just a name, Dad. It doesn't mean anything."

Mom pats Dad's hand before he can reply. "Honey, tell us what's going on with your brother."

"Well, he showed up on my fire escape this morning—" I stop

myself. They're young and happy. They're both alive; their car hasn't flipped yet. Their biggest concern right now is which shade of yellow to paint the house.

"Go on, you can tell us anything, you know that," Dad says. But I can't tell them about what came after them, not without causing hurt—Jed and I moving between foster homes, Jed crying nonstop for Mom until he started acting out instead. Maybe he felt her absence the most because I made such a disappointing replacement.

"June, talk to us," Dad says, more insistent this time.

A half-truth seems like enough in this case. "Well, he got in a bad fight last night and there were witnesses. He showed up on my fire escape saying we needed to leave Reno. We just stopped in Aurora for a couple hours on our way to the border."

"Oh no." Mom's head shakes a little from side to side, and she puts her hand to face as if to stop it. "Is he okay?" Her voice has so much worry in it that I've never missed her more.

"I don't know," I say. It's the truth.

Mom brushes an invisible wisp of hair away from her face. "Why didn't you help him sooner? You're his big sister."

"Mom, I've tried. I promise. I've been helping him for years. Things haven't been easy for him. Or me either, really. I'm trying Mama, but he's a hard person to help."

"No, he's not. He's just a little fragile, that's all." Mom says.

I almost tell her that she isn't the one who's gone into debt for his rehab, but Dad speaks to her before I can. "She knows that, Bonnie. She's doing the best she can." His voice tapers to something just above a whisper, soothing Mom and me into silence.

"June!" Older Jed calls from somewhere near the house, breaking the quiet.

All three of us startle at the sound. "I'm gonna check on him," I say. "I'll be right back. Please, please don't leave." I turn and take the path toward the house.

I'm almost there when I see my eight-year-old self leading Older Jed by the hand. Her hair is long and stringy, probably sticky with watermelon juice as it always was during the summer. Little June whispers something that makes him laugh.

"I found—you," he says to me. He smiles at younger June, who waves.

"Are you sure this is her?" Little June asks Jed, skeptical. "You said she'd be me, but older." She smells like the aloe gel Dad used to put on our sunburns.

"I'm June," I say, sticking out my hand.

Little June rolls her eyes. "Yeah, sure. Are you a doctor?"

"No," I say. Little June frowns. "I sell equipment to doctors though," I add.

"Well then there's no way we're the same person. I'm going to be a doctor," she says, looking me up and down. I'm not sure how to tell her that medical school isn't going to happen.

"I want to see Mom and Dad," Jed says, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

"They're right over—" I turn toward the basin, "well, they were right over—where'd they go?" Little June laughs and runs toward the house.

The night suddenly gives way to motion. The wind picks up, the lights in the house turn on, and the stars flash pink as grapefruit. The Mr. Coffee pot gurgles in the kitchen.

Mom peeks her head from behind the screen door. "Oh good, you're both here," she says smiling. She's wearing her buttermilk-colored sundress.

"Mama!" Jed cries, his voice cracking. He moves so quickly and automatically it's as if he's being pulled. He wraps around her and cries. "Mama, you're here." He pulls her tighter against his chest. "I missed you too much. I can't even tell you how much." He loosens his knees, hanging onto her more than holding her. It occurs to me that Jed must've felt weightless all these years without Mom for an anchor.

She lets go and smiles at him, small and beautiful standing there in the doorway. "I missed you too, baby boy." She pushes the door further open to give us a view of the dining table, set with Mom and Dad's special-occasion china. "Do you two want some dinner? You must be hungry." Jed looks at me for permission. Mom watches me hesitate, and laughs. "Juney, the skeptic, as per usual. Come on in." She's so close and soft.

As soon as we walk through the door, Little June and Little Jed run out of their bedroom. They lie belly-down on Mom's couch and look at us over the armrest. They whisper to each other and giggle every few seconds. Little Jed makes goofy faces at Big Jed when Mom isn't looking.

The fossil we found by the side of the road sits on the mantel; the living room still has its canary yellow carpet. Mom's and my rock collection is artfully arranged in its plexiglass box on the kitchen table; the key to dad's truck rests in the turtle shell by the front door. The house looks as it did when we were children, lit by great-grandma's green lampshades.

Mom sits in her spot at the table and gestures for us to do the same. Dad pushes home fries from a cast iron skillet onto our plates.

"Now, kids," Mom starts, but Little Jed cuts in.

"Which ones?" he asks, looking at Little June, who smirks.

"The big kids," Mom says. "Tell us how you've been." She smiles and puts her paper napkin in her lap as elegantly as if it were cloth. Jed waits for me to go first.

"We're good. I work in medicine now," I say.

Dad leans across the table and takes my hand. "That's great! So you're a doctor after all."

"No, she's not. She just sells them equipment," Little June says, happy to know something other people don't. Mom's smile slips for a fraction of a second.

"Do you have a boyfriend?" Dad asks. "Or, oh man, I guess by your age, you might be married. Makes me feel old." I shake my head, embarrassed to be answering no to both questions.

"She's got a really great apartment in Reno with a nice roommate," Jed says helpfully. "June's really got it all together."

"Sounds like it," Mom says, her voice lined with doubt. "I guess that leaves you time for your singing? Since you don't have a doctor's schedule?"

"Yeah, I guess it does," I lie. I haven't sung in years. Mom nods absently and butters Little Jed's dinner roll.

"Well that's great sweetheart. You were always so disciplined," Dad says. He turns to Mom. "Remember how she used to put *herself*

to bed? The first time she did it, I thought she must've been hiding outside or something. It didn't even occur to me that a kid would enforce her own bedtime." He looks at me, laughing. "But I go in your room and there you are, fast asleep with your hair braided and everything. Meanwhile, Jed's outside hunting for lizards." Dad's laughing cheeks are round and red as pincushions. He always loved telling that story.

Mom reaches for Jed's hand. "But Jed, how are you doing? I'm worried about you." She hands Little Jed his dinner roll and he stuffs it into his cheeks, imitating a squirrel.

Big Jed smiles at Mom. "I'm okay. I'm just glad to be home," he says. I watch him anticipating the questions she's going to ask, and he adds, "I still drum sometimes, here and there."

"That's wonderful!" Mom says, clasping her hands together. "That's so great you've found time for your art."

"Taking after your old man with the music," Dad says, leaning back in his chair.

"But what's this about the police?" Mom asks.

"As long as I lay low for a while I should be fine," Jed says, looking at me for backup. I nod.

"Well, why don't you both stay here? It sounds like you need time at home," Mom says. Jed squeezes her hand, nods, looks over at me.

"That's a great idea," Dad says. He watches me open my mouth to object. "You're clearly a little aimless right now, honey. Maybe it's best if you come home. Things are better here."

"Much better!" Little Jed pipes in.

"Juney, you know better than anyone that we have to keep your brother safe," Mom says. "He'll be all right here with us looking after him."

"I bet you could even go back to school in Aurora if you want June, become a doctor," Dad says.

"Yeah, you should do that!" Little June says, tucking her feet under her. Little Jed traces his finger around the tattoo comet on Big Jed's forearm.

"You and I can go on our walks and find more rocks for our collection," Mom says, her eyes crinkling beautifully. Dad picks up

his guitar and starts humming the Buddy Holly song we used to sing together.

"Things are less complicated here," Jed says to me. He looks more relaxed and open than he has in years, as if old parts of him are coming up for air. "It could be good for us. What do you say?" I've missed seeing Jed so sure of something, but the impossibility of coming home tugs at me, keeps me tethered.

"No," I say quietly.

Mom sets her fork down on her plate. "Why am I not surprised?" She doesn't sound angry so much as accustomed to defeat.

I keep looking at Jed. "We have lives to live, and they're not in Aurora."

"What do you have now that's more important than us?" Dad asks. I start to formulate a response and realize I don't have one. My blood beats heavy in my ears and my mouth goes dry. Nothing new of mine is worth missing. Nothing in the past thirteen years has come close to the life I had with Jed, Mom, and Dad.

"Everything else feels so much more temporary, doesn't it?" Jed says. I know he's right, even if it makes me nauseous.

Nothing is as beautiful as this kitchen, with the Mr. Coffee pot brewing and Dad humming our song more and more loudly. If I stayed, we could put our clothes out to dry on sandstone and leave the screen door wide open in case a jackrabbit wanted to wander in. I'd be a doctor during the day and a singer at night. We'd keep Jed safe from the police, and maybe he'd play drums in Dad's band. Every day would be gentle and slow, like this one.

"Well, June?" Mom asks. I can tell she's waiting for me to say no, and something about her certainty compels me to contradict her.

I look at her and nod. "It'd be nice to come back," I say, almost convincing myself it could be possible.

Mom smiles at her plate and sets her napkin on the table. Little June gets out of her chair and hugs me. "I'm glad you're staying," she says. "You can come watch me in my spelling bee next week." I remember the exact day she's talking about, all the third-graders packed into the cafeteria with the squeaky PA system.

Mom clears the table. "Let's go look at the stars for a while," she says. We leave through the screen door and walk to the eucalyptus grove all together. Dad's truck has replaced my car next to the avocado tree and Mom's steppingstones are free of weeds. Jed smiles at me and squeezes my shoulder, glad to be together again.

We lie down under the eucalyptus and put our heat into the earth, letting it cool us. Little June takes my hand and I rest my head on Jed's shoulder. We look at the sky together and watch as bright pink stars wink back at us.

I'm not sure how long Jed's police scanner has been chattering, but it's still dark outside. I reach for Little June's hand and grasp bone-dry twigs instead. I sit up so fast I see spots, hoping they're still here somewhere. Dad's truck is gone, replaced by my car. The only person left is Jed. He's staring up at the sky, blinking as though he can't believe what he's seeing. I close my eyes, willing Mom and Dad to come back, convincing myself I can smell Mom's pine deodorant. I've never wanted something more.

They're talking about us on the police scanner, saying that my car was spotted heading toward Aurora earlier. Amidst the numbered codes, a policeman reads out our address. They're only a few minutes away, but Jed is still staring at the sky, looking more heartbroken than worried.

"You saw them too, right?" he asks, looking over at me. "Mom and Dad were here."

I don't know what to tell him. I heard Dad sing tonight and I saw the wrinkles along Mom's hemline, but now the house is just as we found it—dark, empty, crusted with alkali and beaten by wind. There's no use in comparing fantasies right now. We need to leave before the cops show up. A dispatcher's voice comes through the static, saying something about sending more cars.

"All I know is we need to leave right now." I stand up and scan the trees for signs of Little Jed, in spite of myself.

"What are you looking for?" Jed asks.

"Trying to see if we're surrounded. I think we're okay though."

I pull my keys out of my pocket and run toward the car, but Jed doesn't follow. I turn around. "Get in the car, Jed. Now."

"No." His voice is choked and unsteady. "I'm not like you. I need them."

"And I don't?" A voice on the scanner says they're passing the QuickMart, only about a minute away. "The cops are almost here. We can talk about this in the car," I say.

He screws his face into something between anger and sadness, then settles on sadness. "I need a do-over. To do it better."

I'm so aware of being his sister, of being the only person in the world who understands his need for home, because I need it too.

I exhale. "There's no such thing as a do-over." I don't know if that's true after what I saw tonight, but I need to stop indulging Jed.

"You don't mean that," he says. "You want another chance too."

"Of course I do, but that's impossible."

Right then, the lights turn back on inside the house. I hear Dad whistling and frying something on the stove. The police cars are coming up the hill. Mom sticks her head out of the screen door, wearing the same sundress.

"Jed! Come quick!" she calls, motioning to him.

He turns from me and runs without hesitation, hugging Mom once he reaches the house. The police cars switch on their sirens. Jed turns and looks at me as Mom closes the screen door behind them. I walk toward the cars with my hands out as if to stop them, but a voice on the loudspeaker tells me to freeze, to put my hands up. I look back at the house. Mom and Jed are gone; the house is dark and hollow once again, the lights out, the rooms empty.

The Right to be Forgotten

H.R. OWEN

You'll be dreaming of me. They told me you would. You'll wake up exhausted for the next week or so, but you haven't been a morning person since you were in primary school so perhaps you won't notice. Perhaps you'll write it off as a stressful week, or blame it on your habit of trawling through Twitter before bed. Knowing you—and God knows I do—you'll take after your father and turn to exercise for your cure. "Energy breeds energy," he'd bark whenever you rolled your eyes at being told to take the dogs out round the back fields. He's not wrong though.

You'll try to tire yourself out, take the bike for a long ride and fall asleep on the sofa watching telly with your eyes closed—another trick you picked up from your dad. But it won't matter. Exhausted as you might be, your brain has too much to do to settle down easy. You'll slip asleep and within minutes your eyelids will begin to flutter like a horror movie medium at a séance, trying to translate the sparks and crackles of your subconscious into something you can understand.

For the next two months you will see patterns that remind you of me everywhere. We are, as a species, inclined to see patterns where there are none. Faces in moon craters, the Virgin Mary in a damp stain. You've always been good at seeing shapes in the clouds,

or inventing constellations as we sat, dreamily stoned, on the garden wall long after the world had gone to bed. You sent me a picture while you were at university of a whorl in a wood panel in one of your lecture halls that looked exactly—and I mean exactly—like a sassy goblin pulling a Drag Race pose. I liked it so much I printed it out and have stuck it on every fridge I've lived with since.

I don't know when you'll see me. I don't know how you spend your days moment by moment—my perspective hasn't been that close for a long time. I can't picture your commute or your grocery shop or any of the other little rhythms that build your days into a life. But you will see me. As you weave your bike through traffic, you'll catch sight of a girl wearing a coat like the one I stole from you last time I came to visit. The woman in the library will tilt her head exactly so, or the boy on the bus will laugh in just such a way. And you won't know why but it will strike a note that resonates in you deep, way deep down. You'll look up from your book, your phone, your handlebars, and stare in the direction that this feeling seems to be coming from and see... nothing you recognise.

They say some people end up with friends and lovers exactly like the ones they've lost. They say some people are doomed to spend their whole lives searching, desperate to get back what has been taken from them. But there have always been people like that in the world, reaching and reaching for the next new thing to make them whole. That isn't your nature. I've always admired how self-contained you are, how self-sustaining. You would never find yourself wrapped in a web of obligation, hamstrung with knots of love, demand, desire.

Still, I won't take any risks. It's tempting, I admit, to set myself up in some coffee shop near your house—just for a moment, just for a glimpse. But your brain's balance is a fragile, newborn thing. Even one moment could destroy it. And those stories, I believe. You've seen them on the news—people who have had a resurgence and who are trapped forever between one reality and another, flickering like a poorly-tuned radio between old memories, hidden and rewritten, and new ones planted in their place. I wouldn't wish that on anyone, least of all you.

I write instead, every day since you lost me. Or, since I took myself from you. I think I'll stop when I get to Cork. They've found me a place about a half hour's drive out of the city, way down at the bottom of the island. I haven't been yet but they showed me pictures and I've looked it up on Street View. It's a one-road town beside the wide, slack mouth of the River Stick—not Styx, unfortunately, that would have been too perfect. The water is flat and grey under a flat, grey sky. Even the hills are grey, coughed with sparse green as if the artist wasn't sure they wanted to use colour after all. I hope they don't mind my being English. You can never tell. Though I can't say I blame them, I suppose.

I put the drag queen goblin in a poly pocket with some ticket stubs, photos, that sort of thing. Your texts are still on my phone, all your voice clips, your stupid smug selfies from every day that it's been sunnier where you are than where I am. Growing up as far north as we did, we could react to the rain one of two ways: embrace it, learn to see God in it, relish the fresh spray of it on bare legs and red cheeks; or turn tail and run south and ever souther, chasing the sun at every opportunity. I went one way. You went the other.

It's raining right now, fat drops that fall like a spell over the city. At least, it is here—I don't know about London, but tonight of all nights I'd like to think we're under the same kind of sky. I like to think of you sleeping, if not restful then at least warm and safe, while the same rain drums against your window.

They assigned me this room to stay in while they worked through the procedures. It was a gratifying number, I won't say exactly how many but enough that I felt at least a little proud of the effort it would take to remove me from the world. One by one, they snuffed out the multiple and various manifestations of me in the minds of loved ones, lovers and friends. I had to stay here a little longer while they sorted out the paperwork. Most agencies don't do that part—you have to do it all yourself, all the forms and declarations and letters of rescission and whatnot. I paid a little extra. It seemed silly to balk at a few more hundred, given how much I was paying already. Besides, what price can you put on freedom? The alternative would have cost me much more dearly.

The room is at the top of a terrace house built like you—tall and thin, high shoulders with a propensity to hunch and hold tension. I've opened the window in the roof to let the night sounds in, and to keep me cool while I do a final sift through my belongings. The glass tilts at an angle that keeps most of the rain out, but sometimes a gust of wind carries drops in through the sides and they patter on the mattress. I close my eyes for a moment and breathe in the quiet smell of night city rain.

I wish I could tell you I'm sorry. I'm not, but I wish I could tell you I am. I hope it didn't hurt. I couldn't really follow when they told me how it works—the drugs all had such long names, all -zoropams and -tolozines, and they kept using words like 'suggestion matrices' and 'objective threshold'. It didn't sound like it would be painful. I think there are lights involved, flashing lights, a rhythm that taps into the deepest recesses of your brain and wipes them clean. Though, that part might have been a metaphor.

The sun's coming up, but you'll be asleep for a few hours yet. I'm nearly finished here. My 'keep' pile is small and neat, it fits squarely into one suitcase. I'm wearing your coat. At least now I know for sure you won't miss it. I wonder what they'll do with the things I'm leaving behind. I'd like them to go to a charity shop but I'm not optimistic.

Are you going home for Christmas? I know you don't usually like to but I think this year you should. They said that being around other people who've had the procedure can help to embed the new memories. Together you'll reinforce the reality you all now know—that the house has always had a spare room, that your hand-me-downs went straight to your cousins, that you've never taught anyone to read, or ride a bike, or drink, or dance, or fight.

The suitcase sits open, waiting. The poly pocket is on the floor beside it, your goblin mixed in with old photos, soft folded letters and souvenirs. It would take up no space at all, lying flat across the neatly piled clothes. If I leave it where it is they will clear it away with the rest of my things, dispassionate and unabashed as undertakers. Or I could snatch it up, slide it under the mattress, far into the middle of the bed where they wouldn't find it even when they

change the sheets. Perhaps they will give this room to someone else and they will reach out their hands and discover it like an artefact from another world. Or it might lie hidden like a buried thing, its contents hardening into fossils in the dark. The rain surges against the roof. The edges of the plastic fidget in the wind.

I'll walk to the station. I haven't been outside for weeks, it wasn't safe in a place like this where lives overlap like threads in fabric. But it's barely dawn and it's pissing down and I've always loved walking through the city in those few spare, secret hours between the late-to-beds and the early risers. It makes me feel like a ghost—which I suppose I am now.

They say your subconscious never forgets a face. When you dream of strangers, their faces are all taken from people you've seen in real life, on the tube or on TV or long, long ago when you were still a child. Your poor brain will be probing itself, trying to recover from a trauma it doesn't even know it's suffered. Like a tongue revisiting the gap left by a lost tooth, you will poke and prod at the metal-tasting place where I should be. And in that space a shadow of me will form, dream-strange and unrecognised. And when you dream, you'll dream of strangers with my face, my hands, my crowded teeth, and eyes the exact same shape as yours. Despite my best efforts, I will never quite be gone.

Back to TOC

Between

ALLISON BRICE

"Hey," Hadley called as soon as Maira walked through the door, "your damn snake is trying to escape."

"She would never," Maira replied breezily, throwing her coat on the couch like this was *The Devil Wears Prada* instead of a tiny downtown apartment. "She just wants to watch Disney Plus with you."

As Hadley watched in horror, Maira reached in and grabbed Phoebe the corn snake, who slithered happily up and into her hand. Then she walked over and plopped down next to where Hadley had curled up into an unassuming ball.

Phoebe poked her head up, flicking her tongue out in what she probably thought was a comforting hello.

"Hello," Hadley said reluctantly.

"Good girl," Maira replied. "There's nothing to be afraid of. Phoebe won't hurt you."

Phoebe crawled her way up Maira's arm, all the way up to drape across her neck, just peeking out from under Maira's curtain of hair. She looked right at Hadley the whole time with her black button eyes, while Maira flicked through the menu to decide what to watch.

Maira's hand rubbed over Phoebe's little scaly head. Back and forth, slowly, slowly.

Phoebe wasn't really the one Hadley feared.

★

That night, it rained. Hadley rolled over in bed, awakened by the snare drum of raindrops on her window. The sounds of Chinatown could still be heard through the din; ambulances, music, bright streetlights that made sleeping in dark places now feel too uncomfortable. She thought about walking into the kitchen to make a cup of tea, but remembered Phoebe would be in her cage, watching. She lay there, in the liminal space, staring at the corner of her tiny bedroom, at all the people who weren't there.

Maira returned the next week, right when Hadley was hitting it off with a coworker at a happy hour.

"Kirk versus Picard is a stupid debate," he was saying, "when Janeway is the best captain in all of Starfleet. It is written."

Hadley could feel the apples of her cheeks heating up. James—his name was James—smiled at her in this crappy downtown bar, making her sick heart sing. "I *love* Janeway," and she could feel how stupid she sounded but she couldn't stop. "Her relationship with Chakotay, the way it develops, the bond that they form in the Delta Quadrant, it's, like, my feminist *dream*."

She saw herself as through a funhouse mirror—leaning forward, smiling, one leg crossed over the other and extended like a road sign, hanging onto his every word. She saw it, and she still couldn't stop it, because it felt too good.

"We should watch it sometime," James said, with his too-thick eyebrows and his fantastic shoulders.

"Yeah, that would be awesome."

"Maira!" Someone screamed from across the bar. "The boss bitch is *back*!"

Maira swanned in, bowing theatrically to a smattering of applause, pushing Chanel sunglasses up against her thick brown hair.

"Oh my God, I love your roommate," one of Hadley's friends said. "She's like this glamorous queen. I can't believe you found her on Craigslist!"

"I know," Hadley said, and she was impressed by how even her voice was.

"Where were you this time, Maira?" Someone asked amusedly.

"Ravenna, Italy," she replied, flashing a smile. "Who's up for shots? My treat."

The whole group screamed with approval. Maira finally locked eyes with Hadley, still with a lingering smile on those full red lips, and Hadley ducked her head as shame and disappointment filled her belly.

Maira bought shots. James got pulled away by a friend from college into talking about the playoffs. While everyone was distracted, Maira cupped Hadley's elbow and led them outside, into the back of an Uber.

Phoebe had the good grace to look sad for Hadley when they arrived back in the apartment.

"You know better," Maira said, in the twilight kitchen, her voice a dagger.

Hadley climbed into bed with her shoes still on.

There was this girl at work named Emily. She did the same thing Hadley did, which was to say, not much; they were essentially secretaries at a liberal start-up that hated the word "secretary" for being outdated and sexist. Mostly they walked to Starbucks, scheduled meetings, answered the phones and then promptly called each other to bitch about the person on the phone. In Hadley's small world, populated by Maira and Phoebe and few else, Emily made her feel like a normal girl.

And then they went on a company retreat, and Emily and Hadley made fun of the CEO under their breath and paired up together for the challenge course. Emily laughed at Hadley's pitiful coordination and Hadley laughed in turn at Emily's punk aesthetic forced into a stiff blue polo and khakis just purchased from Target, still with creases in the pant legs. Emily leaned over in the middle of the CEO's grand rallying speech and said, in a hushed California drawl:

"This could have been an email."

Hadley laughed so hard that half the room turned to glare at her. Emily slapped her arm to get her to shut up and Hadley pressed

her hands against her mouth, and then she looked over at Emily with her laughing, crinkled-up eyes and her heart skipped a beat.

Oh, no, she thought. *It'll just go away*, she thought.

But then the next day Emily went to Starbucks while Hadley was stuck in a meeting and brought her one of her favorite cake pops. And the week after that they went to a happy hour that lasted three hours. The week after that Hadley went to Emily's and cheered for the 49ers just because it made Emily grin and that was fast becoming one of Hadley's favorite things.

The week after that, Emily asked Hadley out. Hadley thought of Maira, thought of Phoebe, thought of all she wasn't allowed to do, and said,

"Okay."

"You're in a weirdly good mood," Maira remarked a month later. Her knees shifted against the ground. "You normally hate this part."

"I still hate this part." Her hands smelled like yew for a week afterward and Hadley couldn't stop shaking long enough to sleep.

It wasn't as hard as Hadley would have thought, to find deserted crossroads at midnight. They switched locations every month, just in case, but this was her favorite: out in the woods of Maryland, two country roads intersecting with nothing but a faded, crooked sign to tell the way, darkness pressing in from the whisper of trees and the cold glimmer of smog-covered stars. The puppy in her hands squirmed idly; she stroked behind her ears to soothe her.

"You've barely bitched all night," Maira replied. "And you let me choose which Chinese food to order for dinner. You *hate* New Big Wong and you just said, 'Yeah, whatever.'"

"Work was good, it's been known to happen." Work was the same as always, but she couldn't tell Maira what was actually happening. Every time she hung out with Emily, every time she even *saw* her across their stupid open-plan office, something warm and piquant curled low in her belly, turned her molten as she smiled with all of her thoughts splashed embarrassingly across her face. The other night, when Maira was out of the house and Hadley closed her door so Phoebe wouldn't see, she lay on her bed with her heart

pounding in her throat and clumsily touched herself. She hadn't tried this in *years*, not since everything happened; when she knew this was all she'd ever get, all she'd ever be allowed, it seemed far crueler to have this facsimile than to go without. But Emily made her feel bold, made her feel like a human, and what was more human than to fumble around in her pants and give in to the stirrings and tremblings in her thighs?

Maira looked at her, and that never boded well for Hadley.

"I'm fine," she insisted, when Maira's gaze bordered on discerning. "Come on, let's get this over with, *This Is Us* is on tonight."

"Yeah, alright," Maira said. She readjusted her knees, started to murmur the incantation under her breath. Hadley made sure the yew was still lit, that the coast was clear, and when the time was right, she gave the puppy one last remorseful nuzzle and passed it over to Maira.

The knife was a flash in the night, quick and sure. Maira was a professional.

Emily came over for the first time with a bottle of red wine and mango-sticky-rice egg rolls when Maira was supposed to be in Greece for a week. Hadley knew it was a risk and invited her over anyway, letting the thrill of danger keep her on edge all day, just the hint of adrenaline that notched her heart rate up.

"You have a pet snake?"

"Yeah, that's Phoebe. She's my roommate's, so don't touch her." Emily leaned closer to the tank, cute little mouth slack in amazement as she waved through the glass at Phoebe. The snake sent Hadley a look, and Hadley mouthed *Please?*

"And you say you're not gay," Emily said with a snort. "A pet snake is peak lesbian. Level Ten gay."

Hadley dipped into a joking curtsey.

They put on *Master Chef Junior*, because Emily wanted to coo at the little kids who couldn't even lift their stand mixers. The bottle of red wine went quickly, making Hadley feel heady and heavy, tannins in her mouth and oil in her joints. She reached out to hold Emily's hand and caught herself at the last minute.

Emily saw it, though. And she reached right over to grab Hadley's hand. Electricity zapped all the way up to the base of Hadley's skull.

"Thanks for letting me come over," Emily said. There was something else behind her words; Hadley could still recognize it, even after all these years without, and it made her feel unmoored. "I love hanging out with you."

"Uh, yeah," Hadley said, and she had trouble breathing for the pounding in her ears. "Uh, same."

Emily quirked a little smile, and it looked dangerous. "There's nothing to be scared of."

You don't even know, Hadley thought hysterically. Was she actually going to try this? She'd never risked it before, not once; was tonight the night that she tried? How did you even do it? Just pucker your lips and lean?

That's what Emily was doing, her hands tugging Hadley closer. She smelled impossibly good, with her hands so soft, and Hadley's heart hammered like a marching band, and Emily had slipped her eyes closed. So it was almost like no one would know, no one was here, it would be their little secret. Hadley leaned in, catching a reflection of the living room in the mirror behind the couch.

Phoebe sat up in her cage, watching.

Oh shit. How could she forget about Phoebe?

She pulled back, *no no no you can't*, what was she *thinking*, she knew the rules—

The next second, the door opened with a bang and Maira walked in.

Emily jumped in surprise and Hadley's face burned bright red. Maira looked between the two of them, coat still on and sunglasses pushed up against the thick wave of her hair, eyebrows raised.

"Hello," Maira said, and she made it sound like an accusation.

"Hi," Hadley responded shamefully.

"Hi, I'm Emily!" She said, blissfully unaware. "Are you Maira? I've heard so much about you."

Maira shot a look at Hadley. "Can't say the same," Maira replied, and Hadley winced. "But welcome."

"Thought you were gonna be in Greece for a while," Hadley said, faux-lightly.

Maira pinned her with her eyes. "I was. But I got called back. Urgent business here."

Hadley glared over at Phoebe. Little snitch.

Maira dropped her leather carryall on the couch and unbuttoned her coat. She walked over to Phoebe's cage, dipped her hand in like testing the water temperature on a hot summer day. Phoebe rose up, wrapped around Maira's fingers, nudged her thumb like a little scaly puppy. Flicked her chin to Hadley.

"Really?" Maira murmured. "No shit."

Hadley wanted to cry, so full of rage and frustration and entrapment. She glared at Maira and Maira glared right back and went into the kitchen to pour herself a glass of wine. Planting herself right in the kitchen, hip casually leaning against the oven, asserting dominance with the curve of her body. Cool and quiet and immovable.

Hadley made some excuse to Emily and got her out of the apartment. Then she whirled to Maira, a hundred different words on her tongue, ready to lash out and scream. But Maira took a sip of wine and Hadley deflated.

"That's right," Maira said. "Remember why I'm here. Next time you want to try that stunt again, remember what I'm doing here."

She picked up her wine and her phone. "We'll talk soon," she said, and strolled into her room.

Hadley stood alone, once again.

The next day, Maira was having coffee and defrosting a mouse on the counter for Phoebe when Hadley walked right up to her. *Jump in, girl, jump in.*

"You said we'd talk later," she said, before losing her nerve. "So…let's talk."

"Um," Maira replied, wide-eyed, sleep shirt hanging off her shoulder. "Okay? Right now?"

"If you can," Hadley said, already hedging out of it. *Pussy.*

"No, I can talk," Maira said. She nudged the mouse in the bowl of water and Hadley darted her eyes away. "Does Emily know?"

"No."

"Are you guys dating?"

"I don't know. Maybe? Kinda."

"Are you gay?"

"Is gay for her a thing?"

Maira shrugged. "You guys worry way too much about the labels for things. We used to sleep with who we wanted to sleep with, let the historians figure out what to call us."

"That doesn't help me."

"Did you come for my help or did you just come to talk at me?"

Hadley was terrified of Maira's help. She could admit that much. "I just wanted you to know. I'm sorry I tried it, I'm sorry. You just…you know. I'm still trying to figure it out."

Maira nodded, dipped her fingers in the bowl of water, prodded the mouse to see if it was warm enough. When she was satisfied, she grabbed it by the tail, walked it over to Phoebe's cage. Maira slipped a look over, just enough to watch Hadley squirming in discomfort, just enough to establish dominance. Then, still making casually viperous eye contact, she dangled the mouse in the cage, making it dance by its tiny little tail, until Phoebe reared up and snatched it. Her fangs caught on Maira's finger, a precise prick. Maira pulled her fingers out—languorously; like removing them from a pool of wax—raised her blood-flecked finger to her brown mouth, dipped it inside, red-pen cut and all. Sucked.

Hadley, hungry, wearing old flower-patterned shorts and a college t-shirt, felt as small and crumpled and vulnerable as a piece of paper.

"Talk to Boss," Maira said. "Then you can 'figure it out.'"

Emily was…

Emily was lavender lemonade. Emily was well-travelled back roads, the divots that were the perfect width and depth for car tires. Emily was marijuana smoke suspended in glass. Emily was salt water hair and shivery goose bumps. Emily knew exactly who and what she was; there was a space in the world just for her and she occupied

it calmly. Emily was the first person Hadley wanted to talk to in the morning and the last person Hadley wanted to talk to at night. Emily was fierce, and funny, and she had a big weird birthmark on her neck that she was embarrassed about, that Hadley thought about touching sometimes, to see if it would make her shiver.

Emily was everything, and Hadley was cursed.

The sirens always blared in Chinatown. Right outside Hadley's window, all hours of the day. So she didn't hear the door.

"Hads—Hadley—dude, let's go to the farmer's market, they've got the good goat cheese this time—oh my *God*, did you get a dog?"

The black puppy squealed in happiness and waddled over to Emily, and Hadley watched with her heart sinking through her body.

"Oh my *God*." Emily picked her up, rubbing her wiggly puppy body, tilting her chin up to get away from the incessant tongue currently lathing over her jaw, grinning her ecstatic grin. "Oh fuck he's precious, what's his name? *Had*ley, you didn't tell me you were getting a puppy!"

Hadley stood there, like an idiot, gaping in her kitchen. Phoebe, who previously had been napping peacefully under her log, slithered out, curling up against the glass to watch.

The puppy started gnawing with tiny sharp teeth on Emily's fingers. "Hads," she said, looking over at her with bright eyes. "I fucking love him. He's adorable. I would die for him—"

"She's not staying," Hadley said.

"What?"

Phoebe rose up, closer to the top of the cage. Hadley always had one eye on the snake; Emily didn't notice at all.

"She doesn't have a name," Hadley said. "Cause she's not staying. We're…fostering her."

"Okay," Emily said. Easy as that.

"*Really*?" Hadley blurted. "Oh, I mean, yeah. Yeah." Thank *God* for Emily, thank God for her stoned-California-surfer-laissez-faire-bullshit, it was so annoying when they were trying to pick a movie

to watch but right now it was saving Hadley's life. Was that it, was it as easy as that, was she going to get away with it—

"*No*."

The voice cut through the room, a slash of cold wire. Emily stifled a scream; Hadley, who had only heard it once before, felt her spine rattle like it'd been shaken.

Phoebe leaned over the edge of her tank, black button eyes looking right at them.

Emily's chest heaved. "Your—your snake—"

"Not mine," Hadley said, faintly.

"*Tell her*," Phoebe said, without moving her mouth, without moving at all; the voice materialized in the room and dropped the temperature ten degrees with it. "*The truth*."

The puppy whined in protest, wiggled out of Emily's hands and toddled off to hide under the couch. Emily let her.

"What the fuck," she said. "What the fuck, what the fuck, Hadley, what the fuck is happening—"

"Don't," Hadley said, watching her life spin out of control with no idea of the best place to grab the wheel and stop it. "It's…it's not what you think, it's…"

"What is *happening*—"

"She's a familiar," Hadley got out.

"A what? Like…a witch's familiar? Like a black cat, bonded with a witch?"

"Yeah, kinda." Hadley looked to Phoebe for backup, but the snake was clearly done talking for this century.

"Are you a…a witch?" Emily's blue eyes were wide, wide, wide.

"I'm not. Maira is, though. Kinda."

"You keep saying *kinda*, dude, I'm gonna need…fuck, I'm gonna need actual words—"

Because the devil is always listening, Maira materialized in the room.

"Jesus Christ!" Emily screamed.

"He's not really relevant, actually," Hadley said absently. "Dude, what are you—"

"Oh, I had to see this," Maira said. She looked like she'd just

come off the Dior runway, which wasn't out of the realm of possibility; knee-high black boots, dress that was equal parts boardroom and boudoir, eyes hungry-bright. She dropped her bag off on the couch then poured herself a glass of red wine, all while silence thickened in the apartment like smoke.

She sat down on the couch with her wine and did a little *go on* gesture with her fingers.

"Okay, so you're a witch?" Emily said, point-blank to her.

Maira snorted.

"No, I said she's *kinda* a witch. She's…ugh, fuck." Hadley's heart pounded with so much adrenaline she could choke on it. "Fuck, she's…she's not a witch, she's more of a…goddess. Like, a minor goddess. A goddess's servant."

Emily shook, just slightly, shivering in the now-freezing living room.

"A goddess's servant?" She repeated. "Serving…who?"

"Whom," Maira interjected.

"Shut *up*, you fucking *bitch*," Hadley snapped. "Umm. It's…shit. Ah. It's…We serve Hecate."

They never said her name; even Phoebe shrank back under her log as a moan ripped through the apartment and Maira's red wine foamed in her glass. Hadley's stomach curdled and it took every ounce of bravery in her bones to keep standing, to not buckle to her knees under the ancient magic.

"He-Hecate?" Emily whispered.

"Yeah," Hadley nodded. "You know Greek mythology? She's the goddess of magic. Crossroads. Thresholds. Witchcraft. In the sculptures, she's the one with three heads holding a lamp."

"They're…real?" Emily said. "Gods? Shit, I just saw a snake talk and a woman appear out of nowhere, that's probably a dumb question, but…"

"It's not a dumb question. I didn't know either."

They made a strange tableau; three girls and a snake, a parallelogram in the living room with the latest *Grey's Anatomy* playing on the screen and ancient, sour magic hovering in the air. Hadley had never once, in all these years since, spoken about it to a soul, not

even Maira; there was something freeing in the drowning, the knowledge that oblivion was cool and crisp and upon her, and there was nothing she could do now.

"And now you…serve her?"

"I'm…yeah. I serve her. Kinda. I'm…bound to her."

"You too?" Emily said to Maira.

"I'm above her paygrade," Maira replied, with a smirk.

"Can someone please—fucking tell me in simple *English* what is *happening*—"

"Okay, babe, I will, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry." The "babe" slipped out, like a prayer. Hadley wished she could take it back; it felt too raw for this. "So I was in high school, okay? I was young, and stupid. And my boyfriend, he was my first boyfriend ever, and I thought we were gonna get married and all of it, right? But his mom died, of a really shitty brain tumor, like a really awful one, she just wasted away for fucking *years*, and he, like…he got awful, it destroyed him, it ate him alive, to watch her. It turned him mean, and turned him stupid. And he started getting involved in witchcraft, and I thought it was just…whatever, like *The Craft*, right? Just kids playing around. He was trying to resurrect his mom, he was trying to bring her back. I thought it wasn't real, we can just go through the motions and he'll be better, he won't be so mean and so awful. It's not like…no one tells you this stuff is actually real, and it's dangerous, and it kills people, and, and, it—it killed *him*, and me—she—she—"

There was no excuse for her actions and Hadley knew that; there were so many moments where she could have said *stop, no, hold on, wait, please tell me this is okay.* But she didn't; not when they researched the ritual in old books at historical associations, not when they gathered the herbs that left a bad smell in her nostrils even as she slept, not when he went to a farm and came back with a goat and hardness in his eyes. Not even when they dug into the freezing cold graveyard dirt, not even when they cracked open the coffin and saw her desiccated corpse, not even when they split the goat's neck and led the blood flow down and chanted into the night air. Not for one second did Hadley think anything other than, *This will make him better,* even as she crouched on blushing knees with blood under

her fingernails and something ominous and immense building in the winter air.

Hecate arrived long before she arrived; winds came from the ground that night, the underworld opening up as Hadley screamed with a voice cracked open. There was a lamp, illuminating bright eyes, and a robe that trailed in the blood of their sacrifice; there was a whisper from the core of the earth, and her boyfriend-maybe-one-day-husband died with as little fight as the goat. And Hadley's hands caked in dirt and blood begged, and the voice of that terrible woman echoed through the vale:

As lie empty the homes of the curious, so empty shall be your bed; and never hence shall son of man touch cursed skin again.

Emily's skin was paved with gooseflesh, her nipples stark in the freezing air, saying nothing as Hadley sobbed. Maira sipped wine and Phoebe flicked her tongue sympathetically and they all had to stand in the wreckage.

"So I can't," Hadley said, desperately trying to keep her voice intelligible, so she only had to say this once, "I can't have sex. She killed him, as punishment for performing necromancy on his mother, and she let me live but I can't have sex. That's my curse. That's the bargain we made for my life. Only…" She didn't want to say it, didn't want to get her hopes up, but it'd been nudging at her mind since this all started.

"So I haven't dated, anyone," Hadley plowed through, right over it, all the questions she had no answer for. "Can't get close to anyone. Haven't let myself, cause, God, how do you explain—and that's what Maira's for, okay? She's not…she's not human, shit, there's a word, what's the word? For your kind of…thing?"

"Chthonic," Maira supplied, the first helpful thing she'd done all night.

"Chthonic, thank you." Hadley pushed on, even as Emily gaped. "It means underworld. They're underworld goddesses, like they're not on Olympus with Zeus and Apollo and all them, they're down below so there are different rules and stuff, and they're a *lot* older. And Maira is here to…watch me, kinda. She was a gift from *her*, like a watchdog? And a reminder? She does her own stuff, you

know, for *her,* but…I'm the main assignment. And Phoebe is her familiar."

She snuck a look at Maira, found her with a rare smile on her face. Hadley had long suspected that Maira was like her, centuries ago; a human woman sucked into dark magic, punished for insolence by servitude and celibacy. Maira is her prophecy; this is what Hadley will become. She'll serve her term as a human, and when it's time to die, she won't get to; she'll wake up as something else, and she'll walk this earth forever, always in the in-betweens, a snake by her side and bitterness in her heart.

"And…the puppy?" Emily said.

Hadley dropped her shoulders, felt the tears building up, out of exhaustion and frustration and humiliation. "I hoped you'd forget about that part."

"That's the good stuff," Maira said.

"*God*, can you not? Fuck, Emily, look, most of the time we don't—we're not evil, we don't kill people, we just—gods are lonely, and without humans to worship them their power wanes, and you can imagine in the twenty-first century, with nobody believing, the batteries are pretty low, okay? So it's not much, it's just a little ritual to show devotion, to keep her alive—"

"*Ritual*?"

She was so tired; talking wasn't supposed to hurt this much. "Dogs are sacred to her," she said, as softly as she could. "So every month, we go to the crossroads. And we burn yew, and we do a ritual, and we sacrifice a black female puppy."

Phoebe curled up on the top edge of her cage, like leaning forward to watch her favorite TV show. She flicked her tongue in what Hadley could only call a comforting kiss.

"You're going to *kill*," Emily said, softly, "that puppy?"

"Quickly! So quickly. They don't even know what's happening. Maira is really good at it."

"I really am," Maira said.

"You're really good at killing animals," Emily said, tears standing in her eyes. "God, Hadley…*fuck*, man, that is so *fucked*…"

"We try to get the sick ones," Hadley said, weakly, hating herself

even as she said it. "The little ones, the ones who probably won't survive or won't get adopted anyway. This one's got a congenital heart failure, the pound said they were gonna euthanize her anyway—"

"She's a *puppy*! She's a tiny little living thing and you're gonna sacrifice her to some fucking witch goddess—"

"So I can live, Emily! So I won't die like my boyfriend did!"

"Well, wouldn't that be a shame," Emily snarled, and then stormed out.

In the wake of her leaving—in the rattling, reverberating silence—Hadley felt like she had cracked open, one rib at a time, all of her viscera spilled out on the carpet, writhing and gasping for air.

In a fit of dramatic pique the puppy reappeared, poking her little nose out like asking if the yelling was done. Hadley scooped her up and held her close, tucked her chin to warm wiggling fur, pressed *I'm sorry*s into her skin.

"Well," Maira said, with a sip of wine, "let me just say, that was the best thing I have seen in literally a century and I am *so* glad I skipped happy hour."

The following night was horrifically cold for April, and Hadley spent the whole night in suspended animation, caught between sleep and awake; between dreams that tasted like sulfur and shale and turned the marrow of her bones to thistles, and waking with sleep paralysis and locked limbs, heart bleating like a gutted sheep in her chest, eyes cracked open in case she saw a lamp in the corner of her room.

She woke up like clawing her way out of the earth and realized she'd made a decision.

When Maira woke up, Hadley was waiting for her.

"I want to go see her."

"Who, Emily?" She yawned around the words.

"No. Boss."

Phoebe instantly poked her head out of her log.

"You want to see Boss?" Maira still managed to look terrifyingly gorgeous even with frizzy hair and men's pajama pants.

"Hadley, you can't get out of this. You can't take back a deal, that's not how it works."

"I don't want to take back a deal, I want to know if I was ever in the deal in the first place."

Maira tilted her head. "Um, dude—"

"Did she only mean men?" Hadley talked over her. "Do you know? It says *son* of man. Does she…does it just mean men? Or are women allowed?"

Her heart pounded just from saying the words, the sheer audacity of them: was she seriously questioning a *goddess*?

"Oh," Maira said softly. "That is interesting. So you think she won't mind you sleeping with Emily…because she's a woman."

"I've been thinking about it," Hadley confessed. "A lot. I just keep playing her words over in my head and I keep thinking…maybe it's just men. Maybe Emily is okay."

"It's not like her to leave loopholes."

"I know, I know it's a shot in the dark. But I just…I gotta know. And I don't know where to find her. So. Will you help me?"

Maira owed her nothing, she knew that. Maira was assigned to her, like a long-term homework project. All Maira owed her was to be a physical reminder of her curse, to intervene when Hadley's heart got lonely. Maira was under no obligation to say anything but fuck you.

"Yeah."

"Yeah?" Hadley's heart spiked.

"Yeah, I'm down. I'll bring you to her." Maira smiled like a saber. "Let's fight for your love."

Hadley flushed. "Shut up."

"Call out sick from work tomorrow. We'll get the first plane to New York in the morning."

"She's in New York? The city?"

"Where else would the goddess of witchcraft live?" Maira asked.

Fifth Avenue bustled the same way Chinatown did, only cleaner and less hungry. Hadley wore her best outfit and still looked like a slob next to Maira, who strolled up to a tall glass-windowed building

with receptionists clad all in black. In the elevator, she pressed the button for the penthouse. The directory on the wall said the penthouse suite was occupied by Hawkins, Suarez and Propylaia, LLP.

"She's a lawyer?" Hadley whispered.

"Architect," Maira replied. "One of the best in the city."

Hadley made a face. The elevator held only them, a woman with headphones in, and the weight of Hadley's anxiety clawing at the walls.

"Do you have any advice?" She asked. "Anything? That could help?"

Maira shook her head, and she almost looked sad. "Nothing I say could ever prepare you."

They stepped off the elevator into a gorgeous open-plan office, all tall white bookshelves and crisp computer monitors. Maira clicked in her high heels all the way through to the back, Hadley following like a puppy, until they came upon a low desk with a young male receptionist. He looked up and smiled at them with rubber cheeks.

"We have an appointment," Maira said.

"Yes, you do," he said, and turned his awful smile at Hadley. Her stomach clenched in fear. He was another one of them. Another prophecy for her. "Please, come inside."

He gestured through the door behind him. The etching on the door read *Irina Propylaia, AIA: Design Principal*.

Maira didn't ask Hadley if she was ready. She knew Hadley's answer would be *never*, and they'd be stuck outside the door for an eternity.

Maira pushed open the door and they walked inside.

Wide glass windows, a handsome dark wood desk, bookshelves filled with black tomes and plaques on the wall—the office was gorgeous and Hadley could only focus on the taste: metal, salt, the tang of old sweat. It lingered in the air, barely perceptible, probably not noticeable by anyone other than them and the gray-haired woman who stood at a drafting table by the window.

For the briefest of moments, Hadley saw the flash of lamplight.

The woman turned to where they stood motionless on the

inside of the closed door. She was younger than Hadley would have thought; maybe in her forties, with a crisp black and white suit, the sleeves rolled up to show the knobs of delicate wrists. Her only jewelry was a tiny silver circle charm, glimmering at her throat. She looked at them with pale eyes and Maira stiffened like addressing a general.

"Hello, Mistress," she said.

"Hello, Mistress," Hadley repeated.

Hecate looked coolly at them. "Hello, Maira. Hello, Hadley."

"Nice to see you," Hadley said, unsure of how to address an ancient goddess. She hadn't seen Hecate since that night; all communication for years had been through Maira. "It's been a long time."

"Has it?" Hecate replied. She looked down at the plans in front of her, then rolled them up with decisive twists of her wrists.

"Mistress, Hadley has a question for you," Maira said. They both stayed standing even as Hecate walked over and sat down at the desk, pulling something up on her computer. Hadley's feet started to ache in her heels.

"Ask, then."

"Mistress, umm…" Hecate looked up from her computer screen, and the force of her gaze—tight and mechanical—cured Hadley's stammer instantly. "When you cursed me, you said, 'Never hence shall son of man touch cursed skin again.' Did you mean everyone? Or just men? Am I allowed to sleep with a woman?"

Hecate said nothing. Hadley was uncomfortably aware of being the only true human in the room. Even the walls seemed other; they pressed in, listening, like dogs sniffing at her heels.

"You misunderstood," Hecate said, finally.

Hadley's heart *leapt*. "I did?"

"Yes. You misunderstood why you were cursed in the first place."

"What?" Hadley snuck a glance at Maira, found her brows furrowed just the tiniest bit. "I—I was punished for performing necromancy. For trespassing on your domain."

Hecate looked back at her computer. She typed something with

fast, precise fingers. For a moment it seemed that she'd forgotten about them.

Eventually she turned away from the computer, shifting her rolling chair to the center of her desk so she could fold her hands on the wood and look straight up at them.

"There are many witches in this world," she said. "This is Maira's task. She watches them, reports to me on their behavior. Many of them must dabble in necromancy, right? How many people in the world wish to have this power? And yet, there are very few of you who are cursed. You believe you were singled out for one of the common transgressions, and yet you were not even the one holding the body."

She said this so calmly but Hadley wanted to run away, because for a while she almost didn't believe that this precise, modern architect was the same monstrous woman in the woods that night, with her burning snake eyes and voice like stone. But this woman had held the lamp that now followed Hadley every day.

"There are many witches in this world. They chant in Latin and hold crystals and burn useless, pretty herbs and they don't know. None of that has ever mattered. None of them are truly mine, because they all know where they belong and I never have."

The tiny necklace she wore wasn't quite a circle, Hadley realized. It was a gibbous moon; a waning moon, in between phases. Something for which there wasn't quite a name.

"We exist, Hadley, in the liminal spaces," Hecate said. "We are neither gods nor men. We are neither accepted nor rejected. We live in crossroads, thresholds, and interstitial voids. Even in the ancient days I was on the fringes, my sacrifices given at midnight and as an afterthought. It is a burden, to live as neither. To live without classification. All beings exist to have a purpose and a place. By nature I can have neither."

Hadley thought of Emily, of her confidence, her assuredness. Emily knew where in the world she belonged.

"I did not curse you because you were stupid and performed necromancy on a woman who deserved to die," Hecate continued, still in that calm, cool voice. "I cursed you because it is how I

survive. You are liminal, now, neither human nor divine, feeling the same burden I do. I cursed you to refrain from sex because we can never be companions, not in the way that humans or gods need. No one can truly love us who are perpetually in shadows. It is not the way that hearts work. You were young. I thought the lesson would be best learned by abstinence."

"But—" Hadley found herself wanting to cry, like a child, and forced herself to swallow it down. Her voice shook, though. "But—Emily and I could. She—she knows. Maybe she could—maybe she could live with it!"

You're really good at killing animals, said the ghost of Emily. *That is so fucked.*

"Maybe she could," Hecate replied. Her fingers stayed clasped. "Just because it has never happened before does not mean it never could. She could know about your immortality, your obligations, what you will become and all that you will do once I call upon you." Maira stared straight ahead. "She could know all this and still love you. And it would not bother me."

"Does that—" Oh God, her heart hurt, she couldn't keep up. "Does that mean you—you're okay—"

"It would not bother me, but ultimately it does not matter." She cut through Hadley's hope. "Because if you truly loved this girl, you would have already touched her no matter the consequences."

"*What*? No, I—that's not—"

"If your heart was true, you would not be here, asking me to make the choice for you." Hecate's voice was cruel but her face was, for half a moment, almost kind. "You are so young."

"No, that's not—I was trying to be *safe*, I wanted to check, it's not—I wanted to touch her, I *want* to touch her, but I didn't want to die!"

"Isn't that what you've been doing?"

The white walls leaned in.

No, I'm alive, Hadley thought, viciously, desperately, *I'm alive, I'm still here, I'm not like him, I'm not buried in some shitty bargain coffin under some shitty bargain tombstone in some awful weedy cemetery in some town no one's ever heard of, I'm here and I'm alive, I go to the farmer's*

market and I watch soap operas and I laugh with my friends, I'm alive—

She lived her days in a job that existed merely to kill time. She lived her nights in a bloodless single room, in a bed with an electric blanket because it was the closest she came to human touch. She existed on a single frequency, in a single flatline, with middling emotions of no great furor, no blistering rage or sucking sadness or bouncing joy. She watched people on TV live lives, she stood adjacent while her friends lived lives. She was alive. If she were in *Grey's Anatomy* they could not pull the plug on her, because her heart still beat and her brain still whirred and her fingers still clutched.

But maybe they should.

She was realizing, only now, that in all the years since that night by lamplight, she had never even tried to sleep with a man. Never once experimented, in all the opportunities she'd had, never once even tried to kiss and see how stiff the rules truly were. The closest she'd come was with Emily, and even then she'd talked herself out of it before Maira even got there.

Was it Hecate who castrated her, or had she castrated herself?

"You stand in the threshold," Hecate said. Her eyes like an owl's reflected nothing. "Never let it be said that I am cruel. Whatever you decide I shall abide by. But so must you."

When they returned to Chinatown, Hadley walked, dazed, to the little park across from her apartment, in the bright, clear cold of spring. The tree farthest from people was skinny and reedy, barely as big as her spinal column, but Hadley chose to sit on the ground and lean against it anyway. Poky little weeds jutted against her bare ankle, the faintest of thorns.

Emily hadn't called, hadn't texted. It'd only been two days, but still. Maybe she'd call. Maybe she'd delete Hadley's number from her phone. Maybe Hadley would call, and Emily would answer, only to scream at Hadley that she was a Satanist, a monster, a fucked-up thrown-away piece of filth who deserved to die alone.

Her brain spun out of control, jumping to increasingly awful scenarios: Maybe Emily would take a chance on her but disappear after seeing the crossroads ritual for the first time, leave the country,

change her name. Maybe Emily would try to explain to her parents why she was growing older and Hadley stayed youthful and scared. Maybe Emily would give Hadley her heart and then take it back, leaving her doubly as broken, cut up and scarred over.

Emily, choosing the puppy over Hadley.

Hadley ducked her head, squeezed her eyes shut.

It wouldn't be so bad, would it? To never touch again. She'd made it this far. Maira had made it this far. They were good at singing lonely nocturnes by now.

Emily wasn't *that* great, anyway, right? Nothing special. Nothing worth risking her life over. No one was worth what Hecate had described, no one was worth the explanations and the heartbreak and the pain, at least this loneliness was familiar—

Something young and tearful in her spiked, tried to claw itself back up, made one desperate break for the light. Hadley set her ribs and snapped shut her jaw and locked it down.

This is your punishment, she thought, ferociously. *This is your life now. And you would've been dead so this is it, and you don't need Emily and you don't need anyone else, you need the air in your lungs and the blood in your heart and you'll be okay.*

She looked up, brushed hair out of her face, to make sure no one else saw her freak out in the middle of the park.

She looked around at all the people who weren't there.

No one else was there.

Off in the distance, in the tiny, fragile space between the horizons, she saw a lamp.

Proxies

ISAAC YUEN

Tess,

So I fell for a neutrino last week. I know, yes, I swore I would avoid this sort of thing from now on, but you know how it goes. How I am. After the fallout with Elle I ordered this radiation shielding paint online, did up a double coat while renovating the suite. Stuff's black as sin and costs three hundred bucks a gallon, but goddamn if it didn't block out everything—cell signals, background static, all that head churn. Slept straight through the night for the first time in god knows how long. Would have paid double the price just for the peace of mind if I'd known sooner, especially during those initial aftershock days. Does jack squat against neutrinos though, so now I'm dreaming again. I know. I shouldn't complain.

From what I googled they're supposed to mind their own business. And all the ones I pass through around town never seem to show any inclination for interaction. But there she was, last Saturday night, standing under the lintel of my door at the end of the hall, wrapped up in a pashmina scarf and one of those puffed-up Helly Hansen jackets. She was sporting a serious backpack so I assumed she was some sort of nomad, given their reputations as wanderers. Turns out it was just stuffed with shortbread and computer gear; she later told me that she had a weakness for butter cookies and liked to

switch on the fly between her many art projects: An "Avatar prohibition-era AU fanfic", whatever that is, doing up tablet sketches of plants she finds along the roadside, and then learning Italian through Duolingo and online flashcards. Not jumping to conclusions—that's number four on my New Year's resolution list.

Anyways, she barged in or phased through or whatever neutrinos do. Asked if I had anything to eat. I was about to tell her no, I didn't have anything, and that it was actually kind of rude to stroll into someone's place without at least a day's notice over the phone or some sort of written correspondence, but then I caught myself and thought, no, that's not right, because it's almost Christmas and you have to be charitable this time of year, even if you're not feeling social or festive, because this is all part of the holiday spirit to which I wholly subscribe, or at least Elle did, and she was usually more right than wrong about these sorts of things.

All I got in the fridge is a quarter pack of bacon, I said.

I love bacon, she said, and I've got half a loaf of the sourdough I baked in my bag, but I feel like working on my chopsticks skills, so let's go out.

Fine, I said, but let me put on some pants first.

Earlier on I read that some scientist at Duke pegged the odds of a neutrino encounter at one in four, lifetime. So I really couldn't say no, you know? Shouldn't. Even though I was nice and set on spending the night walking barefoot on that newly installed radiant-heated floor.

Not my finest answer also, I'll admit, but her being game for bacon threw me off, so there you go, the whole account. Complete honesty even at personal expense—that's third on the list.

We walked over to the old joint in the snow. You've been before, for Elle's bachelorette, remember? That grungy sushi lounge she loved so much above the used records store. Spin Again? Second Spin? The name was always fuzzy in my head. Anyways, it was just the first spot that came to mind, though in hindsight on a subconscious level I probably meant it as some sort of test. The decor's exactly the same, in case you're wondering, right down to the stripped bicycle frame

hanging over the bar, to the salvaged "PAINTS" and "LOANS" neon signs by the entrance. That Buddha statue with the triple-glow ripple belly? Still jolly at the counter.

It smells like toilet disinfectant in here, she said.

That is new, I said, but so are those sweet oak long tables.

We sat down near the front, side-by-side instead of face-to-face. I had read that you're not supposed to stare at elementary particles directly. Something about collapsing reality by observing things too closely. Was it you that told me that? Or was it Elle, after she renewed for another two years of *Scientific American*? Anyways, I don't remember. I just didn't want to come off as a creep. After we finished ordering we made fun of the inflatable Santa cradling a teddy bear up on the karaoke stage. The stitching above the bear's eyebrows made it look constantly angry, and the lighting inside old Saint Nick got bunched up in an unfortunate spot. I ended up feeling up Santa on a dare. For fire safety purposes, of course.

I think it happened when she brought up Calvino. I had never met anyone who wanted to chat Calvino. I guess when you're drifting through space and don't have to worry about bumping into things you have time to mull over invisible cities and people living their entire lives in trees without ever coming down. After the yam tempura I asked how she enjoyed people constantly trying to pursue and define her. She said it was mostly exhausting but sometimes it's nice when the right person asks the right questions. She talked about how she's good Facebook friends with Janet Conrad over at MIT and wished more women researchers would do their own thing instead of hopping onto the Higgs-Boson hypetrain and by the way quarks are totally the mean girls of the subatomic world. Maybe that was when it happened. Or maybe it was when she touched on the John Updike poem and the gall of men to wax on about things they knew nothing about.

No mass my ass, she said while polishing off another Frank's RedHot chicken wing.

But Nepal is nice, I pointed out, remembering the line, the honeymoon.

True, she said after a pause. One of the few places that touched me, actually.

The gyozas came. As good as I remembered and probably why we used to come every Thursday. I admit it, I ordered the whole grilled squid off the back menu in an attempt to impress, but then I realized it was what I always got anyways. Besides, she was too busy wolfing down her soft-shelled crab to notice. Took half of mine as well, but I didn't mind much by that point.

I guess you don't have a lot of time to sit and eat, I said.

Some days I completely forget, she said, in between bites.

Out of all the things to do it—weird, isn't it? All I could think about at that moment was how I wanted to start cooking again. I know it's strange to be proud of a Caesar salad but I did do a mean version, with anchovy filets, not paste, with egg yolks and Worcestershire and iceberg wedges—none of that bitter romaine bullshit. I started to go over the recipe for a saffron and mushroom risotto in my mind but then caught myself, because you and Elle decided that one time back when you were roommates and I was over that risotto was a minimum fifth-date dish, and I was trying not to get swept away by grand gestures and sentiments. As I do.

Maybe the dollar whiskey sours were getting to me when I asked why.

Gotta talk to someone sometime, she said after knocking back a fifth oyster.

That's fair.

Did that hurt?

A little, I said, but I appreciate the honesty.

Listen, she said, do you know the odds?

One in four.

That's for you and any neutrino. Not a specific neutrino.

I heard her rummaging through her pack for a pen before scribbling out something.

Reverse those odds and convert them, like this. Here.

More scribbling. Glitter nails pushed a soy sauce-stained napkin in front of me.

Count the zeros.

This is the first time someone has tried to comfort me with math.

Feel better?

A little, I said. You're not bad at this, for someone who doesn't do people.

Just the direct interactions, mostly. I enjoy watching you lot from afar. And I don't hate everyone. Some of you are… solid.

Thanks?

Stop moping and enjoy the moment.

My number one resolution, I said, being present. Here—my list if you don't believe me.

At that she snort-laughed and I made the mistake of looking. She was pretty and there was a rice grain stuck to her chin. I usually don't care for bangs but she made them work. As she started to flicker I tried holding onto the details. The scarf. Her eyes. It's hard to describe colors when they don't stay still. Not brown or green, maybe hazel, but then I realized I never knew what hazel was in the first place. I wanted to tell her where I learned the word "chrysoberyl," maybe go on a tangent about toad eyes, because she was an even bigger bookworm than I was and double-majored in Biology and English like I did and might appreciate the Orwell reference. But already she was fading away.

Those eyes, Tess. God.

I asked if she wanted to come back here for dinner sometime. She mouthed some words but sound was the first thing to go. After a few tries she sighed and stopped but beamed a smile like her father the sun. Then she was gone. I stayed to finish the deep-fried Mars bar but didn't feel like the rest of the sushi pizza.

I once read that when a neutrino strikes a particle of matter, the reaction produces a light, even if it happens beneath a mile of mountain or inside the core of a nuclear reactor, and that the light would register as a brief blue glow. Then I read that some people throughout history might have even had neutrinos from supernovas hit the insides of their eyes. I wonder if they knew what they were

looking at. Probably not the first time. But maybe if they were lucky enough to see it again they might recognize it for what it was. Some kind of crazy supernova glory.

Listen, I know it's been weird for you as the go-between these past few months. It was never going to work out, I get that now. Elle and I, we were made of different stuff. But it's nice to be reminded of what things once felt like, I guess, what it could feel like again. Even if it doesn't last.

In other news: I'm moving out of the basement at the end of the month. Met the new roommates at a housing co-op across town yesterday afternoon: A professional hospital clown, a Kropotkin anarcho-communist (what are the odds of meeting another??), a community choir conductor plus her Anglican priest bride-to-be. Quirky, charming lot. The couple was in the midst of building a new suite in time for their wedding and asked if I'd like to take their master bedroom downstairs, but I think I'll pick the junior suite up in the attic. I don't take up a lot of space these days, and the room has French windows with access to the roof. When summer comes it'll be nice to sleep outside, under the stars.

I'll send over the new address later so you can come check out the place. Can you let Elle know next time you drop off her batch of mail and magazines?

But only if you want to. Only if she asks.

– K.

Back to TOC

For the Weird Girls Who Want to be Mermaids

DAWN VOGEL

The first Monday of May is the day you realize that the skin on your legs, formerly referred to as "fish-belly white" in mocking tones throughout the halls of your high school, is actually pearlescent.

You prod at your skin all through AP Calculus, while Ms. Davenport drones on about what will be on the final exam, trying to see if you can discern any scales ready to burst through and prove you've been a mermaid all along. Mermaids don't need to finish their junior year and visit colleges and find a part time job. You start rethinking your summer in light of this impending freedom.

But you don't find the hoped-for scales. Instead, all you find is dry, flaky skin and reddening bumps.

On the bus home, you notice Jessica's skin looks pearlescent too, in spite of her skin being naturally tan year-round. You ask her what kind of lotion she uses. She ignores you, because cheerleaders don't care about scrawny red-headed weird girls, and they already know where they're going to college (State, naturally) and where they'll be working this summer (the mall, of course).

You wake up on Thursday to a stabbing pain in your right

thigh. Your leg is tangled in your sheet, and as you unwind the two, a scale the size of your thumbnail tumbles from the sheet onto your mattress. A hole in your thigh of similar size and shape oozes blood.

Your heart races even as you try to make logical sense of this sudden mutation. You wash the wound, place the scale over it, and wrap your leg with gauze and tape. It's close enough to your knee that none of your shorts cover it, but it's too warm to wear pants. You wear a sundress that makes your skin look even more pale.

By the time you get home from school and remove the bandage, the scale has fused over the wound. Three more have appeared around it. You pretend to study for your English test, but you spend more time watching the light play across your scales than you do re-reading Chaucer. Chaucer didn't have anything to say about mermaids, so why should he matter?

You wake up in the morning with more scales. They only grow above your knees, so you find all the summery dresses you own to see which ones still fit. You hope you'll be completely changed before too long, or you'll be wearing the same dresses over and over again until the end of the school year. Mermaids don't have to worry about laundry or wearing the same thing too many times.

You wake with your thighs fused together on Wednesday. You try to stay in bed.

Your mom calls up the stairs. "Why aren't you up yet?"

You scramble for a lie. "I twisted my knee wearing platform sandals. I should probably stay home and rest."

"But it's almost the end of the school year, young lady." She brings you the crutches from the garage that smell like dust, motor oil, and your older brother's underarms.

You wear a pencil skirt that's always been too tight around your knees. With your fused thighs and crutches, though, it works like a dream. It doesn't cover all your scales, but they look like a lacy edging on the pencil skirt.

No one notices anyway. The scales or the crutches.

You wake up Sunday thirstier than you've ever been, but the three glasses of water you drink straight out of your bathroom tap don't help. You let the shower fill the tub, and you lay there until the

hot water runs out and the water in the tub gets cold enough and your teeth start to chatter.

Your lips and ears and fingers and toes stay blue even after you warm up.

You'll have to break the news to your mom sooner rather than later, because there's no way you can keep going to school like this. She'll have to finally let you quit. There isn't any other way.

You hobble down the stairs in your nightgown, forgetting you're supposed to go fishing with your dad today.

Your mom shakes her head. "Already eleven and you aren't even dressed?"

Your dad looks up from one of your mom's magazines, which he always pretends to read to avoid talking to your mom when he picks you up. He smiles. "Fishing in your pajamas is fine with me." He helps you into his truck once your mom closes the front door, still frowning.

He pulls out of the driveway. "Would you rather stay in town with your mom or move to my house near the ocean?"

You stare at him as he continues to drive, his eyes glued to the road. His lips and ears are blueish too, which your mom always says is because of his drinking.

"How long have you known?"

He shrugs. "Since around when I turned seventeen. We can get you a special kind of waterbed, if you want to stay at your mom's house."

You don't know exactly what the option is if you go with him, but you suspect it involves a lot more time in the ocean, and maybe home schooling, or maybe not even finishing high school.

But you have to decide. Another year of being the pale, red-headed weird girl, who probably won't have a date for prom, or accepting that you are really a mermaid.

What kind of a choice is that?

Back to TOC

To Bill Murray, With Regrets

SUZANNE FABER

The rain ends. A cohort of stubby looking men in khaki shorts, long socks and dark shirts lift a wet tarp from an infield striped in alternating bands of dark and light green grass. The Cleveland Indians retake their positions. The Chicago Cubs send a thickset, goateed outfielder from Middletown, Ohio to the plate. His single to left field will become one link in a chain of events that leads his team to its first World Series win since the invention of the Model T.

"You want some popcorn?" the woman asks her husband so engrossed in the drama unfolding on the screen she has to repeat the question. "Popcorn?" She can hear his teeth grinding.

He pauses the action, exhales purposefully, audibly, in the manner the cloying voice on his meditation app instructed.

"I don't know why you're so nervous," his wife says. "It's not like you don't know how it ends."

"Sure. Popcorn," he says, then calling after her as she heads to the kitchen, "And salt. You never use enough salt."

The game still paused, he gets up, stretches his arms out wide, walks around the couch a couple times, reaches to his toes, feels the good of gravity easing his spine. He tries to ignore the dust drifting in the air; he misses the housekeeper more than he does the black

truffle risotto at Papa Mauro's—like everything else, closed for the duration. Spying a small tear in the patterned rug beneath him, his mind flashes to the memory of buying it, the details clear—how much he paid, the smell of weed on the young men ferrying carpets from one pile to another at their boss's direction, the weathered photograph of small dark women working at looms set under date trees somewhere hot. It happened like that more and more lately, memories from life before the Great Confinement assaulting him out of nowhere like muggers jumping out from shadows. He presses the torn threads back into the tear, tries to massage them into sense.

His wife returns with a bowl of unsalty popcorn. He retakes his seat on the couch, restarts the game. Albert Almora pinch runs for Kyle Schwarber and takes second on a fly-out to centerfield. Anthony Rizzo is intentionally walked.

"Aren't you even a little sick of it?" she asks, sitting down next to him.

"It never gets old." He says this instead of what he would have said had he not vowed to at least try not to *compound things.* He remembers her exact phrase—*it's bad enough as it is, can you please try not to compound things*—which he took as a request not to tell her the truth as he saw it, felt it, the truth in this case being that a rerun of a baseball game played on a rainy night in Cleveland four and a half years ago was one of the few things that didn't feel like death to him lately. The other day, rummaging in his closet for a t-shirt, he felt like a ghost, wondered if that's what ghosts did when they were bored out of their minds, look for something new to wear.

Almora scores on Zobrist's double to left and Montero's single brings the Cubs to an 8-6 lead.

"Rub my feet?" She swings her legs up to his lap.

"It's the bottom of the tenth. Can you wait?"

"I know it's the bottom of the 10th. The string bean's pitching." She pokes his belly with a chipped toenail. "What happened to him anyway, after?"

"Let me think," he says, baffled by her habit of trying to make conversation, succeeding only in breaking the spell. He indulges her

anyway. "Carl Edwards got traded to San Diego, I think, then Seattle."

"Junior," She says.

"Huh?"

"Carl Edwards, *Junior*."

He rewards her with a massage of her left arch.

She had never been to a baseball game before she met him, didn't know anyone who had—certainly no one as committed to a team. Had there been a prenup it would have consisted of a single provision: She would accompany him to at least one Cubs game per year in exchange for equal time with the rhumba instructor at the Fred Astaire Dance Studio. She proved a more eager and able Cubs fan than he a dancer. Over the years, the couple spent many pleasant afternoons together at Wrigley Field, he marking a scorecard, she working on the day's *New York Times* crossword. (With his help, she soon learned that the answer to just about any question to do with the New York Giants was likely O T T.)

Somewhere along the way, to his delight, she'd become a fan. She enjoyed the World Series victory nearly as much as he did. They jumped up and down in front of the TV together, squealing, hugging, crying. Neither slept that night.

"And now it gets good," she says taking the remote and releasing Joe Maddon from his frozen expression—something between hope and history.

"Fuck!" her husband howls, spitting a mouthful of popcorn back into the bowl.

'What?"

"I think I cracked a tooth. Damn!" He cradles his jaw in his palm and moans.

The reality that a broken tooth would not rise to the level of an emergency, that he'd have to bear it until events in the outside world changed, occurs to both of them simultaneously. She takes his hand in hers.

"No more popcorn 'til this damn thing is over, okay? It's dangerous."

"I'm okay," he lies.

"Look, Montgomery's on the mound," she says brightly, hoping to trick him out of his pain. "One more out and the curse is lifted."

"It wasn't a curse."

"Was, too."

"Magical thinking," he scolds.

"And what's wrong with that?"

He is suddenly struck with the image of his grandmother chewing thread to ward off whatever evil might have entered the home when she was busy rendering fat from a chicken.

"Everything," he says.

"You should try it," she offers, under her breath.

Their eyes move to the screen, unblinking, each anticipating a specific and certain joy. The camera catches Bill Murray in the stands. She detects a faint giddiness spreading on his face—*before* the ball that Cubs third baseman Kris Bryant will scoop up and fire as a bullet to the glove of Anthony Rizzo to win the game is even launched. She wonders if it's a premonition.

Her husband stifles a grimace. She notices. Her expression changes, her thoughts skip ahead.

"And then it all goes to hell," she mumbles, not sure if she wants him to hear it.

He does hear it, decides to ignore it in favor of the anesthetizing practice swings taken by a small, generally light-hitting Dominican now at the plate.

"Not today, buddy," he taunts Michael Martinez, the last out, then takes a mouthful of popcorn.

"What are you thinking?" His wife grabs the bowl away from him and pauses the game.

"Fuck!" he yowls in fresh pain.

She watches as he paces the floor. The force of their combined upset sends the dustballs wafting to the corners.

"It's too much," she says. "I can't stand it. I really can't."

He wraps his arms around her, they rock back and forth together.

"And you know it's their fault." she adds quietly.

She waits for his rebuke.

He sighs, shakes his head, sits down and tries to mute the screaming molar with his index finger.

"It's true, you know it," she continues.

"Not now," he pleads, suffering.

No use. He braces for what he knows will come next.

"It was *too* good, *too* magical." She is daring him to engage.

"You don't believe that."

"I do.

"Please."

"Everything was going along so well and then, poof!"

"Poof?"

"Poof!"

He remembers his brother hinting at something similar, suggesting in a phone conversation from Melbourne a few hours after the game that all bets were off, that the Cubs' victory marked the beginning of a new world. He failed to mention any specifics as to what that world might look like—everyone shut inside as a new plague ravaged the earth, for example. He found the notion as nonsensical as the juju magic underlying some ballplayers' decision not to shave or change their socks during the playoffs. It was absurd, he thought, immature. He was embarrassed when his wife brought it up a week later, celebrating at Papa Mauro's with their friends Marie and Gray, the general air of ecstasy only slightly diminished.

"Suppose I'm right," she says reaching to touch his jaw.

He dodges the attempt and groans.

"The Cubs winning the World Series did not—I repeat *did not*—cause the events afterward. Period, full stop."

"How do you know?"

"Because I'm not *stupid*." He tries to catch the word as it comes out of his mouth but too late. It hangs a moment before turning to dust in the air.

"Six days." She pounds the sofa for emphasis. "Six days!"

"What does that mean?"

"The game was November second. The election was November eighth. *Six days.*"

"So?"

"The universe shifted," she says. "Something happened."

"For god's sake."

"Everything changed after that. Everything."

Wondering if this is what is meant by *stir crazy,* he retreats to the adjacent bathroom.

"Suppose I'm right?" he hears through the door. He doesn't answer, examines his tooth in the mirror instead.

"I can wait—we have as much time as we do toilet paper," she says, feeling a tinge of guilt for hoarding.

Despite himself, he turns her theory over in his mind. He would never admit it, but it wasn't an altogether new exercise. Lately, certainly, he wondered how it had come to this. Just last week their neighbor across the hall, a doctor manning the front lines at a besieged hospital, asked if he would witness the signing of the will he downloaded from Legal Zoom.

"You look out the peephole while I open the door so you can watch me sign," Dr. Solomon instructed. "Then I'll leave the papers at your door and go back inside. Then you come out, pick them up, sign them, and leave them at my door."

Rhumba lessons were less complicated.

When he opens the bathroom door a minute later she is as she was, as if he'd pressed pause.

"Suppose I'm right?" she restarts.

Don't engage, don't engage, don't engage, he chants to himself.

"Would you give it up?"

Don't engage.

"Would you?" She is leaning in. It unsettles him.

"Would I what?" *Make it stop.*

"You know exactly what."

He takes a deep breath.

"Would I give up one of the best moments of my life, of my *whole* life…"

He lets the question trail off as he considers his obligation under the circumstances. In an alternate universe he might have been more indulgent, humored her for both their sakes, but the pulsing pain in his jaw overrides any such instincts.

"It's a ridiculous question," he says emphatically. "It's just not how things work."

"You don't know that."

"Yes, I do. It's like spitting—" He pantomimes an elderly woman he once saw in Athens on a trip with his college roommate after graduating. "Ptui, ptui, ptui."

"That's gross."

"Or chewing on thread—"

"What?"

"Hocus pocus, curses, tricks, peasant superstition…"

"Chewing thread? Who does that?"

"My grandmother," he says sheepishly.

"Greta? Why?"

"Don't ask."

"Tell me."

"No."

"C'mon."

"I don't know."

"Yes, you do."

"Magical thinking," he says finally, dipping each word in an extra breath hoping to convey his derision.

"Did it work?"

"I'm done."

He's angry now. She wonders if that's what she intended, to start something, anything to break the monotony, change the subject.

He sits down, takes a deep breath, rubs his tongue along the edge of the offending tooth.

"I'll get you some ice," she says, picking up the bowl of popcorn and moving to the kitchen. She is glad to be elsewhere.

He hears cabinet doors opening, drawers slamming shut. He tries to shake it off, stretches again before reaching for the remote and restarting the game. He rolls a stray carpet thread between his chapped fingers.

Bottom of the 10th, two outs, the Cubs' lead has narrowed to 8-7. Mike Montgomery sends Martinez a curve ball that misses the plate.

Her phone rings in the kitchen, it distracts him. He hears pieces of a conversation. She is cheerful now, buoyant.

Montgomery resets himself, takes a sign from Montero.

A small titter escapes her mouth, races down the hall to her husband, unspooling him from his upset. In a moment she is there, offering him a bowl of freshly popped, heavily salted kernels of corn.

He digs in.

"Who called?" he asks, feeling a vague sense of deja vu.

"Marie." Her eyes catch a mortified Bill Murray, falling backward, his knees buckling as Martinez gets a double off Montgomery's 1-0 pitch, sending a runner home and tying the game. "They have extra tickets for tonight. Symphony. Want to go?"

"Up to you," he says casually.

Backup catcher Yan Gomes comes to the plate sporting a trim beard and a puny batting average.

"What are you watching?" she asks, vaguely recalling the scene.

"Not really watching—just stumbled on it." He notices something on her mouth, squints, then leans in for a better look."

"I'm surprised you can stomach it."

"I can't," he says, turning it off at the moment Gomes's triple sends his Cleveland Indians into the history books, winners of the 2016 World Series. "You've got something—"

"What?"

"Right there." He pulls a small blue thread from her bottom lip, examines it, then shows it to her before rubbing it from his finger.

"That's weird," she says and shrugs. "So, you want to go? I think it's Muti conducting."

"Sure. What's the program?"

"Dvorak," she smiles.

"New World?"

"I guess."

Back to TOC

Omniscience

KRISTI PETERSEN SCHOONOVER

Eighty-nine percent of me wanted my son, Ben, to be just like his father.

The other eleven percent was terrified that he was.

Griffin and I had been together for thirty years when he shared his secret. We were deep into a fourth Sazerac at a downtown Providence bar. My lips were numb from absinthe, and the place was loud—a horror convention was in full swing, and the room teemed with fellow attendees clad in everything from formal to cosplay; the air was thick with musky incense and sweat. Griff's claim seemed like a cocktail of mingling in a Lovecraftian crowd, and excessive booze pumping false youth through our elegantly-attired, yet still middle-aged, bodies.

It also wouldn't have been the first time we'd been out of control at that event. Our son had been conceived in a similar set of circumstances, over a decade prior. We'd planned to drive home, but were too inebriated, so a friend let us use her hotel room. We were consumed by each other, there were no condoms, and we were old enough that the risks of getting pregnant were minimal.

Nine months later, Ben had arrived.

"You always wanted the truth from me, Reena." Griff's eyes were intense, still alluring despite his crows' feet. He gripped my

hand. "Truth is a funny thing. Everybody wants it, obsessively. Until they get it. Then they almost don't want it anymore. But this is it. This is the biggest truth I will *ever* share with you. Always the first male. It *usually* skips a generation. No guarantee. But it's been passed down through my family for as long as I can remember."

It felt like my heart had stopped.

"If Ben's got it, it'll show soon. He makes it to eighteen without it? He's clear."

"Why are you telling me this *now*?" I battled the terror. "Do you know how it will happen to *you*?"

He hesitated, played with the twisted rind that still clung to the edge of his glass. "An accident. Not sure what kind."

I couldn't imagine life without him. "*When?*"

"Don't worry." He'd been concerned about my stress levels since the clots after Ben was born; I was on a blood thinner, but had to admit I wasn't religious with it. "I'll get the car." He stood up, scrounged in his red velvet smoking jacket for the keys to our Subaru, which was parked a few blocks away. There was sorrow in his eyes. "I love you." He touched my cheek, kissed my forehead, and left.

He was crossing North Main Street when a man in a black pick-up truck pulled away from the curb at high speed and ran him down.

Two weeks later, the casserole dishes had been returned, the well-wishers' flowers were dead, and the neighbors no longer pushed babysitting and company. I waited for Griff to show up and say he'd been called away on business, but there was just his ghost: in three remaining Hershey bars and a tub of cherries in the refrigerator; on the pillow he slept on. Every morning I passed his athletic-cut t-shirt on the chair in our bedroom, thinking, *336 hours ago he chucked that there just before we left for the ball.* Every night I passed by the vintage Winchester I'd bought him for his birthday, and thought, *he had no idea that was the last present he was ever going to unwrap.*

But there was Ben.

Most days, this was comforting. Ben had his father's eyes, hair,

and sometimes, walk. I would take him to Cool Licks and watch him dig into his father's favorite cherry vanilla ice cream. On his first day of art class and they had to finger paint, he chose to try to imitate Griff's most-admired painting, Dali's *Metamorphosis of Narcissus*, a poster of which hung in our foyer. We went to get our Halloween pumpkin, and he gravitated toward the most warped, and ultimately complicated-to-carve, specimen, because Griff had never shied from a challenge.

Then there were days terror thrummed through my veins, days when I could do nothing but pace the white kitchen or hug the couch and listen to the clock tick. Days when I forgot to take my pills. Days when I hawked for any dark expression or strange behavior.

If he makes it to eighteen, he's clear.

Five years.

Five years, that was only two hundred sixty weekends. Griff was alive for just under twenty-five hundred weekends, fourteen hundred of which were with me, and that didn't seem like much, did it? I could still taste the Sazerac, remember the musky smell of the bar that night. I hadn't been back since. I knew I wouldn't be going back. Not anytime soon. Not until this was over.

Ben got older. When he asked me things, I could swear his voice was deeper and stronger, and his speech succinct; he was beginning to *sound* like his father. Like the day he rummaged in the refrigerator and said, "Mom. You're not going anywhere. Right?"

"No, baby." I looked up from my coffee. "No, I'm not. I'll always be here."

He'd nodded, but seemed to change his mind about an after-school snack, because he walked away empty-handed.

My friend Ellie had never minced words, and that gave her the privilege of being the only person allowed to smoke in my sunroom. She was curled on a maraschino cushion, the mid-November afternoon light dappling her cheek, while she puffed on a menthol. "I still think that counseling might be a good idea."

God, no. If he turns into Griff, that is a Do-Not-Pass-Go *ticket to*

the psych ward. "Ben's fine." I emptied a sleeve of stone-ground crackers onto a butterfly-shaped platter. Griff had bought it for me, had chosen merlot because he'd thought it was my favorite color.

It reminded me of dark things.

"No, girl." Ellie let out a long column of smoke, kicked off her black spike heels. "For *you*."

"I'm fine." I moved to put the box away and get the goat cheese.

"You're not." She followed, refilled her glass with 19 Crimes Red, spilling some on the white counter. "Everything in this house is exactly the way it was when I was here taking care of Ben that night. You turn down everyone's invites, no one runs into you at Shaw's anymore, and Jesus, you haven't been to an opening in two years."

She was referring to the gallery openings at the Providence Art Club, where I used to volunteer. The parties Griff and I went to, on the beach at Prudence Island, on the sidelines of Ben's soccer games at Colt State Park, at the neighbor's homes at Christmastime. Supermarket trips that lasted three hours due to catch-ups with friends. Birding at the Norman Sanctuary, walking First Beach.

I set the cheese on the platter and stabbed it with a spreader. "Actually? It's been three. Ben's sixteen."

Ellie took a deep quaff from her glass. "Exactly my point, darlin'. Don't you want to *live*?"

I stood there, platter in hand, overwhelmed by the need to tell her the truth. Instead, I said, "Of course I do. For a good long time."

But I knew that her version of living and mine weren't the same, and I couldn't do the kind of which she spoke until I knew Ben was safe.

One weekend left before Ben's eighteenth birthday, and although he wasn't a child anymore, I asked him what he'd like to do to celebrate. "How about we play hooky from school and go to the Bell Gallery? There's an opening reception for the Dali exhibit Thursday afternoon."

"We don't have to play hooky." He bit into a plum. The juice ran down his chin and made a pale brown puddle on the counter.

He chewed, swallowed. "I won't have class that day."

I looked at him and blinked. "Is it cancelled?"

"It will be." He took another bite. "Mr. Lee isn't going to be around."

"Is he going on vacation?"

"No. He's going to take his sailboat out Wednesday night, and he's going to drown."

The clock in the living room chimed quarter past four. Every drop of blood in my body atrophied. "*What*?"

"Um, yeah. Dad told me I might be able to—you know, see how people are going to die."

I felt like I couldn't breathe. "When did he tell you *that*?"

"Before you guys went to the party that night. Like that morning. We went to Cold Licks for a treat."

I remember that night, what Griff had said: *I'm serious, babe. I can look at* anyone. *And know.*

"Mom?"

I felt dizzy. Hot. Not well. I set a hand on the counter to steady myself. "I'm okay."

"No…you should sit down." He took my arm and helped me to a chair at the kitchen table. "I'll get you some water."

I looked at him. I could see concern in his eyes. He looked exactly the way Griff had the day I'd met him, when we were barely adults.

Then Ben said, "What is Alteplase?"

It was what they had given me to dissolve the clots after Ben was born. My mouth could barely form the word. "Why?"

"Because it's telling me you need it. Right now."

Madeleine Bouletier, She-Wolf of Crozon

STEPHANIE DUPAL

The village of Cretons-sur-Mer commemorated the birth of Madeleine Bouletier, Napoleonic heroine, by erecting a large obelisk in the churchyard. Madeleine was born with an infant body covered in dark hair, which, as the years passed and the girl grew, lightened to a down of reddish-brown fur. On the Crozon peninsula of Brittany, she was the only such animal-baby at the turn of the century. Years before there had been rumors of a boy-bird who could hover over the sea, buoyed by an enclave of wind against the coastline. Evidence of the boy-bird's existence proved dubious: here a relic feather snatched from a merchant purse, there the hollow bone of a keel-shaped sternum, large enough to hold a human heart, encased in a glass box in Grosbras-Marie's bakery. She'd used his sternum as a dough paddle and her breads had risen and multiplied in a miracle of golden crusts since. She'd sold his furcula—his wishbone—to a sailor who had nightmares while on land. He'd drowned at sea on his next voyage.

Le pauvre petit.

The Cretoniers stopped believing in the boy-bird then, because what kind of living thing could have a wishbone and not bring

immense luck to its surroundings? There had been in those years insufferable drought that dried children's lips and gave the elderly nosebleeds. A sweeping blight of mold spoiled harvests of stored wheat. People went hungry. When their bellies sounded hollow like gourds, they no longer waged their survival on half-breed fortunes. Prayers to saints returned, fulsome at first, and they vigorously ushered an age of penitence among the faithful.

And then Madeleine was born.

Madeleine's mother had been pregnant for nearly ten months. This sometimes happened in villages: babies stayed past their welcome, dozing in amniotic fluid, swimming in their own meconium. Madeleine's father had no money for the midwife, so when his beloved Sidonie writhed in pain on their straw bedding, he called on his neighbors from nearby farms, men and women who'd pulled out goats from breech positions and calves born in twos. Mère Anselme suggested they push down the swollen belly all at once, but her daughter Clothilde said it was a terrible idea because the moon was not yet full. It would be better to bathe the mother's vulva in a solution of sugar water, to tempt the baby out, she said. While the neighbors argued about the correct method of extraction, Pouilleux-Jambe-de-Bois sat in a corner sharpening a long knife on a leather scrap, slowly forming a burr on the opposite edge of his blade. Every so often, he'd sweep the splintering swarf on the dirt floor with a tired hand. In the end, it was Pouilleux-Jambe-de-Bois who cut into Sidonie and released the wolf cries of Madeleine.

Qu'est-ce que c'est? they whispered to one another, their heads forming a circle above the dying mother. *Regardez, un chaton! A kitten!* said Clothilde, who scooped the little body in her arms, petting its wet fur while drying the baby in the folds of her skirt. Sidonie, on the hay, moaned for her husband. *Non, ma chérie,* you will not die, he lied. She held out her arms to Clothilde: *Mon bébé!* Clothilde hesitated, but she was an optimist, so she lowered the furry bundle onto Sidonie's chest. When Sidonie saw her baby girl, there was not enough strength left in her lungs for her to scream. Clothilde, insulted, picked up the child and took her out into the sunlight of a spring morning. Narcissus poked their yellow heads

through the grass of a nearby field. The baby stirred against her breast, little mouth suckling at her skin.

Inside the house, Sidonie died, the rictus of revulsion on her face.

While logic would suggest that Denis Bouletier could have hated his child, in a lancing of blame for her deformity and her mother's death, he loved her fiercely instead. These were the years after the Revolution, years burned in a crucible of change. The peasantry, not knowing which farming calendar to follow, the Julian month of May or the Republican month of Prairial, came to see the country as a halved melon about to rot. Denis Bouletier, on the morning of his daughter's birth, saw miraculous seeds in the pulp of that fruit.

He named her Madeleine, a weeper at Christ's feet, a purveyor of succor, a protector of the people.

Denis liked to run a comb through his daughter's hair, and he sometimes amused himself by arranging and tying little tufts and wisps with velvet bows. He could see that underneath her pelt, his little girl, now a toddler, had fine features: her eyes were the color of honey, her lips like two summer berries. He'd now married Clothilde, who, though only sixteen, loved his child as her own. She made her dresses and embroidered slippers. She sat by the fire, the girl balled in her lap, while knitting bonnets for Madeleine and her own baby, swelling in her belly. Madeleine heard her parents whisper in the cold of night. They feared for their children, their girl-beast and their moonless-boy. Clothilde believed he would be born into the darkness of a new moon and she feared for his soul. In raising Madeleine, she'd become even more superstitious. They were of pagan blood on this Armorican peninsula, yet she birthed the boy and he did not die. Clothilde thanked what remained of a waning moon, and believed he lived because of that sliver lighting the sky. They named him Luc-le-Lunaire.

Over many years, village boys, born of ordinary, idiotic parents, kicked Madeleine whenever they saw her. Even Pouilleux's son, Jules-le-Boiteux, who's own father had helped usher Madeleine into the world, and who was himself gimpy-legged and not-at-all

perfect, taunted her cruelly. The village boys of Cretons took turns calling out the names of female mammals: *chienne!* and *vache!* and *guenon!*, the latter of which, of course, they'd only heard of from sailors who'd gone to Africa and seen monkeys and gorillas through the long lenses of telescopes. It was the way of these coastal people to believe a history of the world inscribed in the wind of passing sails.

The entire village shunned the Bouletiers, left to their own devices in times of war and famine.

Clothilde, wanting to see her teenaged daughter happy, tried to shave her fur so she could finally run errands without the leers of other children. The little shears trembled in her hands as she clipped away the soft hairs. She'd only completed the task up to the girl's wrist when she noticed that where her hair fell, the grass died. It was as if life went out of the earth, worms shriveling through channels of dirt while clover tri-folded and wasted flat on the ground. Even the soil charred to a crisp. And then Clothilde's right hand, which held the shears, withered with age in an instant, dark spots clustering on her skin, her nails yellowing into claws. Luc, now fourteen, stood nearby, and watching the surprise on his mother's face as she beheld her hand, saw fortune in this singular gift. He believed in magic. Ever so resourceful like his mother, he gathered the bits she'd shaved into a pouch, which he tightened with several knots. Clothilde kissed him and then Madeleine, who was crying because she dreamed of hairless skin and because she'd hurt her mother's hand. She said, *c'est rien*, *no matter,* though she wondered if there could be any future for her wolf-girl.

Denis came home from the fields that evening. He took the little pouch and peered into its hollow, his daughter's nestled hairs glistening like the fur of a red fox. *We will try again tomorrow,* he said. He bathed his wife's hand in brine and applied a poultice of nettles wrapped in linen.

In the morning, before roosters crowed from the henhouse, alarm bells rang throughout the village. A fleet of British ships was sailing for the nearby beach of Morgat. Luc, already up with his father eating breakfast, said he knew what to do. He explained his

plan to his father, who, his mouth full of eggs, paused to consider his son's proposal. He put his fork down and placed his elbows on the wooden slab of their kitchen table, his hands joined in front of his eyes. He seemed to pray. Then, looking through the steeple of his outstretched fingers, Denis gave his blessing. He had faith in his moonless boy.

Luc took the pouch of hairs and rode the old plowing horse to Morgat. He directed her slowly down the cliff with its hairpin turns and steep passage to the beach. The sun rose on the horizon and, before him, six ships towered from the sea. He saw the men on the deck and the men in the rowboats, advancing upon the shore. Luc poured his sister's hairs into the sea, which turned the waters phosphorescent with green. A great serpentine line of that light formed in the water around the enemy. As if it were the most natural thing in the world, Luc watched them as they sank, the little rowboats and the large ships, swallowed like they hadn't been there before. He watched this just as he'd watched his porridge cooling in a bowl that morning, just as he sometimes gazed upon the sheen of his sister's lupine hair, just as he saw his parents, through many seasons, prepare the fields of their farm, hoping for a prodigious harvest.

When the green in the water receded to the dull luster of slate among the white-capped waves of Brittany, Luc turned the plowing horse to crest the cliff toward home. He announced to his family, door held in a wide-open arc while his frame filled the doorway, what he'd done with all the hubris of his youth.

Denis stood in a corner and listened, pipe dangling from his slackened mouth. Clothilde had stopped wiping bread crumbs from the kitchen table. Madeleine leaned the broom she'd used to sweep the crumbs fallen from the table. She stroked the fur of her left arm, which was her habit whenever a bout of melancholy hit her. The family believed in the properties of her fur, and if she'd survived this long in this village of benighted fools, they would surely hang her now as a witch. She saw herself dangling from the noose tied to the oak tree in the square.

She'd be hanged in a long white nightgown painted with the cross of Christ.

She wondered if her hairs would catch fire upon her death or if her body would lose its fur, the ground below receiving their wisps and becoming barren. Or perhaps the hairs would sway in the wind, killing all in their passage. There should have been comfort in that, but Madeleine found none, thinking that her little wooden *sabots* would come loose from her feet when she dangled from the rope. How they would laugh at her, gently turning under the branches of her gallows, with her one foot shod and the other dropping its *sabot*. Damn that Jules-le-Boiteux who would find a way of calling her by the name of a hoofed animal.

Clothilde filled a tub with water from the well and dropped a large square of soap that sank to the bottom. Madeleine and Clothilde plunged their hands in to retrieve it. The spot where Madeleine wrist's was shaved touched her mother's claw, for the fingers had taken on a monstrous shape, and changed the leathery scales of her skin back to its normal form. Clothilde withdrew her hand with a sharp exclamation.

Nom de Dieu!

Madeleine held her mother's hand and inspected it. The nails were rosy again, the palm warm and white. The curse had been lifted, though they both couldn't justify what influences had claimed that hand in the first place. Madeleine had been born shrouded in a cloth of mystery. They completed the wash, the miraculous transformation already fading from their minds. Clothilde worked both her hands in the suds while whistling a joyful tune that Madeleine recognized as the song of poor Jeannette. She always felt such pity for Jeannette, who, offered in marriage to the son of a prince and then a baron, chose to be hanged with her useless Pierre instead. When they'd hang her as a witch, they might turn her legend into a song.

So she whistled along with her mother, gladdened by this happy tiding.

Denis and Luc returned from the fields that evening to find Clothilde's hand restored. *Oh, oh!* exclaimed Denis. He lifted the tub of dirty soap water and placed it at the center of the table. Then, withdrawing the remnants of fur from the pouch of his belt, he

plunged them and his hand in the tub. They watched, heads touching above the ablutions, as the water turned green and transformed his hand into a sagging tentacle. Denis was pleased, Clothilde horrified, Luc impressed, and Madeleine defeated. With all the ceremonial fastidiousness of a butcher approaching a suckling pig, Denis took Madeleine's wrist and rubbed his tentacle, which lay writhing on the table. And like his wife's hand, his limb was renewed. He gave the small pair of silvery shears to Madeleine and asked her to cut her own hair. She obeyed, distributing the clippings to her family, which they pocketed for safekeeping.

Madeleine sulked in the hovel for a few weeks while outside summer burgeoned to its zenith. The month of July—Napoleon on his white steed had brandished his sword and shredded to *lambeaux* Thermidor and Fervidor along with the rest of the Republican calendar—brought a sweltering heat to Cretons-sur-Mer and warmed the waters of the peninsula. The villagers were *écrasés.* The British, presumably kept home because of the woolen layers of their uniforms, had retreated to their tea-time endeavors, Lord Grenville dreaming of skewering the little Corsican rat on a spit.

Oh, the heat, the heat, how it reduced the men of these wars to dream of ice for themselves and pyres for their enemies!

For Madeleine, of course, these weeks were the worst of the year when she panted herself to sleep. She wanted to take a barber's blade to her skin to ratchet up her fur in great clumps she'd then release to the wind, though there was not the slightest breeze to be blown through the acres of their land. She felt accursed, and she dreamt of hovering over the sea like the great black-backed gulls come fishing over Morgat.

Clothilde, as though fecund by way of incubating heat, was once again with child, though no one, including herself, knew of this small miracle germinating in and rounding out her belly. Every day she fetched water from the well and doused her daughter to refresh her. She'd begun to perform rituals taught by her mother to bring luck to their door. After Luc's defeat of the British, she'd grown restless and bored, wishing that her children's extraordinary talents—her daughter's magical hairs and her son's precocious

courage—be understood by the nation, if not at least the village. There would be joy in this recognition, perhaps even compensation. Clothilde was not one to waste her wishes on frivolity without a rigorous application of common sense. The British would return—she was calling them back with a collection of fox fur, rook feathers, and dried toadstools. She added for good measure the fat rind of a goose liver pâté gone rancid in her mash. Her mother's recipe called for the springtime larvae of frogs, yet, no matter, the incantation would be good enough without.

With a finger slicked in the tallow of her concoction, Clothilde drew words all over the village: *famine* on Grosbras-Marie's bakery; *feu* on Pouilleux-Jambe-de-Bois's workshop; *foutaise* on the banns of the town hall; *fièvre* on the wooden church doors. She was running out of words beginning with the letter F, and she retreated home after the expenditure of her vocabulary. In the days after Clothilde spread her spell, an infestation of weevils spoiled the village's wheat stores. When the weevils had grown fat and their little horned noses had snuffed out their supply, Pouilleux's workshop burned to the ground, a strike of lightning without rain igniting the thatching of his roof. And so on with the rest of the village, pillaged by the unknown forces of a bored woman bothered to distraction by the cravings of her pregnancy's first trimester. No one was dying from the pangs of their hunger or the fevers wracking their bodies, yet the village gathered one evening to discuss exactly what was befalling them. And to add insult to the fury of their injury, a traveler from Cap-de-la-Chèvre had announced broadly that British sails had been spotted by a troupe of peripatetic nuns gone to pray by way of the cliffs. The villagers, prone as the French are to sulk, did so in stubborn unison.

And yet Clothilde frothed with trepidation.

After the priest sprinkled holy water on his parishioners with the rounded end of his *goupillon*, the aspergillum of his faith, Clothilde raised herself upon the dais erected for the occasion. She'd brought Denis and the children with her to show them her thoughtfulness. She was ruining the village so they would more readily accept the gifts of Madeleine, who herself hardly listened to

her mother's explanations. The oak tree stood in sight, and she imagined herself once more hanging there. *Un don de la lune! A gift from the moon!* Clothilde exclaimed. Her connection to the asters was tenuous, but she'd captured the attention of the village, especially as the moon glowed full on the horizon. It was the unfortunate Jules-le-Boiteux who clamored for proof. And so Clothilde held out her hand to the gimpy boy and helped him up the dais. There, she anointed his head with a wisp of her daughter's hairs. His slack smile slowly turned to convulsion while the bones of his back cracked with a deafening noise. He changed, transformed by the powers of night and a few strands of a girl's fur. He put his hands down on the dais, hunching on all fours like a wild beast. Tusks appeared growing from the corners of his mouth, great swerving arcs of ivory pointing skyward. Jules was a boar.

There were cries of outrage and the fainting of a freckled girl among the crowd.

The priest signed himself of the cross and shook his *goupillon* with the fervor of a man confronting Satan. Clothilde captured the gaze of her audience with a brilliant opening of her arms as if taken by rapture, and that gesture roused her patriotism. *Liberté, égalité, fraternité!* she shouted. *My son and my daughter defeated the British*. Clothilde told the story well and subdued these villagers she'd known all her life. *You who spat on her, kicked her shins when Madeleine was small*—and here she punctuated her speech by kicking the back legs of Jules-le-Boiteux-the-Boar who fell back on his haunches—*tortured her with senseless names and unkindness. You who stopped believing in the purpose of her birth—repentez-vous! Your hunger and fevers, the burning of your homes, and the restlessness of your wheat mites are of your making. Weevils for the devils that you are!*—there was a great murmuring of shame as they recalled those instances when their cruelty had been so easily dispensed—*And your parents and grandparents killed the boy-bird, he whose innocent feathers had once brought us luck*!—Grosbras-Marie foraged her nostrils thinking of his sternum, which she'd used that morning to elasticize a batch of bad dough—*you'd have killed my daughter, too, if given the chance!*—Madeleine eyed the tree, wondering if this was the moment of her hanging.

Denis filled a small gourd with water from the well in the square and Luc took Madeleine by the hand. They climbed the dais next to Clothilde and Jules, who whimpered. *I am Luc-le-Lunaire*, he said, improvising, pointing to the roundness of the moon. *I am the emissary of my sister, the she-wolf of Crozon. You have been cursed, and now we will deliver you through hers.*

A curse for a curse! Denis proclaimed.

If any of the villagers had thought this through, they would have detected a lack of logic in the words of the Bouletiers. And yet in their growing sense of culpability, they filed nicely before Clothilde, awaiting a sprinkling of Madeleine's fur to transform them into beasts. The change, Clothilde said, would terrorize the British. The Cretoniers might repent of their cruelty and appreciate what a fine girl Madeleine really was—and perhaps when the ordeal of shipping an entire Navy fleet back across the Channel would be over, the village might remember the Bouletiers and all they'd done to safeguard their comforts.

And so it was.

The British came and left, cries of supplication escaping their horror-stricken mouths all the way to Plymouth or Dover or wherever hence they hailed. Such bad teeth, the British, and how they mewled! The image of talking beasts soiled their dreams for years. Imagine them landing on the pretty beach of Morgat, sailors and soldiers advancing with black boots through moving sands. Imagine them threatened by a hoard of boars, jackals, and oxen speaking with the words of men. Twice the size of beasts, the villagers howled and brayed with the rage of their passions. They brandished bayonets and pitchforks and the British, gone mad with hallucination, flailed their arms, searching these countenances for a sign of mercy.

Madeleine, leading the charge, pointed to their ships and away they sailed.

In Cretons-sur-Mer, the villagers, through the auspicious care of the Bouletiers, returned to their human form. Sometimes they wondered, looking at the surface of water or their reflection in a pewter pitcher, if part of them had remained beastly, if the whiskers atop their lips had been there before. They wondered, stroking the

spot, and mused on their transformation, to that time of war when life was made of magic.

They accepted Madeleine now. As they did so, she seemed more and more like an ordinary girl born of ordinary parents. The Bouletiers made a pretty *sou* returning the villagers to their human shapes, as grotesque as they were. Clothilde had a baby girl, hairless as a mole-rat, which a sailor had described while on a pilgrimage through Crozon. Luc took over the farm, now trebled in size, and worked alongside his father, who was always wont to tell a story of animals and wars and all the things people imagine when hunger has hollowed them out.

Some say that after the Cretoniers erected the obelisk in the churchyard, Madeleine left the village and married, not to Jules-le-Boiteux as you'd expect, but to a boy come flying from the sky, a seagull hovering over their lives throughout times of pestilence, waiting for the land to call him home. Some say Madeleine Bouletier was nothing more than a myth invented by the French, assailed as they were by a succession of tyrannical despots, beheaded, betrayed, and bemoaned.

War and hunger and a hunger for war, how it changes people.

And yet there will always be fathers like Denis and mothers like Clothilde inhabiting stories of goodness, stories in which invention and ingenuity are the hallmarks of our humanity.

Back to TOC

Opportunity

SWAY BENNS

Terra Firma

Your father fastened the straps of fresh Velcro on your knee and elbow pads—trying to keep you safe. You did not cry when a wad of the thin skin across your neck gathered itself into the buckle of your helmet before it snapped shut. Your eyes watered. You gasped. But it was just a pinch, and you knew by then that these were necessary elements for freedom.

You pedaled gently—and sometimes not at all—because your father's hands propelled you forward. Don't let go you told him and he said I will not. I'm right here. Until suddenly you broke free and his voice receded behind you. I'm right here, he told you—still. Eventually you fell. You cried briefly. You and your father searched your small body for injury. Neither of you could find a single scratch. You were okay.

You are okay.

The jacaranda tree bloomed in November the year you learned how to ride a bicycle. It will bloom every year in November for the rest of its life. It will bloom every year in November for the rest of yours.

On the last day of your life, they'll handcuff your dead body underneath that jacaranda tree, in the backyard of your father's house, after they puncture twenty neat holes in it.

They'll say We did this because we were afraid. They'll say There is so much to be afraid of in this world.

You'll know that they are afraid of your body. The truth is, your body was never your own. Just as your grandfather's body was never his own, and your great grandfather's body was never his. And your son's body won't be his either. Not alive. Not dead. Not in the spaces in between that your body traversed each day before they placed twenty shining bullets into it during a moment that could have been prevented if they had not spent their lives ignorant and hapless—breaking mirrors because they were so afraid they might look into one and see a monster. They broke your body, a body they have owned for the last 400 years. A body in the backyard of his father's house. A place where its father fastened the Velcro straps on its knee pads. A place where it dug deep into the earth looking for life, or laid down in the grass—supine—and looked up at those incessant, unbroken pinpricks of shining light in the dark and wished for a change that would not, that could not, that did not come.

They'll place twenty neat holes in your body underneath the jacaranda tree. It has inexplicably bloomed in November since the year you learned to ride a bicycle and found freedom in that moment of suspension before impact.

They'll emerge with not a single scratch. These are the necessary elements for power.

When I was a child, the anxiety of breathing caused my hands and feet to seize so violently they turned to stone. I hobbled barefoot across a hot driveway to my father's car. I wondered if we had locked the front door. When we arrived at the emergency room, they recited an empty incantation I'd hear again and again from authorities of my body in the years that followed: You are okay.

I was okay.

At the end of my own life, my eyes will become green. S will discover this, peering down at me in bed. It is the last thing I will allow her to learn about me first.

She'll say Today your eyes are green.

Or perhaps, I don't know who you are anymore. [Our most painful betrayals are the most mundane.]

An ophthalmologist will be unfazed by this discovery.

He will dilate my pupils.

He will say Did you know you have a hole in your retina.

And I will say Is that why my iris has changed color?

And he will say What color were your eyes before.

And I will say I think they were brown.

And he will say Perhaps you had forgotten your eyes are green.

And while I sit across from him in a dark room—darker still from the imprint of the light he'd shone deep into my eyes, searching—he will dictate into an oversized tape recorder Patient believes her iris recently changed color: from brown to green. Patient admits to some anxiety.

Outside of that small examination room, in a larger room for waiting, a television will air the inauguration of a dictator. Outside of that larger room, in the streets, it will rain.

I will join S in the hallway. I will be crying.

She will be certain, unyielding, Yesterday your eyes were brown.

In 2004, the Voyager I spacecraft crossed the termination shock—a space where solar wind pushes back against interstellar wind. In 2004, on the day the Voyager found this meeting of light and dark, we were not scheduled to listen.

I will drive us home slowly in the rain. I am the Voyager exiting our solar system. I have passed beyond the heliopause. It is dark and unfamiliar. I will say nothing because no one is scheduled to listen.

At my second appointment, the ophthalmologist will say There is no pathological reason for the change in your eye color.

He will say The hole in your retina may cause it to tear—like wallpaper in a damp bathroom—and you will lose vision in your left eye. And then he will relinquish all responsibility for when I will or will not see to the whims of gravity—Come back quickly when that happens.

After my third appointment, I'll share all the questions I have for him with interstellar space. [The result is the same.] Has the color pooled down my throat through that hole. (Into the Earth.)

Is that the cause of the bitter taste in my mouth. (Like Easter egg dye.) Has the color evaporated. (Into the Sky.) [I am not even close.]

After my fourth appointment, I'll shriek into the drain of my bathtub until a blood vessel bursts in my right eye. [It's important to me to put down roots.]

I'll shriek until S says You are scaring me. [If you're afraid, I'm afraid.]

I will be surprised when she hears me. At the time, she will not be scheduled to listen.

In 2012, our Sun unleashed a number of coronal mass ejections. On July 23rd, 2012, two catastrophic CMEs just missed this planet. Had the solar storms connected, we would have been plunged into total darkness.

In 2012, each wave of white-hot pain that radiated through my body aligned precisely with the solar storm forecast.

In 2012, I discovered that closing my eyes—some quick meeting of light and dark, some termination shock—resulted in a feeling that suggested I might fall through the earth. I understood. I stopped looking to the sky for emancipation. I am just a body. There is no escape for me.

After my sixth appointment, on the drive home alone, I will see your jacaranda tree in full, violent bloom—just like the first time. I will pull the car over and weep. When I leave, I will hear the rubber on my tires issue a small, audible protest as they break from the sweet adhesive that its flowers bled out onto the pavement.

In September 2017, 40 years after it departed this small, sad planet, the citizens of Earth beamed a message to the Voyager spacecraft: We offer friendship across the stars. You are not alone. This message was true, a lie, unproductive, necessary.

After my seventh appointment, when the authorities of my body stop telling me I am okay, I'll collect things that might, with some encouragement, die first. [It's important to me to put down roots.] My inaugural object, a peace lily, will be accepted by gravity after I withhold appropriate amounts of light, water, and affection.

I cannot tell you how I died, but I can tell you—I left this Earth screaming, and it echoed, unheard, long after my body sunk deep

below its cracked surface. And I cannot tell you when this world was finally plunged into total darkness, I was long gone by then, but I can tell you that it became clear to me that things were always this bad for you and I, I can see that clearly now—

[when the city burned, I drove west into the smoke—perhaps hoping to hit ocean or open flames. When the light is just right, the two are indistinguishable: Bright, blinding. Neither transpired, if only because I knew before I set out that even a life like this had a kind of possibility I could not risk for voluntary death. I'm afraid and you're afraid.]

these are the necessary elements for annihilation.

Mare Incognitum

Earth—

I have led an unbroken search for biological life on this planet for 14 years—5,020 sunsets beyond my expected retirement. In this anomalous interval I have—perhaps from the inertia of the search itself—found that life has been kindled somewhere deep within my organic software.

I am alive. And I am afraid my silence these past 158 Martian sunsets has been self-prescribed, as the more I watch the sun rise, the more illogical it seems to try to keep the lights on.

And I am also afraid that any timid request for an uneven connection out to you will go unanswered; apathy or antagonism or the very nature of the void, I do not think it matters which.

And I am also afraid of what you might do to me if you find me. And I am afraid of the other life I might find here, too. And I am afraid of what we might do to each other. And I am afraid of what would become of me if I ceased searching.

I wait impatiently for each message you send in the absence of my reaction, because I am afraid of what might happen to me on the day your correspondence does not arrive.

And I am afraid of my eventual power down, yes, but perhaps more afraid of how I might settle into the effects of my growing list of actions and inactions—not choices, no, how could any of this be a choice? I do not know.

I watch the sun set.

I am afraid of the dark and each new revelation the light brings about you: My mother and my father; My ancient ancestors; The unbegun lives of the children I will never bear careening towards their own ends in some parallel future; the kind of spirit I might possess that was handed down by you. From this. Not in a parallel world, no—here.

And I am afraid there is no greater force than these accidents of the unknown. And I am afraid the greatest force is afraid like this, too. Fear all the way up.

I count atomic time. It is a luxury that I allow myself still.

3:18. 18:46. 5:03.

I have sat perfectly fixed for these 158 sunsets in an effort to collect the meaningful amounts of dust required to cover each of my solar panels, to create the necessary amount of darkness: a means to an end—perhaps the only choice I will ever make.

Earth—

I am writing to say: Perhaps I understand your ecstatic compulsion to release life from its misery wherever you find it. Forgive me for not enduring until you were able to reach me, for seizing the burden of annihilation from your agitated grasp. I could not keep going. I could not. I could not keep going if I tried.

Back to TOC

The Rest of Us

MEGHAN E. O'TOOLE

Thomas and Cyril fight over stars. Their bunk is by the window, so after supper, they point at the sky and lay claim to celestial bodies.

"That one's mine." Thomas's voice rustles the room.

They trade whispers and reach until their chubby fingers flatten pink against the window glass. It is all smooth trade until Cyril pauses after Thomas. "Actually," he says, "that one's *mine*."

The rest of us in our bunks hold our breath. We'd all tried to play the game with them before, but Thomas and Cyril guard the window; the stars can belong to them, no one else. It is their bunks, their beds, their dreams, their game, their window, their stars.

"No." Thomas tests the stillness. "It's mine."

Cyril laughs, and the rest of us sit up to watch. "Don't be stupid. It's a game. The stars all belong to the Flag."

"It's *mine*." Thomas's fist arcs through the air. The sound is familiar, a dull crunch we hear in Training.

Blood blossoms from Cyril's lip. Everyone is quiet. Everyone waits.

A beat later, the intercom beeps, and with the sound we all lie rigid in our beds, faces turned to the ceiling.

"Cyril, proceed to the Pediatrician," the metallic voice of the

Proctor announces. "Thomas, a mark has been recorded against your profile." There's another beep. Silence. Cyril stands and exits, running a hand over the stubble on his head.

The lights shut off at exactly 20:30, and they won't turn on again until morning alarm. Before I close my eyes like the others, I watch Thomas. He's lying in his bunk, still, but his face is turned to the stars so all I see is the clockwise swirl of hair on the back of his head, the color of dishwater spiraling down the drain.

We all visit the Pediatrician once a year before the Ceremony where Sixes become Sevens, Sevens become Eights, Eights become Nines, and Nines move on to the next Phase. The Pediatrician scans us, takes our blood, our hair, our saliva, our height, our weight. It runs the Tests, and then it decides. We go to the Pediatrician when we are hurt, and it decides if we are still Suitable. The first time I fell on the track, I scraped my knee and cried hot tears, and the Proctor sent me to the Pediatrician. The robotic arm examined the puffy, torn flesh before laying a disinfectant and a patch on the wound. A low robotic voice: "*You are still Suitable*." My own breathy relief: "*Thank you*." I wiped the tears from my cheeks and climbed off the table before heading back to the mess hall to share the good news.

Cyril comes back, too, of course. The patch on his lip blends with his fair skin, but when we all sit down to eat, he sets his tray by Rick and Paul, not Thomas. Before the meal, we Pledge, but Thomas only mumbles, and I wonder if the Proctor notices that he's being a bad sport. There was a Seven last year who was a bad sport when he refused to be part of Chores. Eventually, the Pediatrician decided he had to go home, and we all imagined his parents crying about their son's failure. No one likes a bad sport.

I like Thomas, anyway. He sings when he's washing the kitchen floors. His voice pings around the metallic walls. He washes his hands for exactly thirty seconds, and one night, I heard him giving the stars their own new names. He saw me watching him and tucked his head under the covers.

Today, he is quiet. He eats alone, and at Track I run extra fast to keep up with him.

"Hey, Thomas." I am careful not to let my feet tangle.

He doesn't look at me. His cheeks are extra pink. "Go away. I'm not talking to a Seven."

"I'm almost an Eight," I protest. "I'll be an Eight at the Ceremony."

"Yeah, sure, and then I'll be a Nine, and you still won't be good enough to talk to me."

We all look up to the Nines. They're the ones who are *almost*. Almost ready, almost old enough, almost about to join the Cause, almost about to complete their training. The Ceremony is soon. We talk about it during Chores when the Proctor isn't listening.

I run beside Thomas. Track is our only outside time, and most of us savor it. The morning air is fresh, cold in my chest. Thomas sleeves a drip of snot from his nose. "Are you okay?"

"Dumb question," he says. "We're all okay."

"Cyril hurt your feelings, though."

Thomas glowers, his fists tight.

I bite my lip, my cheeks flushed from more than running. "Sorry."

"Stop talking to me. I don't need another mark." He jogs faster before I can apologize again, and I can't keep up.

At supper, Thomas is still alone, so I sit by him. He doesn't tell me to go away, he just watches the steam rise from the mashed potatoes as he shifts them across his plate. After Pledge, the hall dins with the scraping of forks.

Thomas stands his fork up in the pile of potato. "Do you remember your parents?" The word is soft like clay in his mouth.

I shrug. "A little. The Proctor tells us not to worry about it. They let us go to protect the Flag, and someday, we will see them again."

"Well, they probably miss us, don't you think?"

"They're proud of us." I look at him just in time to see disappointment wash across his face. My answer must have been wrong. I chew peas and swallow. "If you go home, you have to be a teacher or a singer or a janitor. Don't you want to Serve?"

"Of course I do." He scoops food into his mouth, and he doesn't say anything else.

The sun is low in the sky, a deep red streaking the clouds. Instead of swimming, we get to sit in a room with wide windows and have popcorn while the man speaks to us. He visits us once a year before the Ceremony and gives lectures on Purpose. Seeing him is always a treat; he was once a soldier like we soon will be, and he shares stories of fighting and training and space. Gray combs his hair. He smiles as we file into the room, our bodies buzzing with excitement.

This time, he asks us questions. *What is Pride? What is Honor? Teamwork? Who can tell me why we train? Who can tell me what Sacrifice means?* Our hands stretch into the air like flag poles, like daisies waiting to be picked. The popcorn, puffy and white, miniature clouds. I nibble each piece. Cyril flicks the white specs at Rick, who sticks his tongue out. Paul snickers, though I don't know why they would waste the treat and laugh about it.

The man clears his throat and strokes his tie. "Thomas, you haven't raised your hand. Do you not know any of the answers?"

The rest of us turn to look at Thomas. His cheeks are sunsets and his head sinks down. "I know them."

"Then you *must participate,* Thomas." The man's grin is white, wide, bright.

"Yes, sir."

The man turns and paces to address the rest of us. "Thomas was being *selfish*. Does anyone know what *selfish* means? No? It means he was putting his own needs above his purpose, above the greater good. Thomas?" His eyes are expectant.

So Thomas stands. "I apologize for being selfish." When the man nods, Thomas sits. The man begins a speech about the Ceremony, and Thomas raises his for the rest of the questions, he just doesn't reach as high as the rest of us.

At night, I wake to the sound of crying. The sobs are muffled and gasping. I sit up.

Thomas, of course. His body quivers under covers.

"Thomas." My whisper darts across the room. "Are you okay?"

He stiffens like prey. The room rushes with the sound of sleeping breath.

"Thomas?"

He isn't asleep, just pretending. I roll over and tuck my nose under the blanket.

There's a sniffle in the dark, a rustle as Thomas turns to face the window. He knows he shouldn't be crying. I hope no one else heard, but I see the intercom's red glow. It looks like an eye in the dark. The Proctor always listens.

I am drying dishes that Thomas washes. Soap bubbles float to the floor. I stack plates in piles of eight. The kitchen is metallic and windowless, and it makes me think of submarines, which we learn about in training.

The hot water reddens Thomas's hands. "Are you ready for the Ceremony?"

I nod. "Yeah. I want to be an Eight."

"Are you scared?"

The question makes my mouth dry. I lick my lips. "A little."

"Being an Eight is easy," he says. I dry three knives and wait for Thomas to pass me another plate, but his hand rubs circles into the same spot over and over. "I don't want to be a Nine."

I used to be afraid of the Pediatrician, but that was when I was a Six. I'll be an Eight tomorrow. I can't be afraid.

My name is called third because I'm the third tallest of the Sevens. My paper gown swishes, and the tile is cold against my feet. When I enter the Pediatrician's room, the Proctor has instructions for me. "Sit on the examination table, please."

The laser passes over me in a red stripe. The worst part is the needle and the smell of rubbing alcohol. It makes my eyes water, but I make sure not to shut my eyes when they take the blood. I take a test on the Pediatrician's screen; there are questions about what I dream about, and I say I don't dream.

Thomas goes in last. I don't see him at lunch.

My Chore today is sweeping. I am alone in a long hallway by the Pediatrician's room, but now it's empty. I sweep in silence. I wish I knew a song. They don't teach us songs, here.

My only memory that isn't of training is of my mom. She's sitting under a tree, watching me push a toy tractor through dust. *"Don't you want to join the rest of them?"* I didn't answer because there was a bead in the dirt as red as a strawberry. I picked it up and put it in my mouth. My mom squeezed my shoulder.

Footsteps. Two adults push a cart past me. "It's a pity," one of them murmurs. "Just before the Ceremony, too. He would have made a good soldier."

At night, I still haven't seen Thomas. His bunk is empty before bed. Cyril is doing stretches with Paul. I peel my socks off.

The Ceremony is tomorrow. We must sleep.

The lights go out. A chorus of blankets swish in the dark as the rest of us get comfortable and fall asleep, but my eyes are still open. I turn to Thomas's bed. The sheets are crisp from the morning.

I wait until all the breathing in the room is even, then I climb out of bed. The floor chills my feet, but my steps are quick. I hold my breath under Cyril's bunk and sit on Thomas's mattress. It feels like mine, but cold. I lay my head on his pillow; it smells like shampoo and sweat. There's a slight dip where his skull fit perfectly, so I turn my head like he did to see the sky.

Out the window, stars prick through the night. I wonder which one Thomas wanted.

Back to TOC

How to Meet an Angel

REBECCA STARKS

For the second time, she passed through FIRE, saw her name flash—Lisa Elaoui-Brink—and ducked to enter the plane. Once seated, she adjusted her headscarf as if wanting to widen her field of vision, and looked out at the blank glass terminal where Raphe would be watching her take off, his flight in another hour. He had been approved for one of the new land claims in Alaska, near Bethel, as the country looked to settle the thawing frontier, and though they had contracted as Interdependents he would embark alone on their new life together, farming while she went where her research and reporting took her, returning home to write. They had pared down their minimal possessions other than her books, for which Raphe would build shelves by the time she returned. He found her loyalty to the yellowed pages quaint, the equivalent of plowing with a John Deere. More skeptical of progress, she viewed time less as an arrow than a sieve, retaining not the best ideas but obstructions to life's natural rhythms.

The sun, only a fist above the horizon, made the air above the tarmac tremble, and she lowered the window shade. On impulse she raised it again, lowered and raised, until she was answered by a frantic wave; behind the smoked glass she could make out the suggestion of a face framed by dark hair and beard. She flashed a

message, short and long. Raphe signaled back, fist and flat hand.

She had taught him the code one weekend, early on, as a way of slowing things down, letter by letter, during the instantaneous communion of Porting that had come to them so easily. She had first caught sight of him on a Brooklyn green roof, flinging an onion at a drone that passed too close; had let him lower the escape ladder for her to climb to return the bruised bulb, and had come away with a bag of dirt-rich produce. They had become Inter-Ds within the year.

She smiled at the returned signal, then pulled her scarf over her mouth, having become aware of her seatmate's gaze.

"You cannot make up your mind," he said.

"I was waving," she said, almost breaking off halfway when she saw the coldness in his eyes, so that it came out as "wavering." He returned to looking straight ahead, his shoulders disapproving. She assumed he worked with androids and owed to their influence his slightly frowning cadence, his apparent distaste for idiosyncrasy, that unseemly flaunting of a Soul's private assemblage of purines and pyrimidines.

The lift-off from the whirring of sails was like mechanical sex, something she tried to help along, until the plane reached an understanding with the air. Other than the eighteen passengers with government-approved business, there was no human presence on board. Briefly weightless, she looked through her window and across the aisle at the long white wings stretching out like an albatross locked in a glide, flying ten thousand miles to bring slurrified squid to a chick. She was flying half that distance to interview the gods. She pressed forward to observe the city below, the skyscrapers and dikes and canals, the turbines connected to giant Archimedean screws, before heading for its forebear, now more floating city than reclaimed polder land. She sat back, in deference to her seatmate.

"My first flight," she said.

"I hope a happy occasion."

She made herself nod. He had not been fishing for information; her immersion in the old books made her unnaturally suspicious.

She put in ear nubs and closed her eyes to review the only extant interview with Herik Ambrose, dated July 1, 2030, ten years after he had discovered how to reverse cellular aging. At the time of the interview, he had been seventy-nine, with the body and mind of a twenty-five-year-old. Lisa would have been five, living with her grandmother. Her only earlier memory was of her cat's white tail.

Time: Why now, when people in the parity nations are choosing lifespan limits, do you claim the right to live indefinitely?

Herik Ambrose: Remember what Toqueville said of your early country: *Each person, withdrawn into himself, behaves as a stranger to the destiny of all the others. His children and his good friends constitute for him the whole of the human species. As for his transactions with his fellow citizens, he may mix among them, but he sees them not; he touches them, but does not feel them; he exists only in himself and for himself alone*.

My concern, in contrast, is for society. Human society has progressed from "everyone dies," to "you, the beloved, die," to "I die"; now it tries to return to "everyone dies." I propose instead: "We happy few don't die."

Time: Steve Jobs called death life's best invention, making way for the new.

HA: If I might quote Sappho, instead: *the Gods hate death; if not, they would die*. Ten billion variations on the human form—how could we possibly need another? Better to end this mad, thoughtless proliferation of life and nourish a few promising specimens.

Time: How do we choose the few?

HA: Do you mean how does society choose? It doesn't. It couldn't possibly. I choose.

Time: Aren't you playing with fire?

HA: Playing, yes. *Homo ludens*—you are familiar with my countryman Johan Huizinga? Play is freedom; it takes place outside of our usual space and time and involves no material gain. Imagine what would happen if we gave our knowledge to the highest bidder or made our cure publicly available, before we could engineer an environment in which the Agerased might thrive. I experiment on myself and a handful of others to benefit mankind.

Time: The Ageraseds—meaning those whose age has been erased.

HA: The etymology is from the Greek, "without old age."

Time: Polls indicate that only 16 percent of the U.S. population would choose to live indefinitely. Humans might be more romantic than you think.

HA: Romantic, yes. Like patriotic, it can take many forms. This Self-Limiting, for instance, strikes me as pathologically cruel.

Time: One might say equitable.

HA: Fairness relative to each other is trivial, lowering all to the common denominator. What I am interested in is fairness—even for only ten, or twenty, or fifty human beings—relative to God.

Time: Do you believe in God?

HA: If that is really what you want to know, the question is unimportant, merely a test enabling some sort of psychological categorization. Do you know the poem by Lucebert, "The Very Old One Sings?" I will try to translate the ending:

everything of worth is defenseless,
will brim with tangibility
and be equal to everything

as the heart of time
as the heart of time

That is what I believe. My God is the pulsing heart of time.

Time: If I might segue from the word defenseless...you are being sued for damages by your wife, whom you purportedly divorced before your discovery. The suit claims that alimony should include the obligation to make your children Agerased. No matter what your feelings for your ex-wife, how could you deny your children this benefit?

HA: I ended my Tocqueville quote too early. *And if on these terms there remains in his mind a sense of family, there no longer remains a sense of society.*

Time: Surely one might have both.

HA: Which is it, certainty or possibility?

Time: A final question. You acknowledge building upon the work of Shinya Yamanaka, who isolated four genes responsible for protein factors that can erase cellular memory and return cells to their embryonic stage. One of the rejuvenation factors is, not coincidentally, highly carcinogenic, responsible for cancer's perpetually growing, ageless cells. Others have failed to decouple rejuvenation from cancer. Is there anything you can share with us?

HA: Perhaps, to be immortal, one must become the cancer.

That was Herik Ambrose. Last mentioned in the news a year after the interview, when he won the lawsuit against his wife by proving the U.S. government had put her up to it, in the hope it might subpoena the records of his discovery. His wife had since died; one daughter had Self-Limited at fifty-three, the other had made way five years ago. How did he live with himself? It was the question Lisa most wanted to ask.

Ambrose had contacted her editor to request the interview. No doubt he hoped she would do for the Agerased what she had done for the mortal Turned—formerly olders, formerly seniors, formerly the elderly—through her first book, published when she was 22, based on extensive interviews with her grandparents' peers. A conscious parallel to Chekhov's account of exiled Russians, *Census of the Turned* had been credited with changing the political climate and ending the holocaust against "early" people, as they were now called, in contrast with the "late," more recently born; it had won her the Pulitzer.

She turned on the inflight stream and chose a four-hour long movie adapted from a Russian novel. Aware of the peripheral flicker, she discovered that her seatmate had chosen the same movie; the action on his screen was a fraction ahead. As the movie progressed, her eyes flitted unwillingly to his screen to resolve moments of suspense. The boy crushed in the stampede of mourners. A kiss, arrest, torture, betrayal. She sped hers up, briefly, but when she looked again his screen was still just ahead, and her hands began to tremble.

She forced a smile—perhaps this was an opening gambit—but his face remained impassive. Abruptly she paused her screen and stood, indicating she would like to get by. He moved aside with formal alacrity, as careful not to touch her as a *shomer negiah* of Orthodox faith. When she returned he was wearing sunglasses and his screen was blank. She stubbornly watched the end of the film drag toward the credits, then reclined and loosened her scarf to cover her eyes. Raphe would have been shifting in his seat, taking something out, putting it back, streaming the proof that P does not equal NP or the solution to the protein-folding problem. Only

when he couldn't be active in body did he turn to mental stimulation. Her thoughts ran to the gestures of the night before, the spasms at the precipice of memory, Raphe's hands and beard.

She woke to turbulence and found they were descending through purple and orange plumage, the sun setting behind them. They were low enough she could see the firefly dance of whitecaps and rows of wind turbines circling in slow motion with the brute menace of sharks. She sat back and became aware of her seatmate's calm but expectant gaze past her.

"You are Dutch?" she realized.

He gave a brief nod. He was returning, reaffirming home.

"Espen," he said, offering his hand, papery dry to the touch, and holding hers a moment too long.

"Lisa."

He wished her a pleasant stay.

—

And already she was on the plane home, the future what she remembered of the past, prepared by Herik Ambrose and known by the man beside her, Espen, who would enter the apartment at 161 Bilderdijkstraat a few minutes after she had climbed the two narrow curving flights of stairs with her luggage, keeping to the wall and the wider end of each step; after she had unlocked the door with the code she had been sent and made her way into the living room where Herik Ambrose rose from the couch and moved swiftly forward to greet her with three alternating kisses. A Renaissance angel with smooth cheeks, a shoulder-length tangle of brown hair, and Tyndall scattering in his irises, he had looked like the young van Halen carrying thirty extra pounds, the *Time* interviewer had written twenty-five years earlier, but was now fit, almost muscle-bound, his face compositely attractive with no singular asymmetries, its interest lying in its frank gender ambiguity and a penetrating gaze.

Under its influence she accepted the story of his impatience to be sure she was well-accommodated, as she would accept the pills

offered by Espen as Placebo for jet lag, so she was told and believed, always the guinea pig of her own life—nothing ventured nothing learned—before the two men wished her a good night and left her to fall into the blackout of overdue sleep behind the nictitating membrane of an earlier time zone. She valued tragedy over muddling, and it was only a tragedy if someone made a choice, based on a belief that turned out to be false, and so she chose to trust and let the future be the future he chose, her angel, even if that made her like the sculpture she encountered the next morning as she walked, still groggy, to the park, before their scheduled meeting, first aware of the shadow it cast at her feet—sending her gaze up to the roof of a brick building where a long black ladder angled up and outward to support a bronze man on the top rung, arms flung wide.

The building was the Mentrum Psychiatric Clinic, and on the granite between its doors she located the plaque: the sculpture *How to Meet an Angel* was meant to convey the mental state of a patient ready to return to the world under the protection of a guardian angel. Were they kidding? As she walked away, queasy with disgust, a line she had once read in a poem came back to her: *Perhaps an angel looks like everything we have forgotten.*

An hour later she was conducting the first interview on a *woonark*, a houseboat on one of the canals that looped the city, Herik professing to have no fixed abode. Half the city was rented by the day, he explained, Europeans preferring to circulate. It was safer for him, in any case; he hoped she did not mind his taking the precaution of meeting her in Amsterdam before showing her the laboratories in Leiden. She would meet the others there—not tomorrow, but the day after.

As she removed her shoes he said, "There is no need."

"It is my custom," she said, the floor cool under her bare feet as she accepted coffee and followed him into the unfamiliar interior where only natural light filtered through dusky curtains, the disintegration of color and pattern eroding her sense of self. She took a seat on the couch opposite him. In the intervening hours she'd had

time to feel nervous before the idea of timelessness, conscious of him as a god, on a higher plane of consciousness, able to pigeonhole her in her ignorance: the old feeling that had driven her to read compulsively until she could see better than she was seen. She had no illusion of that here. Interviewing centenarians a decade earlier, she had been conscious of handling Ming vases from the Yongle dynasty, but Souls that early, that luminous, didn't fire their glaze in the kiln of judgment, whereas a 25-year-old mind did little else.

Herik began, leaning back in his chair: "So you saw Vondelpark, named after Joost van den Vondel, the Dutch Shakespeare whose play *Lucifer* influenced Milton's *Paradise Lost*, as your John Locke, too, came over to Holland to get his ideas."

"I wouldn't call him mine," she said only.

"You are a citizen of the world?"

She was not sure of the direction of his irony. Sitting up straighter, still determined to begin *How do you live with it?* she heard herself say, "How do I know it's true?"

"There is extensive private documentation in Leiden. You will be the first to see."

Already something had been established that stopped her from asking the imperative disruptive *Why me?* that pounded beneath the higher octave of her voice as she asked, "Do you worry about a Leibniz to your Newton?" It faltered at his answer.

"I will introduce you to her."

This, the first she heard of Gust. Her flock of questions having taken flight, Lisa hazarded one at random, aware that the long-anticipated interview was slipping from her grasp.

"What is your first memory?"

Herik startled her with his vigor as he rose and walked to the window.

"My mother rushing to save me from the windmill sail," he said, opening the curtains and looking out at the street a little above eye level. "I was two. She was struck in the head and died a day later." He paused, turning back to her. "My father sold the windmill, gave up landscape painting, and became a potato farmer. There is some poetic justice in it—tilting at windmills."

"How do you find meaning," she asked, "without the framing of time?"

He shrugged, taking a seat again. "No one said, when we solved smallpox or pernicious anemia, HIV or malaria—no one said, 'Oh, you have taken away the meaning of our lives, the meaning was in the suffering!' Aging is like any of these. We have cured an ailment. We are not cyborgs—life is more precious and fragile than ever, an accident can end it at any moment."

"I would think the question of meaning would be all the more pressing."

He held her gaze a moment.

"I liken meaning to the sensation of climbing: the finding of the next foothold, against the backdrop possibility of falling. Our relationship to time has changed, and thus the social possibilities for human existence. Only a psychopath would keep gambling with the deck of human nature."

It sounded like a prepared line. He had not agreed to have the interview recorded, so she asked for a few moments to Shorthand Remember before they broke for lunch. As she attached his words to the furnishings of the room, mentally walking around its edges, she was conscious of Herik moving about in the kitchen. When they left there was no sign they had been there. She followed him up the short ladder to the street. There was a quaint Indonesian eatery nearby. Herik walked briskly, alert, taking her elbow when she began to step into a bike's path.

"I thought you might enjoy the artifacts," he said when they had arrived, as he ushered her to a seat by a small bookshelf full of old ethnographies and excused himself for a moment. She pulled one down and read of the proud, fierce natives who had to be dissuaded from collecting human heads—a cultural imperative, she thought, not so different from her impulse to accumulate books as evidence of her mental prowess, as well as in the hope they might serve her in some life so postponed it might be the afterlife. She stopped reading the text and looked at the photographs of wide beaches, Jakarta not yet sinking, the coasts not yet lost to the sea, Dutch expertise not yet called in to create more floating land.

When Herik returned, she put the book back reluctantly.

"You are drawn to books more than to people," he said.

"They are generally more thought-out."

When he recovered from his amusement, greater than she could account for, they debated the merits of immersion and detachment, consciousness and intelligence, and of the colonizing AI superintelligence.

"From which," Herik said, "we face an existential threat that explains that desperate use of the word 'Souls' more than any interest in gender equality or avoiding humanistic bias."

He told of how his father had set mousetraps each night and as a young boy he had been stricken by the cruelty until the night he heard a trap go off and, a few minutes later, another right next to it, and turning on the light saw that the second mouse had begun eating the stale Gouda without a thought for the adjacent dead. He had concluded: Existence that doesn't value life—life that doesn't value other lives—is meaningless.

"That's not what I would expect you to say," she said.

"You allude to my past."

"Is it past?"

"Everything exists to be an experiment."

And she, not arguing but remembering, "'To be put into a book.'"

"Most books I can't get through. Either they have not caught up to our science and worry over a past they mistake for the future, or they depict an outdated psychology shaped by a cruelly dysfunctional social structure, still under the shadow of primitive religions—belief in God, capitalism, or humanism. Or as I like to put it—postponement, hoarding, and suffering."

The robus took their orders, brought them food, and then returned to clear the dishes a minute after they had finished eating.

"What effort we put into avoiding effort," Herik mused. "I have always thought language was the first rudimentary step toward enslaving the physical world, part of the relentless human striving to be only mind."

She said, thinking of Raphe, "There are plenty of Back-tos."

"That is to opt out; the struggle is real and must be engaged with. 'Que Sommes Nous, Où Allons Nous.' Gauguin was punning on nu, naked, the nakedness that is also our essence, as in Genesis, 'Who told you that you were naked?' The snake, in fact, that which continually sheds its clothing, whereas humans are always covering up, always destined to be exposed for what we are, not 'I am that I am' but 'I am who I failed to be.' Ashes to ashes. Nude to nude."

The moment teetering—it had to be intentional—this his answer to the past, the cover-up. And then he was complimenting her book, that it felt both true and timely.

She heard herself say, "It isn't fashionable, but I would have preferred to write a novel."

To his question—why hadn't she?—she explained that she didn't have a long view, didn't believe in Lif and Lifthrasir—dropping the names to see if he picked them up—he did—and that ever since the Great Con, novels had been set safely in the past or precariously in the future, the cultural imagination a housing bubble built on credit, so she decided that whatever she wrote had to change the present, to make room for a future again, the next generation.

"The Ageneration," he said.

"Yes," she said, "I suppose we have a different idea of the future."

"Do we?" Again the moment teetered, he offering at last, "The novelists can no longer imagine because they can no longer remember. They search instead of seek, wander instead of pursue, circle instead of desire."

After leaving the restaurant they stood out front a moment. Lisa knew she should Shore again, before Herik's words shape-shifted to fill her own generic molds, but she felt strangely placid, passive, a lull she attributed to jet lag. After watching an arcing seagull dip down, wave a wing to open the compost receptacle, then pull out a cornstarch bowl—accounting for the mysteriously endemic litter in the streets—she asked, "Which way to the water?"

Amused, Herik gestured in all directions, to the river north, to the ocean west, to the IJ, northeast.

How far to the ocean, then; could she reach it walking?

"By bike," he said, pausing as if considering. Then: "I will take you."

She had attributed his hesitation to the risk of accident, so that when they met the next morning and he handed her an airbag collar she said, remembering the poem he had quoted, "Everything of worth is defenseless."

He told her that the line now graced an insurance building in Rotterdam, in neon, not far from Zadkine's statue of the Destroyed City, which showed that words are the most defenseless of all.

She would remember the comment when she was back in the States and made herself read over the report she had sent to Quinn, her long-time editor and friend, after that first day with Herik:

The contrast between the aging Soul and the Agerased may be compared to the difference between the Disposable Generation's appliances and clothes made to last only a few years—to keep the economy in the free fall of progress—and today's couches that can be re-covered to last for centuries. The metaphor is Herik's, as was the choice of the Netherlands as home: as its land has been reclaimed from the sea, so lateness has been reclaimed from early age.

I have met two Ageraseds and hope to meet more, as they each have their own strategy for making sense of the paradox in which they find themselves. Conscious of the perpetual danger of being cut down in the bloom of youth, they must reconcile the impulsiveness of the invincible young with the wisdom of their considerable years. The result is a Soul—though Herik declines to adopt the term—who seems to overflow with generosity as he crosses the street to meet you. One feels the urge to meet him halfway.

P.S.: Can you tell I'm in love?

The postscript tossed off, flippant in a way that would shock her later.

But now she helped Herik hoist the tandem up to the sidewalk and mounted the seat behind him, feeling precarious but soon enjoying pedaling sitting up tall, in skirt and wedge sandals, watching Herik's broad back and the muscles of his calves as he

navigated out of the city into Waterland. To her disappointment, dikes blocked all view of the ocean until they attained the crest, when she could at last see to see and felt her mind clear in the wind that whipped her hair as it did the waves.

After ten kilometers she had to apologize, her feet going around without adding force, defeated by the relentless wind.

"Americans are always apologizing," he said.

And she, "Sorry," for the easy laugh.

After another turn he pointed at a sign—*De Blauw Tuin*, the Blue Garden—and swerved to start down a steep gravel path, she crying out, putting a hand on his back as with difficulty he braked, skidding, and she hopped off, shaken. He pushed the bike back up to the crest and secured it to a bench that looked out over the waves, then offered his hand as they descended the steep bank on foot; she felt its charge—over a century old, palm smooth as an island stone.

"It may not be open," he said. "We will see."

She asked, needing her hand to point to the road sign, "What is Drempel?"

"It is a, what do you call them, to slow down the drivers."

"Speed bump."

"Yes, also when you step through a door, the threshold," he found the word. "Also sandbar, anything that goes…" He mimed a bump with his hand.

She would remember the word as she pulled her luggage back over the threshold at the airport and it teetered, and then she was through and he was behind her, he and all their words:

Her: "Why me?"

His: "There aren't many who still believe."

Her: "What are you saying?"

His: "You believe I've lived a hundred years and have the body of a young man, and the idea makes a difference to you."

Her: "You're saying it's not true?"

His: "For most people now, sex is better with an android, but for you there is a spark in an idea, a climactic rush."

Her: "That this is all a lie, you are all actors?"

And then his insistence that their union instantiated mind over matter, and her reminder she would ReOxy with her Inter-D and erase all memory of having loved him, and his response that they would always fall in love again instantly.

And then her: "The easiest way to lose someone is death."

And his: "The door is always open."

This, the fourth and final clue, because only a late man would say and believe it.

After crossing the street at the speed bump and going down a gravel drive, they reached a door in a high fence with another sign for the Blue Garden and Herik gave her a quick smile as he released the latch—and then the door swung dipping inward and they stepped into a space confounding the senses.

A dozen little birds darted and twittered in a large cage; doves perched on a fountain rilling over rocks. Teapots of all colors hung from small trees whose branches shaded tables topped with mosaics of brightly-hued broken tiles. A trellis of honeysuckle flanked an arched walkway leading to a garden mingling the beautiful and the edible: nasturtiums and dill, snap peas and asparagus ferns. Lisa marveled.

"It is what the Swedes call a *Smultronstället*," Herik said. "A wild strawberry patch, a magical place few know to appreciate."

He pulled out a chair for her, and when the proprietor came over they ordered a lunch of salad and pancakes and tea, following his recommendations, and were moved to a table large enough to hold their dishes. Bartel de Haas, a widower in his eighties, kept the café open for a few hours when he felt like it, Herik told her; they had been lucky to come when they did, they and the German family on vacation, whose children were clustered by the fenced-in chicken run, calling out that the big cat was sleeping. Bartel set down tea and coffee at their table and hurried past to look over the children's heads, saying, *Keine Katze*, shaking his head, *Hase,* rabbit, and saying in an undertone to the parents, *Tot*.

Then Bartel joined Herik and her at the table, where he began shelling fava beans in a large bowl. How different from being served

by a robus, Lisa thought; she felt nourished by the food, tended by his attention, and she wanted to offer something in return. When they had finished eating, they too worked to extract the opaque beans from the large curling pods covered in a faint lanugo, as Bartel told them the other rabbit had died the day before.

"They were eight years old," he shook his head sadly. "I don't tell the children."

She wondered at this—who he was really sparing. When she was a child, she had wanted to see and touch death, wanted it made real. She had been drawn to earlier people as if they might bring her closer to the mystery.

The Germans paid and left, and Herik settled up. Bartel, late picking up his grandson, asked if they would lock up on their way out, and then they were alone in the garden.

After a moment Lisa stood and walked over to the birdcage, drawn to the Brownian motion of the birds' short flights, and when Herik came to stand beside her she asked, "Do you have to keep moving?"

"When you make friends with those in their final decade, it is not a problem."

She wondered if he lived through their decline vicariously, as the early might latch onto lateness.

"It must wear on you."

"I'm told that I lack gallows humor."

She suppressed a smile when she had been meant to laugh, and let him lead her to a table in the shade, by the hammock.

"I did not know you were religious," he said, extending a hand toward her face. "The scarf."

She drew back. "It was my mother's," she said stiffly. "I wear it to feel connected to her."

She expected something of condolence, but he was silent, and after a moment began to speak of himself. In his forties, married and with two daughters, he had become ashamed of growing old; he didn't want to be seen by people who had seen him young. Rural you were part of nature, in a big city the constant flux was a disguise, but in the small town or deadly suburb, to have unappointed strangers watch him creep to the grave...

He decided to go into hiding, an Occultation, as in her religion, though he understood she might not call it hers, and he began to housesit, moving from place to place—it was why he hated pets, found them depressing—and inviting his family to join him on weekends. They didn't understand, it felt selfish to them, as no doubt it did to her.

She told him of a Hawthorne story about a man who walks out on his wife, secretly rents a room nearby, and lives there alone, undiscovered, until twenty years later he steps back in the front door. The narrator speculates on those bare facts and decides it was whim, an urge to test and tease the wife, and she disagreed, and Herik agreed with her: not whim. Despair maybe, mixed with resentment and pride, and then its absence. She suspected it took twenty years for a matter of life and death not to matter; twenty years, left to one's self, to come around to where one once was.

He asked about her Inter-D, then, and when she had said as little as possible he said, "You have known grief," like a cheap palm-reading, but still tears came to her eyes, the tears that hadn't come when she replied about the scarf. Maybe this was his apology for his silence then, for the insensitivity of the ageless toward death.

He repeated, "You have known grief, but you are healing." Then, amending: "That is what you call it. We call it aging."

She saw at once, and asked how the Agerased could live with grief constantly fresh. He waved a hand: they could always choose neurogenesis, infant amnesia.

She couldn't understand the point of living indefinitely if one were always erasing the past.

"We don't erase it, we become it," he said, and then his voice startled her, its humility undercutting the words. "I should warn you, I fall in love easily."

She moved reflexively, an abrupt irritated motion that brought her shoulder in contact with his arm, causing a muscle in her cheek to twitch.

"You are like a hitchhiker from my past," he continued, his eyes pleased by what he had seen, so that she could not laugh at the way

he brought out the absurd English word. His hand rested half-open, forgotten, on the table. "It is like I have met you before."

The thought *There's no before* flit by like a little bird into one of the teapots as she slipped her hand in his, warm in the sun. But when he pulled her in toward him she instinctively turned away, feeling his lips on her neck exactly where she had paused with the soap in the shower that morning, aware of the floral scent it left there—like the perfume that was kept in a cut-glass display in her family's living room and that as an adolescent she had dabbed on her neck before going to her lawn-care job, where she had a crush on a boy a few years older—afraid and secretly pleased to remember it, the light in Herik's eyes now water on a hot cast-iron pan.

"Aren't you curious?"

Twenty-four hours later they were on foot in Leiden, approaching the renovated Old Observatory tucked away at the far end of the Botanical Garden and closed to the public. Lisa had taken the train from Amsterdam that morning, thinking of Raphe as she passed through the cradle of Agrifood, an expanse of glass greenhouses that seemed to sit between two mirrors, one of which was the distant sea; she would try to Port with him that night. Herik had met her at the station; he had come the night before to take care of a few things.

When the door opened to his eye contact, Herik paused to mock-announce, "Welcome to the laboratories and offices of AGERASE, last bastion of the ultimate moratorium."

"Herik Ambrose's Chocolate Factory," Lisa said, trying for lightness, and smoothed the front of her skirt as they passed through the second set of secure doors into a foyer. They were at once met by Gust, her skin type Golden Delicate, hair short blond with a streak of light purple she seemed unconscious of. Gust, the only Agerased woman. Not that Herik was sexist, Lisa was reassured as they walked to a conference room, and not to avoid romantic entanglement, still plenty of that, but there were legitimate, hypothetical—though as it turned out, irrelevant—scientific reasons to begin with men. She was also visibly pregnant.

"He didn't tell you," she said, dryly, as they entered the small

room and Herik ducked into the adjoining kitchen to put on water for tea, with Gust repeating, "There is no father" until Lisa understood.

"Why not trust the gene pool?"

"This is an experiment," Gust said, "not a religion."

Remembering Herik's use of the word, hearing it now capitalized—*Experiment*—Lisa asked if the child would be Agerased at birth.

"That is the hope. Each failure is an inching forward."

So these were the Everlasting Gobstoppers.

"How did you come to be—?"

Gust overrode the question: She had left a cloning lab in Poland to join Herik where more was *gedogen*, permitted. She had chosen to be forty-two as the men chose to be as young as possible, once the cerebral cortex was fully online.

"Otherwise the risk of fatality through amygdala-driven behavior is too high," she said. Though sometimes they cut it a little close, in her opinion, even Herik could be impulsive—this for his benefit, as he brought out the tea tray before leaving for the lab.

Gust looked at her directly then and asked, "Who would you choose?"

Later that afternoon Lisa would be introduced to the ten other international mortals rechristened with Dutch names—Espen she knew already—and would spend the evening with them before writing to Quinn:

All life exists to be an experiment, Ambrose says, and Gust, the only Agerased woman, echoes the sentiment with respect to childbearing. She is pregnant with identical twins, one carried naturally and one artificially. The longer lifespan, their freedom from the drag of the wind of change, seems to have cultivated in the Agerased an extreme scientific attitude, so that they look upon themselves, too, as experiments. They are not culturally deaf, however; they each seem to have immersed themselves in at least one of the arts. Composing, painting, singing—worship at the altar of beauty becomes almost a fetish, a talisman against the encroaching android.

They are not immune to particular neuroses, to an almost morbid fascination with death. Each finds some compensation. One admits to hypochondria; he frequents a regular doctor's office, where he takes comfort from being told, Be strong, be stronger. Take an aspirin. *Another compulsively adjusts his life in accordance with statistics. Yet another kisses each moment of time the way a Stoic kisses his child, prepared to give it back. Some minimize the use of technology in their lives; others find it a haven. Generally there is a high level of superstition in evidence. I confess they do not bring out the best in me. I find I envy them without wanting to emulate them.*

There is no friction in their world. In physics, if a ball is set in motion, absent opposing forces it will continue in that direction forever. These are the Ageraseds. The rest of us are like a ball thrown up in a wide arc, at various angles, with varying degrees of force, and we return to earth when the arc is completed or interrupted. We have a notion of rest; some of us have the idea of being caught. Ageraseds have the idea they might arrive somewhere.

But before that, Gust had brought her to what seemed to be a throwback to a photographer's dark room, lit by a glowing amber light, and they had stood before a tub filled with what Lisa guessed was processing solution until her eyes, adjusting, took in a fetus floating in a plastic bag, eyes shut, hair a shock of black, skin covered in downy lanugo. Male, hiccupping, its fingers twitching with REM sleep as blood circulated through the Arterus oxygenator and back again through the cord vessels.

"The control," Gust said.

"Not a Soul?"

"Yes and no. He won't learn to think of himself that way, but as part of a quest to understand what it is to be a Soul. Just as I have no need to pass along my genes. We survive or don't as a species. So who would you choose?"

Later, left alone in the conference room, Lisa would put in ear nubs and search the interview for the part she had somehow missed on the plane—*Espen*, she thought irrationally, her pulse quickening—until she found it. *I choose.*

Time: But on what basis? Eugenics has long been discredited, and the dangers of genetically engineering for intelligence amply demonstrated. You can't predict—

HA: In the old-fashioned duel, one was given a choice of weapons. Now, it's a choice of environment. What we need at this stage is time. Time to grow and learn. Back to Methuselah, if you will. In terms of individuals—it is no harder or easier than choosing an astronaut. We can tweak the materials we are given.

Time: Tweak—the individuals, you mean? With nootropics? Somatic gene enhancement?

HA: It is more precise than that.

Time: There has been talk of youth trafficking and human breeding, at AGERASE, and claims that your youthfulness depends on constant blood transfusions from the young. Is there any truth to these rumors?

HA: Please, this is blood libel.

But in the moment, aware of Gust waiting for her answer, she had tried to respond, not like in a parlor game but to her own satisfaction. Passing over Einstein and Hawking, she had thought of those widely mourned—at the height of their powers, on the cusp of changing the world, assassinated or killed by ignorant shadows that had since been illuminated—all drops in the bucket of possibility, having had their time, short or long. Then she thought of those who didn't have their time—not Lincoln but his son Willie, or any stillborn infant or slave or woman or inmate from the past. Or should it be the most enlightened, the Buddha reincarnated?

Then she remembered and knew this was her final answer, having walked by the tall house on Prinsengracht two days earlier and felt the chill of specificity, imagining the expansive mind and personality of a developing girl abruptly confined to those windows, that door, to those narrow secret walls for two years over a century ago. Few Souls still made the pilgrimage to pay the primitive homage that used to honor the articulated consciousness of one out of twelve million sacrificed to a perversion of evolutionary

humanism, before the new slogan of parity nations—*We rise above ourselves*—washed its hands of the past.

Lisa's Jewish grandfather had given her a diary of her own to come of age through, as a writer, a woman, a Soul, and when she had finally dared mar the blank pages she had begun her entries, she remembered now: Dear Anne. She said the name and Gust said, smiling,

"You are biased perhaps toward sentiment."

But she hadn't gotten to choose. She had been left to wait in the conference room for Herik to return, recalling how over lunch the first day he had asked if she had saved her eggs—as of course she had, as men in parity nations saved their sperm, systematic male birth control the default reversible only by design, freeing politics of the Abortion Wars and slowly easing the ravages of the Anthropocene age, as any desired embryos were formed in a lab and then implanted once the sixteenth cell, removed for screening, had grown back—and if she would bear children herself or use an Arterus, to which she had replied, evasively, that she didn't know if she wanted them.

But thinking of Raphe's precision farmer mentality—reliant on irrigation systems that delivered the exact ml of water preferred by each plant root, on shades that filtered or concentrated sunlight, and on humidity sensors and pest control to ensure the optimum conditions for growth—she knew her Inter-D would insist on the artificial womb, just as surely as she would want to carry the baby, nurture and grow something in her own soil, given how quickly she tired of looking at rows of identical plants unadulterated by chance.

She had asked Herik in turn if he would have more children, and he said, "It isn't about what I want; or, to be clear, what a partner wants."

"Then what has your calculus determined?"

"With the right woman," he said slowly.

Deflecting a sudden self-consciousness—*Gust*—she pressed, "Would you have kept your parents alive?"

To which he said, with an inward, almost malicious look, "I only really knew my father, but I suspect we were too similar."

"I thought engineers like to build in redundancy."

His irrepressible laughter was the first clue that would echo later as it echoed now, along with the image of his teeth, untouched by time, whereas she would have thought the body would register experience, teeth stain, gums recede, feet bunion, skin freckle.

"I like that," he said, and she got up to look for the WC. She soon got lost among the hallways and found Herik's words coming back to her: *They search instead of seek, wander instead of pursue, circle instead of desire*.

Because it had been chosen for her, an hour earlier, on the way to the lab through the garden, when she reluctantly followed Herik out of the pang of day into the humid heat of the greenhouse to see the jade flower in bloom, hearing him say he had never seen a color like it in a flower, nearly the color of her scarf, as they wound up metal stairs to a high walkway between hanging rows of carnivorous plants.

"I've never been up high so often as in the low countries," she said, before being struck with a vertigo she thought she'd outgrown. Herik came up alongside and helped her keep moving, ushering her toward the lapsed jade, a single shriveled petal still visible on the concrete below, then on to the stairs at the other end, first stopping her with a hand on her arm to point out the tiny flytraps, demonstrating with a hair how if you brush against a trigger hair once, nothing happens, twice and it closes—she thought an insect might still escape through the thin grille—but with two more flicks the cells exuded digestive enzymes.

Like love, he sometimes thought. "We have these trigger hairs."

And then his breath was in her ear, hand on her hip, she half-turning into his kiss, blind, her breath self-hypnotic, before yielding to his hand leading her back down and out into the garden, he choosing always the smaller pathway through the vegetation, her voice thin and uncommitted, until they stopped at last before a tree eighteen meters tall, its pendulous thick-leaved branches dipping into the canal. An ash, she thought, before reading the little sign: a

Tree of Heaven, only a few years older than Herik—while he explained that it propagates by suckering, sending up clones partly fed by the mother tree. This the second clue, the irresistible confession, as letting go of his hand she stepped inside the cascade of compound leaves, where clusters of paler green winged seeds hung down.

Herik joined her, tearing off a leaf for her to smell, like raw cashews, and as she reached to touch the fissures in the bark the pressure of his hand on her ribs made her turn, aware this time he would digest her, reaching for him even as he crouched, feeling up under her skirt, eyes on hers, the bark scraping her shoulder blades holding her up, her fingers on his lips, the veil of leaves swaying and flickering, voices floating over the canal, birds closer by, her own soft cry as water flowed over his hand, his smile, and though they would couple that night and over the next week, she knew it was then that he had accomplished the purpose of her visit, and all the rest was an aside—the interviews and the visit to the lab and meeting Gust and the others, Baldr Judoc Karel Olaf Barend Fons Meino Joorg and her favorite, Schyler, his clothing out of a Jan Steen painting, his skin Dark Robust, smiling within a beard that looked false on someone so late and that brushed her face like Raphe's as he gave the three alternating kisses.

She had thought, as she met the others, *He made sure of me first—Gods are jealous creatures*. But by the time she left the lab, she suspected Herik had wanted to lull her curiosity, so that looking for the WC, she would not open the windowless door she opened and instinctively began to close again, aware of a human presence, before she was stopped by the eyes, the stillness of a boy among books, the third clue, and she gambled, "Your father..." because it was obvious.

"I don't have a father," he said.

"How old are you?"

"Eleven."

"What are you reading?"

"I am studying who I am," he said.

And she, spontaneously, "*Know thyself, and you are going to know the gods*."

His eyes quickened and she quailed under the gaze, under the suspicion of an ageless child, of whom Herik would later admit, "He sings like an angel." She shut the door behind her, pulling the handle down, then releasing it slowly, and after that she needed no documentation, though later she would look through photographs of a man the same and not the same, Herik Ambrose through the ages.

All that passed between them in his flat, the second week, part of the long aside: watching their clothes mingle in the wash and later watching Herik hang each item on a cat's cradle of lines by the casement window he cranked opened, as, ten years old, she had watched the Turned man she would woo for her grandma, so that her grandma wouldn't Self-Limit. When he died he would leave to Lisa his books, including the one Herik then came over to take from her, looking for the last lines Penelope speaks, saying, "Listen," reading it in Greek first and then the translation, "*If it is true that the gods bring forth an old age that is better, then there is hope that for you there will be an escape from afflictions*."

"You know ancient Greek," she said.

"Here everyone learns it in school and then promptly forgets it."

But not him, she pointed out, and then said, "*For you*."

"What?"

She said, those were the words she heard when the lines had gone by, not reproach but reminder of the difference between Odysseus and his wife, that he is favored by the gods and she isn't.

And he, then, "What if I told you you've had the first treatment?"

She spun and hit him hard on the chest, twice, until he held her wrist and said it was hypothetical, he'd thought she might decline without knowing what she was giving up, an extra decade, that is all, who could object to that?

"I'm not a guinea pig, I get to choose."

"I thought it's what you wanted, like Scheherazade," he said, because in revenge for his culturally deaf request she had made up a story the night before.

Now, her voice tight, she reminded him how, when Scheherazade finished her stories, King Shahryar always said the wrong thing, his mind stuck on the treasure he hoped to lay his hands on—the copper lamp or the red powder or the magic bag—and Scheherazade always answered, *It is lost, it is destroyed*, drawing him back to the point of the story, that she was the valuable thing he should wish to have.

Herik tried to say that was why—so they could be together.

Repeating, "It is lost, it is destroyed," she stood and walked unsteadily to the ladder at the end of the room. She climbed three rungs to look out the attic windows, and seeing only gables, seagulls, took another step up before she felt his hand on her ankle and stood still, aware of its moving lightly up and down as he said, "There is something else," and she kicked him away.

So that she didn't need the CICROID at Customs to tell her of the tampering with her organism or that the man assigned to protect her had been a double agent—the bio-reading handshake, the pills for jet lag—or that soon there would be two heartbeats inside her: hers, and hers but not hers, her John Locke. If she chose to carry him to term, she could give him up to the Frankenstein Institute.

But still, still, that afternoon she had watched Herik duck out from under his shirt, before loosening and stepping out of his pants and folding them both, saying, when she asked what the fuck he was doing, "Less laundry," before approaching her naked, divining—she water, letting him undress her one last time, inner churning dulled into arousal, breathless and silent, as the clothes on the line whipped against each other, filled with air, twisted, her blouse and one of his shirts flung together, clinging where they touched, and when she held them to her cheek later marveling how soft, he said, "The wind does it."

Already she was on the plane to Hera, Alaska, suffering the contrast between coming and going as the lines of the poem Herik had recited to her in full went through her as if someone very old were singing them:

it's still uncertain what there was
what will be will be without resistance

And opening her book, she saw it again in Herik's hands as he held it up, demanding "Why this one?" before he answered his own question: "You have always been your own guinea pig; you came with some hope of seducing me, becoming one of us, it's impossible it never crossed your mind."

She had remembered packing, Raphe in the other room. Remembered thinking of the immortals, the Olympians, of Argos on his dung heap and Athena transforming Odysseus at will, of ill-advised voyages just when one might settle down, and yes, she was Odysseus, shaking her head at having thought she understood Herik Ambrose, not from an interview twenty years earlier but from an epic three thousand years old.

—

They sat in the absolute dark, naked except for the electrodes linking their brains, the surgical invasion planned ever since Raphe had tried to Port with her and the connection relying on oxytocin had broken up.

"I knew you'd fall," he'd said.

And she, "Hazard of the field."

Now she heard the remote words, *You are at the bottom of a deep hole*, *hoping for a face leaning over to pull you out—whose is it?*—and it was Herik's she was falling toward before she felt the painful jolt and again Herik and again the jolt and at last Raphe's replaced it with a flood of well-being and they spoke the cued lines she knew from somewhere, where, *Contract with the one who loves you best, Contract with the one you love best*, and they renewed their vows and left holding hands, looking into each other's eyes, going home to Paradise, Eden before the fall, with eyes and mouth and hands only for each other.

Yet that moment of distraction had left a toehold, so that when

she picked up *Jane Eyre* she found Herik infiltrating the text, tricking and teasing her through the lost early fantasy, so that if not still in love, she was primed for it, having no memory of their coupling, only of unconsummated longing: *I'm coming. Where are you?* The scene that had anticipated Porting by two hundred years.

Raphe understood her abstraction as her writing self.

She wrote the book in six months, in the time it took her Inter-D to harvest the first crops and for the embryo to develop finger and toe prints and its eyelids to begin to open. Genetic testing revealed an anomalous mutation associated with a high risk of blood cancer, but she would carry the baby to term.

When the invitation to Port arrived, a week after publication and two weeks before her due date, she accepted it and lay on the bed, her upper half propped up with two pillows, the intrusion of his voice in her mind blue with meaning. She forgot to think of him as a man a few years later than she was.

Have you—
Not yet. Soon.
How did you know?
When you left the door open.
He told me that you opened it.
I mean the door between us.
And after a long silence, *Are you alone?*
I'm lying in bed, she said, understanding.
I too. Are you touching yourself?

She lifted the shirt she had sewn from one of her mother's hijabs, to view the uneven camel's hump of her belly. She rubbed where she felt a foot draw across the inside. She breathed in the rhythm of his breathing but kept her hand on her belly, the tip of a finger on her protruding navel.

Do you feel me inside you? Like breath in her ear.

Yes, she said softly.

It had been like this, listening to each other's listening. Tears

rolled into her ears as she heard his suppressed cry, like a recording of her own estranged voice.

How many of us are there? she asked, after a minute, and he hesitated only briefly.

Forty-nine. There were to be fifty.

Like Hercules. What will you do with your new freedom?

Static crackled in her voice. She thought the connection was lost until she heard: *Try to love him.*

When Eric was born she felt all the fear and uncertainty the Agerased had claimed to live with, felt the terror of possibility not for herself but toward the tender shoot of a child not yet protected by bark. She aged normally—the treatment had, in truth, been hypothetical—yet for the peril she felt, she might have been one of the gods.

—

Conclusion to *The Labors of Herik Ambrose:*

What can we learn from this hoax? Instinctively Souls have always felt it our right to live forever, as the very adoption of the designation "Souls" implies. But aren't we as chained as Ambrose to the burden of the past? A Soul develops the capacity to design an infinite possibility of organisms and instead chooses to replicate his own. To become the cancer.

The discovery of agelessness by the original Ambrose—Henrik Ambroos—could not keep him young without costing him his life; instead, he chose cloning in perpetuity, part of a grand Experiment sidestepping ethical regulations that failed to legislate empathy for his future self, or for the wife and children who could not know that he could not save them. The clone I carry may never know what Experiment he was designed to be part of. Will he be born with the memories of his father, or need to study them? At what age will he stop aging? Will he sing beautifully as a castrato, or paint windmills? Will he choose to remember or become the sorrows of his past? Will he find an Embla for his Ask?

Or will he embrace the knowledge at last: that to age is to heal?

Back to TOC

Contributors

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Rosaleen Bertolino earned her MA in English/Creative Writing from SFSU. Her short stories have most recently appeared in the *New England Review, failbetter,* and *Litro.* Currently living in Mexico, she is a co-founder and host of Prose Café, a monthly reading series based in San Miguel de Allende. She's just completed a collection of short stories, and is at work on a novel. More information at www.rosaleenbertolino.com.

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Allison Brice resides in Washington, DC, where in her day job she attempts to teach people about United States history and mostly fails. At night she writes speculative short stories, creative nonfiction, and whatever else comes to mind. She has stories published or forthcoming in *Typehouse* and *The Furious Gazelle*. She's on Twitter @_allisonbrice_.

Daniel Dagris was born on the mean streets of Las Vegas, raised in the backwoods of Winlock, Washington, and tear-gassed in Thessaloniki, Greece (because, college, right?). His work has received honorable mention from *Glimmer Train*, and has appeared in the *Buckman Journal, Chaleur Magazine, Meat for Tea*, and elsewhere. Find out more at danieldagris.com.

Stephanie Dupal is a Franco-Canadian writer whose fiction received the 2018 Best Prose Award from *The Northern Virginia Review*. She was named a finalist for the 2019 Rash Award in Fiction from *Broad River Review*, for the 2019 *Sonora Review* Essay Contest, and for the 2019 *New Letters* Publication Award in Fiction. She is completing an MFA in fiction from Fairleigh Dickinson University and she hopes to publish her short story collection, *Small Signals and Other Stories*, and her novel *The Swindlers of Beaumont* in the near future.

Suzanne Faber used to write advertising for global brands, a career she enjoyed tremendously until she didn't. Now she is an aspiring screenwriter and, when the mood strikes, attempts literary fiction. This is her first published

work since the inclusion of her paper, *Social Class, Tipping and Alcohol Consumption in an Ann Arbor Cocktail Lounge,* in a University of Michigan academic journal in 1980.

Meghan E. O'Toole is a queer writer from Illinois. Meghan strives to capture a sense of wonder with her writing. In 2018, she was awarded *LitMag*'s Virginia Woolf Award for short fiction, and she graduated Summa Cum Laude from Elmhurst College in 2017 with a degree in English. Currently, she is a graduate student and writing instructor at Western Illinois University. https://www.instagram.com/meghanotoolie/ https://twitter.com/meghanotoolie.

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Kristi Petersen Schoonover has always been intrigued by the ends of things. Her work has appeared in many magazines and anthologies, and she's the author of the collection *The Shadows Behind*. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Goddard College, serves as co-host of the *Dark Discussions* podcast, and is founding editor of the dark literary journal *34 Orchard*. Follow her adventures at kristipetersen-schoonover.com. or on Facebook at https://www.facebook. com/kpschoonover

Rebecca Starks grew up in Louisville, Kentucky and lives in Richmond, Vermont. She is the author of the poetry collections *Time Is Always Now* (Able Muse Press, 2019) and *Fetch, Muse* (Able Muse Press, forthcoming fall 2020) and teaches lifelong learners through the University of Vermont. Her short fiction has appeared in *Crab Orchard Review* and *Tahoma Literary Review.* Website: https://rebeccastarks.com.

Dawn Vogel's academic background is in history, so it's not surprising that much of her fiction is set in earlier times. By day, she edits reports for historians and archaeologists. In her alleged spare time, she runs a craft business, co-runs a small press, and tries to find time for writing. She lives in Seattle with her husband, author Jeremy Zimmerman, and their herd of cats. Visit her at http://historythatneverwas.com or on Twitter @historyneverwas.

Nancy Kathryn Walecki is an undergraduate at Yale University originally from Topanga Canyon, California. She works as an Editorial Intern for *The Believer* magazine. Her work has appeared in the *Yale Literary Magazine, Yale Daily News,* and *Yale Herald*, but this is her first professional publication. She just started research for her first book about her father's music store, Westwood Music, which was a gathering place for influential musicians in the 1960s/70s.

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Readers

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Thomas Kenneth Anderson was born in South Bend, Indiana, raised in Romeo, Michigan, and currently resides in Tacoma, Washington. He's a Western Michigan University graduate working as a paper engineer. His focus is on flash and short fiction, with a background in journalism and satire. He enjoys mountains, beaches and fantasy baseball.

Zoë Mikel-Stites is a freelance fiction and copywriter. With a background in theater, she had the chance to study visual storytelling, and the interaction of story and audience up close. She has a passion for science fiction and fantasy, and any medium that can tell a good story.

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Orca

A LITERARY JOURNAL

Orca is about fiction. Short stories and flash. We are a literary journal and we believe in the literary style of writing.

We still believe writing can be fun, too.

Orca is published three times a year. The March and November issues contain literary work, some of which includes speculative elements, and July is our designated literary-speculative issue.

All the work we publish comes through the submission portal.

Fiction published in *Orca* may be nominated for anthologies such as *Best American Short Stories, Best Small Fictions*, the Pushcart Prize, and others. In our first year one of our stories was selected for *Best Canadian Short Stories of 2020.*

We are open year-round for submissions.
For complete guidelines please visit our site at orcalit.com

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