cottonwood

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Lucy Zhang

Evidence of a Soul

"Why are you such a philosophical zombie?" Ben asks me as he rips open a salted egg yolk bun. The filling spills out like molten lava.

"Uh, what?" I say, peeling a lotus leaf away from a mass of glutinous rice, poking my chopsticks in hopes of the rice falling cleanly away without having to get my fingers dirty. I should know better than to hope. It sticks so I lift the leaf with my index finger and thumb and shake it up and down until the rice spills and collapses onto my plate. "Is that what people say these days? I thought you were still calling people noobs?" I'm kidding. Ben has probably never even heard of the word "noob" before.

Ben shakes his head and I watch the yolk ooze as he makes no move to rescue it. I resist the urge to dab away the filling with a chunk of plain mantou.

"I'm saying, why do you have no consciousness?" He pinches my wrist, which had been resting on the table close to his plate, ready to rescue the yolk bun if he abandoned it.

"Ouch," I say.

"See? You say ouch but does it actually hurt you?"

I pull my hand to my chest, rubbing the pink skin. "Yeah, it does."

"Of course you'd say that. Zombies know what to say to appear just like us."

I already know better than to try and convince Ben otherwise. When I was in high school, our parents installed infrared sensors outside of our rooms to ensure we didn't go on midnight adventures. Around 1 am, Ben would sneak out of his room and into mine, a huge cardboard box wrapped in foil tugged over his head to spoof his body heat. One time he entered my room while I was cutting my nails and he flipped. *You should never clip your toenails when it's dark outside*, he claimed. *Nail clippings will manifest evil spirits. They're omens of death.* But I was down to my left pinky

toe, so I clipped it and figured I'd deal with Ben after. He lunged for the clipper and thanks to tennis, I had fast enough reflexes to dodge him else I might've nicked my skin as well. *Look, I've been cutting my nails at night all the time and there have been no evil spirits or death entering this house*. I paused. *Unless you consider yourself an evil spirit.* Ben glared at my foot and then my fist full of nail clippings. *You can't do that, you can't do that* he repeated the entire night even after I conceded, swearing to never cut my nails after sunset ever again.

"Ok, I'm a zombie, then," I say. "Aren't you going to eat your bun?" Ben looks at me suspiciously before biting into a hollow bun, the yolk custard almost completely emptied onto the plate, a pool of yellow. I suppose it's not a bad thing that Ben thinks he's always right. I can normally nod along without an issue.

"How can I be sure?" Ben asks as he chews. I see bits of mush caught between his teeth. I hear him slurping and swallowing and grinding his teeth. He has attachment issues. He used to have a pet daikon named Fred, a radish dressed up with a rubber band necklace twisted twice around its body and olive eyes stabbed in with toothpicks. After learning dad had stripped Fred down, peeled its skin, and turned it into dinner, Ben screamed and banged my violin case into the walls. *You can get a new daikon*, I reassured Ben although it ended up being a lie. Dad insisted we only eat daikon in the winter when the moisture-sucking heaters were in full blast because daikon was a cooling food to maintain balance, and the days were getting warm enough to no longer need the heater so he stopped buying daikon and started buying ginger. No Fred replacement. Later, dad discovered the violin case dents in the drywall and asked *which hand did it*, and I reached my right hand out, palm facing upward, and he slapped it until the skin blushed red.

"You can't," I shrug.

"Does that mean even if you say and act like you care about me, you don't actually care about me on the inside?" Ben looks like he's going to dissolve in acid and fall down a drain.

"No," I say, although I'm really thinking "does it matter?" I don't even understand what "on the inside" means—quantifying

souls is above my pay grade. Maybe I am a zombie like Ben says. But he's a sensitive person and the instant release Adderall keeps him on edge, peaking and falling like a sine curve, so I indulge in his theories and switch my brain off. "Do you still want that?" I ask, gesturing to the puddle of sweet and savory yolk. Ben pushes his plate to me.

"Zombies are dead on the inside," he murmurs. I rip off a bit of mantou and soak it in the rich custard and pop it into my mouth. "They sure are, but maybe they have enough on the outside to make up for it," I reply. "Fake it til you make it."

Ben shakes his head and stares into the other half of his hollow, soggy bun. I fish for the pills in my bag and toss him one. A 20mg full pill is honestly too much for him, but I figure he might want it.

Leonore Wilson

Right Hand Girl

Luck of the draw she is in the first stages of birth. Body bulk lowering, straining, groaning, exerting. Blow flies encircle her head. Eyes wild, sickled white. Fat raft of tongue. Floppy scum of cud. Cloudy ropes of saliva. Contractions ripple down her flanks. Warm beads of colostrum form on swollen udders. She kneels, lies down, throws her head back and bellows. The thick water sac falls from her swollen vulva. Red slow ooze of slime. Her broom-like tail whips up. Ears narrow back.

"Damnit there. Damnit," my dad says. "Hold on there," he says, until the calf's front feet appear. "Just look at that," he says, as the Jersey bellows, snorts more. Morning air freighted with labor.

"You all right?" my dad says. "You really all right? You don't look too good," he says. "You steady?"

I close my eyes, count inside, blink back open and shake my head, yes.

"Good girl," my dad says. "You're my right hand girl. Now relax your hands just enough. Animals can smell your sweat a long way off. Have to believe you're doing good. God's work. Like a soldier meaning no harm. Hear him calling. God's calling. What Cain knew. Abraham too."

A big man, over six feet, weighing perhaps two hundred pounds. His footsteps make the barn floor vibrate. Deep inhalation of his breath can suck the oxygen out of most any room. He has tufts of hair in all the wrong places, in the whorls of his ears and in his nostrils. Acts as if he has some special knowledge. I'm deaf and blind when it comes to who he is. I've learned to smile to cover up my heart's anguish. Though my dad's a brute, I can't help but see him as my protector too. How can I not, I'm sure he'd fight for me if he'd have to. I must not show ingratitude.

My dad casts off his heavy hunting jacket, rolls up his sleeves, pulls on his orange rubber boots. I pull on mine too. He tips two

cups of antiseptic into a small bucket and fills it with scalding water. He lathers up his arms, rinses them cool, kneels behind the cow. His arm buries almost up to his shoulder in her swollen uterus. His teeth clench with the effort. I turn my head away, but my other voice says, *no no be brave*, remember what he said, *you are my right hand girl*.

I rub my palms on my knees and try to concentrate. My dad focuses on winching out the stubborn calf. He pulls and pulls through the bovine's cervix until the bull calf emerges. I want to look away, but I tell myself: this is part of the cycle of life, what are you so afraid of?

My dad says to stick my finger deep in the calf's muzzle, into its warm pink sweet mouth. The strength of the suck contracts through me, seems to makes me a mother, too.

Great steaming *plop plop* and my farmer dad guffaws, struts like a dove. His face cracks into a satisfied smile. He cleans up while the bovine stretches, groans dark deep like an oboe. What is afterbirth of the calf plops to the ground too. Thick black gelatin of coagulated blood. Red pink placenta. The fresh calf tries to rise, fumbles, totters, moves a little more with its slick wet muzzle. He searches for the bloated dugs, the frothy braids of milk, the good god-like nectar.

I've seen my dad take a sick calf home, warm her in front of the kitchen fire and massage her legs steadily until the new crack of dawn. I've seen him rub the ropy mucus from a newborn mouth, blow his own breath hard down its throat. I've seen my dad stick a blade of grass into a calf's nose to get it to gasp. And I've seen my dad dash cold water on a calf's head to make it awaken. He's had towels handy for rubbing to stimulate breathing. I've watched him withdraw the big rubber suction bulb to clear the animal's airways. He's told me not all cows are good mothers. Some first timers just stroll off as if they don't know what's happening. And some return and won't let the baby nurse as if afraid of this wobbly foreign creature.

I can't help but love and respect my dad for all the good animal husbandry he does. The bad parts of him just float away.

Sometimes I have to question myself if the dad I don't like exists at all.

My dad tethers a cow's neck to a wooden post. My job is to keep that brownish yellow rope from slipping. He leads the bawling calf to the right end of its mother and expresses the warm colostrum onto its nose, directs its muzzle to the sticky pink teats. Several tries before it's latched and gulping.

"Best way to get a mama not wantin to nurse is to lead her into the chute," my dad says. "Can't go anywhere then. The sides can always drop down and the hungry calf can have free rein. What else to do but rasp the youngster and lead it. Cows can be damn protective, just like humans," he says. "You might shuffle nervous and calm all down when you talk to her. Good to have a decent willow stick too."

We have milked this Jersey a bunch of times; our foreheads bowed, cheek and ear bent to her flank, listening to the tank of stomach gurgle like a quarrel of sparrows, busy leverets of hares. White handkerchiefs fixed around our mouths to block out the kicked-up dust clouds of dry manure. Our hands pull and squeeze her swabbed nipples. Strong steaming jets of milk *tat tat tat* as they hit the sides of the open steel pail.

This one never needed to be tied or stalled like some others. She never kicked or button hooked around to snort a pint of snot. She never dropped her head, hoofed over the top of us. Not this one. She let us milk her in exchange for a full feedbag of summer harvested alfalfa. This one never driven to the cannery to be chopped up into dog food. No this mother never shot in the brainpan. She's one of the lucky few.

I've seen my dad kick a newborn calf within an inch of its life. I've seen him tie an old dairy cow to the corral and beat it with a brassy pipe or burn its backside with an electric prod. I've seen him jam a pitchfork into a bovine's udders: the beast full of adrenaline that won't produce, or if she does produce, won't let down her milk. I've watched my dad straddle a grunting calf to make it be still, then punch it in the head repeatedly, cursing it as if it was some kind of enemy.

Right hand girl has seen all and said nothing. Always a hoarse undertone of anger and condemnation makes her tremble. The near impossible getting on calmly has robbed her of even the simplest words. She knows about ridicule, that her dad can tease, make her feel worthless. Shame and guilt are tools he wields. She's afraid if she cries, an entire creek will pour from her eyes.

Today he won't have it. My dad is the manager of what is important and urgent. He wipes his nose with his forearm, throws a leather noose around the bull calf's neck. Sickening tug as the little one is drawn away. Roughened larynx of *Ma Ma aaa.*. One hind leg jousting, hoof kicking like a piston. String of tail whipping back and forth. Tail not yet severed. A cloud of bats dart the air as my dad digs in his heels, picks up the .22 from the floor, brushes the barrel's mouth against his hip, raises an eyebrow and cocks the trigger. *Maaa Maaa. Maaaaaaa*. Click of hammer. Lock of notch.

My dad says, "You don't want the three legged guy to suffer, do you? No, you owe it that."

Today my body wants to please him. Prove I'm old enough for learning the hardest lesson of this ranch life—that I can be fierce like a predator, kill like a predator—a coyote, bear, mountain lion.

.

I always knew you had it in you. Helluva slaughterin you did. You're a fighter, a tough son-of-a bitch, smart as a whip, my right hand girl.

I watch how he pushes the lipstick red shell beneath his tongue to fix his aim. Caps have stamped concentric circles on the bottom where each pin will hit against the center of the baby's forehead with exacting force. He clicks the neck of the .22 shut, places the steel muzzle into the hollow behind the little calf's ear. Safety and hammer. Barrel and grip.

"Imagine an X here," he says, "Level it. Don't pull the trigger. No squeeze it. Between heartbeats. Now," he says, and fires the slug right smack into the bull calf's brain. Thunk goes the bullet. Sulphur hell smell. A breeze whistles in and out of the bloody

hole. The infant is stunned, looks drunk, thrashes, sways, staggers, throws himself against the walls in hard spasms, thuds to the floor. Eyeballs swivel-jerk; tongue lolling out of the side of its blue reddish mouth. Warm thick slobber, clotted like frogspawn. I hear the gasp once or twice and then silence. *Silence*.

My dad disassembles the .22 with his forefinger, blows through the barrel, grabs the long hunting knife from his side pocket, removes it from the leather sheaf. The wind wields the blade light, luminous black and emerald. Wind stampeding the field under the window outside.

I close my eyes, trying to be elsewhere, but where? High-pitched buzz in my head: every sound, thought and word distilled in a perfect single note of fear. He comes from behind with the knife. Knife with a peckerwood handle, its banding and mottling like running water. My dad wraps his big arm around, holding me against his blood-splashed chest, shows me how to cut outward all the way around, careful to keep the blade from skin and flesh avoiding hair tufts, cutting away from me as I butcher it.

"No, no. It's not an eel in a net. Silly girl," he says. "Grab it right! Don't be a prissy. Fresh brains for dinner. Fresh veal too."

First real nick, ripped windpipe, tough skin. Skin pulled up and over like a t-shirt. My dad grins, jerks up the bull calf's neck, yanks my hand in again, pushes it down directly over his. No, wraps it around my finger like a vice. Leans his forehead down. I am a falcon tethered to a leather-gloved fist. Blade unmooring muscle; another incision back and forth, back and forth, sawing fur and flesh, pulpy tendon and bone, blade on bone clicking and the severing of arteries. Major veins in blue. Major arteries in red spreading new deltas through chest, neck, limbs, deep under slick casing of skin.

Wet incardinate trickle; then a flourish, a maniacal gush like too loud applause, bottomless seepage-splash, black butter melting and more like dirty motor oil, unquenchable gushing, smelling like camping dust, furious coal–tide underfoot. My dad laughs big and crazy, leans against the concrete feed trough, the

grey steel manure-spattered bars. He claps me hard. More and more sawing. Blood splashes. Blood stutters up from my fingers smelling of copper, of iron. Sweet metallic pungency. Of this cruel earth's offering.

"Ignore the leg jerkin. Only reflexes. No big deal. Even decapitated animals kick out or seem to watch you. Unconscious muscle reflexes come from the spinal cord not the brain and don't mean the animal is alive after bein killed. No it don't. And the eyes blinkin too. Don't be silly, be strong…No time for that… Be my good ol' country right hand girl. Now hurry, hurry before the dogs come round."

My pulse tattooes. Try not to think but do. Rankness crawls into my skin. The cow's teats are beginning to drip *drip faster faster harder harder* and no bucket to catch. I want to turn away, want to run, *run far.* Want the dead calf to follow. I catch my breath. Bile in my throat rises as my dad drops the knife

Right hand girl, you done good. Good, better than a boy ever could, he says, as I run from the barn, and I hear my heart slide right there, right in my mouth. Barn where a foreman in the '30s hanged himself from the rafters after shooting fifty-one of his dairy cows that he'd been milking since most had mastitis and there was not enough work to feed his family. I stagger first, then run past the hayrack, goldenrod, corn stubble, past the abandoned crates of hard homemade cider. I run past where the cow path skinnies through tall cottonwoods and willows, where gnats and grey flies dandle. I'm all pulse and sweat and breath battering my own singular street, heart unhitched, startling the treading drowsy cattle, their udders sputtering. I peel away from what I've seen. What remains is what's unsaid. Always the question of what's unsaid, what's underneath. I reach the long chute, kneel to the hardpan earth, the cold stream by the farm-rusted vehicles. I kneel to the spent grain, spring golden pollen. I kneel to the mud matter of which this boundless planet is composed. *Mutter, madre, mater, material, maternal, moeder…*suggested by the burbling syllables of a suckling baby, the first words I said then and now *ma ma ma* and I ask this shot-slashed bewildering world to forgive.

Barbara Saunier

Wingbound III: Elegy on a Barn Swallow, Trapped

She might have been destined for tea cups —
that sweep of cobalt glaze a-wing
on a translucent porcelain sky, where swallows
can and cannot fly, where they do

and do not jabber. Black pekoe and verbena
steaming in the curve of two hands
would have warmed her bird heart.

A different incarnation might have sent her
bedecked with gold into the afterlife
— amulets tucked against linen windings
and worthy of plunder, or with

the dry coracle of her own body
all the boat she would need
for ferrying up and down the river . . . .

How many migrations did her familiars make
in the time it took mites to strip this swallow's back
of its cobalt, to strip her wings to their spines
and lay the skin over her egg-reminiscent body

translucent and bare? A slow business,
and on-going, from the look of it. This naked,
desiccated hull, less weighty

than a breath, but veined with bones
and her many absent ardors: her slipstream, her up
flown from her interchangeable down; absent
her foliations of summer sunlight — and she, a spray

bred of an arrow and crazy eights —
How many migrations have her familiars made
in her lifetime of absences?

She's left here, really, almost nothing
but conjecture: A first flight, maybe two. Then
some rookie mistake. Now this pinched
and papery stillness longer than the linen strips that bind

an ancient corpse. I have robbed her accidental
tomb, absconded with what's left of her for my own
purposes: this jabber of words on paper, my

too much wonder and imposition.
Hostess, priestess of the sill above my kitchen sink, she is
no less worthy of fine porcelain, of wrought gold,
in spite of the absence of any of it. As though either

would excite her ardors. As though porcelain, gold
or airy words were ever more than a swallow's flight —

Susan Slobodanka Strauss

Ours and Theirs

We visit
the dead.

At our table
they dip

their fingers
in our

olive oil.

Catherine Swanson

The Shop Awaits

I see your face, I know why you're here.
It's not because you've lost a button.
I've heard what people say, how I sew
the moon and stars on a piece of cloth
and throw it on the floor for you.
I've seen them watching as I move
from one lace-covered window to another.
They think I chant the colors of thread,
pour beads on the table top, and let them
slide through my fingers.

If you come in now, you won't regret it.
We'll drink from cups cradled in our hands.
I'll mend your shirt and hold it up, turning slowly
to let it lay against my skin. Everything else
is just gossip waving its torn seam.
There's only one real secret in this shop:
you don't have to do a thing, and you'll be
famous in the morning, the one who
breathed on glass and stepped inside.

Cecil Morris

Lessons we chose not to learn

the liquid quickness of the world and spring's sudden flush,
the rush from bloom to seed to spent brown shaft rattling
like sheaves of old papers clasped in our hands, driest dust
of history, souvenirs the dead have left behind
while we try to hold the flower scent and color
with mandible and claw, maxillae and palps,
everything in the great and gaping maw, our hungry hearts.
We eat our dead, fried or fricaseed, and shit them, too,
excrementum obsequium, most solemn duty
room of silent contemplation and fly buzzing
concentration of the compound eye assembling
always the fragmented world, resolving colors
into motive depths or motion blur to danger,
all reflex, all natural function. Take the tulip
on its slender stem, that hermaphroditic
perennial with its single terminal flower,
that waxy balloon of color, that delicate fist
opening to reveal stamen, style, and stigma,
that *herbaceous bulbiferous tulipa*
automatically opening and opening
until the petals drop away and all withers.
Think of our Japanese maples casting off swirls of seeds,
the single-wings fluttering to light in dirt gathered
in concrete cracks and seams, in the dark spaces in bark
mulch, then seedlings springing up like new ideas,
like errant children everywhere, the delicate
green leaves the thready stems the probing roots that can't find
purchase or water. Then the leaves crisp and curl.
Recall the dumb doves building their nest on the four-inch beam
above our gate and perching there and watching their eggs
tumble down and down to crack and splat on patio.
Think of things desiccated petrified freeze-dried

like the rats' carcasses we found once secreted
behind the wood pile, the fearsome intrepid trio
all gray and stiff and yet still the *rattus rattus* shape,
the stiffened tail the arrow face the black eyes gone.
Remember the first strike, the hand hurtling out out,
the hand autonomous last expression of the nerves,
the fist a clot of bones barely buried, fused and not,
flung forward, end of one way of knowing and start—
like riding backward in the bed of a pickup
watching the country roll away as we fly forward,
the sun-burnt field of fox-tails and thistles, death upright,
the present spilling into the past, time unfurling
the endless banner of over over over.

Cecil Morris

Once More He Looks Inside Me

I think of the slick black watermelon seeds,
the soft white ghostly ones, how easily they slid
down my throat even as grandpa warned
of wandering vines and broad leaves opening
inside me. I think of the sunflower seeds
we planted in glass jars so we could see
the slow explosion, the white root reaching
down, the tiny green fist punching up and up.
I think of the food coloring we dripped
in the vase and how the cut carnation drew
it up to tinge the blossom blue or red.
I close my eyes and remember the grasping
green tendrils of snap peas, the way they wind
and cling and climb, almost magic, as they slide
me in the tube of thumps and hums, aligning
my protons' spin, they say, and probing me
with music I can not hear. I hold still
and think myself away, at home, at rest,
in the dark behind my eyes, but other plants
infiltrate: the wire vine and oxalis,
the rampant mint, the gallop of crab grass,
invasive, unstoppable, mindless spread.

Later the doctor shows me in slices thin
as deli meat gone gray and bright and dark.
He points out things he thinks I should know,
landmarks in hidden world, isle of long odds,
isthmus of despair, the rising meningeal sea,
hepatic anomalies, osteoclastic
something or other, but I stop listening
and wait for instructions, for next appointment,
his calm soft voice, his slow enunciation
as he scrolls through my insides, a distant surf,

a breeze leaving, repetitions of mourning doves
that watch me in my garden on my knees
in the endless chore of holding back, controlling
the fecundity of weeds, relentless
in their surge and sweep, their green resilience
springing up again and again from their pale
and knotted roots, from their virulent tangle,
in spite of efforts extreme to stamp them out.

James McKee

Point of Infliction

Naught can deform the Human race
Like to the Armour's iron brace.
Blake

The damage is always there:
whether caked in forgetting or,
as now, stark from the stripping
an imagined origin brings.

As when bark, rough and fibrous,
scabs over growth rings
whose even intervals of tissue
must narrow and warp till they fuse,
tracing where a steel shank,
its haft broken off, has sunk
like a dead cutting grafted
for the trunk's life; and beyond.

Bayonet, hatchet, or spear—
one chip off the workbench of war—
has dealt so reverberant a stroke
the pith still thrums with the shock,
which a raving in the leaves foretells
ends only when the tree is felled.

To ensure the barbs can sever
webbed capillaries no further,
cells down the gash begin,
not to heal, but to clot, harden,
and die into a stiff coat
of self-secreted cement
casing, like a sleeve, the wound

in a numb, unyielding rind
that proves itself far tougher
than the moist enveloping matter.

Fallen, its remains soon crumble
to nothing but a fist-sized fossil.

Eras pass; continents shift;
the nugget of anguish persists
through forest, suburb, jungle,
floodscape and desert, a kernel
assembling, like a hailstone, shell
upon shell upon shell of minerals
into a hulking, rust-flecked boulder,
scoured, then abandoned by its glacier,
shedding itself now flake by flake
into the sand anchoring its bulk,
and ravaged less by weather
than the lodged unblunted splinter.

From a trough between dune and dune
it juts like a sullen ruin,
where figures blurred by heat—
perhaps like us, perhaps not—
stand gazing upwards, together
in what looks, from afar, like wonder.

Kelley Jean White

Barred

Again you're a crack in the bell of my skull.
I'd like to wring your little chicken neck:
you just dragged me into the bedroom so I could smell
whatever you smelled on your rumpled sheet,
listen to your anger spitting dry rust into my breath.
I'm tasting your soggy breath. You grow small
Mr. Lowly. Is there 911 in Heaven? Were you injured
when you fell? When the angels dropped you
you were guilty of reckless burning in the first degree.
But this is Weirs Beach, just a bit past the Drive-In
Theater; it's crumbling into dust around our picnic
Blanket, rumpled in the mosquito-haunted air.
Today the owls are quiet. Last night I heard them
squawking in the night air, or was it screaming?
Owlets calling the parents? Parents gular fluttering
in the too-hot May afternoon, one adult
watching from high above, neck puffing and then you
see the other on a branch just above my head.
I will not let them mean death. That woman said
she had one of those Public Pretenders representing
her in her suit to get her children back. This small
owl is a ghost face peering from the darkened
wound of the tree. The cleft left when the branch
was wrenched away. By what force? Lightning? Disease?
Or just the weight of growing older? The sodden
Hands of Exhaustion carry my mother's shivering fists
into another room. The spirit owl flies away. I am crying:
feathers, let me hold feathers, drifting on the wind.
I'll remember these lyrics on my deathbed—if 1 ever
lay down, 'the tiny ship was tossed...' That sunken
pillow, you lay your head every night in another
world. Chou Chou, Shoe Shoe, mon petit cabbage.
This is when the door blocks your way with an angry
lock. This is where the doorbell sounds like a haunted bird.

Claudia Buckholts

While the Cold Stars Shine

Rain turns to ice, visibility zero, a car
skids across the median and detonates:
small teeth of flame, mouths open

as though speech were still possible.
Afterwards the doleful drill, wreckage
compressed into a landfill, the car a

black silhouette without depth;
earthmovers wrestle the ground flat.
Above me shine the cold harmonies

of the stars. Birds whir past, ice slicking
their feathers, looking for home. I'm
an understudy, failing my role in the

challenging light, waiting in obscurity,
sans audience, an auditor fashioning
from the days beadwork and scrollwork,

a patterned dress to wear on a disappearing
stage. Through many intermediaries, I watch
ice turn to rain, while the cold stars shine.

Stephanie Coyne DeGhett

Sonata's

I.

On her infrequent trips home over the last decade, Shira would show up with the chocolate-dipped cookies her stepfather always brought home when he came back from a road trip. And she would find a shrinking downtown and a shrinking mother behind the counter at *Sonja's*—an anomaly of a lingerie shop still open for business in the midst of a procession of closed stores with their empty windows and curling "For Rent" signs. It was in a neighborhood presided over by Concert Hall, a legendary venue whose marquee had been unlit for twenty years.

"Here, Mom," Shira would say, sliding the white bakery bag across the glass display case in the store where she'd grown up, "the ones you like." On a good trip, the cookies would disappear from the bag. By the last few, they went uneaten.

"You don't have to come," her mother eventually came to say. "You're busy and I am fine." Shira had been very busy back in graduate school, but she came at the holidays, thinking to help with the window display. In later years, her mother would say to her, "There's no need. You've got work and right now there's no room in the apartment." Each time Shira did visit, the apartment her mother lived in above the store seemed to be warehousing more and more inventory. The stacks of boxes—pink and lavender advertising logos fading, in styles that dated from Shira's childhood—were not recent deliveries. "I'll stay at the Radisson," she had said to her mother finally and once or twice she did. The last time Shira hadn't even mounted the steps to the apartment. "I'm redecorating," her mother had said. "It's a mess up there." Finally, her mother said, simply, "Don't come."

Shira had an arrangement for keeping track of her mother with Murphy. *Little Murphy's*, diagonally across the street from *Sonja's* was one of the few other business holdouts and sold newspapers and lottery tickets and pocketable snacks. Their system was simple: Murphy was to call her any day the *closed* sign didn't

switch to *open* by 10 in the morning. Both of them realized that Sunday became the system's great flaw and that there were other difficulties as well—a fall requiring immediate attention would not be caught. Shira thought her mother would eventually agree to wearing some kind of alert device.

Neither Murphy nor Shira had thought the system's downfall would be that it didn't include Murphy watching for the sign to flip to *closed* at five. Murphy started going home around four, leaving the place to be clerked by one of his nephews. The sign gave its all's-well message to Murphy for two days, nothing catching his eye until Sunday, when it still said *open*. There must not have been a single customer to notice the ancient proprietor slumped in her chair behind the counter with its display of mannequin legs, graceful feet arched toward the ceiling for decades, each clad in a sample stocking sheath.

And now Shira was back home to decide what to do with the business and building. And what to do with herself. She really hadn't been busy at work last time she and Sonja talked. Her company had downsized. She had been downsized out the door. "Downsizing" sounded like a term her mother would have used, lingerie lingo for women who had lost weight or had their weight shift. A little shift in her life's load and balance.

It's all a question of load and balance, Max—her stepfather—would say about silken supportware, as if he were talking about a bridge. He was a lingerie salesman when he met Shira's mother, but he had wanted to be an engineer and it was his sense of the mechanics of lingerie that had been his great gift as a traveling rep. Shira had driven up, deliberately checking out all the bridges Max had shown her when she was a little girl. She wished her stepfather were here now.

"It was in my hand," a voice said as *Sonja's* shop door opened. Shira looked up—she hadn't thought to lock the front door against customers who thought the store might still be open. She hadn't dealt with a customer since she was seventeen, about the age of the girls walking through the door. She hadn't been terribly successful at it then. Now was the time to just say, *Sorry, but we're closed. Sorry, but we're out of business.* But she just watched as the two

young women came in, one of them carrying a clarinet case.

"It was in my hand," repeated the first girl, and then it was on the floor. And it's not just cracked. The mouthpiece is broken. I don't even want to play if I have to use someone else's."

Concert Hall, with its nearly acoustically perfect performance space—the scene of thousands of events over the stretch of a century—had been saved in the last few years from the calamitous swing of the wrecking ball by a massive fund-raising campaign and a last-minute intercession by city council. The renovations were ongoing, but it had re-opened. Was Concert Hall having a youth camp, Shira wondered, looking at the young musicians—was there a visiting contingent from a conservatory for a six-week program?

"Let's just get the stockings," said her friend. "Then we'll see what we can do." Looking around her, she added, "What is this place, anyway?"

Good question, thought Shira. She found herself wanting to be able to say yes to whatever these girls wanted. But even as she asked what they needed, she knew better than to think she could provide it. *Sonja's* stock was all voluminous nighties and old-school foundation garments. She straightened up and made eye contact. Both girls were a head shorter than she was.

"Stockings, sheer black stockings," said one girl. "A size for 5' 2" and under."

Shira could tell that in spite of the distress caused by the broken mouthpiece, they were beginning to take it all in, every dusty corner. Sonja must have spilled coffee on the counter and the dust had turned to mud. And the mud had turned, in time, to something else. Shira imagined that no matter where one looked in the shop, an ancient grime would be there, too.

"Of course," smiled Shira, only because those were the words she had wanted to say. Behind the counter, the inventory looked like a delicates laundry left undone. After a lifetime of neatly folding delicate fabrics back in their boxes, her mother apparently had taken to plopping them behind a stack of boxes. The girls could see none of this.

Shira turned to the deep drawer labeled *HOSIERY* in her mother's careful hand. Was there anything here that petite? And black? Impossible. But the drawer gave and there they were. An inventory of black stockings in a full array of petite sizes. Never sold. How long had they been here? They weren't so much new as in mint condition—each pair in its impossibly thin box, with a shapely leg on its front and a graphic of a ribbon unfurling the word *SILK* around the ankle.

Pushing aside the alabaster-like mannequin legs on the glass counter, Shira opened the box to display the magic that had somehow materialized in her drawer. Her hand touched the silky fabric. It felt exquisite.

"Oh," cried one of the girls, "but these aren't pantyhose."

Of course not, thought Shira, guessing at the vintage, there were no panty hose in 1962. They had stocked panty hose all through her growing up—the *tall* size she needed was a special order—but there was only remnant inventory left now.

"But they're so sexy," said her friend. The band of black had a faint diamond design running through it.

"We have garter belts as well," said Shira, deciding to push the mysteries of this drawer. They didn't fail her. Shira clicked on the little light on the counter.

The black silk shimmered and made the distressed clarinetist laugh. She slid her hand inside the top of the stocking, fanning her fingers as she held the stocking up to observe. "It seems a shame to waste them on a concert."

Shira had to make the change for the purchase from the bills in her purse.

The apartment's kitchen had proven unusable, so that night she walked to a restaurant—a new one since the revitalization began, one with flower boxes that trailed nasturtiums. Tomorrow would be time enough to begin cleaning her mother's place out, start thinking of realtors. There were other changes on the street since her last visit. One of the abandoned shop fronts was now a vintage clothing shop called *Strut's.* The headless mannequin in the window wore an evening dress of green leather that trailed

behind it in in stiff, bright folds. Wouldn't wearing a green leather dress feel like wearing a body boot? Shira, lover of soft and unconstructed clothing, writhed a little. She looked down at her own attire—soft dark skirt, dark pullover—and brushed at the streaks of shop dust. What did she have to say about green leather dresses?

And who would wear what they saw in the window at *Sonja's*? *Strut's* window was not only a window but a send-up on windows. Her mother's shop, odd enough to be a spoof, was the real thing—arrived at once, a long time ago, without any sense of irony. And now here she was, having to deal with an inventory of Miss Havisham's underwear. Maybe she should keep the shop and call it just that: *Miss Havisham's Lingerie and Intimates.* Do the retro thing up right.

On the stoop, two young people in dreadlocks were talking, one was simultaneously writing in a journal. Several doors down, a cross-legged pair sitting on the sidewalk, backs against the brickwork. She stepped up the concrete stair past the journal-keeper and into a boutique of velvet capes, airline pilot's caps and a display case with bright metallic-colored false eyelashes. Besides the leather dress in the window, *Strut's* formal wear included a plaid evening gown with plastic buckles. She decided to check out the *faux* fur panties with animal prints, the tuxedo-front thongs and the patent leather garter belts. In the end, she decided, they were no more alien to her than the lace-up foundation garments that had peeled away from their wearers in whole jacquard sheets and dropped onto chairs in her mother's dressing rooms.

As Shira jangled the halves of a coconut shell bra, she heard someone say, "We need to check out that weird little store. You know, the one called *Sonata's* or something. They might have it." The girl who was speaking was looking at a belt that had once been a bike chain.

Sonata's? Did they mean her mother's shop? Her shop? What exactly might she have that they might need?

II.

Back in the shop, Shira went into the recesses of the fitting rooms, three curtained cubicles at the back of the store, searching for stashed inventory. The curtains were gestures toward a privacy not actually to be had at *Sonja's,* for the proprietor would be there, curtain in one hand, shoulder against the door, saying, *What do you think?* as the customer smoothed her hands down the silky fabric of a slip and her own contours in a gesture of taming or affection. This was the place that Sonja made her sales, in her ability to wield intimacy and intimidation. This is where Shira's career in sales had ended.

Her mother had been waiting to let Shira behind the counter and into the dressing rooms until her daughter had volume of her own to sculpt—the conspiratorial patter about the ways of soft flesh and silky fabrics was half the sale. It became clear, though, that there was no point waiting for her narrow, leggy daughter's body to comply.

When she pushed back the curtain for the first time to help a customer, Shira cooed in a voice she hoped sounded like her mother's. *Look,* she said, *look what else I've brought you to try*. She thought she could be fine about seeing her mother's acquaintances in their underpinnings—she had been coaching herself. What she wasn't prepared for was the scent of body powder and soap—both like and unlike her mother's—filling the small dressing room. It was all so personal.

And then there were the garments on the floor of the dressing room—a small faintly graying, intimate heap. They spoke of laundry hampers and gentle detergents for hand washes and the unhooked release of the end of the day. She knew the gray tinge was simply how the fabric on that make of foundation wear changed over time. *It's like the discoloration of concrete in an arch bridge,* Max would say when he counseled Sonja against the brand. However briefly, Shira averted her eyes. And then she looked back into the face of the now-embarrassed woman standing there in her underwear, free from the engineering of compression and lift. It had taken a flicker of an instant to fail. Shira wanted

to say, *that look on my face wasn't what you think. I'm new at this. Let's find something for you.* But those words were never going to find their way out.

Her mother materialized instantly with chatter about embroidered panels, her arms draped in the foundation garments she had swiftly taken from Shira. It took her mother's aggressive charms to stand fully clothed in front of nearly naked women and make their shared space an intimately constructed private sphere in which one could be knowing about the ways of soft bodies, could talk about seams and fabric whose elasticity was about to be tested to the limits of its design specifications.

Shira slid back behind the register and pulled out the receipts. Max—gone now for several years—had been the shop's bookkeeper in the years after he retired. His old job increasingly fell to her—as did the dusting cloth and the window squeegee. None of this seemed other than ordinary, nothing except for the alloy of failure and relief she felt at escaping the dressing room. *All things are elastic,* Max would say, *even the steel in bridges. You just can't see the change in shape or the return.* With time, Shira returned to her own shape.

In the shop, on a good day, her mother would say to customers, *We're both good at figures, Shira and I. Shira knows the figures in the books—me, I know other kinds of figures*. She would pat her full hips as she turned to go to the dressing rooms with three bras over her arm. On a more ordinary day, they would bicker. When Max was alive, it would happen under their breaths when they were elbow to elbow at the register. *Be good to her,* he would say softly to Sonja. *She's your only girl.*

After Max died, when she was a teenager, the discord took on volume and they would complain at each other across the length of the long, narrow store. *You'll lose customers,* hissed Bibi, her mother's oldest friend, one day, as she pinched Shira's upper arm. *Don't talk back. She isn't going to change.* And then Shira left home—at a time when leaving was natural enough to do. It didn't surprise her that the door wasn't really left open for her return. And now here she was, considering a return after all.

What are my assets? Shira asked herself that night. Her mother's assets had been threefold: an intuitive understanding of lingerie and the bodies that inhabited it, the store itself and the voluptuous figure she had spent a lifetime commandeering to the needs of the day with jacquard panels and hidden rows of hooks and eyes. Shira cleared a space on her childhood bed and propped her long legs against the wall. Her ankle-length skirt lay crumpled on the floor, her knee-highs in a ball beside it. Her goal was to come up with three things of her own. She could come up with only two, and they seemed insufficient: this old building and her ease with numbers.

She pulled her bare foot toward her and massaged the instep—it was a pretty foot with its high arch. Her hair was unruly and she was taller than she had ever felt comfortable with, but her foot was elegant and her legs were shapely. This then was a third thing, the last in her trio of assets: a well-turned leg. Great gams.

What a waste, her mother had remarked to Bibi one day, as they stood outside the dressing room Shira occupied one afternoon after closing. She was trying on clothes for Bibi—who owned the dry cleaner's with her husband and did alterations. *No frontside, no backside,* her mother said. *Just these legs that end up going on forever until they get nowhere.*

That night at dinner, one of Max's records spinning on the hi-fi, her mother said *Your figure is funny as a hairpin.* And Max said *A hairpin is really a remarkable piece of engineering.*

Later, when there was, from time to time, a man in Shira's life, she always undressed in the dark or in the closet or under the covers or in the bathroom. And when she arose, she would swing her legs out of bed before the alarm, keep a big bathrobe by the bed. If all else failed, she would push herself up against the headboard holding a pillow to her and chatter until she was the last in bed and alone to rise.

Shira pushed herself up against the headboard and crossed her legs. What was it that musicians might need? What would a store called *Sonata's* carry?

III.

The only one to attend the opening of her new store was Murphy. He and Shira leaned on the glass counter near the window and toasted with a couple of bottles of iced tea that he had brought over from his store's cooler. They waited until dusk deepened to near-indigo and turned on the switch to the new sign in the window. The fluid tubing of neon turquoise flickered and blinked and then lit up: *Sonata's*.

"Your mother would have loved it," said Murphy.

"My mother would have hated it," said Shira.

After Murphy left, she stepped out the door and looked up and down the street at the other lighted shop windows—the café, a sliver of a bookstore. At the end of the block, Concert Hall, its marquee alight with hundreds of bulbs. It all had the effect of a gathering of bioluminescent ocean floor creatures trying to attract what they could, each with its own strategy for glowing in the dark.

Almost everything she sold was concert black—and concert-related. She sold bow ties—on the wall behind her cash register, she mounted a sampler display of them as if they were butterflies in black-edged, glass-fronted specimen cases from a biological supply catalogue: they looked like exotic species that had evolved on some distant island. Striped black-on-black, black shantung, soft finish crepe, red silk jacquard, white charmeuse, silver-on-black paisley. She sold cummerbunds to match the bow ties. And she sold men's dress socks—fine-ribbed, basketweave, black with a nearly invisible silver fleck. She sold white dress shirts for men, pleated-front tuxedo shirts of Egyptian broadcloth, Oxford shirts, white shirts that met local high-school dress-code standards. She had men standing inside her mother's dressing rooms whose curtains had been replaced by louvered doors that swung closed with the quiet click of a magnetic latch.

She carried a line of black skirts that fell to the ankle and traveled so well that they could be wadded in the corner of a suitcase on Friday morning and played in on Friday night without the touch of an iron. The only lingerie she sold were stockings—

primarily pantyhose: black, tawny, mocha, black with a tiny run of diamonds at the ankle. A small local market had developed among the younger musicians for garter belts and thigh-high hosiery and she kept a modest stock for her new aficionados. When she went to concerts, she watched how fabrics behaved in the lights.

On the counter she had a basket of cakes of rosin in velveteen bags and another of business cards that spelled out *Sonata's* in letters like neon at dusk. In her mother's things she found postcards—a stash of the ones Max had sent her when he was still on the road—ones that read *Home on Friday*—and among them she found a linen postcard of the old Concert Hall and had it reproduced. She began to sell the CDs of visiting performers—a 15-member university choir from Zimbabwe, a Celtic jazz group called Re-Fuze. She brought down Max's old record player and his collection of vinyl and thick 78's and sometimes, instead of Public Radio, listened to Bach or Benny Goodman.

In the opening weeks customers came—curious—to browse the shop. Now they were returning to buy things. She quickly became a performer's problem-solver: there was always the right size, the right sock. She began to realize after a few months, that people came to buy specifically from her narrow, quirky store. Maybe *quirky* was no longer the word—maybe she had become a specialty shop. The girl she had seen at *Strut's* came in one afternoon, talking with a friend about having saved up for a beaded black velvet bag on a silk cord. Shira made sure to put it into the gift bag, the one with the rendering of the neon *Sonata's* sign.

The trick was to be able to always say yes. At least that was her preliminary philosophy. It might have its drawbacks. It was amazing how hope and fear sometimes played tricks with her talent for numbers, how wanting to be able to provide just the right thing in the moment tinkered with her radar. Shira would stay in the shop for the hour after closing to arrange the new inventory she invested in, following her mother's belief in keeping a deep stock. The ledger numbers on her electronic spreadsheets were terrifying.

On many days, late in the afternoon, past closing, she pushed

the ledgers aside and settled in behind the counter with a napkin stacked with from-the-package cookies and a takeout of tea and surveyed her new domain. Her mother must have done this in quiet times—taken a visual accounting of the shop. Had she been lonely? Had she been energized? Had she felt captive or set free in her own terrain? Shira certainly felt all those things. Here she was, a narrow woman with a generous severance who had inherited a narrow shop and was now placing her faith in bow ties. She sometimes found herself with an after-hours customer if she didn't click the lock when she came back with her evening sweet treat. This night she had her back to the counter.

"Nice legs," said the new customer, shifting the vintage silk-clad alabaster legs to the side of the counter as he laid out several pages of notes.

"My stepfather's," Shira said as she turned around. "That is, he was a salesman a long time ago. Lingerie. A traveling rep. These were his traveling display." At this moment, she could feel her knee-highs doing their end-of-day sag. Underwear could be humiliating even when it went unseen.

"Interesting job," he said, turning one gracefully pointing foot and abbreviated leg a little. And then he said, "I'm sure I'm here for something that is a lost cause." His name was Sam and he was a youth orchestra director—and they had forgotten some of their concert gear for the boys. A regional competition—the finals. He consulted the lists—he needed twenty-two white shirts in nine different sizes.

"The new solution is that everyone wears jeans—that's all they've got—and we try to make them look formal from the waist up. A dressed-up dressed-down thing. They look great," Sam said, "but if we can't make the white shirts thing work, it's going to just look like rehearsal. We've put in a call for the lend of bow ties from area musicians."

She checked the list, and started to move other boxes of shirts his way. "14 ½ X 33," she said, sliding a box toward him. "15 ½ X 34."

Twenty-two shirts, nine sizes.

IV.

When the door to *Sonata's* opened Friday afternoon, sirens—ambulance? police?—were shrieking from vehicles flashing down the street in front of the store. It all gave an emergency adrenalin to the entry of a late-day customer. The woman was as tall as Shira, but built like Sonja. Her hair was pulled up in a soft but orderly twist and pinned in place with a silver hair stick. She wore a silky burgundy tunic with an embroidered placket over loose black silky trousers. Elegant. The woman looked around and then moved down the narrow aisle she nearly filled. The cellist. Zsófia—the great Zsófia. She was known primarily by her given name—but that in no way implied any more familiarity than calling a king *Edward* or a queen *Catherine*. Zsófia had played La Scala and the Sidney Opera House. *Demanding,* is what the director of educational programming said about her. *Intimidating.*

This was the formidable and legendary Hungarian cellist who had, as a very young girl, walked to a new life across a snowy border in the middle of the night with her family. Who had terrorized production managers and offended conductors. She was here now to give master classes and perform. Shira's dress for the evening performance—this woman's performance—hung on the back of the bedroom door upstairs.

Afraid in her own store. Shira felt a flash of old dread take her. She had done nothing but crawl into the tunnel of a store in which her mother had immured herself. She hadn't taken a day off since she opened. Maybe this was the inevitability of a narrow store: you never left. Bow ties—who ever rescued herself selling bow ties? She should have found herself a little family chain of hardware stores, wowed them with her retail accountancy expertise until they forgot they were hoping for someone just a little younger. Maybe she could work for that nonprofit downstate—a friend from grad school had a connection that would get her an interview. She marveled at how hope and fear sometimes played tricks with her talent for numbers. Now here she was, with the cellist and enough inventory to go properly broke with.

"I saw the stockings in your display," said the cellist. "I thought maybe you carried lingerie. You know, brassieres." She was scanning the place, taking in the bow tie lepidoptery, the rosin baskets, the elegant socks. "Or some kind of shaping garment," she added. "A body briefer?"

Shira recognized the change of tone in her customer's voice when she started talking about these intimate, silk-paneled feats of engineering. Lingerie could reduce the most confident woman.

"I lost my luggage. They returned all but one bag—the one with all my night clothes, toiletries, undergarments. I can sleep in anything," she said, "but I can't wear my performance clothes without a little support. And the underthings I'm wearing now won't work at all."

Shira guessed a size.

"Close," said the cellist. "Maybe a size up."

It's all a lonely business, thought Shira. Whatever performances fell to you, you shouldn't go unaccompanied. And the right thing against the skin was company. "Let me get you some of our possibilities," said Shira, overcome again by wanting to produce the needed item from her stash of absolute improbabilites. There were boxes under the stairs leading up to the apartment, the stock Shira had moved out of the shop. There were no doubled sizes in her mother's trove, she knew that ahead of time, but cup sizes got less accurate as they went up and maybe something in all the foundation gear she had inherited would work. Three boxes were possibilities. In the dark Shira wiped them individually against the chance of dust and hoped for the best. She returned and ushered the woman into one of the louvered doors, and handing her a white, firm-control body briefer. Spandex. A 3-hook, 3-row, 3-column hidden hook-and-eye closure. She let the door click closed.

She heard rustling and breathing. Movements. And then silence.

"Can I help?" asked Shira.

"Maybe." The door clicked open.

The soft spillage under the woman's arm looked uncomfortable. Shira reached over and tugged at the top bit of elastic as if she

had adjusted strangers' intimate garments a thousand times. "You need a little flexibility," she said.

The cellist's hair was coming undone a little.

The second body briefer was beige, and Shira started to call it nude, but this woman wasn't after the comforts of being nude. "Taupe," said Shira. "A lovely, light taupe." The cellist admired its luster—a finish that would let clothes slip over it.

Too small.

"I can probably manage with that first one," said the cellist.

And then, from the third box, came a black garment. It was an older technology, guessed Shira, than what you might find on the torsos in most lingerie departments, but its design took into account contour and support and elasticity and its shiny satin details were pretty enough that Shira ran her finger gently along a side panel just to feel it. A body briefer in white could look like a bandage, but in black it shimmered.

The cellist gasped and reached for it. "I can never find them in black."

V.

Later that night, the youth orchestra director remarked on the performance of the great Zsófia. "All that power. All that joy. I think it was your doing," he said.

"Don't underestimate lingerie," she said.

They were in the shop. The neon sign was glowing in its turquoise script letters, but the only store lights still on were at the back. The door was locked. They were, at the moment, in one of the louvered dressing rooms. He had been trying on shirts. And now he was slipping something up over his head—and then he was slipping something up over hers. An intimate space, clothing in a small heap on the floor. A vertical space, a space for a hairpin form in the soft engineerings of the moment.

Gabriel Welsch

Grown-Up Shoes

I had been telling Sonny for days that I did not want to go to Carla and Lou's gathering for Eva. But we both knew Carla was excited about it. Eva had come back to town to introduce us to her new partner, a man, and about whom she made declarations in the email that would have appalled the woman we all knew in graduate school: they were considering a child, had purchased a home, hosted dinner parties.

Carla had joked about dyeing her hair scarlet for the gathering, but it was too short to matter. She was not a temptress locks person. For her, a comb scarcely was necessary. She enjoyed the severity of her glasses, saying her expressive gaze would do.

In graduate school, when Eva lived in town among us, we did potlucks, the usual cash-strapped entertainment of transients. She was happy Carla and Lou would host the party, and we could tell by how Eva said it that *hers* were *soirées* where she cooked, gave thought to what plates she used (however ironic the choices might be), that she and her husband (Josh was his name; apropos, we thought, given that for so long we thought it a joke) would tidy up and perhaps go so far as to clean before anyone arrived. She had been breezy and offhand, as if she had not spent four years marinating in a theory vitriol she absorbed with the ardency of the addicted.

Carla was excited herself to host. Many of the people who would gather had not seen her in this way. She had been the youngest of our loose association of people, with sufficient patronage while a student to go out, travel, buy new clothes. It seems silly in retrospect, but because she had the dignity of pursuing what we regarded as a real life (bourgeois, yes, with the mix of envy and disdain that such a term too often embodies, but she was also straight and that made things easier for her), we dismissed her, passively, and eventually shamefully, as *lightweight, flighty,* and less. But for all her loose academic chops, they were sufficient to have earned her the directorship of the college's humanities

center. Not tenure line, very administrative, but she read what she wanted, occasionally taught, and managed respectability. Truth be told, many of us were envious, especially those who denied it the hardest.

But employed, married to Lou—a geologist working for the county, who was all things sensible and stolid, who was bearded and avuncular, perpetually ball-capped and redolent of wood and stream—Carla had achieved what she had been clear she most wanted. He was pronouncedly not one of us. Lou lacked our ambition, sure, but Sonny said that if he *had* cultivated any ambition, the demands would have taken him away from what Carla saw as his role: adoration of her, no competition in her sphere, no jumping the boundary of his position—and proper housework sharing.

Sonny I had met after grad school. Like Lou, he was stability incarnate—in the form of a network analyst. Where he worked, the majority of his co-workers lived in the beige cubes we told ourselves we attended graduate school to avoid. He had the office with a real door even if the walls were primarily glass. He himself was not beige, but neither electric nor chrome, an English green maybe—the classic hue of an old MG—and knew his charm, his bearing, the line of his neck and the dive slope of his back. Mostly, he didn't abuse the power of his presence.

I know some of our friends saw Sonny as a paycheck, *my* paycheck. Because of him, I could afford to do more of what I wanted. And because we chose never to try to adopt. I wrote for magazines, corporate clients, did social media consulting, but mostly wrote what I wanted. I could claim rigor in my endeavors, but suddenly it was I who had become lightweight, flighty, and any success attributable to *well, he has a partner who makes it all possible.* Comfort was no virtue, however accidentally it emerged. I understood Lou because Sonny was my Carla, in some ways: my own lane had grown narrower even as I enjoyed freedom for my pursuits.

Sonny loved Carla. She was funny and smart—we knew that. But she committed more to it, was more comfortable in that skin. She would break into song and, while it was annoying, warbly

song, with all the vibrato that once had been trained into her, the gusto she had made it forgivable. She delighted in scarves and flowing ensembles, in romance novels and gossip television, and feminist critique ala Buzzfeed and Jezebel.

It wasn't Carla, *per se*, who gave me pause. Nor was it Eva. We were in touch, I liked them. They lived nearby, so it was not arduous travel. We were close enough that we could head back afterward if we wanted to, or stay at a hotel in town.

"What is it, then?" Sonny asked. It was late afternoon, a Friday, a week or so before the gathering. I had returned from a client meeting, and he reached over and loosened my tie as I removed my jacket. He had opened wine. I saw the ploy.

"You've asked a lot. I just don't know," I said. "How about we not talk about it?"

His frustration was palpable, poker-face or not. He could release a pheromone of peevishness that I could smell in the next zip code.

"I do not think I will be comfortable with those people anymore," I said.

"If I can do it you certainly can," he said. "But it's more than that."

"You always say that," I said. "How about we just not talk about it? I will assent to going, but I reserve the right for us to leave at any time, and you will follow."

"I'll just add that to the list of things we don't talk about."

I refused that bait as well.

We were to have worked in the garden the morning of the party, but the fog had been heavy, spring still uncertain, and so we puttered in separate parts of the townhouse. I could hear Sonny in the kitchen, cleaning things, tinny music coming from his iPad. I felt an almost clandestine frisson looking through some old papers and photos, remembering the awkward proto-adults we were, yelling and carousing about ideas into the night, into conversations that usually just devolved into bitchy gossip about other students, the profs, and the always disappointing (perhaps

too much like us?) undergrads. I told myself the people would be different. Smarter clothing, more reserve, a better cache of conversational *bon mots*. But I kept going back to imagining those roles.

Everything I owned was black and fit for meetings or t-shirts and summer vacation wear—my preferred garb for home writing. To my former colleagues, I would look like I was wearing an interview suit or not yet mature enough to have items that fit the amorphous *business casual* universe. Sonny was the dresser, and could be ready in fifteen minutes for any occasion. I could hear each flip of a magazine page like an alarm, reminding me of the time. I yelled for him to help me, bemoaning that I didn't even possess shoes suitable for adulthood.

"My shoes are all loafers or worse. No laces," I said. "I am a ridiculous person."

He was wearing a seersucker coat and slacks, like he was going to sail somewhere while holding a gin and tonic. I nearly said, *what are you trying to prove?* but then remembered the jacket. He had worn it on the worst day of my life. I knew, *hoped*, he wasn't provoking me. I put down the shirt I was holding, slowly enough that his expression changed.

"*That* jacket?" I said. It was all I could manage.

He looked at it, held an arm out and turned it once. It was as though he searched for a stain.

"Please change."

"What?"

I inhaled, through my nose, the calming intake that is supposed to settle you.

"The day you came home, the day you told me you knew about—" I couldn't say the name. That was one of the very few rules we had had since that day. It was a rule that gave me comfort and dread, as well as strength and a shorthand for moments when we needed to push through to the next part of a conversation.

His face snapped to awareness. "I was wearing this, wasn't I?"

I nodded. He nodded, too, slowly at first, not breaking eye

contact. He could make me worry about a fist when he wanted to, though it had never happened. I too often felt it would be a release to get there.

Then he took the jacket off, flipped it to the vent, and proceeded to try and tear the suit in half. My instinct was to yell at him to stop, but I resisted. And as he found the jacket more resistant than he thought, I nearly laughed but suppressed it into a snicker. His glare demanded to know what was so funny. I turned and did not turn back until he had left the room.

The drive was quiet. Sonny noodled on his phone and I watched the gas mileage gauge and drove trying to game it. For once, Sonny didn't say anything about it. Carla had let us know little about actual plans, other than we would be combining Eva's arrival and a birthday for her son, Jeffrey, who was turning four.

The crowd was mixed—friends from Jeffrey's daycare, former colleagues and other academics with whom she now worked, Eva, of course, and neighbors. There were easily twenty or twenty-five people there, and in their small home, with its 1920s floor plan made firm with solid wooden and plaster walls. It meant noise, people in little groups in different rooms, constant shifting seats when someone went for a refill.

A lawyer named John and his wife, Aggie, friends from daycare (which explained the unlikely association of Carla with the ruling class), provided the other children: an amorphous one-year-old who was perpetually being held by someone and a four-year-old nicknamed Bixie Boop, her moniker an almost verbal spasm they had around her the entire time. Aggie's parents also came, her father apparently a mid-century trust fund novelist who worked with an editor in New York. The editor was 85, kept offices in Hell's Kitchen from before its gentrification, and persevered while preserving his lease. The question, the ersatz novelist said with a line he had clearly zinged before, was whether the man kept the career to keep the office or vice versa. He said this with the knowing wink possessed by those who have spent sufficient time in New York as to inveigh to we bumpkins how *it has all changed*.

The ersatz novelist, it turned out, had never published anything. I told Sonny, later in the kitchen, as Carla checked on her sloppy soufflés, that his paying for that expense struck me as profligate, an investment in something that, at his late stage in life, has still not amounted to anything. Sonny sipped wine and kept his eyes fixed on Carla, bent into the oven.

Also at the party was Mandy Chen, the person from school about whom I knew the most. She had stayed in the area and I saw her occasionally. I referred to her as The Vegan, as to me, that had been her most salient characteristic, since she seldom spoke and I found her writing difficult to decipher and requiring more effort than I was willing to give. She had a new man, a gentleman named Max, and unfortunately, he drew her more clearly in my mind, and not in a helpful way.

Sonny bristled about him right away: the smug air of cultivated avante-culture—round glasses, striped denim blazer artfully faded and a pair of Chuck Ts, jeans and a shirt. The shirt had a sketchy stencil of a band that undoubtedly none of us knew. Probably Pakistani ambient trip-emo or some other meaningless combination of words that loosely translated to *pretentious and unlistenable*. He had carefully deconstructed facial hair, the loudest voice in the room, and incessant jabber about his counseling work.

Max spent his time *affirming* people, getting them out of their comfort zone, pushing us to *conversation* that would bring the room closer. This, of course, made the four-year-old whose anniversary of living was ostensibly the point of it all, somewhat surreal. For pronouncements Max made, there often arose a gurgle or hoot or scream, and at one exquisite moment, from the baby a sloppy rumble of audible shit that was the one thing that made Max quiet. But only momentarily. He took the initiative to assure us all that it was *wonderfully natural.* The Vegan beamed serenity, first at us, and then at Max.

For someone to whom I said barely four words, I knew all about him before we left. For one, he was too familiar, as Sonny well understood. But he was also Exposition Incarnate. He worked in radio, had three grown and growing children, and apparently

was a social media "pioneer" and a digital "architect" who referred to people as "monkeys" (his Darwinian shorthand showing us he will not tolerate vapid creation narratives). When the medicine alarm on my phone went off as we had birthday cake, he pointed at my phone and winkingly announced to me, but loud enough that everyone knew, that the tune was from the Stone Roses. I said, "Nope, Rolling Stones." We ceased being chums.

He gave me the first sight of how to explain why I didn't want to come. I had long left Ann Arbor. I had found employment, fulfillment, and another life in a suburb far out of town. Sure, it was a suburb, but it contained a greater variety of people than what I had known, and exposed to me some of the impractical nature of what I had seen in school, attracted by the likes of people like Max. I retroactively understood the protection people enjoyed in those settings, oblivious to anything the rest of the world studies. What my friends studied patronizingly.

Though Sonny was bothered by Max, he could see I was more tightly wound. As we refilled plates with munchies, he leaned in to me as if to kiss me. Instead, he said, "*Max* is wearing grown-up shoes with laces, you know."

The noise of the party, for all its mild appearance of people chattering and ignoring any victuals other than wine, blossomed. The seemingly Tourette's-inspired parental admonitions of *Bixie Boop!*, the baby's amplified bowel distress (about which at least The Vegan seemed to grow increasingly concerned), Jeffery the Birthday Boy's newfound zeal for spitting on people, Carla's hooting and singing, Max's air quotes and exhortations, all inspired Sonny and me to seek the back patio's bright April sun. A group had arrived and encamped there, not actually entering the house.

Sonny practically pushed me out the door. As we blinked and stood in the cooler air, he said, only to me, "That guy just makes me want to leave right now."

"Should we? Tell me what you want to do," I said. I had imagined, in great detail, that it would be me doing this, not him. Him wanting to leave was worse.

"Just—no. We're here. Let's talk," he said. "But stay close to me. Please. OK?"

His forehead tightened, his jaw working to set. I gave him my hand. He patted it as though it were a small dog. I thought, *he doesn't know what to do with himself.*

The first person I saw was a surprise: Eugenia Kris. We called her Iggy, or used to. Last I had known, she was earning her Ph.D. while working as an online instructional designer. It was possible she now was simply Dr. Kris. She had not, in my imagination, progressed beyond the two events, salient in my head, that form who she is: her response to a comment Sonny made years ago, where Eugenia essentially understood him as saying poor people are stupid, which was not the case, and another where I (perhaps inappropriately) heard that Phil Kolemann's dog had died and wondered, aloud and ironically, given the prevalence of disease in Kolemann's family and his willingness to talk and write about it at every opportunity, if the dog had expired of cancer.

Celebrating Eva's birthday, it had been one of those parties where the attendees were all either recently out of grad school or still in it. The apartment was Goodwill chic, tapestries on the wall, art made by friends, faded but interesting posters, chipped dishes, and the fare was the combination of potluck necessary for a gluten-free guest, a vegan guest, and an assortment of more conventional eaters, none of whom had much money.

When we roared with laughter at the tragicomic notion of Kolemann's dog dying of cancer—probably from second-hand smoke—Iggy commenced to ball herself into a corner and weep and lash out about our collective cruelty. She had been physically riotous, kicking toward anyone who came near her, coughing out sobs that increased in intensity until some guests grew concerned. It took a long time, perhaps an hour, before she would tolerate one of the women there, the host, to sit with her on the floor, to gently stroke her hair, to whisper at her things none of us could hear. Exasperated, I left long before the situation resolved, with apologies to Eva, who simply sat drinking glass after glass of wine while never taking her eyes off Iggy.

Utterly humorous, I thought to myself at the time. Only later, after diagnosis and medication, was it clear she struggled with something larger than I understood. Others persisted in being her friend, mostly Carla and Iggy's roommate, the one who lived with her after Eva had moved out. Eva finished her Ph.D. and landed at a small college in Ohio, where she married a man and settled down. When she and Iggy had cohabitated, Eva was a professed lesbian, probably struggling with some understanding of the fluidity of affection and gender, since she eventually married her present husband, and, to all outward appearances, assumed the mantle of typical breeder, albeit one both very liberal and conversant in gender dynamics. During the time they lived together, Iggy had developed a crush, we all speculated, on Eva, but never acted on it.

Her depression became aggravated when, seemingly out of the blue, Eva started seeing a man she met in a ceramics class, Len Simon, who was at least 20 years her senior, recently divorced, and the father of two children, at least one of whom was drifting through life as a desultory drinker and occasional tradesman. To Iggy, whose stridency was of a flavor extreme even in a university setting, this was deeply upsetting.

And now, here she was, calm, funny, collected. She was lean now like a runner, and was curiously tan—*curious* since tanning beds seemed to me so antithetical to the person she wanted to project. But then, for all I knew, she had been somewhere tropical. I had to remind myself that she was no longer a graduate student, and that, like me, she was a professional who could do things like take vacation. While the rest of the party had let us slip back into our former roles, we—Sonny, me, and Dr. Kris—did not. We had a bit of pleasant conversation on the back porch. We laughed easily at one another's jokes. We watched the spectacle of Jeffrey choosing to go shoeless in his driveway, to drop to the sun-warmed pavement, and commence rolling about as though he were on a giant rug.

Others joined us, later arrivals from Carla's department, many of whom knew Iggy, and the porch grew more animated with conversation, even as Iggy maintained the posture of an empress

gifting a fainting couch with her imperial recline. I could hear Max proclaiming his intellectual humanity as a gift to all back in the house. Lou scurried in and out from the grill. The children gave not the least of shits as adults paraded their neuroses in and out of the room.

I lost myself thinking and chatting, and then realized I had lost track of Sonny. The skin on my neck prickled. He probably just went to get another glass of wine or to use the bathroom. I recognized some children, their parents very peripheral people to me but whom I had casually known over the years. With some humiliation, I considered how all of the others here, more or less, had seen me and Sonny, too. Frayed hair, eyes pink and brows creased—they interpreted sleeplessness in some way, chose to read reticence as an emotion I didn't want to think about. In a moment, they thought they knew something of us. We had been part of their assumptions, and had witnessed the awkward year we were living through, *working* through is a better way to say it: showing up to events, the two of us, and the simmer was clear, the brooding evident. But no one, with the exception of Carla, said anything to us.

One afternoon as we were leaving a sushi buffet with them, tense and shifty, Carla said to us, "I don't know what's happening, but we want you both to know you can always just be with us." I said to Sonny later, "We will never turn down an invitation." He didn't reply. I know he wondered whether that meant together or on our own.

If people thought about those times at all now, the few who noticed, they probably saw we have not been the same since. I know, because Carla has said it, and Mandy has commented to her, that we now seem calmer, more resigned, and yet happier. They do not know why, unless they have experienced something similar themselves. If so, they do not speculate, knowing the path is a perilous one. They can see now who we are, as if clearly after a long time of fog, and accept us as another bit of complication.

I wondered where Sonny was, again, but with more force. I wanted to touch him, hold him if I could, just confirm his solidity. I could not see him. Oddly, at that moment, he refused coalescing

in my mind. I wanted to confirm the patient phantom with whom I lived. Mandy appeared at my side with a plate of spring rolls, grinning sheepishly as she said, “they have tofu, not shrimp. You look like you could use a little sustenance.” I just walked away.

I found Sonny standing in the straggly garden by the garage, kicking at the dead leaves gnarled among the new shoots of early plants. Behind us, now on the porch amid the previously pleasant conversation, Jeffery bellowed the happy birthday song over and over, invoking his name in the third line.

“I feel like Jesus,” Sonny said. He tried to laugh, a cruel spasm. “I’m standing in a garden and wondering, once again, why you betrayed me.”

My mouth opened on its own, it felt, and I closed it. The useless gesture was all I had. I remember what we learned in counseling, and so after forcing myself to stay in the moment, I said, “I don’t know what to say. I know you’re hurting. Tell me what to do.”

Sonny shook his head and inhaled deeply. “We will never fucking leave this place, will we?”

“We can go right now,” I said.

After a long pause wherein he inspected the tip of his shoe, he said, “No.We have to live. This is just a bad day.”

“This is like it used to be, isn’t it?” It was a lie, maybe, but I needed something solid for an anchor. “This is where I’m from.”

He worked to control himself. “Well, I’m not. It makes me wonder what you remember, and what I can never know.”

I looked behind us at the deck. I remembered everyone here, but now knew none of them. Iggy was Eugenia, Eva was married, Mandy apparently had horrible taste in men, and Carla had friends from the aristocracy. All I could remember, it felt to me, was failure, or putative personhood. That was not the remembering to which he referred.

“You know,” I started, sounding more uptight than I intended, but unable to stop myself, “I am not going to let my guilt and your discomfort push me back into something I am working hard to forget. You could have declined, but we are here. Let’s make the best of it.”

Sonny asked for a mimosa. When I went in to get it, I had to wend my way through party attendees now enjoying the frail sun on the back deck. The rest of the children were making their way to the driveway to join a now partially naked Jeffery who, while still shirtless, had returned shoes to his feet, the laces flopping everywhere. No one told him he was going to trip. Had parenting changed that much?

By the time Eva and Carla caught me up on all the discussion and I returned outside, I could not find Sonny. Bixie was around, because I could hear the homing device mantra of her father trailing her around the yard. Max shared stories denigrating his students, eliciting uncomfortable laughter from the patio group, with the exception of Iggy, who regarded him coolly. I asked her if she had seen Sonny walk off somewhere.

"I thought you left," she said. "Yours was the CRV, right?"

I don't know what I said next, if I said anything at all. Eva had arrived then, and the look she and Iggy exchanged as their arms rose for an embrace gave me enough space to walk away. Behind me, I knew, the weight of that embrace was more than I could watch. The Iggy I knew would be trembling, her eyes a giveaway, but I did not know what she would be like today—cool, despatched, maybe even seductive from a distance. I didn't want to know, didn't want to watch magnetism that raw when I felt like the wrong end of my own magnet, pushing at the pole of Sonny's. I put the mimosa on the rail of the deck and stepped through the chaos of children and toys, and back beyond the garden.

The pulse of his presence showed up via satellite approximation on the map provided by the Find My iPhone app. I realized Sonny's mind might throb like that, peering, a perpetual question and throb of ache. I could visualize where he was driving, where he lingered, though I had avoided those streets for more than a decade. I backed further beyond the garden, beyond the garage, where I could lean against its back wall, amid the cobwebs and the back fence rails with their tangle of vines and creepers.

Amid the noise but apart from attention, I kept watching the pulse. Sonny drove by the apartment building. It was not clear if he drove slowly or stopped, but the pulse stayed there for several

long seconds. From there, he drove by a café where I no longer ate, drove by other places I had to force myself to visualize and remember, since I had worked so hard to put them out of my mind.

I wanted to stop watching him, to leave him to what he was doing, except that I felt I should suffer for it, should hurt myself in an effort to get somewhere near what he was feeling. I tried to picture the look on his face, the squint he got when struggling.

Or maybe not. Perhaps by going to those places, seeing their changed doorways, their dirty windows, the scores of people rushing in and out, people walking sidewalks of a world that existed to us as only a threat but to others as the banality of another town, maybe seeing how others treated it would undo the hold. I hoped he wrote a new world, and that my wishing so was not denying what he felt, or what I had done. I had to wish for him whatever it was he wanted. And I couldn't know what that was.

Carla's voice broke the murmuring din apart, an operatic stretch of her son's name etched in sound like a skywriter making new clouds. Jeffery had fallen, tripped on his laces, down the deck stairs and on his face. He skinned it—this I knew because of Max and his compulsion to narrate the events at volume while the ersatz novelist kept shushing Bixie Boop with the mantra of her name and an idiotic bouncing in his arms. Max told everyone it would be okay, it would be *OKAY*, until I heard Lou tell him to shut up. As I came around the garage, Mandy made it to Jeffery. She lifted him and I saw more blood than I thought could come from a child's face. The other children started shrieking, none louder than Bixie, and her grandfather rushed her into the house.

I caught sight of Iggy, close to Eva, as she let her eyes droop. Eva tilted her head—aside from the smile, it could have been a look of condolence, could have been an understanding between old friends at a funeral. Eva may well have been, that moment, mourning an imagined clarity as I was. Iggy lifted on her toes and kissed Eva's cheek, lingering amid the chaos, and Eva, in her embrace, let her fingers stay a moment in Iggy's hair just above the nape. The children shouted and wailed at Jeffery's stunned

bloody face, the pale sun shocked colors around us, and Lou took Jeffery from Mandy. Carla flailed to his side but Lou put a hand on her shoulder, as if holding her back.

"We need to get this kid Velcro shoes," he said, pointing at the dangling laces. "He's just not ready for these."

I returned my gaze to where Eva and Iggy had stood, but they were separated now. Carla and Lou were cleaning Jeffery's face with Mandy's help. The murmur began to rise. When I entered the house to deposit my glass, Sonny was putting cartons of orange juice in the refrigerator. "Carla sent me on a mission," he said.

My phone was still in my hand, so I put it in my back pocket. I wanted to say something, but had no sense of what it would be. I wondered if it needed to be said, or if I just needed to drop it. Sonny finished packing the fridge and stuck the receipt under a door magnet. He grabbed my arm and said we should go outside, the weather was great. He was in an entirely different mood than earlier. While I figured we might speak about it later, in the car, at home, somewhere, I decided to simply indulge it, enjoy the change, however it came. I was weary of hiding behind the garage or worrying over everything.

On the porch, fresh drinks in hand, we stopped to begin chatting with Max and the collective attention turned then to Jeffery, now naked but for his underwear bunched about his knees, in the driveway pissing a confident splatter in a wide circle created by his zest for the now.

Daniel Webre

Blues Harmonica

Simon piped a blues harmonica some nights when he went to get the buggies. It was more or less a drawing in and out of his breath, a droning—not playing so much as amplifying the wheeze in his lungs—the blues harp's chords gliding across the empty parking lot. It sounded off to distant trains. The same device at upper registers he used to call his dog. Maybe that was who he was thinking about when there was no one else around.

I myself had no real reason to be out this time of night, except I wanted eggs for breakfast and this supermarket stayed open all night. I don't know why they did that. My late night express-lane runs wouldn't be enough to keep them in business. But I was grateful. They gave me something to do.

Sometimes Simon would come and stand at the bagging station, as though expecting someone with a full cart to pull up at any moment, forgotten and shopping somewhere in the vacant aisles. That was the only way I knew his name. I had seen his name tag, taking note only because of his odd musical habit. Otherwise, he was just a guy working at a grocery store. He did his job, didn't bother anybody, and I didn't think there was much else to notice really. But now with this harmonica business, I guess I was trying to figure him out.

He was a little bit heavy-set. Wasn't slow, but took his time. There was something vaguely Amish about him—maybe it was the way he kept a ruddy beard but no mustache. He could have taken better care of himself. His hair and beard needed trimming, and where they had grown out, they were starting to curl. I'm certain now—he must have been Amish. One of those who'd left in search of the city and never gone back. He'd chosen a new life, working in a grocery store, every now and then sending echoes throughout the parking lot. Not quite music, not quite noise, either.

How did I know about the dog? I wouldn't have. Except one day, I'd gone for a walk. It was early evening—still partial

light out—and I wasn't far from my apartment—just a couple of blocks—when I hesitated. A strange dog was loose. One I hadn't noticed before. It shouldn't have been out walking in the middle of the street unattended, at this or any other hour. It hadn't threatened me. In fact, it wasn't paying me much attention at all. We both were walking vaguely in the same direction, though the dog was veering off at an angle and would soon reach the other side of the street. It had tiger stripes and seemed large. But in reality, it was only medium-sized. The tiger stripes made it seem taller than it actually was. Otherwise, it had a coat the color of honey mustard and the face of a Schnauzer.

Like I said, I stopped as soon as I saw it. I wondered what it was going to do next. Thinking about it now, more than likely, it would have continued on its way and I on mine. But then this beat-up old sedan pulled up a little further down the street, and I watched as the guy from the supermarket got out. Simon, that is. He was wearing his uniform, like he was getting ready to go to work. But the dog ignored him. Which was weird, given what was about to happen. Simon took out his harmonica and played the highest note possible. It made my ears tingle, but the effect it had on the dog was something remarkable. The dog stopped in its tracks, then looked up at the sky—like it might howl or retch. Then it sat down. Its leg started twitching as though it wanted to scratch. Simon played the same note again, which caused the dog to shake for another few seconds. Then it was up again. Its course adjusted so that now it headed straight for Simon's car and the open door behind the driver's seat.

But back to this night. It was about one in the morning when I got home, and I thought about maybe making myself a breakfast of eggs now that I had them in the house. I decided to wait, though. As I lay there in bed for what seemed like hours, a freight train passed through the north side of town. Usually, I would have been sleeping already when this route came through. Train whistles never woke me. It was a sad, sad sound, as all train whistles are, but it had nothing on that tuneless harmonica. I got even sadder thinking about that mustard-colored tiger dog waiting

on its master to come home or possibly plotting its escape again. I was certain it must have been listening to the train whistle too. Maybe it could even hear the harmonica at such a distance. Dogs have superior hearing, as we all know.

This set me to thinking about the Amish community off in the country somewhere, one member fewer because Simon had chosen grocery-store life over theirs. I wondered if they felt bitter about that. Had the dog also left the Amish? Or had Simon tamed it as a stray, using those upper-registers of his harmonica? All this is simply to say, I kept on getting sadder, because it was late, and I couldn't get any sleep.

I must have slept, though, because when I woke, it was morning. I wanted to sleep some more now that I had gotten the hang of it, and I hoped to do exactly that before I started thinking about those eggs waiting in the refrigerator. But before I knew it, the thought occurred to me that maybe I should get a harmonica for myself—though I didn't want a dog or a grocery-store job. But I did want to learn a song of some kind, something jolly or jaunty, the very opposite of melancholy, something that would expel every sonorous sound from my memory.

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