cottonwood

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Christina J. Kelly

HOT RAIL

It's called "training" he tells me and tries to explain, but I just shake my head at him. Despite the description, I can't picture exactly what he means. It's not until we actually ride our bikes over the levee and he takes me out onto the tracks to point where we'll we be sitting that it starts to makes sense. It is, without exception, the stupidest, most dangerous thing I have ever considered doing. He stands before the bridge, looking up and down the tracks for a minute, then turns and signals me forward. We're lucky, he says. There's a train coming. He sits down with his back against one of the iron girders that supports the bridge, his right side against the bridge proper. The ties are inches to his left, the rails just beyond that. He motions for me to sit between his legs, which are bent at the knee, his feet flat on the ground. I step around him, my shoes crunching over the ballast of the track bed, and wedge myself against his chest. He wraps his arms around me, his legs on either side of mine. I feel a deep pulsation as the steel starts throbbing like a living thing. I am scared, but he says it's relatively safe, which would be funny if it wasn't so absurd. The train theoretically can't touch us if we stay tucked and pressed against the bridge. Are you sure you've done this before, I ask, having to raise my voice over the advancing roar as the train gets closer. Yes, he laughs, and the idea that he's probably been here with other girls flits across my mind. I hear the whistle blast as the rail vibrations begin propagating from my tail bone all the way up my spine, concentrating at the base of my skull. It's almost here, but I can't look around the support because if I miscalculate where the train actually is, my head will be separated from my body and he will be sitting there with a corpse. Instead, I press myself deeper against him, tuck my chin down and close my eyes. I wait like that, feeling the sweat trickle off my nose and in between my breasts, focused on the cocooning heat and mix of smells surrounding me, dank earth, ragweed, and the musky scent rising off his body.

When it comes, it is louder than anything I could have imagined. The noise resonates through the air space so completely nothing else could possibly fit. The entire bridge shudders. A tornado is supposed to sound something like a freight train, but I don't know if this is true or not. I open my eyes for a second and see the whir of yellow-red-gray-black rushing past on my left and imagine what would happen if I stuck my arm out, then squeeze my eyes shut once more and promise I will never do anything like this again. The end of the train whooshes past abruptly and before we can move, another one comes by on the opposite track and going the other direction. The reality of what just could have been washes through me, causing goose bumps to appear on my skin. The experience is different because this train is farther away so I can turn my head and look without feeling I'm going to be sucked in. The hypnotic sway of the cars as they wander side to side between the rails is soporific; I think I could be here always, only someone would probably steal our bikes. Finally it is past and I can feel him behind me, slowly inching upward, keeping his body still within the safety zone in case another train is approaching. But the tracks don't hum and only the thrum of cicadas breaks the silence. We both stand up all the way and I can see the train that just went by receding in the distance. Well, he asks, cocking his head a little to the side, what did you think? I don't answer him, just shrug my shoulders. He takes my hand, leading me away from our little L-shaped spot. There's something I've always wanted to do he says, walking me off the tracks, down the dusty slope and under the bridge, where he stops and faces me. What is that, I ask, but I already know because I can see it in his eyes and the slight curl of his lips. He places his hands on either side of my head, his fingers in my hair. He kisses me, then turns me around, leaning my body over one of the smooth boulders in the shadows below the bridge. I don't even care if someone comes by and sees us. The shit I've done today.

Elizabeth Rodriguez

FOR UNKNOWN REASONS

Her grandfather came home with a large glass jar of honey and chopped onions, and he sat it on the counter of the kitchen nook, the one her grandmother had "upholstered" in adhesive contact paper from the discount store.

The jar glimmered in the orange of the setting sun, peeking through the bars of the fire escape attached to their kitchen window. He had gotten it from the Botanica de San Lazaro. Ana knew that as soon as she saw it. The botanica was five blocks away, situated between a twenty-four-hour deli and the Buster Brown shoe store, where her grandmother had always bought her school shoes when she'd been still a student at Holy Mother. It had a purple and teal awning. Her grandfather had taken her to that botanica once when she was in the second grade. It was a secret they'd shared, her grandfather pausing beneath the purple awning, suddenly paranoid and imploring her not to speak a word of it to her grandmother; and inside, she'd seen the old lady whom she'd dreamt of for months afterwards, the one with the gold earrings fastened to her brown ear lobes that seemed to hang lower than they should from the weight of them and the white scarf tied over her coarse hair that looked like the steel pads her grandmother used to scrub the burnt rice from the bottom of her calderos.

The woman had hooked a finger at Ana as the door bell tinkled to a rest, her nails long and glistening as if wet, and beckoned her toward the glass display counter, where inside, on lit shelves, lay rosaries, bottles of holy water, medallas and relics, the paw of some animal that looked like fake leather among them. The woman's charm bracelets clinked against the glass counter as she rested on her forearms. Behind her, almost reaching the ceiling, were shelves of boxed incense and bottled oils and tall, glass-jarred candles in every color, some labeled with only a word, others with the picture of some saint, most of whom Ana hadn't recognized.

Come in and light a candle, the woman'd said, her gold earrings swaying like the pendulums of a clock that could tell two

times at once. She rested still on her arms beside a plastic display of the Virgin Mother, who, at her feet, offered machine cut cards embossed with the botanica's name and its services and number, instead of the obligatory roses. The flame that you light can hear you, she'd said. If you light it, it listens and answers your prayers. It costs six dollars but that's okay, she'd smiled, because it's a very talented candle, and really six dollars is a steal for such a thing.

It was that same woman, Ana imagined, who had charged her grandfather $25 for this honey concoction, because always he was coming home with some oil, some candle, some *thing* he meant for her to keep hidden in a pocket, fastened to the inside of her jeans with a safety pin, in secret where her grandmother couldn't see because her grandmother did not believe in Santeria and wanted none of it in her house.

But her grandfather couldn't help it, he'd told Ana after they'd visited the botanica, because it was in his blood, and then he'd led her to the closet that was all his, just outside the bathroom, the one with no door but a curtain instead, hanging from a shower rod he had drilled into the frame, and showed her an elaborately carved Indian head with a hooked nose and feathered headdress, so big and awkward she could not imagine how he might've hidden it all of these years.

"Are we Native American?" she had asked him, flushing because the idea of being anything than what they already were made her feel lightheaded.

Her grandfather had wrinkled his forehead, his eyebrows coming together for a moment as he rubbed his prickly chin with the tips of his fingers. "No," he'd said. "It's Taíno."

She hadn't known what he'd meant, and seemingly frustrated, her grandfather'd wagged a finger and looked at her from the tops of his eyes. "You should know where you come from," he'd said, and she'd rolled her eyes because that was hard when you'd spent at least half of your life being told that you asked too many questions.

She asked him nothing about the jar of honey and onions just then, as it sat in the waning sun of their kitchen. A far cry from

the honey and milk the Bible had promised, the onions appeared to almost move behind the glass, making her feel sick. In all of these years, he had never come home with something for her to eat, and just how he imagined he would keep the jar a secret from her grandmother she couldn't guess.

Digging through the tray of silverware kept in the drawer by their ceramic stove, he pulled out a tablespoon with a warped handle and looked at her.

"You've got to be kidding me," she said. Leaning against the microwave stand, the vines of her grandmother's hanging ferns tickling the back of her neck, she shook her head, her arms crossed, her ankles too. "Not happening, old man."

"Ana, please," her grandfather whimpered, his onyx pinky ring glinting in the sun for a moment and making her squint. "Just try it. If you don't like it, we throw it out. I don't ask much."

"What is it supposed to do?"

He only looked at her, his black curls combed over his forehead, his sleeveless undershirt yellow at its collar. He wouldn't tell her, she knew, and she had spent years already carrying out his spells for reasons unknown. It was only important, she supposed, that he had found her deficient in some way that needed remedying and because he loved her had spent some of his social security check to fix her.

She was named Anastasia for her mother Annie, who had been named so for her grandmother Ana, each name attempting to accomplish something the other hadn't. Ana was too plain, too Puerto Rican, but Annie was American, making her grandmother imagine the little red-head everyone loved. But Annie had found her name a bore, a name for a white girl she could never be, and instead thought Anastasia was exotic and sexy, a name fit for a princess; but you weren't supposed to pick a sexy name for an infant, Ana had been told over the years. That was why a teenager was not supposed to have a baby, her grandmother always said, hooking her finger like the old lady at the botanica, a gesture they had both brought with them from the island of their births. And al-

ways in response, ever since she was in the third grade, Ana would smile at her blandly and promise that she would not get pregnant as a teenager; and always her grandmother smiled too, thinking Ana meant it, but Ana couldn't mean what she didn't understand.

She was called Ana most of the time, just like her grandmother, undoing everything that had been done with the elaborate name game, and sometimes little Ana, "Anita," by her neighbors. But at Holy Mother and then at St. Cristopher's, to her classmates and her friends, she was Ana, and in the seventh grade she had learned from Sister Edith that Anastasia *was* the name of a princess, one presumed dead because she had not been found alive after the slaughter of her family. The whole thing had made sense, because her mother had been killed coming out of the subway station two blocks from their apartment, her assailants imagining she had something more valuable than half a pack of spearmint gum, a Walkman, and some used tissues in her purse.

Their neighborhood had been experiencing a "crime wave" that her grandmother remembered through the anchorman Will Blake's nightly reports. Blake had said it was the worst crime spree the city had seen in some time. Her grandmother couldn't remember just how long they'd been without crime up until then, she'd always said when Ana used to still ask, back when her grandmother still lit a candle regularly for her mother's soul—but that wasn't the point. People were being held up when they ran to the bodega to buy a carton of milk, on empty subway cars, within the Plexiglass enclosures of bus stops, and just generally anywhere one might find themselves surrounded by shadow. It was the most dangerous at night, Blake had said, and people should exercise caution, especially when unaccompanied, especially women. To Ana her grandmother's memory of the warning was like the horoscopes she read aloud over her cafecitos in the mornings, the ones warning Ana always that she would soon meet a stranger or some unforeseen circumstance; in other words, it meant nothing to her at all.

Ana remembered watching Blake before he'd retired, a wry man of maybe Irish descent, she thought, now that she knew what

Irish looked like, with a brown mustache and deep wrinkles about his eyes, the kind men were allowed to have, though her grandfather had none while her grandmother had too many. He'd had slick brown hair too, and a lilt at the end of his words that sometimes threatened to tell his viewers where he was really from, if they'd cared to listen. But she was sure none of them had, because after all, they had been experiencing a crime wave, one her mother had laughed off, as the young always do, because she had lived in that place all her life, because no newsman was going to tell her about her neighborhood, because Annie had always been full of herself, Ana's Aunt Lillian told her begrudgingly whenever Ana asked, because Annie hated to stay at home as a mother should, because she had a hard time dealing with the fact that Ana was real.

"I don't know what she thought having a baby was going to be like," Lillian said. "But I guess it hadn't entailed your father running off."

And knowing that she shouldn't bother asking for any more of her mother's story, because always Lillian shut her up with this fact, Ana only nodded. Where her father had gone, no one would tell her, maybe because they didn't know, and she stopped asking because he was a stranger and she couldn't decide if she cared. But it was her father, she eventually learned, who had bought her mother the Walkman she was listening to when she'd died, though Blake had told everyone not to use the devices when walking alone because it made one vulnerable, a target, her grandmother always said when recounting the facts.

Ah, well, when had her mother ever listened to anything anyone told her?

Never, Lillian always said, shaking her head, as always her grandfather looked sadly out the window. Her mother, he'd told her, used to sit on the fire escape watching the L train rumble by from what appeared only an arm's length away, so close she could probably touch the cars if she wanted. She had never been afraid, he'd said. Sometimes it looked to him like she'd caught the eyes of every passenger in those fluorescent cars, just begging to be seen, and Ana imagined her mother waiting, nestled like a bird

in the nest of those wrought-iron bars, keeping the secret of the egg she knew she was going to lay, knowing that the chick inside meant that her parents and her sister were going to hate her, as she waited for the train to pass by.

"She would flirt with your father, thinking nobody noticed," Lillian had told her, and her grandmother had shrugged because, it seemed, she was feeling guilty then for not saying something about it at the time.

"She would use the kitchen phone, the cord pulled so tightly it lost its curl so she could sit on the fire escape and look up at him doing the same two floors above her, and they'd talk all night. Sometimes I'd come into the kitchen in the middle of the night for some water and see her sitting out, on the phone. She'd put the ringer way down so he could call and the rest of us wouldn't hear."

"How did she hear it?" Ana had asked in the middle of some algebra homework that she meant to tell her grandfather about, because it seemed she needed one of his spells in order to figure out the formula and come to a reasonable conclusion for x.

Lillian'd snorted. "She'd sit in the kitchen in the dark, waiting for it to ring. It was pathetic."

And returning to her homework, Ana erased the conclusion she'd come to, flicking the rubber shavings away with her hand.

She had told Kelly to never call her after that.

"Why?" he'd asked, his green eyes wide.

"Because," she'd told him, as if "because" could be considered an answer, and knowing her temper, Kelly had shrugged as they'd chugged along on the number six train, back in the day when they still wore their uniforms and the nuns told them what to do.

Kelly listened to the old nuns because it was in his blood, he'd said, sounding like her grandfather when he'd said it. "I'm Irish Catholic. There's a special place in hell for us boys when we don't listen to the sisters."

He'd smiled, his teeth white and almost perfect—all except for the "rebel tooth," he called it, his lower canine that jutted out at an angle as if it meant to confront his other teeth about some

wrong they'd done—and she'd smiled with him, pretending to understand.

Everyone called him Kelly, because it was his last name, because it was different and sounded somehow more credible than his first name, Simon. Simon was a kid who wore glasses that made him look cross-eyed and pants hemmed too short, but Kelly was the name of a square-shouldered Irish kid whose father had been a boxer and was now a cop, who lived in a townhouse passed down two generations, the only Irish kid in their neighborhood—the one who made the Latin girls swoon because he had green eyes that sometimes looked blue in a certain light, but whom Ana had never found particularly wonderful because she had been a late bloomer, uninterested in boys still in her freshman year of high school.

Thank God for that, her grandmother had said as if testifying to her gratitude in the middle of their kitchen before a steaming caldero of habichuelas. Lillian had started attending a Pentacostal church her grandmother had visited twice before deciding it wasn't for her, and she sometimes allowed their Protestant practices to slip into the serious dealings of her Catholicism. Making the sign of the cross, unable to let go of the Catholic in her veins, Ana had supposed, Lillian had thanked God too that Ana, though her spitting image, was nothing like her mother, and her grandmother had paused, looking guilty again for things, it seemed, she should've been able to control.

"Did they get married?" Kelly had asked her once when she'd told him of her parents' teenage pregnancy as they'd ridden the train back to the nuns one morning. It seemed it would all be okay by him if her parents had made her illegitimate conception all right with a wedding.

"No," she'd mumbled, embarrassed, because by then she'd seen the pictures of his parents on their wedding day, his mother covered from her neck to the red carpet of the church in white lace, a veil of stiff tulle jutting from her teased curls as his father, in his pressed uniform, stood beside her, their elbows hooked, the marble white altar dim in the church's overhead lighting behind them.

Oh, he'd said. Well, she certainly wasn't the only kid in the world with unmarried parents. He could run out of fingers counting just how many they had in their class alone, and it had struck her as odd because she would've never thought to count them as if they were anything other than normal.

He had looked at her then as the train had chugged along on the elevated track. A girl they'd both known since kindergarten, Alyssa Ramirez, jutted her hip out only inches from his nose, her fingers hooked in the belt loops of her jeans and her fake nails shining as if with shellac in the morning light of the subway car. Alyssa, pobrecita, her grandmother had said on the morning St. Cristopher's sent out their acceptance letters, had not been fortunate enough to win a scholarship. She attended Kennedy like so many of the other kids in their neighborhood, and just then was showing Kelly what his green eyes could have, but Kelly paid her no attention and sat instead with his knapsack on his lap, his khaki uniform pants ironed to fine creases at his shins as he looked red-eyed at Ana. He was always looking tired, staying up often to help his brothers with their homework while his father fell asleep in front of the television and his mother worked a late shift at the drugstore that she hated because no one ever bought anything decent after nine o'clock, she said; and in the mornings, his eyes were often red, his skin so pale that sometimes Ana found herself studying him, as she'd done in the third grade when they'd held their arms up against one another to see just how different they really were.

"Well, you're just as hairy as me," a third grade Kelly had told her, as if he meant it as a consolation, and, covering the top of her forearm with the opposite hand, Ana had averted her eyes, blushing for the first time that she could remember. She had hated him for weeks after that and he hadn't understood why, just as he hadn't understood when she'd told him he could no longer call her.

"What did I do?" he asked both times and both times she'd shaken her head. Questions were not always meant to be answered and Kelly was no one to her, she told herself as they got older and he grew taller, more broad shouldered, his jaw harder, his eyes

more greenish blue. They were nothing alike. Kelly had never been like anyone in their neighborhood. He wore Rugby shirts and ate roast beef sandwiches at lunch, said things were "grand" when everyone else had agreed they were "cool," and knocked on her apartment door to ask if she was home when not one of their classmates bothered with such a thing. They understood they'd all run into one another in their buildings' courtyards, something Kelly didn't because he lived in a private house.

"The blanquito likes you, eh?" her grandfather had asked her once in the fifth grade when Kelly'd shown up at their door. Mortified, Ana'd shaken her head.

"Okay, I'm sorry," her grandfather'd laughed, because there seemed to be nothing in his magic that let him know just how different Kelly was.

She swallowed two tablespoons of the honey and onion concoction the woman from the botanica had sent home with her grandfather. If you swallowed it without thinking about what it was you did, it wasn't so bad, she thought, until with a sudden rush the honey was coming up again and she was running to the bathroom to be sick, her hands clasped over her mouth as if she meant to keep the magic of it inside just as her grandmother and Lillian were returning from the Avenue, her grandmother's black shopping carriage filled with white plastic supermarket bags and squeaking under the weight of them as they rolled it through the door.

She threw up the onions violently, her eyes tearing, the smell of the ammonia in the toilet water making her want to gag, and the sight of some stray hairs stuck to the toilet's tank making her more nauseous than the honey; and when she came out of the bathroom, her wrist at her mouth, her grandfather was waiting for her in the living room beside her grandmother and Lillian. Where the honey and onions had gone, where the spoon had disappeared, she didn't know, but it was just her, alone, looking at the three, her grandmother and aunt still bundled up in their coats, her grandfather tight-lipped and keeping his secret.

"Were you just sick?" Lillian asked her, because Lillian could always think of the stupidest questions and ask them seriously.

And when Ana nodded, Lillian looked from the corner of her eye at her grandmother, and without needing to think very hard, she knew the conclusion to which they were both coming. That was just wonderful. They should start to plan her baby shower right then, she thought, and she clutched her stomach and excused herself to her bedroom, knowing it would make Lillian uneasy, knowing in that moment that she looked like her mother, as she did in every other, she'd been told.

In her bedroom, she picked up the telephone and dialed Kelly.

"Can you come over here?" she asked him without even a hello, and, chewing something, Kelly slurred, "Sure," and then hung up.

In twenty minutes he was in her living room smiling at her grandparents, who loved him, they always told him, who remembered him still from the first grade. They always smiled because, it seemed, they were trying a different approach this time, trying instead to endear to them the boy they couldn't control rather than alienate him, as they had her father, who had in response taken what was theirs, her mother, without a hint of remorse, because they had been strangers.

Standing tall, his hands in his coat pockets, Kelly looked across the room at her in question, but she only smiled. Knowing he was being used, he smiled then too, because he didn't seem to care.

"They think I'm pregnant," she told him after she'd had the guts to excuse them both from the living room and then the gall to lead him into her bedroom and close the door behind them as her grandmother wore the same guilty expression she always did, looking at Lillian as if asking whether or not she should permit it.

"Pregnant?" Kelly laughed. "Who's the father?"

"You, if you want to be," she told him.

"I don't know, Ana. This seems like the kind of thing you tell a guy before you invite him over."

She only smiled up at him from her bed. Almost sitting on top of her desk, which was far too small for her now, he laughed.

They had graduated from St. Cristopher's in June and were feeling grown up. The last time they had studied together at the kitchen nook before finals he had played with her hair, tying it in almost a bow in front of her lips, pretending he was only wanting to see what she'd look like with a beard when really he had wanted to touch her. The other night as they'd ridden the train home together from the city campus, holding the chrome pole between them as if meaning it to steady everything vibrating between them, he had slipped his arm about the small of her back just as the train had risen out of the ground, and the yellow lights gleaming through their neighbors' apartment windows had seemed to watch them; he'd dug his nose into her hair, something it seemed he had been waiting to do for a long time, and she'd stood, the ground shaking beneath her, letting him, feeling it was where the train had been taking them all of this time.

"Are you a virgin?" she asked him then, looking up at him still from her bed.

Kelly straightened, clearing his throat. "Well, excuse me, madam."

Ana smiled.

"What makes you ask that?" he asked.

Ana shook her head, suddenly nervous that like her grandfather he had secrets. "No reason," she told him. Looking out her window and into her building's empty courtyard, he nodded, as if asking a question for no reason made sense.

She had spent one year of their time at St. Cristopher's ignoring Kelly because in the beginning of their junior year, he had suddenly realized that he was handsome and had become insufferable. He had eventually dated Alyssa and her shellacked nails, though it was brief, and then Stephanie Gonzalez with the banging body, not Stephanie Torres with the gap between her two front teeth, before meeting Paula, a Polish girl whose family had lived briefly in a two-bedroom basement apartment in one of the townhouses on his block; and that had made sense, everyone had thought, that the blanquito had found a blanquita, but that had also been when Ana

had tired of Kelly completely, who by then was on the baseball team, number 17, and captain of the debate club while she spent her afternoons after school working as a checkout girl at the supermarket and barely finding enough time to finish her homework. But when Paula the Polish girl had moved and Kelly had gone on living like Paula'd never really mattered, Ana had started talking to him again, slow at first, one day deciding she would speak to him as if they'd never stopped talking, and then the next looking at him confusedly as if curious why he thought they were friends again when he'd sit beside her on the train, until eventually Kelly called her out on it and told her to stop acting like a bitch.

"What did you say?" she'd asked, turning to face him in the subway car, her uniform skirt fanned across her lap and her high socks making her knees sweat in a May that was starting at ninety degrees that season.

"You heard me," Kelly'd said, squaring his shoulders, and they'd had it out right there in the subway car as some of their old classmates from Holy Mother, on their way to Kennedy, had pretended to look entranced by the dermatologist ads overhead, while others watched openly, nudging each other and smiling, because Ana never cared enough to fight with anyone.

Ana had gotten off the train a full stop before St. Cristopher's, determined to walk the fifteen remaining blocks alone just to make a point, but Kelly had gotten off too, stalking behind her the whole way as if to prove he could be as stubborn, and by the eighth block they'd both been wheezing in the early morning humidity, feeling stupid as they continued on.

"Hey hold up," Kelly'd finally called to her.

And Ana'd stopped as he'd skipped up to her, his knapsack slapping his back and sounding almost empty, because it was the morning of their second to last day of junior year.

"What did I do to you, huh?" he asked. "Can we call it a truce?"

She couldn't tell him what he'd done because she wasn't sure what that was herself, but she'd said it was fine. Having managed to grow taller still in those months spent apart, he looked down at

her sheepishly, happy, it seemed, to be back at her side after having been so unceremoniously expelled.

Now four months into their first semester at Hunter, they were riding the train together again only further this time and in street clothes, Kelly wearing his jeans too tight at his hips and a navy peacoat, the collar of which he always flipped up, and looking nothing like the other guys in their neighborhood and seeming not to care.

She was telling him about the honey and onions because he had left the previous afternoon without learning just why her family thought her pregnant. His brown hair looked occasionally red as the lights in the train car flickered and he listened to her account of the honey jar and the botanica.

"I know it sounds weird," Ana told him, smiling at the absurdity of it all.

Kelly shook his head. "You want to talk weird?" he started, his rebel tooth exposed as he half smiled. "Then let us, shall we, delve into the world of Irish mysticism for a moment and talk about my mother and aunts who think they can all speak to the dead."

He laughed, his body swaying with hers as the train churned beneath them, and she smiled, as with his hands in his coat pockets he looked about the train car.

"So what do you think it was for?" he asked her finally, his eyes as red, maybe redder, as they'd ever been on their way to St. Cristopher's.

Ana shrugged, because she'd never been able to pinpoint what it was her family found her lacking and had stopped wondering.

Kelly smiled. "I can't imagine you ever needing magic, Ana. Not when you're so filled with it already." The train car slid down into the labyrinth of the underground tracks, screeching and almost drowning out the only nice thing she'd ever heard someone say about her, just as she lost sight of him in the temporary dark.

They looked for the jar of honey and onions together after class.

As if in the fifth grade again, Kelly showed up at her door, only this time her grandparents were not home, having gone to the free clinic to refill their diabetes medications. Together, they looked in her grandfather's closet, behind boxes of photo albums, his toolbox, and then behind the Indian head.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph," Kelly laughed, and shaking her head, Ana giggled compulsively because it embarrassed her. "Well goodbye." Kelly waved at the head as they let the curtain close on their search. Giggling still, her hand over her mouth, Ana led him into the kitchen where they searched through cabinets and shelves until resolving finally that the jar was not in the kitchen. They sat at the nook's counter, Kelly swiveling on the kitchen stool as he had when they were kids, until suddenly, with a hand on his knee, Ana stopped him.

"What?" he said. Very seriously, she pointed to the fire escape behind them, but Kelly knew nothing of her mother sitting bravely in the path of the L train.

Ana opened the window. Nestled in the furthest corner from view was the jar of honey and onions, looking as if it had never been opened. "Wow," Kelly said, as she put it on the counter before him and closed the window. "I was just starting to think that maybe it didn't really exist."

"We should return it," he whispered, sitting suddenly very erect on the kitchen stool, his green eyes wide. "We should say it made you sick."

"That's not how those places work. No refunds."

"Well, isn't that just like Jesus," Kelly said laughing. "Having a no-return policy." Shaking her head at him, Ana slapped his arm because never, not once, had she ever been comfortable with his dark humor.

"So then, what did we find it for?" he asked her.

Ana shrugged.

"You were beginning to think it didn't exist either, huh?" he laughed.

"Oh believe me," she said, feeling she might gag all over again. "I knew it existed."

Kelly leaned forward on his elbows, looking at her, and she remembered the incense, the scarf-headed Priestess and her fingernails. "I'm going to light a candle," she said.

Kelly scrunched up his nose. "Because . . . ?"

"Because," she told him, and he was quiet.

"You can talk to the flame," she said. "And it listens."

"Is that so?"

"Yup." She fished some matches out of the junk drawer by the sink and then rifled through the tray of silverware in the drawer next to the stove. Smiling, she turned to him, feeling flushed, with a book of matches in one hand and a tablespoon in the other. "Then you should try some."

His mouth open, Kelly held her eyes a moment before he said, "Well, aren't you pretty when you lose your mind?"

"Come on."

"Nope," he said, his brown hair falling into his eyes. "Not happening."

She laughed, but he couldn't guess why it was all so funny and sat frozen with an open smile as if trying to guess. Without realizing she was doing it, she pulled a leg beneath her as she sat across his lap, the matches and spoon in her hand. "Please," she whispered, her nose as close to his as Alyssa's hip had once been.

Kelly looked down at her, his eyes looking suddenly blue. "What'll you do for me?"

Ana smiled again. "What do you want?"

"To go home to my mother," he said, widening his eyes.

Ana only giggled.

"I'm serious," he whispered into her ear, nuzzling her hair with his nose as if they'd always sat this way. Looking up at him, she shook her head. "No, it isn't," she said.

Everything in her bedroom looked suddenly miniature, as if Kelly had to bend to fit, though nothing had really changed. As they climbed into her bed, Kelly looking as if he could hardly believe what was happening, she told him, "I can't get pregnant."

"Like ever?" he asked her, panic-stricken.

"No, like right now."

"No shit, Ana," he said, his hands on her hips as in her jeans still she straddled him, and though it was the answer she wanted, some part of her was disappointed with him.

Holding the back of her neck, he kissed her, tasting something sour but delicious, and then with his hands on her hips, paused. "I don't mean that I wouldn't love to be stuck with you," he said.

Atop him still, she only held his eyes.

"That sounds all wrong," he whispered. "But I don't mean it to—I'm saying that if I was going to be stuck with someone, I'd want it to be with you. I know that doesn't sound romantic, but I swear that it is. My mother and father, they laugh all the time about being stuck with one another, and it's a good thing when they say it, I promise."

But being stuck was not romantic, not cute, not to her. She imagined her mother stuck with her, sitting on the fire escape watching the train pass her by and not wanting to come in and look at her infant daughter but to stay there in the cold, shivering and looking for everything else that there was in the world, catching her cold, filling her purse with tissues the next morning before she caught the train out of there, not bothering to say goodbye to her in her crib because she did not think much of her, this being she was stuck with, Lillian had said.

Kissing her neck, Kelly played with the hem of her shirt and she stopped him.

"What is it?" he asked.

"We should return the jar of crap," she told him.

"I thought Jesus didn't do refunds."

"It wasn't Jesus who sold it," she sighed, climbing from his lap.

Sitting upright in her bed, his pant legs twisted about his knees and revealing his hairy calves, he watched her, the waistband of his boxers poking up out of his jeans at his sides. "Well, I went ahead and talked myself right out of that one, didn't I?"

"No," she said, feeling the heat of him still in her chest. "We just have to return it first."

The same bell she remembered from years ago tinkled when she went into the botanica, as outside Kelly waited for her, his nose red and his hands in his coat pockets. But this time the botanica's glass counter was empty as incense burned before the display of colorful wax candles by itself. Ana stood, tapping her fingers dully on the glass, waiting for someone to appear, until a minute later the same woman, looking as she had years ago as if she'd lit a candle and told the flame she wished to stay looking always the same, appeared from behind a paper screen partition. Behind her trailed a gray-haired Maltese, the fur about its mouth dark and almost black and looking like a cartoon moustache.

The woman with hands outstretched, her nails still lacquered and looking wet all of these years later, smiled, thinking maybe that she had come bearing the jar of honey and onions in thanks. "Can I help you?" she asked.

"You can take this back," Ana said, putting the jar down carefully on the glass counter, and the woman smiled, her eyes flitting for a moment past the elaborate display of saints and house plants she kept in her front window to look at Kelly's back.

"Is he with you?"

"I need you to take this back," Ana went on, ignoring the question. "It didn't work and it was too expensive. My grandfather can't afford it."

"We don't take things back." The woman smiled, her earrings this time little slivers of what looked like crystal. "Once we put the magic out there, it's out. There's nothing I can do."

"There isn't a candle or something?" Ana pressed sarcastically, and the woman smiled tightly, knowing she was making fun of her.

Uncomfortably, Ana looked over the cramped shelves of oils and lotions and candles because she was never rude and it felt unfamiliar, as the Maltese licked its lips, watching her, and then yawned.

The woman laughed, as if the dog had made a joke.

Ana looked at her again. "Well, fine," she said. "Keep it anyway. We don't want it anymore."

Hooking a finger at her, the woman cocked a hip. "You've only taken it once, correct?"

Ana was silent. There was no magic needed to guess that she might try the concoction only once.

"You should take it once more at least."

"No thank you."

"Why are you so afraid?"

"I'm not," Ana said.

The woman smiled. "Your mother says you are."

Ana paused. What her grandfather had told this woman over the years, she wasn't sure, and immediately she was uncomfortable again, and instinctually she looked out of the store front window too, wishing Kelly would come in and get her just then, but he stood with his back to her in the cold that was coming on quick this November, his shoulders hunched up to his ears.

"Is he with you?" the woman asked her again.

Ana shook her head.

"Why lie?" the woman asked.

Ana was silent again. Fiddling for a moment in a basket she kept behind her counter, the woman pulled out a deck of tarot cards. "Take one," she said. "Let's see what it says."

"I don't want a reading."

The woman shook her head as if to say it didn't matter, her crystal earrings swinging.

"You don't understand," Ana said, crossing her arms. "I won't pay you for a reading."

The woman smiled, her eyelids creping for a moment and revealing the secret that perhaps she had aged over the years. "I won't charge you. Take one."

But Ana was uninterested, and she turned to leave.

"Fine," the woman said, losing her calm for a moment. "I'll pick for you."

Running her long fingernails along the front of the cards, she shook them in her hand a moment. After shuffling them twice, she pulled a card from the deck and placed it face down on the glass counter.

"Look," she said, tapping her index finger on the glass. Looking again at Kelly's back through the window, Ana went to the counter.

The woman flipped the card and catching her breath Ana looked it over, wanting it to mean something, letting it mean everything. She looked at the woman, but that, it seemed, was where her free services ended. "Do you want to make an appointment to talk about it?" she asked.

Huffing a laugh, Ana shook her head because she should've known better.

"Are you sure?" the woman pressed.

"Yes," Ana said, embarrassed that for a moment she had believed, for a moment been thinking she might just go home and speak to her grandfather's Indian head, and without saying anything more, Ana stalked out of the shop, leaving the honey and onions on the glass counter.

The door tinkled as she exited, and with his hands still in his pockets, Kelly turned. "Did she pay you back?"

Ana shook her head starting past him.

"Hey whoa," Kelly said, skipping to catch up to her. Grabbing her elbow he said, "What's wrong?"

His eyes redder in the cold, his breath leaking in wisps of smoke from his open mouth, he looked at her confusedly as she pulled away from him again. "Nothing," she said. "I'm going home, that's all. You should do the same."

And then she started away, the L tracks empty above her head, knowing what the card had told her about Kelly without the woman needing to say it and knowing it was right.

She loved him.

Matthew W. Griffin

POWER THROUGH THE LAMB

Carrie set the kitchen timer for ten minutes. Time in isolation was the only punishment that meant anything to Cole, and she knew ten minutes was all the five-year-old could bear at once. Even so, he skipped brightly away to his punishment at what she had come to accept was not a defiant slight but his natural tempo.

In his absence Carrie darted around the kitchen with a frantic precision, matching her rhythm to the ticking of the timer. She was making a grocery list as she did every Friday. Most Fridays Cole was there to watch her, and she liked that, but she was much faster when he was away. Tick, tick; the timer ticked away the strokes of her pencil on an elongated paper pad. She leaned her head into the refrigerator and counted eggs—one, two, three, four—tick, tick, tick. She retreated to write the number. Down, left, lift, down. Four. She was three quarters of the way finished when the timer rang and the ticking stopped, replaced by the faster but irregular pat, pat, patting of feet coming down the hall.

"May I come out now, Mama?"

"Yes, you may. But if you remind me about the grocery store again, you'll have to go back to your room."

"Okay. May I watch you?"

"Yes, you may."

Cole sat on a little stool and began tapping his foot. Tap, tap, tap. "Mama?" he said with a grin peeking from his mouth at ten and two.

"Yes."

"I think I would like to have a watch."

"Oh, really? Why is that?"

"Well, sometimes when I'm in the backyard or I'm in my room, I just want to know what time it is, and then I have to come to the kitchen to see what time it is."

"That's true."

"Can you get me a watch?"

"Well, I don't think so today. That may be something you could ask for for your birthday or for Christmas."

"Okay. What are you writing?"

"You know what I'm writing."

"Mama! I mean what are you writing right now?" Cole dragged out "now" to four taps of his foot.

It was twenty minutes later when Carrie finally finished her list and followed Cole through the front door. The house alarm was set. Carrie locked the door and checked it once. Cole snapped his seat buckle into place; she checked it once.

"Mama?" Cole shouted from the backseat as they rolled out of the driveway.

"Yes."

"May I have a cookie at the grocery store?"

"Maybe."

"May I have two?"

"No."

Carrie pulled out onto the highway. The hum in the car grew and grew and held. Bump-bump; they started up an overpass. Bump-bump; they went down. One-two, one-two. They were deep, percussive beats—the beat of something fast, foreboding, something out-of-the-house. Her thoughts veered. She was going to turn thirty-three next month. She thought about it every day now because it meant that Gene was about to turn fifty-five, and his oldest daughter, Jody, would turn twenty-eight, which felt much closer to her own age than it had when she was twenty-two and Jody was seventeen. She wondered when Gene would die. It was always the next thought on her mind. It would be too late for her to have more children; it would be too early for her to go on alone. She couldn't ask Gene for more. He already had five. Anyway, he had promised her one and that's what they had, and that was all she thought she would ever want if she ever wanted any. But that was eleven years ago when she had ideas about her life that were reckless, adamant.

Carrie pointed her rear view mirror at Cole. Their eyes met; he smiled a too-big smile and swung his legs hard three times. Carrie

smiled back. He was always much quieter when they were out of the house, almost contemplative, as if the broader world was already seducing some part of him to itself. She could see herself in his face when he was like this. Bump-bump... Bump-bump.

Maybe Gene would understand and they could have one more—a girl. A girl that would be a lot like Cole but also different. There was time. Maybe she would ask him. Carrie pulled off the highway and over to the entrance of the grocery store. There were more cars in the parking lot than usual, and she had to park some distance from the main entryway.

Cole held tightly to her hand through the parking lot but always made the most of his short leash, hopping and twisting and pulling, smiling the whole time as if Carrie should enjoy it as much as he did. When their feet crossed the yellow curb at the edge of the sidewalk, he wriggled his hand free and shot out for the carts. It was his job to pick out the cart, and he always started at the lone cart in the corner with the dinosaur seat attached to it.

"No, Cole." Carrie said shortly. "You know which ones to choose from."

Cole laughed and ran to the long line of regular carts. He gave the one on the end a yank so hard that his grip broke, and he fell to the ground. Carrie helped him up.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah," he said through a grunt as he dusted his hands off. Knees still bent, he grabbed for the plastic sheathed handle again. This time Carrie pulled with him and the cart broke free. Cole ducked under her arm and scaled the side of the cart, flopping over the edge into the basket. They glided smoothly for several steps. Bonk. Three steps. Bonk. Three steps. Bonk.

"Awww!" Carrie groaned.

"It's a train, Mama. You got a train," Cole said, hunching shoulders in excitement. "It bonks like a train."

"That's true." She didn't want to go back for another cart; she would only be in there for half an hour anyway. She kept on through the open door into the produce section. Bonk . . . Bonk . . .

An hour later Carrie emerged from the automatic doors at the front of the grocery store with an overflowing cart. Cole had long before been forced out of the main basket and into the wire child seat at the rear. He was staring down intently at a little white plastic strap around his wrist as Carrie extended her head to look out over the cars in the parking lot. Turning the overloaded basket required her to squat almost to the ground and pull at one side of the handle. Finally, she was able to navigate into their row. Bonk . . . Bonk . . . Bonk . . . Cole's fingers shot out one at a time. One, two, three. Bonk. They all went back into his fist. One, two, three. Bonk. Back to fist.

"Mama. It takes three seconds for one bonk."

Carrie leaned in to push harder. Bonk, bonk, bonk. The sound came faster.

"Mama! That's not funny!"

Carrie smiled and dug her heels in to slow down as they approached their car.

"That lady was so nice to give me a watch, Mama. That's just what I wanted for Christmas. You said I could get one for Christmas, but I got one today instead."

"Well, she didn't exactly give it to us," Carrie said.

"Why not?"

"Go ahead and get in the car. I need to get all this home before it starts to thaw."

Cole sighed. "This is a glorious day, Mama."

"Glorious? That's a good word, Cole. Now get in the car."

Cole jumped out of the cart and ran to the side door while Carrie flung plastic bags into the trunk. Half the space was filled before the bags of meat were exhausted and bags filled with other items began. "What was I thinking?" she whispered to herself.

Cole buckled his seat belt; she checked it once. They were out on the highway again. Bump-bump. Bump-bump. What kind of funeral would Gene like? She had never asked him before. Where would she bury him? It was strange to think there would still be some part of him left here. And later—much later—there would be part of her left.

"Mama, this is the best watch I've ever seen. I can tell you what time it is whenever you ask me, okay?"

"Okay."

"I just counted one hundred seconds, and it didn't stop."

"Yeah. I guess it is a good watch."

Carrie bit her lip. She thought about the lamb—thirty-five pounds of frozen lamb—in the trunk of the car. She didn't even know if she liked lamb. If Gene didn't like it she would lose traction. He wouldn't say anything when it happened, but she would know he was disappointed, and it would be a long time before she could ask him about the baby.

"I can't believe that white is my favorite color," Cole shouted suddenly from the back.

"Huh?"

"My favorite color is white, and that old lady gave me a white watch, and I never told her that white is my favorite color."

"Oh. That is pretty neat."

"Did you tell her that I love white, and it's my favorite color?"

"No, I didn't. She must have made a good guess."

"Yeah. Wow!"

Two exits before theirs Carrie had a sudden urge to peel off the highway; she did, cutting across diagonal white lines and traffic bumps. She would take the lamb to a dumpster and get rid of it—all but a few pounds. Gene wouldn't know, and she could stop worrying about the lamb and start worrying about Gene dying and when she would ask him about the baby.

"Mama! This isn't where our house is. Where are you going?"

Carrie's heart sank. Cole would never keep the secret; it wouldn't work. Crowning his atomic innocence was a compulsive disclosure. The events of the day must be recited to Daddy when he returned home from work. Nothing could stop this ritual: no bribe, no begging; world without end. She smiled back at him.

"Oops! I forgot where our exit was. That was silly."

"Mama!"

Carrie put on her left blinker and looked over her shoulder.

"I'm going to see how long it takes to get home from here, Mama."

"Okay."

It was thirty minutes until dinner. Thirty-two pounds of lamb lay dark and crammed in the little freezer above the refrigerator, and thirty-two pounds of old (but not so old) frozen food lay thawing in the trash. Carrie stood doubled over the open oven, sweat glistening on the nape of her neck where her hair had been pulled back, brow furrowed over the three pound leg of lamb bubbling in the pan. She jerked her body upright on the verge of an internal panic. A printed index card was held tightly in her left hand between her thumb and forefinger. Her eyes moved up and down the little card as if she were searching for a key to some riddle. She flipped it over—blank. She flipped it back. The words at the top (in a zany canary yellow font) read, "Three easy steps," and were perched atop a list numbered one to three. On its flank, taunting her, was a tiny photo of a glistening, immaculately prepared leg of lamb. The one in her pan had two minutes left to cook and was still bleeding profusely.

"Mama!"

"Yeah?"

"I'm going to tell you how long you have been in the kitchen."

"Okay."

"You have been in the kitchen for . . ." Cole looked down at the white clock face on his wrist and thrust his fingers out one at a time. One, two, three. "You have been in the kitchen for . . . one hour and two minutes and twenty-two seconds." His eyebrows went up as his mouth gaped in suggestive amazement.

"Wow," Carrie mumbled in a distracted voice, eyes wandering off into the wall. She slammed the oven door shut and cranked the temperature dial to 450. "That stupid old bitch!" she whispered.

"Mama?"

"Yes."

"Mama . . . Mama . . . lamb takes a long time to cook, doesn't it?"

"I don't know, Cole. Can't you . . ."

The front door opened and shut.

"Daddy!" Cole ran out.

Carrie met Gene at the kitchen doorway with a dazed kiss as Cole hopped in and out around their legs. Gene pushed past her in his usual way, nose out, rubbing the bald spot on the back of his head and sniffing the air as if he were following a trail to the oven. "Something smells good!" He stopped in front of the oven, put his fists on his hips, pelvis thrust forward, and dropped his chin to his chest with an exaggerated bob. "It's like coming home to my mama's cooking, I'll tell you." He waved a hand in the air dramatically in the sign of the cross.

"Daddy! Come see what my new watch does in my room."

"Okay. I'm coming." Gene kissed Carrie again on the way out.

The kitchen timer rang. Carrie opened the oven and quickly shut it—still a bloody mess. She turned the temperature dial back down to 350 and set the timer for fifteen more minutes. Tick, tick. But the beat was broken by Cole's voice pitching through the wall, ringing with indiscernible, unrelenting syllables: Ting, ting-ting. Ting-ting-ting. She was sure he was telling Gene all about the lamb.

It was her decision; she had weighed it carefully, masterfully. She would not let anyone think she had been duped by an old woman because the whole project—yes, that's what it was, a project—was a matter of economics. At three dollars a pound, that was cheaper than ground beef, but . . . No, now that she thought of it, ground beef was much cheaper than that. "That sneaky old bitch!" she hissed under her breath. It was an experiment. It was not a project, it was an experiment. She didn't care what gristly meat Gene's mother had fed them in their slum house in the 1960s. This is lamb, dammit! Is lamb really too good for us, for our child? Yes, it's a little more expensive than ground beef, but you'll never see it any cheaper than it was today. What if it's amazing, the best meat any one of us has ever had? Wouldn't it be worth paying a little more to have something so amazing?

Gene and Cole came to the dining room table at Carrie's call. In the center of the table sat a lump of meat, burned black in a

sporadic pattern that was impossible to hide, and resting on their only silver platter, freshly polished, with wilted rosemary sprinkled around its circumference—the final ingredient in the entrée parody. Carrie was already cutting off slabs of lamb with an intensity that verged on pagan ceremonial violence.

"Wow, Mama!" Cole called out as he sat down. "That is the biggest leg of lamb I have ever seen. It took you, I think, two hours to cook it . . . no . . . more than two. Daddy has the biggest piece of lamb. I'll let you know how long it takes Daddy to eat it. Daddy, do you want to know how long it takes you to eat your lamb?"

"Sure."

Cole dropped his head to his wrist. Gene turned to Carrie. "I don't think I've ever had lamb in my life, if you can believe it," he said with one tangled eyebrow raised.

"It's an experiment," Carrie responded (a little too quickly) and turned sharply to Cole. "Cole, I'm sorry, but you're going to have to stop timing Daddy for now and eat your food. You can start again in a few minutes if Daddy says it's okay."

"Okay." Cole grabbed his fork and stabbed a little chunk of meat Carrie had diced for him. Then he stuck the fork into his mouth. "Wow, Mama! That is the best meat I have ever tasted! I love it, Mama!"

Gene took a bite. He chewed and chewed and looked off into some private world of consideration behind the wall. "Hmm . . ." he said, nodding, and chewed a few more times. "Hmm . . ." he said again. He swallowed. Carrie took a bite but kept her eyes on Gene.

"Well," Gene announced looking down at the single open wound on his cut of lamb. "It was worth giving it a try. I'll give you that."

At those words, Carrie became instantly and intensely aware of how horribly miscast Gene had become. Her jaw tightened. Who does he think he is? Almost sixty years old and still playing the verdant father who can't eat anything unless it involves ground beef and potatoes. He's burlesque is what he is. She chewed, her

senses blocked by her singular focus on the human anachronism before her. But then she felt a tingle on her tongue, followed by the gradual introduction of a burning sensation that didn't subside when she swallowed. She placed her fork casually by her plate and swallowed again hard. But the burning continued to blaze a trail down her esophagus into her stomach. It was the most horrible bite of anything she had ever eaten in her life. She raised her eyes across the table to where Cole was sitting. He had already devoured half of his portion and seemed to have forgotten his watch completely.

"How long has Daddy been eating his lamb?" she asked him.

"Oh, I'm not timing anything right now, Mama. I'm eating this really good lamb. I can time some more things later," Cole said with a hunk of half-chewed lamb rolling back and forth over his tongue. He pressed his fork into a cube of the remaining meat, and blood gushed out into pools on either side.

"Okay," Gene said suddenly, almost shouting. "It doesn't matter if I'm on the clock or not because two bites of that is all I'm ever going to eat. I'm sorry, Sweetie, I just can't do it. It's . . . it's . . . I don't know . . . gamy, way too gamy."

Carrie looked over at Gene but didn't say anything in return—no justification. Instead, she rammed her fork into her own lamb and sawed off a piece almost too big to fit in her mouth; she shoved it in. At first she thought she was doing it for Gene's sake, powering through the lamb to make a point. But as the burn intensified and radiated out into her body, she found that the only thing that made her feel better was the one thing she could hardly stand: more.

"Sweetie, that's enough. Slow down. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. It's just one leg of lamb." Carrie didn't stop. She chewed as quickly as she could while her fork went back for another bite. Gene shook his head, his face reddening slowly around the temples. "I said, that's enough, Carrie. Cole doesn't need to see this. It's bloody. It's burned. It's okay. We gave it a try and that's all. That's it. It's not for us."

Carrie swallowed her bite. "No, it's not all because I bought thirty-five pounds of this goddamn lamb. I got duped by an old

bitch because Cole wanted a plastic watch worth nothing and it happened to come free with my purchase of an ass-load of lamb. And now everything is going to be timed, and you won't trust me, and I'll never have another baby, and you'll die and leave me with just Cole and a bunch of time, and I guess that was always the plan so I can blame myself." It was perfect, concise, a rhetorical dessert composed of equal parts percolated truth, improvised hysteria, and apocalyptic prophecy. When she was finished, she didn't cry or fold her hands over her face or worry about how long it would take to make it up. She looked up at an angle away from Gene and Cole, lips pressed tightly together, and nodded a nod of personal satisfaction. There was no need to say anything else. She took another bite.

"It's okay, Mama. I like the lamb. I won't time you, Mama."

"It's okay, Cole. Sometimes it's okay, just not all the time."

Gene remained wide-eyed and silent.

The next week Cole was timing Carrie surreptitiously from the hall while she talked on the phone. She was having a conversation with her mother. Then Cole heard her say that he might have a new brother or sister sometime, and he stopped and listened closely to every word.

"Well, I don't particularly like the taste either, and Gene won't eat it at all. But there's just so much of it; I can't throw it all away. Anyway, Cole loves it. He asks about it everyday. Yeah. I finally had to make a rule that he couldn't ask anymore. And I guess it's growing on me in a funny way too. We're going to have to power through it, and at the very least it looks like I'll get another baby out of it." Carrie chuckled at her joke and stepped into the kitchen where Cole could see her shadow but no longer distinguish her words. He looked back down to his watch; he had lost count. He matched his finger with the second hand and started over.

David James

NIGHT GLOWING WITH ANGER UNDER A FULL MOON

There is silence
emptying in your mouth,

despair draining down your face.
These plain white walls

shift and tilt, losing the shape
we always believed would hold up around us.

I want to say this happens sometimes,
this fact of dying, these awkward gestures.

I want to tell you it'll pass,
that the walls will collapse for new rooms,

the silence ring until one of us answers.
But I don't say a thing

because tonight we only act out being human,
playing our first and last roles, you alone, me alone,

trying to swallow
thick scars of air.

Randy Blythe

ATHWART

Crimsoner for spring fights,
cock cardinal darts up,

claims air above the blueberry bush.
Point settled, adamant,

and back down proud,
never unsure of nature's nature.

How many times
you drop what's in hand

to pick it up again, shoo a wren
from the porch with a broom,

clean mud from soles,
heft river stones rounded

and patient
a million years?

Oceans of sweat over what
falls away anyway.

So many souls brow-furrowed
over what worse than this

might swing into view.
The teeth of a wish

smile at the taste of juice and pulp
until the tongue finds a seed.

Ken Haas

ANIMAL MODELS

A fruit fly bred in the lab at Harvard
with a bead of DNA flicked out of its one life
waddles toward the light, too interesting to swat;
a roundworm simmers in a salty dish,
flapping like a rubber wand;
a rat wired through its cerebellum
to a shiny red button grinds a rosy tongue;
and Mike, by invitation,
looks through the glass.

On the drive over to observe the science
that might restore the child
whose seizures are more terrifying now,
whose classmates won't sit next to her at lunch,
he was certain his adamant love would get him through.
Look what nature had done to his girl.

But nothing prepares for witnessing.
On a day when leaves
are turning everywhere in New England
and an eight-year-old is churning in her bed,
Mike meets the fly, the worm, and the rat,
and they meet the man
who asks to know their Latin names—
Drosophila melanogaster,
Caenorhabditis elegans,
Rattus norvegicus—
the names by which we would all know them
if they were saints.

Angie Macri

THE PILLAR OF FIRE BY NIGHT

In the shadow of the moon, the man,
all arms and long body,
crosses prairie not yet in bloom,
crosses grain carved from soil,
all arms like rain.

The shadow has no face,
like the sun
stole it
(the heart skips a beat).
The shadow is the lungs
of the cloud,
a pillar that can't
be touched.

He reaches with the ladder
cut and tied from saplings
near the mud creek,
green as sleep in spring,
and she climbs down.

Kate E. Schultz

IN DEFENSE OF MATERIALISM

Sometimes I open my closet and drawers just to look
at my jeans worn down to a second skin;
my jewelry—this ring, thin silver band,
criss-crossed metal embracing smoky
black pearl; my favorite bra, diaphanous gold
threads wound through the fabric. Sometimes
at work, I concentrate on its feel against my skin.
I'm not an administrator—I'm a sexpot. I earn this money
to buy myself nice things

and before bed at night, I pick out something to read
from the bookcase custom-made for me.
See the dips and curves carved in blond wood.
No one else will ever own the same one.
I smell printer's ink when I open the volumes
of poetry, the novels; this Bible
seems out of place, telling me it's easier
for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle
than a man with many possessions to enter
the kingdom of God. I don't want to live like

a nun, waking, slumbering in a room
with walls barren except for a crucifix.
A dark dresser with a single drawer
containing a Bible. She wears a simple
sheath nightgown, sleeps on pure white
bedsheets. But I want

to wrap myself in my pink cashmere robe,
slide underneath my magenta down comforter,
and in the morning wake up to see
the cut flowers that color my bedroom's
eggshell paint; the curled wrought-iron
of the mirror on my wall.

Darren C. Demaree

Emily as Sand Bites the Mirror

We are so much more than pearls
at this point, Emily I know you want
to age in a way that will refine

your whole body, jewel you in a way,
make the glass in your own mirror
shake a little with the thought

of your beauty. That sounds dangerous
to me. Why can't we be a quilt
that slowly blends together? I will claim

none of the excellent thread to be my own.
I will drape our bodies as a tapestry.
We will cover the mirror together.

We will be a full demonstration
of what beauty can be when tended to
without reservation or gilded longing.

Alison Hicks

FEBRUARY LANDSCAPE

What's brewing below
How far do you have to go to be warm

Descend to some rage
That furnace that ticks on

Burns until the fuel's spent
Brine truck a porcupine

Creeping along arteries
Spraying white

Clichés of the season
Snowfields from the farmhouse

Sky in flannel
When I lived in a place without winter

Some complained of sunshine
Many wished aloud for rain

The monsoon in August
Slicked down burning streets

The desert hum
Rose from under ground

Kathryn Gahl

TELOMERES

like time ticking
during deer hunting season
telomeres on a chromosome shorten
with each cell division
until dead and gone
and
soft light
when the sun is fading
requires the experience of witness
a connection with nature

parts of me are older
    than the sun
I am made of
    supernatural parts
I could be the woolly steel stag
running in rut   head-on into my auto

Oh luminosity
All artists are obsessed by light
A deer obsessed
An obsessed deer
    leaps crashes explodes my hood

Headlights of truckers and travelers
whiz by   no one sees
the stag's supernatural parts disperse
        the floating belly of night
        when nature hits the ditch
while I am left behind, the one
    still running
the split eye obsessed

to connect
with bony rays of moon
strumming telomere strings
after the deer flew flaring dividing
the singed air
the night's mosaic
eating his shoulders and shank
and my ticking heart

Nathan Whiting

SUMMIT IN SECRECY

I learned strategy without one
reference to meaning and now wonder
does war or truth persist longer?
Why do they nibble each other
until only time to-the-bones remains?
Defeat embittered my easy temper.
I beheaded the higher officers,
hanged the lesser, shot
every tenth man in the ranks

yet peace remains elusive. Some used
rifles for sport in churches, set fire
to the town then plundered people
camped over graves. I nearly
intervened. News from outside
vanishes. No courage grabs to end
my epic self-containment, virulent
hatred between troops and civilians
a frenzy through alleyways in dreams.

Tomorrow I meet a general truly evil.

Karl Garson

TELLING STARS

I'm below the barn
to watch The Pleiades
and Aldebaran
lead Orion's train.

It is so still the trout
stream, mid-valley,
speaks quite clearly
from its deep meander.

A thin frost covers the
hay wagon I lean upon,
with my left hand, bare
against white oak planed

by seasons gone west
with Aries tonight, like
the ones I've wasted
and those I will.

Gary Lechliter

AFTER THE FALL

Semimaru, blind in your refuge,
where you strummed the moon's 4 strings,
what came of them, in the long run,
the notes so keen and lunar?

Having seen darkness from the cliff
that ridges on death, I know the light
of recovery room, the overhung lamps.
The fog of nurse and tech, doctors in
their godlike certainties, the saline drip
and the saline drip, boots that walk past
a window where there is no window.

Having visited the abyss, though
brief, and returned to my place in the
queue, I treasure the red and lapis
lazuli of dawn, the transient hues.

Having been near soulless, bereft
of thought, then snapped back to life,
even the workdays, tedious, needful,
stand as surrogates for the lack
of light and of being, factors that
surely make their play for nothing
but indefatigable ends.

What I'm saying is I've been lucky,
a sinistral klutz, who should be
hugging the slab by now, who
would be known as the lesser and
least of a species called poet.

What I'm saying is nothing's new.
That memory strips naked and jogs
past every night, wagging her nipples,
that the ghosts of lost verse wander
on streets most luminous, hands
in pockets, searching for newborn
poems that wander off.

Tom Hansen

NIGHT PASSAGE

We labored through darkness
to reach that far shore,
held on tight, heaved by wild seas,
as our fragile craft shuddered, surrendered,
and sank.

We woke up marooned
on this island of light,
tangled in each other's arms.
Scattered about us, the radiant wreckage
of love.

Mark Jackley

Eighth-Grade Band Recital

Then,
midway through the song
the music wanders off
in a dozen different directions,
spilling out like shirttails,
like the kids themselves when the very last bell rings
in June and someone brushes
bangs from hazel eyes,
glances furtively and zig-zags down the halls
as boys bounce off the walls,
one later gazing out
the window of the bus, listening to the score
of his soul composing
itself, before he tears
into a bag of Cheese Curls
and licks his fingers clean
of the orange sort of
moon dust as the wheels
on the bus and in his heart
turn, a melody
unencumbered by anything
with anything
like bars.

Donald Levering

HOWLER MONKEYS

Unlike our cousin capuchins,
who cadge for handouts
and bare their teeth while reaching,

the howlers stay in the rainforest.
If we spot them, they're way up in the branches,
remote from jaguars

and from us.
Through scopes we see they're grooming
or cracking open nuts.

At dusk their voices come
from someplace deep in the forest,
fearsome growls that swell

to loud bravado, even booming,
not quite human,
not quite not.

Don Russ

SUPPOSE

Cosmologist Dozing in His Backyard Eden

Suppose then
that an accident, a had-to-be
accident, happened and happens still:
night, that blinding white
celestial rose, nothing then somehow
everything, the two of us

the universe at once
and in this our only moment all
of time. From our lawn chairs
we survey a noonday garden,
a weeded summer of a room, and see
that yes it's good. Your mud-

stained hand slips smudging
my sweaty knee. My heart's blood,
lifting, thick-tongued, all but speaks:
guttering butterflies, oh green
buzzings of the heat—let now
our cool of evening come.

Carolyn Light Bell

STORIES FROM OLD PINES

I. SPORT

A gigantic black lab puppy wearing a metal-pronged choke collar bounded from his yard and circled round me. I knew from earlier encounters that Sport was more brawn than brains, and this time I was on Rollerblades.

I came to a screeching halt when my neighbor, John, appeared and beckoned me to approach, a feat I found tricky to perform on an incline in loose gravel and sand with a wild dog off leash.

"Hi!" I said. "How are you?" I was still upright.

"Oh, pretty darned good, but the stress is terrible."

"It is? I'm so sorry!" Sport was sniffing the hindquarters of our ever-so-feminine Beardie, Calliope, who was also off leash but relatively calm.

"Yes, I have to paint this mailbox post here, go to the Laundromat, pick up a thing or two at the grocery store, and come back for the wife to go out to eat at Foxy's. I don't know if I can do it all." He placed his hands on what was intended to be his waist and stretched backward, belly swelling out between red suspenders. Torn jeans and a paint-splotched T-shirt seemed an appropriate outfit for today's chores.

"That doesn't sound too stressful," I said. He laughed, his face melting into soft puddles.

"Oh, you're easy," he said, making me laugh. "Get over here!" he shouted at the dog.

Sport was still circling and Calliope was repeatedly sitting down and running away, tail between her legs.

"I don't mind your dog. I just don't want to get between our two dogs. I might fall. Where's Foxy's?"

"Foxy's? In Spooner. Get over here, Sport! What's your dog's name again?"

"Her name's Calliope. Is the food any good?" I said.

"Oh, terrific, we like it a lot. Beer's good. Drinks are cheap."

"And the food?" I asked again.

"Shrimp's terrific."

"Is it grilled?"

"No, fried. Calliope, huh? Like a merry-go-round?"

"Exactly. Also the muse of poetry. How do you get to Foxy's?" I asked.

"Aw, it's easy to find when you know the way. You take the first left after you see the sign for Spooner. You follow that road about a quarter mile, and take the second right and then a left by the school, and you go down the big hill that just kinda ends up by the railroad tracks. You'll see a crossing sign and you cross there at the tracks. Then, you'll see a dingy ole brown house. Turn left onto the dirt road that looks like it's not going to be a road at all. But it is and you take it until you can't go any further. You'll see a sign that says Foxy's, but that isn't your turn. That's just a sign to let you know you're on the right road."

"Tricky," I said.

"Well, some folks'll get confused here. Keep going straight another mile or so, go down another hill, and then there's a split rail fence on your left . . . Sport! I told you, now!" Sport was lifting a leg on a pine tree while Calliope was sitting as close to me as she could without tripping me up.

"You know, I think I'd probably call Foxy's for directions. I'll never remember all that."

"You want an easier way? Cut right through town. It's longer, but you hang a left by the DQ and then go about five blocks until you get to the third stop sign. You hang a right and then another left and then go about three miles until you see an old barn with a coupla brown-spotted cows in the pasture. Guernseys."

"Okay . . ."

"You follow right off the fork in the road until you see a billboard advertising the casino down in Turtle Lake."

"Mm-hmm."

"Keep going until you see a big pasture with a hand-painted sign for Surrey bulls. You're out of milking territory and into ranching country over there, y'see."

"Yup." Sport's circles were getting tighter as he was brushing dangerously closely to my leg. Calliope was hiding behind me.

"Go on," I said.

"Then you'll come to a turkey hunting registration and pass the little cemetery on the hill there and pretty soon you hit Sand Lake."

"Sand Lake?"

"Yup. You're gettin' close now. You'll pass Simpson's boat storage. There's a big eagle's nest up in the telephone pole. You'll miss it unless you know what you're lookin' for." He looked me dead in the eye. "Been there for years. They just keep making it bigger and bigger."

"And Sand Lake? How do I know when I've come to Sand Lake?"

"There's a little sign that you can barely see unless you're really looking for it. At night you won't see it at all."

"So I guess if you set out early enough, the sun will still be up."

"Ha! Right you are. Well, as a matter of fact, cloudy and rainy days are kinda hard too because Foxy's is set way down in the grass like a prairie chicken."

"You know. When we're at the cabin, we eat at home most of the time. Are there other lakes you pass?"

"Just a couple more. Bass Lake and Round Lake."

"Yah, well, maybe sometime . . ." I rolled back on my blades to turn around.

He interrupted me. Sport had returned to sniff around Calliope's back. "Sport? What did I tell you? I mean it now!" Sport put his big head down between his front legs and dropped to the road next to Calliope.

I started to roll backward by way of saying goodbye. "Well, thanks for the tip."

"Okay, then, see ya. Say hi to the mister. Sorry Sport doesn't mind his manners around your carousel."

II. OLYMPIAD

It seems like a lot of guys around here are named John. But this John is taller and mightier than the rest. He's even a doctor. And

aren't doctors the closest we mortals get to gods? I am amazed at his stamina, his lean physique, his results! He stands well over 6'6". His teeth are even and white; his skin the leathery brown that suggests virility on men past *a certain age*—men whose skin has achieved the texture of worn hide that's been around the horn.

I wouldn't have encountered this John if I hadn't secretly explored his garden tucked away off the private road, scarcely visible. Most yards in lake country are simply marked by fading headless loon mailboxes; toilet bowls filled with volunteer grasses and milkweed; battered milk cans; or fields of daisies that last until they're mowed under. John's garden, once discovered, is dazzling and inviting.

He has invited Calliope and me to stroll down the flower-strewn paths, to share in the glory of Gethsemane kissed by sunshine with no crucifixion to follow. Terraced down to the lake, his garden is a spectacular riot, each flower clamoring for attention.

He has outdone everyone near and far, throughout every county from our lake home in Wisconsin over to Minneapolis. His clearing is filled with yellow, pink, and white Asiatic lilies; variegated hostas; wild roses; purple and yellow irises; white marigolds, ferns, and sunflowers—all spilling over one another in a plethora of abundant color. His flowers have a way of surprising you at each curve that slopes down to Crane Lake.

A bed of dahlias greets you by the shuffleboard court; sweet little tricycles and old red wagons filled with impatiens and vinca decorate the greens; hand-painted rocks monogrammed by grandchildren nestle down amongst the flowers. He is not only a gardener extraordinaire, but he also has some kind of magical superpower that keeps animals at bay. His sprinkler system must have a motion detector to fend off foraging deer.

John's garden didn't happen by accident. There was a tornado here in 2002 that leveled many yards, taking scores of native white pine. Instead of bemoaning the loss, he arranged to have truckloads of manure deposited on his rubble. And he began to plant. Every time I see him, he's bending over weeding, spreading mulch, or planting new beds of flowers. John seems driven by

sheer love of soil, watching it spring to life as he nurses young plants and flowers to their ripest conclusion. When he works, his knees are married to the earth. His hands are invisible to the wrists. He is a titan of terrain.

To transport the dozens of flats of flowers, he drives a luxury SUV with a huge cargo space from which I've seen him unload dozens of bags of mulch and crate after crate of dazzling flowers, all in the midst of a deep green virgin pine forest.

DNR pamphlets would disapprove of the non-native species John has introduced, to say nothing of the fertilizer and other types of additives he uses to maintain this amazement. The DNR would further specify that John's garden may encroach on the proper number of feet from shore a garden should be. But herein lies the conundrum, perhaps his tragic flaw. Can John host a true Olympiad if he defies laws, singlehandedly building a monument to pure aesthetics despite its effects on the environment? Is this, after all, what the Greeks had in mind when they prayed to Zeus—that he was infallible and had a superhuman ego?

I have no answer to that, not being a scholar of Greek myth. I can tell you, I both admire John's garden and wonder about the nutrients that may leech into the soil from flats of flowers grown in greenhouses somewhere, grass, fertilizer, and mulch so close to a wilderness lake.

Once John took pity on me—an unabashed admirer, doubtless one amidst a throng—and offered discarded fern that he had thinned. I was grateful and planted them in our garden, knowing they are native to our forest.

Along with the enormous scale of his time investment and formal beauty is the scale of his expenditure. It has taken a sprinkler system and a gargantuan amount of plant material to create and maintain such splendor. However, if medals were being distributed for the finest garden this side of the St. Croix Valley, he deserves the gold.

A few years ago, Marshall and I ran into him and his wife, Hera, at a funeral gathering. "What are you doing here?" she asked in an icy tone. Apparently surprised at her own bluntness, she modified her question. "That is, how do you know. . . ?"

"Well, she (the deceased) was a dear friend of our son's," I answered. Hera's eyes widened and she smiled politely, patting her very large paisley scarf, one end tossed casually but carefully over her square shoulder, before she turned to continue socializing with her familiars.

Not too long after that, after one of my strolls through his garden, I invited the two of them with their children and grandchildren over to our lake home on the adjoining lake. They came. They and their children and the heirs apparent ate our fresh poppy seed banana cake with warm fruit and real whipping cream. And we even found a few things we had in common.

However, one day Marshall and I parked our car close by and were getting Calliope leashed up to take our usual stroll around the loop road past John's house. From the direction of town came a tall, gaunt man and a young boy, both on bicycles. As soon as they approached, I could see it was Gardener John. Not seeming to recognize us, he cocked his head and spoke sharply to us as if we were fallen from grace and needed to be quickly removed from Olympus. "Out of gas?!"

"What's that?" Marshall said, smiling, not yet comprehending that John didn't seem to know us.

"Are you out of gas?" he repeated loudly.

"No, no, we always park here and walk," Marshall explained.

"Thanks anyway," I said.

John's eager expression paled. He had wanted to perform an heroic deed exhibiting his godly beneficence as an example to his grandson, but we weren't cooperating. He sped past us without further comment toward his home, spitting up gravel behind him.

John may be mortal, demigod, or god, who achieves success and floats slightly above ground, levitating without support. If he knew you once, there is no guarantee he'll know you the next time. He exists in a kind of superstratum, a vaporless vacuum of impermeability. Eyes on the prize or, in this case, the flowers.

I don't visit his garden much anymore. I'd rather watch the rusty needles fall thickly from the majestic pine trees in our yard. They seem so effortless and beautiful in an ordinary sort of way.

III. LESTER

I pull into the dark garage, the heady smell of pine flooding my senses. I am breathing deeply again after a particularly hectic week in the city, already imagining myself swimming in our magnificent lake, arm over arm, not another soul in sight. I feel my cares melting away when I have nothing to do but scan the horizon for the tallest pine, my marker that it's time to turn around and swim back toward home shore.

I unfold out of the car after our long ride, lift the back gate, and out springs Calliope, my sweet merry-go-round, running and barking through a thick bed of pine needles, searching out a spot to anoint.

A loud gunshot bursts through the woods, puncturing my fantasy, jolting me into the moment. Calliope gallops back to me, quivering.

The shots are coming from the woods, I mutter aloud, stepping hesitantly around the car door, trying to peer through the trees. In each hand, I carry groceries and odds and ends from the car into the cabin.

Lester will know. I'll call him for an answer. He keeps up with everything. Because he's the only one around, Lester's the go-to guy for information. He knows how long the baby loon has been on the lake and what day the sandhill cranes depart.

Lester flies two flags on his property—one a Confederate flag, and the other a Marine Corps flag. The only year-round resident, his little white cottage is directly across from us on our small, remote lake. Between us is the deepest, cleanest, prettiest part of the lake. Not a tendril of a weed.

"Hi, Violet," I begin. "How are you?" Violet, Lester's wife, has a bad heart and has been dwindling for years.

"I'm better, thanks. How are you?"

"You know, I'm really fine except I heard a shot. Sounded like it was right next door. Doesn't hunting season begin on Thanksgiving?"

"Hang on a minute." There's a loud clunk as Vi puts the phone down.

Vi picks up the receiver again. "Yup. Handgun's missin'. I think he's out shootin' in the trees."

"In the trees? Why?"

"Oh, there's a branch he can't get down. He keeps shootin' at it, hoping he'll scare it down." She laughs a husky, smoke-filled laugh and lapses into spasmodic coughing.

"Hmm," I say.

We often hear shooting when Lester and Vi's son and grandson visit from Tennessee. Their shots vary from the popping of handguns and the pinging of rifles to the rat-a-tat-tat of semiautomatics. The deafening reverberations might as well be in our front yard. With little to do but watch television, smoke, and watch his wife linger, this ex-Marine is someone I may need in a pinch, so I limit my comments about their intense and persistent gunfire. If I call to request a temporary halt, he usually cooperates.

I hear some explanatory conversation in the background whereupon Lester takes the phone from Violet. "'Lo," he says. "Wife says you don't like the shootin'. They're just practicin' their huntin'. Don't like to say too much since Junior only comes once in a while, but I'll tell him to quit for now if it's bothering you," he says.

"Thank you, Lester, very much," I say. "I really appreciate it."

I take a swim, hoping they'll hold off long enough for me to get out of the water. *I wonder what the loons feel in the water from the gunfire.* When I swim across the lake, I don't swim all the way to Lester's dock. Although I have no proof, I believe he has binoculars trained on me. I swim directly toward his house and then stop at my white pine stretching way above the tops of the others, where I turn around, and swim back. Calliope attends at the end of the dock, paws crossed, scanning the woods, then watching me, then the woods.

As I'm getting dressed, I find myself thinking about Lester looking in the windows. He's only done it once, to my knowledge, but I have to admit that one time made me uneasy.

About three years ago, I was standing in the kitchen, fully clothed, thank God. Suddenly, I saw a red hat pass by just under

the window frame. Kind of bouncing up and down in a half-marching, half-limping gait. Lester.

I burst through the front door, the screen door slamming loudly behind me.

"Lester," I said in my most assertive voice, "can I help you?"

"Just checkin' on things," he said. "Thought I saw smoke across the lake and since there was a fire here once, I wanted to make sure everything was all right."

"I'm burning some brush," I said, my mind trying to fathom why he didn't call first. Or better yet, why didn't he come to the door and ring the bell?

It's scary sometimes at night here alone. I stash a row of defense weaponry on top of my bedcovers—a rosewood truncheon, my cell phone, and our cordless land line. We have installed a blind over the outside door that has a direct sightline to my bed. When I close my eyes, I dream I'm being hunted.

Kevin Rabas and Masami Sugimori

HAWAII

Zenji's girlfriend, Haru, broke up with him the day before the trip. So, Calvin had a free room in Hawaii. The two young men were slated to present a paper in Ohana.

When Calvin arrived, he and Zenji hit the beach, each with something to forget. Zenji wanted to forget Haru, and Calvin wanted to forget how his first honeymoon went, a series of island hopping days that soon ended in divorce. Calvin's current wife said, "I'll never go to Hawaii with you. That's her place," when Calvin asked Isabel to come to Hawaii with him to the conference, where Zenji and Calvin were presenting a paper on Hughes and Mingus based on a series of interviews with jazz and blues musicians, scant scholarly articles, and a classic 1958 MGM LP that the two played over and over, looking for signs.

Calvin dropped his pack into the sand, set his glasses on a beach chair, and went straight into the water. The water was cool and the rocks on the bottom were ice cube cold, but soon his body attuned to the waves and the long stretches of ocean in between. Calvin looked toward the horn of the island, and it was like a thundercloud, large and indistinct. He did not see as well as he did as a kid. Calvin remembered how he had gone right into the water with his first wife, Julie, a petite younger woman. He had trimmed her crotch with his goatee trimmers: Kansans not used to the beach, to the sun and surf, bikinis. His honeymoon had progressed with a phrase turned—Waimea to "Why me ah?"— as the two tired of each other on the long drive around the Big Island. The two were passionate white fire. Calvin's new wife, Isabel, gave him space, didn't care much to argue, was a slow blue flame.

When Calvin returned to the beach chair, his glasses back on, he noticed something. All of the people sunning themselves on the chairs had blue and white striped towels, identical—a mark, a sign.

"Excuse me, fellas," an older man in off-white shorts and white shirt said, a beach man, a hotel man. "What hotel are you staying in?"

Calvin said, "Ohana."

"These chairs are for hotel members only," the hotel man said, not angry, not assertive, just doing his job.

"Very sorry," Zenji said.

"Listen. You can sit here today, but don't come back tomorrow."

Calvin and Zenji said sorry.

"I knew it had to be too good to be true," Zenji said.

An hour passed. Another. Women walked in front of the sun.

"You two staying here?" a younger man in the off-white uniform said. "This area is for hotel members only." He was quick, sharp, his face a red fist.

"No. Our mistake," Calvin said, "we're going," and so Calvin and Zenji left the beach before sunset.

Zenji said, "Should we have stayed?"

Zenji stood beside the arch, waiting for Calvin. The light turned red, and people started crossing the street. A young Japanese couple stopped, and the man took a camera out of his backpack. Zenji knew they looked at him from the corner of their eyes, but he didn't care. They gave up, and the man took a picture of the woman under the big white sign. International Market Place.

Zenji turned around and saw Calvin checking the necklace stand. Calvin picked a surfboard one, then a turtle one, and held each. He studied them one by one, then side by side, and put the turtle one back on the hook. Then took it again. He returned both and moved to the next stall, right in front of the muumuu shop. There was a dress with red and white hibiscuses on a black background, with wide-open shoulders. It's nice, Zenji thought. It would be nice on her. I would buy it for her, and she would be happy. She would kiss me, and we would . . .

To make a long story short, I can't go to Hawaii. Or should I say I've chosen not to go.

Zenji strolled around the market, looking for Calvin. A young woman talked to him in broken Japanese, with a small bottle of hand cream. He could not tell if she was Hawaiian, Asian, or Middle Eastern. She talked about the beach and the market and the weather, putting the orange-colored cream on his hands and massaging them. Her nonstop drollery did not give him a chance to interrupt, so he let her go on, wondering what mother tongue would make her Japanese sound like that. When she finished her massage and gave him the smile that had never accepted no from Japanese tourists, he said, in English, "Sorry, ma'am, I'm afraid I'm not interested." Zenji found Calvin at the aloha shirt stand.

Calvin picked a tan aloha shirt with big blue flowers, quickly slipping his t-shirt off and pulling the sign of tourist and surfer Hawaii over his head. Calvin's body was a tad slack but not too bad, especially for a "nerd cool" academic, although Calvin never really thought of himself that way; he thought of himself as a poet. And Zenji, a Murakami fan, wrote stories when he wasn't rooting around in libraries—and some of these stories Zenji and Calvin told together.

Calvin said, "My stomach's rumbling. Where should we eat?"
Zenji said, "Follow me. I know a place."
"Will I need to use chopsticks?"
"You might."

"Here you are." Zenji picked up two black wooden trays and handed one to Calvin. Zenji found this Japanese noodle place on the day he arrived, and knew it served real *sanuki udon.* When asked how to find authentic Japanese restaurants, Zenji always told his American friends to look for names that didn't make sense to them. Forget Shogun, Yokozuna, or whatever rings the bell with you, he said, and go with Marukame or Gyukaku instead.

Zenji and Calvin followed the slow progress of the line, receiving noodles, picking up tempura toppings, and paying a Caucasian woman in the all-white uniform. Zenji put his tray on a window-side table and waited for Calvin. Not too bad, he thought. He knew he was off the hinges, but hanging out with Calvin like this would buy the time to get back. Everything he had enjoyed—reading, writing, traveling—was a nebulous nonentity now, about which he couldn't push himself to care anymore. But it's fine, he thought. The paper was all finished, just waiting to be read. He could buy the time to get back to normal, and how else could you kill time better than eating nice authentic *udon?*

"Like this?" Calvin slid the chopsticks in his hand.

"Yes. Now move the top one so its tip hits the bottom one's." The trick was to hold the top one with your thumb and two fingers, just like a pencil, and put the bottom one balanced on the side of your palm and ring finger. When you pick up food, move the top one but not the bottom one.

"Hmm, that's not easy," Calvin said. Zenji was worried that Calvin's noodle would get soggy by the time he made his first bite. Calvin gave it another try, but the top one went past the bottom one again. Then they caught a piece of thick white noodle in between the X they formed, and carried it precariously to his mouth.

"That's fine, man," Zenji said. "It took me six years to use them right."

Calvin picked the pencil-thick noodle up with his chopsticks that shook with effort, but held. He slurped when he pulled the noodle in.

"It's okay to make that sound," Zenji said.

Calvin picked up the bowl and sipped.

Zenji and Calvin walked into the Waikiki night. The sidewalks were full of people in their twenties and thirties—women in red dresses and black leather miniskirts, some in dresses with sequins that caught the beach streetlights, and men in silk aloha club shirts, shirts with silver shimmer, men in alligator loafers. Two glimmering women walked past Calvin and Zenji. The stouter one said, "Fifty dollars" to Zenji.

Calvin punched Zenji in the arm and said, "She didn't say anything to me."

"Really? I was just closer."

"No. Who she wants is you."

Zenji wondered aloud why hookers called on him all the time. Every time he walked in city streets at night. He was not popular—though not unpopular either—among girls. He was not a swaggering macho type, nor the smooth urbane type. He worked out regularly, lifting weights and swimming, but always preferred to be wiry-strong.

"And I have no hair." Zenji pointed to his shaven bald head. He was on the Big Island the day before, to kill the time without Haru, and paid a beginning-of-the-year visit to a Buddhist temple in Hilo. The middle-aged Japanese reverend saw his head and thought he was another Buddhist priest. When Zenji said he wasn't, the reverend asked if he was interested to be one. The reverend had two daughters but no son, and had been looking for a successor for some years. Just think of it, he said with a gentle smile; it was not a coincidence you visited this temple.

"That's why they always call on you," Calvin laughed.

"Ah, well, maybe you're right," Zenji shrugged.

Calvin ran a hand over the crown of Zenji's head.

"Maybe that's what they all want to do," Calvin said. "Smooth a hand over your bald head."

"You bet they do," Zenji said.

"Like rubbing a statue for luck."

"And it works."

"Man, I need some more luck," said Calvin.

"Get that hand away from my head."

Zenji entered the ballroom, balancing two plates on one hand and carrying a thick heavy briefcase with the other. He had picked a little bit of everything—cinnamon roll, waffle, bacon, smoked sausage, scrambled eggs, hash browns, salad and fruits. He found

an open table, put the briefcase on one of the seven chairs around it, and placed the plates on the clean white tablecloth.

He looked over the room and saw there were more than forty tables and barely a dozen people eating. The final day of a conference, he thought. People were already headed back home, or hitting the beach one last time. Or just tired, like Calvin. He had alluded to skipping the breakfast, but Zenji asked anyway.

"Go ahead without me." With a slow rustle of the comforter, Calvin turned over to face Zenji standing by the window. "I'll catch you up at lunch."

He opened the briefcase and took out his watch. Two minutes to eight. Perhaps people had just left for 8 A.M. sessions. He put the watch on and went to get a glass of milk.

Calvin woke slow, but showered and dressed quickly.

He donned his khaki slacks and ivory shirt and black sports coat his wife, Isabel, had chosen for him. Women were always getting and giving him things: clothes. Calvin slipped on tan socks and dark brown loafers and grabbed his conference pack.

Almost out the door Calvin paused. In the closet his aloha shirt hung, black with white hibiscus flowers, hummingbird flowers—the shirt he got his last trip here, honeymoon of 1998, shirt his ex-wife bought, shirt from pretty, petite Julie. With so many things gone, discarded, left, thrown out, Calvin sometimes wondered why he kept the shirt. But now he knew. The shirt reminded him of days of joy, tropical days, days in the sun with the woman he loved. The shirt held that sun, that sand, that sea salt somewhere in its knit—somewhere within its slick ripples that shirt knew love, Mayfly love, brief love, afternoon island rain love.

Calvin pulled the shirt from the closet, folded it neatly three times, and stuffed it in his pack. He'd wear that shirt later today, once the talk was done, once the sports jacket was off.

A quarter to nine. Just a few people were in the ballroom, all of them done with eating. Zenji sipped his second cup of coffee, looking vaguely into the clear sky through the open door. With

the drowsy quietude permeating the room, he could not believe he was giving a scholarly presentation in just a few hours. Hawaii in January, well-brewed French press in the air-conditioned ballroom, with another bright tropical morning outside.

Or should I say I've chosen not to go. . .

Haru would have been taking her return flight by now. He wondered how she spent the five days off she got for the trip. She was probably visiting her parents, he thought. Though tsunami did not hit their town, she had told him, it was not easy for them to lose a modest but comfortable retired life, with the tilted house and sinkholes and rolling blackouts and all. "And," she went on, "we are expecting more power outage this summer."

A caterer came in and began cleaning up the tables. As Zenji packed his things, he saw a bobbed-haired woman in a gray suit pass by his table, recognizing him in a silent smile. They had shared a table on the first day, with three others. After introducing themselves, the five of them promised to attend each others' sessions—a promise Zenji failed to keep as he left for the Big Island shortly after. He remembered that she, a doctoral student at a west-coast university, was reading a paper on "gender roles in reality TV," but her name escaped him. He returned an awkward smile, saying an unvoiced "hi," and wondered if she was coming to his session.

Calvin and Zenji were slated to present in the last session of the last day. As usual, Calvin and Zenji arrived early. The two sat in the hotel lobby and gave the paper a last run through.

Zenji said, "Do you say it wear-ee or weer-ee?"

And Calvin said, "Weer-ee. That's how I say weary. But it may change by region."

"Like how your father says Missour-ah?" Zenji said.

"Yep. Just like that," said Calvin. "You say po-tah-to; I say po-tay-to."

Zenji sang, "'Let's call the whole thing off.'"

"Not bad, Sinatra. Let's bring 'em some jazz and blues, wake up that room."

"We will, Cal. We will. Ready?"

The penultimate session was full of art therapists, large women in large dark dresses with big belts at their middles—silver belts and white belts and dark brown belts. The women were laughing. Calvin asked one to stay. But none did.

The last session was a shared session, and a woman with a head full of sandy curls and a skirt suit promptly shook Calvin's hand, and said, "I'm Sandra, and this is Chauncy." "Calvin," he said back. Chauncy wore a purple sports jacket with white chinos and a yellow shirt. At his neck was a blue and purple polka dotted bow tie. He nodded, he saluted, he laughed. The four readied the room. Calvin plugged in the tape player. Never trust batteries alone. Zenji tapped his note cards into a neat stack. Chauncy, who was not presenting but was moral support, tugged at his argyle socks. Sandra said, "Mind if I go first?" And no one said no, and so, with one quick breath, she started.

Sandra had seated herself beside the small round table in the front. Zenji moved to avoid the cold air stream near the wall. All three listeners were in the front row.

"Okay," Sandra said and began to talk. Calvin took out a small notepad and flipped the pages. Chauncy crossed his legs and rested his jaw on his hand. The paper was about documentary films on East Germans' memory of the secret police. Public records versus individual stories. Generation gaps and fading memories. The lack of language in which to tell a story and overcome the trauma. The collaboration of the storyteller and the audience. Remembering as re-membering. . . .

Zenji was dozing on a long-distance bus when he felt a gentle pat on his shoulder. He opened his eyes and saw Haru craning her neck over his face. She turned and pointed out the window with a big smile on her face, and he raised his upper body. He

saw terraced rice fields spreading all over the green hillsides, graciously curved and bordering harmoniously on each other. He looked at Haru again. She was still smiling, silently, wrinkling her eyes behind her glasses.

"Thank you," Sandra said, and applause followed. Zenji looked a little taken aback, but he soon caught up.

Sandra tugged gently at the edges of her skirt and curtsied. The three men clapped. Sandra tapped Zenji on the shoulder as he took her place up front in a folding chair. Calvin double checked the tape player, bringing the player to life for a second or two. The sound of a small jazz and blues combo rose from the speaker holes. A little staticky, but full of soul. Chauncy sat up straighter, strummed an imaginary banjo or guitar, chording. Everything was set. Zenji would speak first. He knew the background, was the better researcher. Calvin was the idea guy, and interviewed the musicians.

"Okay," Zenji said and felt all the eyes were on him. The opening was always the toughest for him, the part before the first word of the paper. This pre-talk talk should be meaningless enough to transition smoothly and meaningful enough to introduce the real talk. He was in trouble. With all the days he spent idling around and straying to the Big Island and daydreaming of Haru, he had nothing in his head. After a moment of awkward silence, he began.

Among many blues poems Langston Hughes composed in his productive career . . .

Zenji could see Sandra and Chauncy's smiles, and Calvin's too, drawn taut a little to the sudden opening. He kept on, speaking slowly, hoping to sound clear and confident. He pronounced weer-ee at one time and wear-ee at another.

The blues-suicide motif informs some of Hughes's early poems later included in the 1958 LP. . . .

Sandra refolded her legs under the suit skirt without stopping the white fountain pen. Chauncy's eyes were fixed on Zenji, his slow nods synchronizing with the brown oxford tapping silently on a leg of the chair. They were on, Zenji thought, and all he had to do was just keep going. Then Calvin would take care of the rest. Haru or no Haru.

Now we'll move on to a musical analysis. Calvin will take over. . . .

Sandra and Chauncy smiled and turned to Calvin, who nodded once and then began. Zenji let out an inaudible sigh of relief, and noticed none of those who shared the first day's breakfast table was present, including the bobbed-haired girl working on "gender roles in reality TV."

Calvin told about his interviews with jazz and blues musicians, what they found in Langston Hughes's sessions—what was ignored in the words, what music was brought to match the words, and what moments were lost, in boredom or miscommunication and in a lack of inspiration. Calvin pressed play on the 1980s vintage cassette player, a castoff gift from his current wife. Nothing happened. Calvin hit stop, then pressed play again. The six-sided stars did not spin, did not even lurch. Calvin took and held the plug to the outlet on the wall, and it all moved, jerked into electricity and life, sound: Hughes's voice with Mingus's band behind him, a version of "The Weary Blues," trumpet high and quick, New Orleans style griot music. Calvin held onto that plug as if everything depended on it, and, in a way, it did.

Sandra blushed as if from wine, getting a kick out of Calvin's moment of thin ice, and Chauncy bounced his head to the tune, also with a smirk but with that crinkle in the brow a musician has when an instrument needs you, that moment when the metal tube is full of spit and you must play a long, held note, or when a string snaps but you must go on without it, without that note, that hole in the chord.

And it all ended as quickly as it began, with mild applause, a room almost empty, formal regard, a quick question or two, the golf clap of academia, and Calvin wanted to hug someone or to fall into someone's arms. But he thought of the peace of white sand, as a dream, a wish, a sublimation, a replacement for lust and its extrapolation, its end. He shook Zenji's hand, and pulled a length of duct tape from the floor, a long strip that guarded a line of extension cord on the floor.

"For your broken suitcase, my friend." And Zenji patted him on the back.

Back on the beach, Calvin waded out into water with his trunks and aloha shirt on, shirt his ex-wife had given him, black with white hibiscus flowers, their stamens up, perch for the hummingbirds—one of the only things his ex-wife left him. One night he came home to his HUD townhouse in little Manhattan, Kansas, and the plates and flatware were gone, the table and chairs, all the art, the sofa, and Julie's clothes. She left a note, a kind of note, a rock she had given him that said "create" on it, and a little Episcopal Jesus with the word "trust" on his red and yellow cross. These two final things were paired together on his writing desk. She'd put them there. Trust and create. Calvin would always remember this, he knew. Trust and create. But right now he must let go, to release instead of "create". He took off his shirt. He spread it on top of a calm wave and it fluttered like a ray, and stayed on top, then sank like a feather does, by degrees, making its way down and in. He would beat it to the shore, by hours, by days. He would leave this thing of his first honeymoon here, in the waves, in the surf, sand.

By now, thought Calvin, Zenji is already on his plane.

Zenji opened his eyes as the plane heaved up smoothly. A soft female voice from the microphone warned not to leave the seat until the light went out. He looked out the window and saw the dazzling Honolulu sky. He sighed.

He had barely made it to the four o'clock flight. The airline clerk checked in the clumsily duct-taped suitcase and asked if the eastbound itinerary was all correct. "Just to make sure," she

winked, giving his passport back. "There are lots of tourists from your country, you know, especially this time of the year."

He thought of the upcoming flights and wondered how he could spend the time with no distraction that could possibly work. Six hours to Seattle, three to Dallas, then one-and-half to Mobile, Alabama. Then the familiar apartment and everyday routine. Only with no more Skyping at eight every morning, eleven at night in Japan. Just a week ago he logged in to finalize a meeting arrangement with her when he found the final message on the chat window, time-stamped a few hours before.

"I've chosen not to go . . ." He repeated the phrase to himself, and looked out the rain-streaked window at the clouds, white and uncertain, wisps of water held tenuously as cotton candy puffs, both vapor and droplet, both there and not there.

Jody Azzouni

REVEALING

There are these weird fish—they've been genetically modified I think, because fish surely aren't like that in the wild. They've been genetically modified so that their skin is transparent now, and you can see right through them. The fish are used in experiments of course, because the point of them is that scientists can watch the progress of the diseases they give to the fish, the point is that they can watch the fish's insides deteriorate. They can film the process right through the fish's skin (sitting around later with popcorn, going to one another: look at that, that used to be a *liver*). Reality fish shows for scientists, people who never really grow up, if you think about it, some of them acting like medical students their whole lives. I should know, I slept with a bunch of them.

Internal guts getting to do their thing in public. Visceral transparency. And wouldn't you know it, that's the title of one of Jim's works, of course—maybe it was a prototype for me. It was a public installation, one of the only ones that they ever let Jim do. No buildings wrapped in cellophane for him, no unbearably cute giant teddy bears or differently colored elephants with smirky expressions doing dumb shit with umbrellas. It looked like a real pond right there in the middle of Times Square except that it wasn't, it was solid and you could walk on it, and when you looked down into it, you could see all these animals dying in fires deep down at the bottom of the pond. The fires were flickering, and it was amazing to be seeing into what looked like water in a pond except that you could see all the way down apparently, all the way down to hell, to where all these animals were in total agony, their fur on fire, cats screaming as they tried to roll out the fires burning on their backs, their flaming bodies blazing against the black smoking ash, the hippos or some other large pained fat animals moaning and shaking in what looked like boiling mud, birds trying to flap away from it all, their wings suddenly bursting into flames—weird shit like that. Everything was moving really slowly, the way

things do in water, and if you went back several hours later all the scenes would have changed completely, different animals were being tortured now, some zebras coated in brownish viscous flaming oil bellowing their agony to the heavens. So it was still hell, it was always still hell down there at the bottom of the pond—no matter how much time went by.

And like I mentioned, all the animals looked like they were surrounded by water, because the water from the pond that you were looking through, it seemed to reach down to where they were, so that it looked like they were still under water but in hell too, and on fire, all at the same time. It looked that way because of the optics, because of how Jim made the transparent plastic refract the light.

It caused an uproar of course—I mean the kind of uproar that *art* causes because we're not rock stars or politicians being busted with cocaine up our noses or with our noses up the butts of prostitutes or anything like that. Because by that time Times Square had become a kind of Disney World of New York City, and children aren't supposed to see animals with big round eyes having bad experiences, not near mainstream media anyway. So a lot of the uproar was about protecting young innocent American kiddie-eyes from bad shit when they're wandering around in Times Square.

But the Catholic Church got involved too, I don't know why exactly—maybe because it was New York and the Catholic Church always gets involved in things like that here, taking the moral high road or something, letting us all know what movies they don't approve of and that we shouldn't see even if we're Jewish or something. Like somehow they've got a monopoly on how hell's allowed to look. And there was this conservative think-tank out of Massachussetts or Texas or somewhere, and it was outraged too, because it was claiming there were all sorts of political implications that Jim was implying somehow with his flambéed animals: like somehow Jim was supporting leftish anti-business sentiments or the anti-big-farm movement or something, that he was letting us know (somehow he was doing this with his cooking animals) that energy companies, oil companies I guess, are run by

really really bad people who don't like animals. There was even supposed to be something in there about polytheism, that was supporting polytheism somehow, although we never could figure out how *polytheism* was exactly showing up at the bottom of the pond. I read a ton of the blogs posting shit on this—I never could figure out what they thought they were talking about.

Jim did an interview that got posted on YouTube, him eating a steak. It was deliberate, him eating that steak the whole time, during the entire interview, a rare steak. "There are no words in my work, none at all." That's what Jim mumbles at one point during the interview, because he's got a lot of chewy steak in his mouth. "Not even the words: All hope abandon ye who enter here. There are no signs anywhere in the work, no advertising at all, nothing like that." Jim playing the innocent. Like he was just representing a typical American bar-b-que or something at the bottom of his fake pond. "Maybe I should call it *Forever July 4th*," that's what he said to me at one point while he was still thinking about a title for it, before it was installed, before it even had a name. Instead he decided to call it *79*. Which, as you might guess, doesn't mean a damn thing at all.

I think what I read about the fish is that the scientists give them a kind of tuberculosis, the kind of tuberculosis that fish can get, and then they watch what happens in their gills, inside of the fish. I don't know what the hell a coughing fish is supposed to look like.

Okay, so I'm making fun of this, but pretty much everything I said about there being transparent fish that scientists study is true. And that they are Frankenfish—that's true too. They are valuable for some scientific reason or other, because scientists can learn a whole lot more from a transparent Frankenfish than they can learn from your everyday flounder or guppie. Fish—you've probably heard this, or you might have already guessed it because fish really aren't that deep—fish are not very big on privacy, although they definitely feel pain.

Fish-pain, boy was *that* a big deal a couple of years ago, and you probably still remember it because it was all over the web

about fish being in pain *too*, because the we-love-all-the-animals people were railing and ranting and protesting about the evil fishermen from Japan or Canada or Russia or Maine or whatnot who hurt the little fishies with their big hooks.

Some people think we should live on turnips or radishes or grass or something. But we kill things and eat them for a living, that's who we are, that's the kind of animal we are. Vegans can pretend they're the close cousins of cows and the other peaceful munching creatures, but they're just not, they're a lot closer to pigs—I mean if we're going to talk about our family relations. And that means they can eat *everything*. And we're really not very nice about it, eating everything, I mean. But that's what being human is, in case you didn't notice. We're really a very complicated animal, we're not simple loving peaceful creatures munching on leaves all the time—we're not making-love-all-the-time bonobos that all the vegans like to think we are just under the surface, or that we could be anyway if we'd just embrace peace and love and sprouts. Vegans always crack me up because they're from somewhere else, somewhere on Mars I think. They really are.

Anyway, I think the fish stuff came out around the same time that the murdering porpoises made the news too. The kinds of things that people like to idealize and look up to. My rule: if it has a big brain then it's probably got a really creepy personality to match. If it seems nice, it's just trying to fuck with you. Those porpoises, they sure do seem to be smiling all the time, don't they? That's a smirk, it really is. (Okay, I'm joking again. I am *not* particularly paranoid about porpoises.)

People *still* bring up the transparent fish whenever they talk to me, or they used to anyway. Whenever they were seeing me without my clothes on, I mean. And I had to keep explaining to them that Jim had had the idea years and years before transparent fish even *existed*. That if anything, the scientists got their ideas from Jim; they got it from looking at videos of me on the web.

We were already together by then, we were already an item. I'd been a model in his classes first—the usual thing that starts it up between a cute girl and an artist—but I wasn't one of those art

students that was doing naked on the side for extra cash. A friend had suggested it to me because she thought it would be interesting for the art classes to see a body like mine, and I thought, *oh what the hell*, and so I just went to the school, and then I walked into the first studio I saw off the hallway. It happened to be Jim's studio and he happened to be there when I showed up. Bouncing around that cluttered classroom, all sorts of shit everywhere, he was showing a couple of art students the ropes. Real ropes, I mean, and all other sorts of junk too—posters, construction material, plasterboard, pieces of a truck tire. Hubcaps. A real junkyard his studio was. And medical instruments too, and what looked like a couple of chopped-up dentist chairs. Like this is the stuff they make art out of nowadays? I just wasn't getting it. Whatever happened to landscapes and flowers and naked women?

But then I stood there watching him the whole time, watching him talk to the students who were just totally open-eyed and kissing up, and I watched how he kept glancing sidelong at me to see what my reactions were going to be, and it took a few minutes but then I was thinking to myself: Are you for *real*?

Because I didn't really believe that anything like him could *exist*. Not in this universe, not nearby enough in this universe for me to meet him, anyway. If you watch his face move long enough soon you're wondering if anyone else is even *alive*, everyone else is so wooden in comparison somehow. So that everything that happened after that was a coincidence. Everything. I mean it. Because I could have walked into any old studio at all, or even that one on a different day or time. Or my girlfriend could have forgotten to suggest to me that I check out the art school for modeling money. That's how coincidence works. Or any other sort of dumb accident.

I lost all my hair when I was twelve. I lost *all* my hair. I'd already started puberty so it was plenty traumatic, as you can imagine. If it happens when you're a really little kid, like when you're two or three, then that's just who you are—you develop all your life as a kid with no hair, that's your personality, that's one of the givens of your personality, like being really really short or kind of

homely. Because it's always been like that with you. And if you're already an adult when it happens, you learn to deal with it because that's what being an adult is, dealing with unexpected shit. But for it to happen like it did to me, just at the beginning of adolescence, there's no getting past that, there just isn't. That crushes you for life, it just does, because now you've just been wrenched out of the path it was clear until then that you were going down. And you know exactly what's happening because right there next to you, moving in parallel, is the path you were going to take, you're aware of it, and how it's suddenly horribly veering away from you with all your cute chipper friends still on it waving goodbye.

So I know who I would've been otherwise. If this hadn't happened to me. Not everyone can tell who they would have been if their life had accidently veered left instead of right, the way it did for me, but I know. I would have been this simple happy loud soul, sort of like Sarah Palin with brains. I would have been a CEO, one of those powerful women you see all the time on television nowadays, running a couple of media empires and contemplating going into politics as a power-mommy. I would have been nice on the surface, but hard as nails everywhere else. And really really busy. Even if I didn't rise that high, I would have done really really well. I'd be a head-hunter for big corporations maybe—putting *A* together with *B*, matchmaking and being paid plenty for it. And maybe only maybe I'd have had kids too. Because they display well if you dress them up right, and because you can hire a lot of help if you're making it the way I would have been making it. I would have been really really cool and really really successful, I just know it. Because I had the ambition and the smarts, and I would have had the looks too. Because I would have had really really beautiful hair. Like my mom did.

Instead, I was totally traumatized. Inside of me, I mean, where no one could see all the damage. But everyone had to know it was there, my internal wasteland, they had to know I was traumatized just because of how I looked now. And I hated that, I hated the fact that here was something about me that I couldn't hide. No matter how I behaved. I hated the fact that people were always going to think I was vulnerable in some way that they could clearly

see, that I was damaged goods, palpably damaged goods. I hated the fact that they were just going to assume I was wounded psychologically, because if everyone around you just assumes you're vulnerable and damaged and bleeding inside, well then they're going to find all the ways that you *are* damaged and vulnerable and bleeding inside. There's just no way you can play poker with the other predators who like doing business if you *look* like you've got a handicap. Because they'll focus on you being damaged, because they'll probe and push and look, and if people focus on you and probe and push, looking for a handicap, then they're going to find whatever handicap you've got. That's the rule, right?

Here's a goldfish fact. If a goldfish in a tank is wounded, like if it develops a little fungus on it or something, then you've got to isolate it from the other goldfish, take it out of the tank or put netting around it. Because the other goldfish that happen to be swimming by it just take casual bites out of it. Not all of them, and not all the time. It's just sort of casual cruelty, a bite in passing, nothing personal. But the wounded fish ends up dead in a day or so if you don't isolate it.

So what do you do when you don't have any hair? You make a lot of lemonade, all the time you're doing that, pouring sugar on the wounds. And you're laughing heartily a lot all the time too. In a crude broad way I mean, very earthy jokes, nothing subtle at all—not if you've got no hair. Because what you look like dictates what kind of jokes you can make. And because all your other options are really really dark. And you have to become an exhibitionist too, especially if you've got good facial features, especially if you've got good bone structure, a good body, all of which I had plenty of. And all of which would have really played well in my favor. Because people are going to be staring at you all the time anyway. And you have to allow what's happened to you to take you to new places that you would have had no interest in otherwise. Like into art.

Because otherwise you aren't going anywhere, you sure as hell aren't going to any of those places that you were planning to go to, those places that you'd played with your dolls about. All those wonderful things that young women can do nowadays—

but not you. You've been made weird by circumstances, and you haven't got any choice about that.

My mother, my poor simple mother never got it. "You can be anything you want, honey, you know that." That's what she'd say to me *all* the time, and strong silent dad would nod his head in the background, making clear that whatever the two of them had by way of cash and resources, it was all for me, it was all for making their babygirl able to do whatever she wanted to do. But I was a sharp kid, I knew what reality looked like when I saw it, I always did. I was simple *that way,* not simple the way my mom was: *We can do anything we want, if we just wish for it hard enough, work for it hard enough.* No, you can't, you can't do anything you want, you can't have anything you want. Because a lot of it just comes down to how you look, because that really does come first—that's what people notice first, of course. And it's what they call a parameter, those scientists I mean, the ones who torture transparent fish for a living. It's what they call *a fixed* parameter. Fixed parameters are like walls, they're like cliffs. You don't get to go through them. There are no miracles out there waiting for bald people.

It was bad enough that I had no hair—I'm not going to lie to myself about what that meant. Even at twelve I wasn't going to lie about that. I knew that things were going to be plenty crooked for me from then on. That I couldn't be the standard girl-goddess in middle school, something I would have been otherwise. I couldn't be cruel to others because I had the looks they didn't have that I could flaunt. I couldn't establish my high place in the middle-school hierarchy with the typical girl knowing glances, with the usual sneering. Not without eyebrows, I couldn't. I knew this clearly, and so I went right for the twisted stuff instead, I totally embraced the alternative universe that I'd been pushed into. What else was I supposed to do?

Jim had been sleeping with me for about a year when he finally got the idea. Because I know exactly when it happened, because Jim can't hide anything from anyone, not with that charming showmanship face he's got that's always expressing whatever

enthusiasm that's going through his head at that moment. And then we're talking about it, not whether to do it but how to do it.

"About ten years it has to take," that's what Jim tells me right at the beginning. "And not just because this has to be right, and I can't work over the medium if I make a mistake."

"Work over the medium"—that was my fucking skin he was talking about.

But he was talking about publicity almost as much as he was talking about technique, maybe more. Which is Jim all over. How we would have to pace it—because that's what you do. You don't just create something, you also create how it's going to be perceived, when it's going to be perceived, and that's creating how it's going to be publicized and advertised. All in stages, all in planned careful stages. That's Jim all over.

It's funny, because momentous things are the things you're supposed to think about for a while, ponder over slowly, walk around meditating about for weeks and weeks and weeks. They're decisions you're supposed to *agonize* over. But momentous things just crash in on me, ruin my life totally without my permission—that's just what they do to me. *Hi: I'm here*, the terrible thing says to me, *and I'm here to stay.* So why can't that be true about momentous good things too?

So I didn't have to think about this at all, I already knew it was right, right away I knew that. So I said to Jim, "Okay, where do you start?"—and I meant, where do you start on *me?* And now it's Jim who balks, it's Jim who says, now wait a minute, sweetie, we've got to think about this, we can't rush into this without thinking. This is *serious.* Me, I already know that we're doing it, that we're committed in deep.

Where do we start? And I mean, where on my body do we start? That's what I asked him a couple of days later. The second time. Right after we'd made love in the light. Because he loved staring at me. So I ask him when he's kind of starting to doze the way he always does afterwards. And he sits up in the bed, glances at me for just a moment. And then bends down, starts to kiss my leg, moving his lips up my thigh. I'm laughing, when I push his

head away from my hairless baby-cunt—"What are you doing?" I say to him. "I'm letting my lips decide," he tells me. "Okay, feels good to me," that's what I say.

My knees are very ticklish—especially if I've bent my legs a little—and he starts to nibble on my right one. *Stop it*, I say, no way you're starting with my knees. The knees are last, totally last. And that's when I decided that I was going to change my name to Amber. For obvious reasons. Jim never adapted to my new name. Which really pissed me off—that he kept automatically saying Amanda. And then to placate me, he'd say honey or darling or lovedove. Lovedove. This is not how Jim normally talks.

It took a really long time to decide—I mean it took *months*, really—and I'm the one that made the final decision. About where to begin. The heart, I told him, you have to start with the heart. I was pointing to where my heart is. And then you gradually grow the rest of it out of the heart, gradually grow the images over the rest of my body. I was showing him sketches too, and I'd unbuttoned my shirt, unhooked my bra, so that I could show him exactly what I had in mind, how the tattoos would have to grow out from my heart area over the rest of my body.

And once you settle on the heart as where you're beginning, you've fixed to a very large extent how the rest of it *has* to go. That's what I told him next. It doesn't look that way at first, it doesn't look that way as the two of you are negotiating your way to how to proceed, because I was certainly going to have a lot of say on this one, because it was me. But still, if the heart is there, that means you're going down to a certain level, you're not going to expose a lot of muscle because you're in deeper than that. And anyway, muscles are too boring for a permanent installation. That was something I stressed to Jim, that when I was going to drop my clothes, I didn't want people staring at a lot of muscle tattoos. Because all the shifts in grain and flow would be something only muscle-aficionados would be into. Because it really wouldn't do much for the rest of our audience.

But Jim explained to me that it wasn't about realism. It wasn't about me looking as if I have no skin for example. That this in-

stallation had to be stylized, and it had to be stylized sort of the way that anatomy books already stylize the insides of the human body. I remember not getting what he was telling me right away, but Jim's a good teacher. He explained that there are lots of medical students out there, and lots of anatomy books that most people are familiar with. And it isn't that they just depict the human body with skin missing. They accentuate structures in the human body at different levels of functionality that doesn't have a lot to do with how things *look* because, say, they're depicting the cardiovascular system, or because they're depicting the lymphatic system. Or the central and peripheral nervous systems, or how some of these three-dimensionally play out with the skeleton. So actually, they're not depicting anything visually in a way it would look if your skin or some of your other surface layers were missing. The depictions are sort of functional based on systems that physiologically work together in certain ways, or that are studied by certain sets of medical specialists and not by others.

The depictions are scientifically motivated, Jim tells me, but that means that the population at large has certain misperceptions about what human anatomy looks like inside. What they think things look like is optically inaccurate—like if you had x-ray vision it wouldn't look like that in there at all. Instead, x-ray vision would just take you into the body a certain depth, and you'd be getting weird slices of everything which wouldn't look like anything you'd ever seen in an anatomy book or anywhere else. Because the human body is packed tight with all sorts of stuff jumbled together. It's not like there's a simple perspective inside the body from which to expose our insides in a way that's visually informative.

So the tattoos have to be stylized, Jim explained to me, kind of like cutaways. Like when we do the top of your head—this one is easy, he tells me—we have to layer the tattoo-images, present the appearance of layering, so that there's the brain, what looks the deepest is the surface of the brain, and we can let that get covered up quite a bit with other things because so many people have seen or think they've seen brains; they've already got plenty of images in their heads about what brains look like and so we can rely on

that. And so we can overlay the brain with the vascular system a little and even show a bit of skull around the edges.

"Different colors, different colors matter at lot—not the colors things in there actually have," that's what Jim told me next. Because people don't have any preconceived ideas about the colors of things in the human body, except that they think stuff related to blood is really really red—Jim laughed at that—so color differences can bring out different structures and can help provide the illusion of depth, so people will think they're seeing really deeply into your body.

Realism, optical realism, really won't work here, not even a little bit. And then, stroking my leg, he talked about how we could show a lot more muscle there in the legs, not so much bone and tendon except as we approach the knees. But the feet were different. The feet would have to be very complicated, especially as we worked the tattoos out toward the toes. A lot of work on the feet, years are going to be spent on the feet. And as he's holding my foot in his hand, stroking it, turning me on, he says something that he claims Rothko and Gottlieb said once in an article in the *New York Times*—that there is no such thing as a good painting about nothing, that only that subject matter is valid which is tragic and timeless. And we're both laughing, because he's fondled my foot so much while he's been saying all this stuff to me that we both have to stop what we're doing right then and there and fuck one another again.

Our one fight, our one kinda-fight. About maybe five years into the project. We're already famous, really famous, rock-star famous—more famous than either of us ever thought we'd be. Because of all the videos. And maybe half of my body's been done. And what I find on the kitchen table is torn-out pages of an anatomy book—it's the face. *Superficial blood vessels and nerves of the head (60%). Right lateral aspect.* And just the ear is left alone, looking like an ear, I mean. I'm thinking at first it's not Jim's, that it's something his fucked-up little creep-kid has left on the kitchen table. But then I see Jim's handwriting, and so when he

comes back from classes later, I'm holding it in my hands, which are shaking. I'm waving the pages at him because I can't stop my hands from shaking, I'm so enraged.

What the *fuck* is this? I'm saying. We'd never talked about it, about my face. I thought it was understood. But he'd been working on my neck for a while, because we'd decided to pack the structure into the images a little more fully there, the vertebral column visible through all the other stuff because people are familiar with what it looks like. Nervous tissue running through it, brightly colored discs because people think they know what those look like too. A lot more of the cardiovascular system like lace, really brightly colored.

Which brings us to the face. My face. No face, I said, the face doesn't get touched. Don't even think about it. And I've started crying.

This went on for a long time. Weeks, I mean. Jim almost threatened me with ditching the whole project. Artistic integrity or something. *Yeah right, or something*—that's what I said back to him. The face gets left alone. Because this is important: once the tattoos healed you couldn't see my body anymore, not where it had been tattooed, you really couldn't. And I kind of saw this coming. That the stunning visuality and depth of the tattoos would obliterate the appearance of my actual body—that you wouldn't be able to see my figure anymore, for example, you weren't able to tell I had breasts anymore when I took off my top. Because the depth illusions in the tattoos obliterated the depths that I really had, my actual physical curves I mean. My surfaces.

At first glance for sure you couldn't tell, but with later glances you couldn't see me either—pretty much all the time. Because Jim was that good, because the surface of my skin had a lot of anatomical content now. And content obliterates the medium it appears on—that's what content does. And so Jim just wasn't going to do that to my face, no way, so that people wouldn't be able see my expressions anymore, they wouldn't be able to read me at all. I'd smile and they'd have no idea what just happened—I'd be gone. And I wasn't going to accept that, he wasn't going to make my face disappear. And Jim got it eventually, he really did—he

eventually gave in. He let me keep my face. He didn't get sullen about it. He didn't ditch our project.

But some people complained later, when it became clear that we weren't going to do anything to my face. That bitch-critic—whatever the fuck her name was—who went on and on about it a couple of years later, about my face and how my face ruined the greatest work Jim had ever done, his opus etc. Sylvia Menses, that was her name. In the *Huffington Post*. And her friend, that other bitch-critic she was supposed to have slept with. Intrinsically flawed but great nevertheless—that was the kind of crap they wrote about us. Before we'd even finished us. Because they'd guessed correctly that my face was going to remain my face, that it wasn't going to be part of the art. Like now I didn't have a right to a face anymore.

Filming the sessions. For YouTube. Because believe it or not that wasn't our plan right from the beginning. Even Jim didn't plan that so early. It came later. Jim needed to film the sessions because he needed to remember everything he'd done to my body, the actual order in which he'd done things. Because if you can do it over, you don't need to remember what you did in the first place in all that much detail. That's what he told me. But here he couldn't make any mistakes about what happened, about what he did earlier. And it was me of course, it was my idea that the best time for us to make love was at the beginning of a session, just before the session began. Because I was always too tender afterwards, and I stayed tender so that I was at my best, really my best, at the beginning of the next session. And anyway that's what I wanted, that got clear to me pretty quickly—that we had to fuck before he went at my body with those instruments.

And it was pretty obvious that's what we'd been doing once the film got rolling on the session itself. Maybe because of our flushed faces, or the way we were glancing at one another, or something. People can really pick up that sort of thing, they can smell the chemistry. And this was obvious too: how much the whole tattooing process was turning me on. The pain, I mean, and the blood. To this day I don't know if Jim really got it, because he's kind of a simple soul about stuff like that, believe it or not—

he's really cerebral even about all that visceral stuff he's always coming up with. His images that just hit you in the gut never hit him in the gut. I don't think he's got a gut, or that he's in touch with it anyway. But the audience sure as hell got it, they knew exactly what had been going on. And that had a whole lot to do with how popular the videos got, and how well known Jim got too. And it also explains all the hate mail we started getting. Some people really hate it when you're having a lot of fun.

I'm never going to forget that first day. I'm not talking about the day when Jim first hit on the idea, I'm not talking about the day he was kissing me on the knees, flirting with me, trying to decide where to begin the tattooing. That was sweet and lovely and wonderful and romantic and I'll never forget that day either. But what I'll really never forget is when we sat down with my first drawings. Because I started thinking about this in detail before he did. And I saw how Jim started concentrating on the project, how his focus kept jittering back and forth from my drawings to my body and then back again. And how he kept jumping up and down, pacing around thinking and then sitting down in front of me again, looking at me, staring at me, gazing at me. I'm going to have to invent a lot of new things to get this work, that's what he said to me at one point. You'd better, I told him, because this is me we're messing with. And Jim kept smiling as he kept thinking it all out. And I knew right then and there that I was going to keep Jim's attention on me for a really long time, maybe as long as the rest of our lives. That pretty much everyone else was going to be out of the picture from now on. And I was totally right about that, at least for a while I was totally right about this—it was for at least a decade that I was totally right about this.

Juliet Williams

YOU'RE REALLY IN IT NOW

You go to the strip club because you could use a few laughs. You haven't been to a strip club since your bridesmaids took you out before your wedding years ago, but right now it seems like the place to be. School teacher—ex-school teacher—enjoys night out at the DollHouse. What could be better?

You've still got a chunk of cash left from what you raided two days ago. Yes, you know your husband meant that money to go to the new roof, but the roof is fine, he's overreacting, and he opened the account without telling you, and this is survival money for you, so there. The rum at the past four bars you've been to has you almost feeling good, and you kept to your vow to leave each bar after two or three drinks, so you've been on good behavior. You're wearing the white denim skirt you've had since college but you can still make it work because your legs have stayed thin even though your stomach has begun to resemble a half-deflated volleyball. The body will have its jokes. And why not? It's been the one home you've had all your life. Of course it would treat you worse and worse the longer you stayed in it. You're wondering just what kind of mortgage you're paying on it anyway as you walk down the short, dark hallway, and for a minute you can't exactly remember where you are or why you've come here. But then the hairsprayed woman behind the little hostess station says, "Welcome to the DollHouse," and she smiles and nods you in. No cover charge; ladies free. Here, this body is like a coupon.

You take your time threading through the tables. If you head right for the bar, you'll catch the bartender's eye in a bad way and you might be lucky to get only one drink from him. The music is Van Halen-ish and the place is foggy with smoke. Giant screen TVs, each one tuned to a different sports channel, flash and flicker from all corners of the ceiling, and pink neon lights ribbon around the stages. A main stage bellies out among the tables, and three platforms dot the sides of the room. On one of the platforms, a

woman gyrates wearing nothing but a neon yellow G-string. Her breasts, bare and joggling, startle you at first and heat creeps into your face. Then you spot more of them around the bar, jouncing or just being casual among the men who are fully clothed and sitting around the tables or at the bar. A couple of the topless women are giving slow, grinding lap dances, but most are standing around talking, taking drink orders. One of the women is sitting down smoking while she talks, flicking her cigarette the same way Lynette Busby used to do in the teacher's lounge.

You ease up onto the barstool, trying not to look at the gleaming rows of bottles behind the bar, trying to keep your hand from jittering on the bar top. "This isn't very exciting," you say as the bartender comes over.

He shrugs. "We got Lusty Linda coming up next," he says. "What'll it be?"

You make a point of looking toward the list of specials and the domestic and imported beer, even though your heart is pounding and your body is chanting *Rumandcoke Rumandcoke Rumandcoke.* "Mmm, I think I'll have a rum and Coke, please," you say and cross your arms in front of you so you're holding on to your elbows. You hope this looks casual.

He goes off to mix the drink, and you are practically salivating. He's a somewhat chunky guy with brown hair that's close cropped so it sticks out a little at the back of his neck, but you're not really interested in him, you're staring at how he's going through all the necessary, wonderful steps to make the drink. With each step, something like a gigantic screw inside you gets turned tighter and tighter. He's shoveling up the ice and sliding it into the glass. You wish he wouldn't use so much ice, but sometimes when you ask for straight up they get suspicious so you've learned to put up with the ice. Now he's grabbing the bottle of rum, tilting it over the glass, and out streams the rum like liquid beauty. He lifts the bottle a little higher, then lowers it at the end of the pour, and you let out a small sigh at the letdown. You scrutinize him as he shoots the Coke into the glass with his soda nozzle. Not too much Coke, that's good. You can almost feel the rum mingling with the

Coke and the ice, though you really wish there weren't so much ice in it, and you can almost feel the cool tingle of the drink sliding down your throat, and as he brings it over to you it seems like it must be your birthday, he's bringing this wonderful concoction to *you.* But when he sets the drink on its napkin in front of you, you want to say, "Is that all?" You don't because some bartenders think this means you wanted a double and they get mad, and even though sometimes you say yes, bring me a double, that isn't what you meant. However much you love the taste of rum on your tongue, however much you can't help but pick up the glass and take the first gulp, however much you thirst for it and no matter how much of it you drink, part of you always knows it's still just a drink in a glass and not what you really want, which is something that will razor through your life and leave you stunned and wholly changed.

You're halfway through this drink already. You tell yourself to slow down. You turn toward the stage and discover you've missed Lusty Linda's entrance. She's out there on the main stage, moving her arms around and sticking out her butt and kicking up her high heels which are Day-Glo pink and which match her Day-Glo pink outfit which is like a marriage between a thong and a rubber band. Her heavy, wobbling breasts are fully on view in spite of the Day-Glo pink stretchy straps running up alongside them, and every once in a while she grabs them with both hands, smooshes them together, and makes a pouty face. A scrap of Day-Glo pink has already been tossed aside and it lies rumpled on the stage. She's bending backwards, forwards, flipping her permed hair, turning around and gyrating her bare bottom with the strip of stretchy Day-Glo pink running up the middle. She turns around again and licks her lips, but the rest of her face is fixed, the way some of your kindergarteners looked during their Christmas music program.

You've taken three more gulps of your rum and Coke before you can make yourself put the glass down. A thick-armed man in jeans has come up to the bar to order. He's got comb marks in his dark hair: he's ready for a night out. You say to him, "I teach kindergarten."

He looks at you, his eyes go down toward your chest then back up to your face, and his expression does not change. He turns back toward the bartender. He's got a ten in his hand. He's going to go to one of the tables as soon as he gets his drink if you don't keep talking.

"I've been teaching for seven years," you tell him. It would have been seven years last month.

Without looking at you, he says, "You thinking this might make a good field trip?"

He says this without even a trace of a smile, but you laugh anyway. He looks at you now, and though he still doesn't smile, something eases up in his face and you laugh some more.

"I figure I might see some former students here," you tell him, and as you say it, you wonder if you actually might. Annette Stockwell, maybe.

The bartender brings the man his beer, and he drops the ten on the bar. "Where do you teach?"

"West Park," you tell him, naming a different school in the same district. Sometimes when you get talkative like this, you make up everything. Once you were a veterinarian on vacation, originally from Virginia but living in Nova Scotia. Another time you used to drive cabs in Chicago but had recently moved here to Columbus where you were cashiering at a convenience store. But the alphabet has temporarily deserted you, and you can't seem to stray far from the truth. Must be all the nudity.

He's eyeballing your legs and the fact that no one is sitting on the other side of you. The bartender comes back with his change, and you know you have to come up with something he can get comfortable with quick. "It's not as bad as it looks," you tell him. "I got a letter from my sister today, and she told me she's a stripper. Out in Sausalito." Ah, the alphabet has come through in a pinch after all. You sip your rum and Coke demurely through the straw.

He sits down. "Really?"

You nod, as if it's a sad case but it can't be helped. "I'm flying out to see her next week, and she wanted me to know before I got

there. So I thought I'd come here to get an idea of what she does. I don't want to be judgmental about it."

Oh, this is good. You can't believe how easily you're coming up with this stuff. Your brain is working as if a thousand fingers were massaging it. You know he doesn't believe this for a second, but he's intrigued, trying to figure out what the real truth is that you're not telling, though he doesn't actually want to know. The real truth is boring, anyhow. Your sister is actually an otorhinolaryngologist in Tampa, and you haven't heard from her in months—or has it been a couple of years now? Ever since she talked to Katie on the phone and Katie told her she'd gotten up for breakfast and found you asleep on the living room floor, your sister has quit talking to you. It wasn't Katie's fault. She's only nine.

He's talking about strippers and how they're just trying to make a buck, same as everybody else, and you're trying to get a fix on what he's saying. You're watching his mouth, wondering if he'll move his lips enough to show his teeth because you can tell a lot about a man by his teeth, and you don't want to think about Katie eating cereal in front of the television and walking through the house like you're not there. She doesn't understand what it is you're doing when you go out to bars like this, when you come home slumped and ragged, sometimes you can't even remember how you got through the front door. Jay doesn't get it either. He doesn't understand it at all, slaps your hands away when you get like this. He doesn't know it's the price you pay for *discovery.*

The tight-lipped man has been saying something about free enterprise, but you interrupt him. "I don't hold it against her at all," you say, feeling a heat rise in your neck. "People call places like this the underbelly, right?" You move your arm in a broad sweep that takes in all the strippers, and the men hunched over the tables, and the stage where another stripper is doing something with shiny silver pistols. "They think this is so awful, all those regular people who go to their nice, safe, regular jobs doing nice, safe, regular, boring things, but really, they all want to know what this kind of thing is like. I mean, even the ones who never come to a place like this, who never do things like this, maybe especially

those people, they all want to know what it takes to live this way. Seamy. Prurient," you say, drawing it out and loving the fact that you can use this multisyllabic word on him. "And let me tell you," you say, leaning close to him so you get a whiff of his cologne which is cheap and heavy with too much orange and not much else, and now you know exactly what kind of guy you're dealing with. You narrow your eyes at him, and he's getting a bead on you, too. "It takes guts," you say. You polish off your drink and slam the glass on the bar.

He looks skeptical. "Anybody can come in here any time they want," he says. He goes on about how it's a free country, but you're not paying attention because your glass is empty except for ice. You've developed the habit of sneaking out the ice cubes but you downed this one before you had time to take any of them out. The ice in the glass reminds you of how you dropped your wedding ring down a ventilator grate in the sidewalk on 6th Street at 2 a.m. That was five or six months ago, when Jay still bothered to yell at you. You'd let go of it on purpose, but once it left your hand and it was lying on a metal ledge below the grate, impossibly out of reach, it was as if the wind had gone right out of you and the only sound it made was a small, "Oh." After some more staring at it, you'd walked away because there was nothing you could do, no way to get it back.

"But you know what," the guy says, and there's something like an idea in his voice. "I think you're right. It does take guts for a lady like you to come into a place like this by yourself." You nod and pick up your glass, tilt it way back, hoping for something other than ice. "Here," the guy says, reaching for his wallet, "let me buy you another," and he flags down the bartender. A glass, however, can always be refilled.

You still have money in your purse, but you're letting him buy the drinks. You're going to have to make that cash last. You know what he'll expect in return for this, but it doesn't matter. He thinks he'll be getting something from you, but he can do anything he wants and it won't touch you. No matter how much you might

want something to drive deep enough into you to finally feel it, that just never happens, so it doesn't matter what this guy does or doesn't do.

You've noticed that the sports TVs are all looping the same highlights over and over, and you've discovered that the strippers are on a three-stop schedule. They start out on the center stage and then they move to one of the platforms on either side, and then they come off the stage and mingle with the folks at the tables. Right now Lusty Linda is giving a table dance to a bunch of college guys who are whooping and laughing while still tight with nerves. You passed your two-drink limit half an hour ago, and you're gulping at this one because you've hit the memory deluge. One or two more drinks and you'll be past it. He's running his hand from your bare knee up to the hem of your white skirt, saying something about the route he drives for his trucker job and how that's no picnic, but you're distracted by flashes of light. When the bartender opens the small metal refrigerator behind the bar, the light slants across the metal, and you say, "I'm in the middle of it right now."

"What d'you mean?" He leans back, wavering on his stool.

What you mean is too much for you to translate from your head to your mouth. You mean the thing you discovered in the classroom that bright, boring winter day, a day or two after a hard snow, sunny but still too cold to melt anything. The classroom was warm and sleepy with the smell of young, soft heads, child sweat, wet wool, Elmer's glue. You'd been standing in the middle of the room looking at Charlie Bennis' drawing of something unintelligible which he said was a horse, and when you straightened up, you were facing the window. In the street outside a van passed by and the sunlight struck it just right so it flashed a miniature, brilliant white sun, and then was gone. There was a whole world outside, it struck you then, full of people doing things, exciting things you knew nothing about, while here you were stuck in a closed-up room with tiny wooden chairs and carpeted corners and blunt scissors.

"It's like there's two worlds," you try to explain, and you hold out your hands, one for each world. Your hands are not jit-

tery now; they feel filled with water, with something heavier than water. "There's the safe world, the clean world, the easy world. Then," you say, spreading the fingers of your right hand, "there's the other, secret world, the real world." The place you most like to be is in between. You'd felt it that day in the classroom, that you were neither standing among all those desks and small bent heads, nor were you outside with all that teeming traffic. You were someplace quiet, airless, disconnected. You found out you could keep that feeling if you took a sip or two of rum before driving to school, and then you found out you could keep it again with Jamaican coffee during lunch—the school provided the coffee, you, the rum. You'd be sitting in the teachers' lounge drinking coffee with them, but they never knew what else you had in your cup. Then, during recess duty, while the children were all running and climbing and losing their hats and bumping their chins, you'd be leaning against the brick of the school and drinking Coke and rum from the can. A boy in a green sweater came up to you one time, Adam something, and he asked if he could have some of your Coke, and you'd said no, it was bad for him, and you'd felt the glow knowing just how bad it was. Then you were drinking the bad Coke during class, telling all the little faces that the maps were wrong, that Jamaica was actually one of the fifty states, it was right next door to Ohio in fact, and all adults were liars. You told them that adults always lie to children because they're afraid of children. They're afraid because they know they'll let them down, adults always let children down and they know it. This made the children afraid—you could see it in their faces—but you thought it was ridiculous for them to be afraid when they had such power. Then, on another day, you told some girl with pinched-up eyes and tight curly hair that her drawing of a rainbow was stupid because it was—all the colors nicely outlined by darker lines and everything p-e-r-f-e-c-t—and then she went and told her parents. Then there was a conference with Lyman Hendricks, who always was more of a prick than a principal. And then there was that moment, or maybe it was five minutes or maybe it was half an hour, when you stood freshly fired in the girls' bathroom in front of

the sinks that barely came halfway up your thighs while one of the little toilets ran and the ancient copper radiators hissed and spat, and there was your stupid face in the mirror that you didn't even recognize, and you felt your life's two strands unwinding and separating themselves, and all you had was that dumb, blank face looking at you in the mirror.

So you got fired. So what. You put on lipstick and fluffed your hair and told yourself it was a sign. You got booted out of the plain world, and it was time to get into the other one, get all the way in. You can list the things you've learned since: breaking one bottle will not get you forever banned from a bar; breaking $750 worth of bottles will. A man will stop talking to you if you touch him during the first five minutes of conversation. If you want a cigarette in a bar, always ask a woman because women are prepared; men never are. If you're going to have sex in a bathroom stall, make sure you start well before last call and ten minutes to lights on. If you drive your car half on the sidewalk and half off, even if you can barely feel that you're mowing down stop signs and no-parking signs, the damage to your car will cost thousands.

Those lessons are easy to learn. Those you picked up in a snap, as you liked to say to your students. But there's another kind of lesson, too. You know you must have learned these because they are so branded on your brain not even fifteen rum and Cokes a night can wear them away. Some of these lessons are as follows: making lunch for your children for the first time in two weeks and while still hung over means you will make sandwiches with bologna gone purply-green and that will make them sick. Kissing your husband after a long night out without him means he will taste it on you and detest you even more. Calling your sister when it finally seems right to ask her just what did mom say that day by the fish pond means you will have gotten her up at four-thirty in the morning, and she will claim to remember exactly what your mother said, and she will tell you that what you remember is just pitiful horseshit, and then you will discover she has hung up on you. Going for a walk alone at dinnertime means you will see through all the windows into all the houses to all the families sitting down

to dinner in their warm houses, and you will know that somebody somewhere is telling a terrible thick lie, but you don't know if it's you or them. Because this is what those lit-up houses, those cars in driveways, those trikes on porches, those men spraying with their garden hoses say to you: You have no heart inside you. You have a husband and a family and you are miserable and that is selfish and that is wrong. You are selfish and you can't love anybody even though you promised you would, and you gave birth and you still can't love because you never could love. Your heart is stone and you have nothing to give. You have no gifts, you have no love, you're only taking up time and space until it's done. That is what you see when you look in the lit-up windows, and those are some of the things that glance through your mind, like silverfish near the surface, when the bartender opens the steel refrigerator and the light glances off it. When he shakes the martini canister. When you set your glass down and the ice cubes in it shift.

"I'm really in it now," you tell the truck-driving man. You're leaning close to him, trying to whisper in spite of AC/DC yelling, "You Shook Me All Night Long." He's got his tongue in your ear, trying to do something to it, and you're sloping farther and farther forward, so you put your hand on his shoulder to keep yourself from falling outright. Then you remember that you could go home, could make that agonizing trip back up the driveway and put the key in the lock and sneak inside yet one more time, except this time no one else will be there. *Did you take the money? So what if I did, what's yours is mine.* On his face—not even the anger about the roof anymore, or the hours he spent working for that money, or the pain at what he thinks you've lost—just nothing, absolutely no expression on his face. *All right, then, all right. The kids and I will be gone when you get back.*

"It doesn't really matter what I do," you tell the truck driver guy. He's standing you up, you realize, and you're glad to finally get off that stool. "That's right, honey girl," he's saying and he's leading you out of there, and you're so glad to be out of that fake-foggy air that you smile. It is so good to be outside in the fresh, big-night air that you reach for the man's neck to put your arms around him. "It could be so easy to love," you say to the sky.

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