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The University of Southern Mississippi

NINE EXITS

A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

by

Tracie Renée Dawson

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts

Approved:

Steve Barthelme

Director

Andrew Milward

Monika Gehlawat

Maureen A. Ryan

Dean of the Graduate School

May 2014

ABSTRACT

NINE EXITS

A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

by Tracie Renée Dawson

May 2014

Nine Exits is a collection of fiction and nonfiction written over the span of two years in workshops provided by the Center for Writers.

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INTRODUCTION

I entered college to study computer science, which is fine, practical, fiscally-sound, but instead I took writing classes and art studios. This may sound like a drastic change, but the disciplines involve many of the same principles: solid syntax, appealing graphics, user-friendliness. In the way that operating systems evolved from frustrating command lines to easy-to-navigate interfaces, I believe that fiction can benefit from being non-linear, interactive, and immersive. My first glimpse at the power of interactive literature was Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000). His demonstration of the ways aesthetics and genre can inform a given narrative continue to impress me. The cohesive application of various techniques—extensive footnotes, codes, colors and twists of typography—provide his work with far more layers of meaning than possible in a traditional format. At a reading Q&A, he said, “I was bored with structures derived from literature. I wanted to find structures derived from the world” (Zemach). To me, a large part of fiction's power is in the uncanny reflection of life and the intentional ways of making strange the language that we use everyday in order to incite us to sit up and take note of our existence. One way to foster this awareness is to require the reader to engage with the text in familiar yet destabilized ways. For example, Chris Ware's *Building Stories* (2012) uses multiple formats of illustrations (on par with Sunday comics in their simplicity and ranging in size from a fold-out map to a small, oblong flip book) to atemporally show the sprawl of human experience inside a single apartment building. While the typical graphic novel guides the reader panel by panel, *Building Stories* encourages exploration

by allowing the reader to manually create connections and rethink interactions between the characters based on the order in which the strips are read.

A particular challenge of the short story, though, is that it doesn't have as much space to create its own logic or a network of references in order to let the reader play. There is a fine line between employing a technique to engage the reader more deeply in the work and employing a gimmick that only serves to alienate the reader, a line that blurs the shorter the work becomes. E. E.

Cummings, one of my favorite poets, is often accused of being eccentric and his poems formless, scattered on the page, but it seems to me that his work is as carefully constructed as any ghazal and uses rather conventional themes. The unique structures allow the reader to interact with old content in a new, more innovative fashion, which has the effect of letting them in on a secret while not appearing to. The foreword to *House of Leaves* reads, "This is not for you," *you* possibly meaning *you who have not gotten past the first page and invested yourself in the story* (Danielewski ix). All of the works I admire engage me to some extent in a way that feels special and nontrivial. I look at others writing short, fantastical works, like Etgar Keret and Gabriel Garcia-Marquez, and it is clear the stories connect with the reader through the underlying humanity of the characters, not because of the weird premises but in spite of them. The stories in this collection, then, experiment with structure but for the most part stick to first person in order to erase the distance between the reader and the page as much as possible.

One thing I changed out of consideration for the reader was the original title of “Degausser.” The story was called “Reduction,” after a type of relief printing that is sometimes called a suicide print. An image is carved into wood or linoleum, impressions made then additional layers carved away, the previous states destroyed, and new impressions made on top of the old, colors and lines blending and overlapping into a new configuration. The name of the technique alone is evocative from a linguistic standpoint, and the accretion of layers in the reduction process seem to function a lot like memory to me. I read an outdated article about the mysterious disappearance of Helen DeWitt, author of *The Last Samurai* (2000), one of my favorite books. She had since been safely recovered, and I realized my concern at that moment was not why she disappeared, but what evidence of her existence was left behind. This suggested the question to me of what happens when a relationship ends, by whatever means, and what is at the forefront as new experiences overlap the old.

While the nod to the printmaking process stayed in the form of the narrator's profession, the title now seemed too abstract to me. In talking about why he put the word *foehn* at the end of his manuscript, poet John Ashbery said he liked the idea of the reader going to the dictionary and leaving one book for another (Stitt). In the same way I feel more comfortable with the title of “Degausser” rather than “Reduction,” which though meaningful to me is just jargon and would be difficult for the reader to define. Reduction is a kind of sauce, a surgery, many things other than a printing technique. Degaussing, on the other hand, is easily discovered to be the act of removing a magnetic field

from an object. What is especially interesting is that it is impossible to completely remove the magnetism of an object, and there is always some remnant of the field that gives some indication of the past attraction, a point I hope makes the last line that much more poignant and the reader's time with the dictionary that much more fulfilling.

Additionally, it is an ongoing effort in my stories to incorporate diversity in a way that is authentic and avoids mere appropriation. Egalitarian works like Brian K. Vaughan's comic series *Saga* (Mar. 2012-present) and short stories by Roxane Gay and Joey Comeau demonstrate the necessity of exploring other cultures and viewpoints in order to give voice to under-represented minorities. Jewish-American poet Alan Shapiro suggests that we are most American in our hyphens, and it occurs to me that however much these hyphens inform our identity, they aren't always readily apparent (Croley). The narrator in "The Year of Us," Siàn, retains vestiges of her Irish background mostly in her name and stories from her grandmother rather than on her own through the language or by following traditions. But her heritage as Irish-American manifests in a variety of non-obvious ways like burning easily in the sun, her lack of good fortunes (a fun nod to the luck of the Irish), and growing up in Boston, where Irish immigrants originally settled, rather than, say, New Mexico.

The story was originally just a line about a pig-shaped good luck charm as a bridge between language barriers until I read Carol Rifka Brunt's *Tell the Wolves I'm Home* (2012), a novel invested in various kinds of impossible love, whether that of a niece for her uncle or between two men at the height of the

AIDS movement. I realized, not immediately after finishing the book but several weeks later, that language barriers are another form of impossibility yet could be overcome with basic human longing, in turn highlighting the fragility of desire all the more by stripping away the obvious connections that can get in the way, like talk of Super Bowl Sunday or a mutually-funny line from *The Office* (2005-2013). My story attempts to mimic this with the reader, too, in a way, by redefining the commonplace utterance of *okay* and turning it into a kind of secret handshake as the story progresses.

In thinking through the ways that language and stories can become *more*, I found myself drawn to the magic realism of Sherman Alexie, Etgar Keret, Jim Dodge's *Stone Junction* (1990), and of course, Gabriel García Márquez's short stories. In a *Paris Review* interview, Marquez described his method as telling stories the same way that his grandmother told them: "with a brick face" (Stone). In "The Xiphoid Yearnings of Zazen," this influence is especially apparent—the juxtaposition of the fantasy nausea bag and the very real dilemma of the narrator's love affair makes it seem mundane and maybe believable.

The inception of "Zazen" was reading an abecedarian poem in an issue of *Poetry*. I'd seen the technique done many times, but always with poems. I already had this idea in the works (that is, a few words scribbled in a notebook) about a girl that finds the name of God in a vomit bag—a story I knew would be very concerned with wonder and not knowing, and the importance of speech yet the utter failure of it too—which seems particularly suited to the use of alphabetic paragraphs. *Zazen*—the practice of meditating by non-speaking and non-thinking

—is the step before enlightenment, but it can also be an anagram of *A-Z zen*, emphasizing again the peace that comes through words, or *kōan*. As a reader, I know I can get too comfortable with the traditional narrative arc, so it is immensely rewarding to be nudged into engaging with a text in a new, non-obvious way, as Marc Saporta does with the shuffled pages of *Composition No. 1* (2011) or the selective attention required by the die-cuts in Foer's *Tree of Codes* (2010). My hope is that by adopting a structure found in poetry, an attempt at communicating life, rather than directly from life, as Danielewski suggests, that I am better able to investigate solipsism and the fundamental rift that exists between people because of cross-purposes and language, sometimes despite our best intentions (ix).

Later, when it came time to challenge myself to write from the first-person plural perspective, something I had wanted to do ever since reading Ayn Rand's *Anthem* (1995), a flash fiction piece was a natural choice in order to explore in a condensed way the best uses of that point of view. The universality of *we* encourages feelings of connectedness and as such is particularly good at showing the rhythms of a specific collective lifestyle.

Though initial inspiration for “The Horticulturalists” was just an overgrown oregano plant, I knew I wanted to use an economy of words to illustrate the transience of a moment, as Haruki Murakami often does in his short stories. I find it important to engage in the rigorous word-pruning of authors like Miranda July and Grace Paley, partially influenced by poetry and partially by another Japanese concept, *ma*, or an awareness of spatial relationships that demands a lack of

clutter, to provide the reader with the best aesthetic experience possible. To that end, I borrowed the structure from the typical *Nōh* play, the pacing of which is called *jo-ha-kyū*, modeled after what is seen as the natural movements of life. *Jo* indicates the beginning or initial set-up of the events; *ha* is a break in the pacing; *kyū* involves a rapid unfolding of the final events. This seemed to me something likely experienced in life on a farm, built as it is around the life cycle of whatever is being grown.

Another example of Danielewski's idea of borrowing structures from life, "Some Conversations on Heartache and Nothing" uses what I imagine is the cab driver's construct of time—place and fare—to show the progression of the story and the possibilities of first-person point of view. The narrator's voice was largely inspired by the gritty yet vulnerable tone of Harlan Ellison's *Angry Candy* (1988) and maybe channels Tony Soprano a little to give the piece a comedic high/low effect. In the original draft, the narrator would try to use larger words but end up mispronouncing them (i.e., *vincinity* and *perturberations*), though in the final draft these words reverted to the correct spelling to make sure readers wouldn't be distracted with what could be interpreted as just a typographical error.

Marquez' brick face technique is again applied to the idea of a magically-perfect burger, born out the conviction that a certain level of awareness can elevate anything to the sacred or religious. Consider Masaharu Morimoto's performance on *Iron Chef* (1993-1999) or books like *The Joy of Cooking* (1931), which transform food from everyday nutrition to an art that involves, among other things, balancing flavors and "juxtaposing tropes," as Rae Armantrout calls the

work of poetry (Legro). Anything can be an art form if given enough attention and what's more American than a burger? The tension in the story was then generated by putting a character absolutely in service to this idea of the sacred and a character who never looks beyond the day-to-day business of life or going from point A to point B.

With “Winter Song,” I knew from the beginning I wanted to write a story about the aftermath of loss, specifically a sudden, inexplicable loss. Morton Feldman, avant garde musician, points out in his essay “The Anxiety of Art” (2000), that in life we strive away from anxiety, and only in art do we strive towards it (32).

Originally, the story used an odd hybrid of first and third-person narrator as in Margaret Atwood's “The War in the Bathroom” (1994). In Atwood's story, the effect was disturbing and unsettling, something I wanted to echo to highlight the fractured nature of grief, but in the end the effect was distancing and confusing. I was going for quiet, for the numbness that we take on in proximity to the dead that we struggle to throw off to stay with the living while still not wanting to let go. Workshop comments called it lyric but mystifying. The story, then, was too muted, shut off from the reader, too close to what the actual grieving process looks like. My hope is that changing it to first person perspective, coupled with the third person flashbacks, allows the reader get close to an otherwise solipsistic experience.

As for the nonfiction, in “Vous Êtes Ici” the *flâneur* is jokingly evoked but I absolutely believe that the writer has a duty to wander and dabble to foster

awareness of other perspectives and associations. My experience with nonfiction is less extensive than fiction and far less pleasurable. I also have fewer models for how to go about the business of writing—Chuck Klosterman's pop culture essays are hilarious, but I'm not interested in pop culture nor am I anything like hilarious. Marguerite Duras' *The Lover* (1985) is a favorite but far too confessional in style.

Still, these aren't reasons to shy away from a new form. I decided to find my way through the genre by focusing on travel, so the work would center on the interpretation of a specific experience rather than trying to take up a more expansive topic, like the arc of a relationship or a trend in society. Additionally, going outside the United States for the first time already created a heightened sense of awareness making of everything a possibility, whereas finding a story in a daily commute, for example, would require more finesse.

In “You Are Here,” I continued considering the importance of place but from a more familiar vantage point as a slight challenge. This concern for the temporal is stressed through the titles adopted from maps and the ambiguity of “here” and “ici,” respectively. As my fiction explored variations in structure, so too did I want my nonfiction to engage the reader in a different way. I chose to break up the narrative with sections corresponding to the exhibits of the zoo, drawing attention to the artificial nature and guided experience of the whole outing.

I see the work of the nonfiction essay as part autobiography, part history, and part poetry, a balancing act that requires an astounding amount of skill and bravura. These are useful tools to develop, but a great deal of work considering

the constraint of facts and reality, which I tried to overcome through sheer exuberance in the first story and quiet searching in the second.

In Buddhism, there is a *kōan* that goes something like this: there is a powerful storyteller who has an effect on everyone who listens to him. He can make people laugh as easily as he can make them cry, and if he tells a war story they cower in fear. One day the storyteller meets a Zen master, who has heard of the storyteller before and believes in the strength of his art. “When I was little,” he says, “I had a favorite story that would put me right to sleep. Tell it to me.” The storyteller first has to do research, which takes several months, but soon he comes back to tell the story. The Zen master says that he is not ready to hear it yet. The storyteller goes back to his studies but returns often to try to tell the story, each time getting turned away. It takes five years, but finally he is able to tell the story, and the storyteller achieves Zen.

As in most *kōan*, minimal details are given to facilitate meditation and memorization. The choice of what gets left out is fascinating in itself though. The original version is unclear about whether the storyteller achieves Zen through the act of perseverance or the act of telling the story. And despite the research and years dedicated, the story itself also seems to be beside the point. Two elements, then, are left in relief—the need to tell, on the part of the storyteller, matched with the willingness to hear, on the part of the audience.

FICTION

DEGAUSSER

Monday morning is the most depressing time of week for mall kiosk employees, unless they're also artists needing downtime. No shoppers, no lines for overpriced cellphone plans or Bluetooth devices imported from China, which is killer on the week's commission. But I can sketch without it being obvious I've given up working. On some faded receipts from China Wok, I try drawing the mannequins hanging out in front of Express, but it comes out a scribble of a vague form, nothing identifiable. Same for the philodendron, the elevator. At home, my printmaking is suffering worse. Say I want to print a square of perfectly smooth pyrrol red, I hold the image in my mind, a sheet held at four corners, but within seconds it starts rippling as if in wind. Before the paint can even begin to make contact with the zinc, it slips, fades, to burnt scarlet, sienna, or bends into a sphere of process magenta. It further collapses into only the barest definition of line, without texture or tone, before melting into a murky sense of mystery and heartache. When I look, there is only slop before me. My friend Dex writes it off, saying, "Eddie, everyone has a Pollock phase," but I worry it will never end and the concrete will always be out of reach. For now he's managed to set up an exhibition for us next month at a local gallery to show the few pieces I've completed along with some of his sculptures. There's no coherent theme, so he came up with the title "Figuring Dysfunction: Post-Painterly Art of Aesthetic Forms and Their Opposites," which makes it sound much more interesting than it is. I agreed to do the show for the same reason I took the temp work: because there

will be advertisements, and a crowd, and the possibility of seeing Jessica Laurent in that crowd.



I was in the middle of a massive run of 150 prints, covered to the elbows in gobs of hansa yellow and lamp black, so I almost ignored the phone when I saw it was Jessica's husband. She'd called the previous week to catch up, which is our monthly ritual of reminiscing over drinks (usually Charles Shaw on her end and cheap scotch on mine). We tried to make each other still feel sexually relevant with inappropriate jokes and mild flirting. Sometimes I answered the phone "Johnny Walker speaking" when I knew it was her—she always laughed at that. Her husband, Joel, knew something of our past, and he didn't strike me as the type to snoop around on her phone then call with accusations. Anyway, our thing had run its course. But I could understand him being concerned. Jessica and I met back before she knew her future husband, before she weirdly became *Mrs. Laurent*, way back when we were just undergrads at SCAD and she was a fellow artist and Raconteurs fan. We never dated, officially, and often saw other people. It was on-and-off through the years for various reasons, but from the beginning we fell into each other with all the inevitability of Hokusai's waves—and does water fear never reaching the shore?

I took my time putting the lids back on the paints, then wiped off the ink knives on newspaper and scrubbed my hands in the side sink, all the while regretting never getting voicemail for the studio.

It's an odd detail to remember, but Joel hiccupped when he told me how no one had seen her for days, and how he thought I was the last one to talk to her based on the outgoing calls on her cellphone.

“Did Jessie give any signs that she was distressed or anxious?”

“What? No. She sounded happy, and a little drunk.”

“Were there any signs of underlying mental problems?”

“You mean do I think she was crazy?”

“The police filed a report but they're not taking this seriously. They don't think there's evidence of suspicious activity because she took one of her winter coats. But her phone is still here, her wallet, the car.”

“So they think she left you. I'm not going to call her crazy.”

He ignored my sardonic remarks, my growing anger, and just asked a stream of questions as if he were still at the office brainstorming the next ad campaign. As the call wore on, though, as I was preparing to hang up, his voice began to shake.

“Her house keys are here too, like she wasn't planning on coming back. Edward, you're sure she didn't mention anything about me? Or about us?”

“Sorry, we didn't talk long,” I said, before I remembered he had access to her phone and would have seen the call timer, which was pretty damning evidence of the hours we'd spent talking about things that didn't matter, that never mattered, mundane shit like songs that were on the radio ten years ago, my latest tattoo, rising taxes, when I could have been doing something useful like finding out where she was going, or convincing her to stay. But he didn't call me

on it, just thanked me all the same and told me to keep in touch if I heard anything.

“Listen, Joel, I'm sure she'll show up. She probably just had an opportunity to shoot somewhere and went for it.”

“All of the cameras are shelved.”

“Scouting a location, then. She'll turn up.”

He didn't end the call right away so I caught the beginning of a big heaving sob before I could put the receiver down.

By habit I rolled out the brayer to dry overnight, then tucked the matting back under the press and pulled down the cover before turning off the shop lights. I took the long route to the Vortex off Moreland where Dex worked, but he wasn't on the schedule. I just ordered a Reuben to-go, nervous in the crowd, then crawled through traffic toward my loft in Midtown. I ate dinner standing in front of the kitchen counter, staring out the window absently at the streetlights and parked cars. I half-expected the doorbell to ring, I wanted it to ring, but it never did.

One night when we were still new and our hands often tangled in each other's hair, I had just gotten off work from the print shop I was interning at. I had an essay on Early Renaissance artists due the next day with zero research done, but I wanted to see her, told myself I had to see her. I drove over to her place without warning, in the dead middle of night, and had to climb six flights of stairs because the elevator was out. I felt pretty crazy but when she opened the door, she looked at me in soundless thanks. It was obvious she'd been crying, I never

knew about what. I just couldn't help wondering if she'd disappeared now because I'd missed some gesture or signal, forsaken an inner call to arms perhaps.

At the back of the closet I dug out a box with the few photos I'd convinced her to let me take of her, under pretense of the color-theory course we were both in sophomore year. I held the slides for the final portfolio up to the light. It was a series using long exposures and LED bulbs. The professor loved it and found a museum willing to do a show. But Jessica had felt awkward seeing herself dramatized by the camera so it never went up. I did loosely base some color field work on the final prints, but they weren't nearly as popular. My favorite, though, full of chiaroscuro and an unreal amount depth, was just a grainy black and white image, taken with a junky Holga one afternoon, of her leaning in a doorway, looking past the viewer, gazing somewhere over their shoulder, her arms up overhead and heavy shadows draped over the right half of her body, inscrutable and devastating. Every time I see it, I can't help being moved.

At the bottom of the box, wrapped in tissue paper, I also found a collection of reels from her first show that she had wanted to toss. She'd burned the developed film with cigarettes and clouded it with smoke before dipping it in wine or whatever random chemicals she could find. I stayed up through morning looking at these artifacts for clues until I heard the distant buzz of the neighbor's doorbell. It sounded like the timers in the studio, and I remembered the diptych plates I'd spent two weeks etching that were still sitting in the acid bath for their third and final aquatint, but by the time I drove across town and got them rinsed

off, the fine lines and corners had been eaten away, left jagged, raw, rendering them useless.



I saw Dex the next day over lunch at Chow Baby's, a fun modern restaurant Jessica always took us to when it was her turn to choose, I think only partially because she liked the stir fry and mostly to gross out Dex with the little calamari tentacles on the buffet.

“So what are you going to do?” he said.

“What, you're not upset too?” I pulled a Sharpie out of my portfolio case and doodled a fan design at the top of the chopsticks.

“You know I love that girl to death but she's not *my* muse. Also your fan looks like shit.”

He was right, it had come out looking like an upside down scalene triangle, if you squinted at it, and the dragon design was a scrawl of curves.

“She's just a convenient model,” I say, and try again on Dex's untouched chopsticks.

“So what are you going to do?”

“What's her husband going to do, you mean? He called the police. They said it looked voluntary so they haven't done much.”

“You seriously have no idea where she is? You guys always seemed psychic to me.”

“She didn't tell me anything.” The next attempt looked more like a rhombus. Dex took the marker away from me and pushed the fork over to my side of the table.

“Listen, Eddie,” he said, dropping his voice, “maybe you should try looking yourself.”

“I do look, I'm looking everywhere,” I said, pushing the fork back to him. I stabbed a piece of tofu using the fucked-up chopsticks. “I can't even work in the studio without checking over my shoulder every minute.”

“Obviously bad for business. I mean get the gang together, someone's got to know something.”

“Maybe. I guess it couldn't hurt.”

“You know, you kind of look like shit yourself, man,” he said.

“Thanks, Dex.”

I called Joel the next day to tell him the suggestion of banding together a search party. He thought it sounded absurd and said as much, but I told him maybe it would help so he believed that it had to help. He got a list of her associates off a forward in his email, I filled in the gaps with the names of our art school friends that we both kept in touch with, then we set a date for the weekend.



Going into the suburbs to their home in Marietta, there was always the feeling of leaving the country for a long vacation, or at least crossing states, probably something to do with the sudden density of the trees or maybe just the

higher speed limits. She usually visited my place anyway because I was always uncomfortable seeing the house, never knowing where her tastes ended and his began. For instance, back in college she hated roses so much that she tried to start a Valentine's Day embargo with the local florists, but now several bushes line the driveway, in bloom. She also always mocked the pre-fab condos downtown but now she was living in a ranch-style house, one of many in a subdivision. It was hard to reconcile my ex-lover, who had vandalized the school pool with fifty bottles of Rit dye and later left streaks of green down my back with the woman who kept a thriving herb garden.

I expected the search party to be a solemn affair. I pictured us gathering around, speaking in hushed voices, but it was more kin to a gallery reception. A woman in a lavender bodysuit and orange boots that I recognized as part of Jessica's rotation of regular models walked past with a mimosa in one hand and a purse made out of carabineers in the other. Some guys from the old photography meet-ups were handing out oversized fliers parodying the Psycho movie poster. It looked like Joel had also given her designer friends free-reign with decorating. They'd taken what looked like every dress she owned and sewed them together into a massive waterfall of dark brocades and lace, with the occasional velvet and leather piece that they draped over the birch trees in the backyard. Her scent was heavy in the air and every time I brushed up against the strips of fabric it was like dancing with her ghost. Someone with a loudspeaker asked everyone to "please sign this life-sized love letter." But I didn't see what that meant or how that would convince her of anything, though there was the

distant possibility they knew what they were doing. They worked with her every week, whereas I saw her infrequently, just talked to her maybe once a month.

I skulked around the driveway by the refreshments until I spotted Joel. He was still wearing his suit from work, it seemed, but his pants were unpressed and the tie clashed.

“Any news?” I asked him when he came over to grab a bottle of water.

“Well, not much. But I think there's been some progress. Glad you were able to get off work.” He shook my hand as an afterthought.

“No problem. And something's better than nothing. What'd you find out?”

“Here, let's go inside,” he said, motioning me past a row of begonias.

The house itself was slightly less jarring because of the prints and photographs Jessica had put up all over the place, some of her own, some from friends. On the wall over the couch, a large mural of mine featuring a desert landscape overlaid with a slightly disproportional rendering of cacti and a buzzard.

“She kept it,” I said, strangely touched.

“Sure, there's another of yours in the kitchen that she hung up last year, has a girl holding a handgun drawn over some Swedish I think.”

“Well, it's German probably. *Peng, Peng?*”

“That sounds right. I'm not sure though. I like it, the girl reminds me of Jessie.”

“Hm.”

From the entryway I noticed a row of noodle bowls and soda cans cluttering the bar in the kitchen, and he noticed me noticing.

“I've just been busy with a project. And I didn't see the point in cooking for two when...”

We settled into an uncomfortable silence, him staring into his water bottle and taking small sips, and me rubbing at a small blue paint stain on the pocket of my jeans.

“You had news, right?” I said, moving to the couch.

He took her phone from his pocket and sat in the chair opposite me, “Look at this.” He pulled up the outgoing call list.

“Okay.”

“What I mean is look at the time stamps on the calls.”

She'd called me that night around nine and, after we had hung up well after midnight, called Joel's office line. The other names, much earlier in the day, I didn't recognize but were probably for work.

“So she called you that night too, then.” I handed the phone back to him.

“What'd she say? You guys didn't talk long.”

“That's between me and my wife.” He finished off his water and tossed the bottle somewhere behind him, “But four fucking hours you were talking to her, Ed. And then she disappears. What am I supposed to make of that?”

“Make whatever you want of it, but she didn't tell me anything so I can't tell you anything.”

“Listen, she had a lot of hours to fill with something and I want to know what Jessie said to you. If it's about us, maybe something she didn't want me to know, I'm not going to be angry. I just want her safe, do you understand?”

“Joel, I wish I could tell you something, but she just didn't say anything. Nothing new, nothing that hadn't been said a million times. I keep thinking about how she said good night and hi and what's new, but I can't make anything of it. Maybe you could have. I don't know.”

The woman in the bodysuit poked her head in, then called to someone outside.

“Joel, David is look for you,” she told him in a heavy accent.

David, the guy Jessica had tried to leave after we met, walked in. I stood up. Bodysuit went into the bathroom down the hall, swaying slightly.

“He was one of the outgoing calls, Edward,” Joel explained. Joel also hadn't been there for the emotional abuse she'd had to put up with, the rants and violent outbursts.

“She was still speaking to this asshole?”

David had always looked a bit like a young, gawky version of Jimmy Page, and now he just looked like a version with short hair and darker circles under his eyes. “Of course Jes and I talked. And you're the psycho who put peanut butter in my gas tank and left almonds on my windshield. It had to be flushed by a mechanic.”

I laughed. I'd forgotten about that. It was almond butter in the tank, actually, hence the almonds on the car. Jessica thought it was going too far, but

after he'd *just wanted to talk* one time I'd found bruises on her arm, so I think it was more than fair.

"I don't know anything about that but I guess you shouldn't have pissed someone off."

Her time with Joel had been nothing but sunshine compared to the *sturm und drang* that was her years going between David and me, driven by guilt, kindness, turmoil, I don't know. He hadn't fought for her like we had. But maybe that's what attracted her to him.

"Sit down, no one's getting into a fistfight in my living room," Joel said, the voice of reason, taking off his tie, "We're here for Jessie, remember that?"

David took a chair on the far side of the room.

"So we're all somewhere on the outgoing calls, but yesterday I looked at the incoming calls too. A little after one in the morning there was a call from Canada," he explained.

"Canada, eh?" David said. We looked at him.

"Did you call the number back?" I asked.

"It was a payphone at Niagara Falls. Do you know if she had any friends up there?"

"I mean, she always wanted to go to Canada, she thought about it a lot," David said.

"Really?" Joel and I said in unison.

"No, I'm sure she wanted to go to the Riviera," I said. In her first apartment the only art she had on her walls, aside from my schoolboy sketches, were

photographs of its beaches and the Monte Carlo. And she loved it when I spoke French to her, even though my accent was terrible.

The girl came out of the bathroom and leaned against the entryway. “Last summer she mention Venezuela,” she offered.

“Thanks, Agnes,” Joel said, as she went back outside. “But I don't think any of this is relevant. Her passport is still here. She couldn't have crossed over into another country without it.”

“Wait. Venezuela?” David said, standing up, then sitting back down. “No.”

“Anything helps,” Joel said.

“It's where—it's got a big waterfall or something. Angel Falls. She liked the name.”

“Okay, so what?”

David sat back down, “No, it's nothing. It was a long time ago. Just, she just used to joke that she wouldn't make it to thirty and she wanted to go there. But she didn't mean it, it was just a joke.”

Joel dismissed it with a wave of his hand, but I remembered her saying pretty much the same thing and I also had thought she was joking. One night we'd hiked up to a huge quarry we'd heard about outside of town. It was technically off-limits but we climbed the fence. It was a gorgeous clear summer night and she was pointing out constellations to me while I drew in the dirt. And when she said that she wouldn't make it past thirty, she was smiling, there was nothing morbid about it. I just told her *of course*, that we'd be young forever. In

the morning the sun turned her hair red and reflected off the blues and greens of the water into splintered rainbows.

“She told me the same thing, Joel,” I admitted.

“No,” Joel said, standing up, “No, Jessie wasn't suicidal, she wasn't depressed.”

“What'd she say on the phone to you?” David asked.

“That's private,” Joel said, and went into the kitchen for another bottle of water.

I followed him in. “What, was she leaving you?”

David walked in too. “Listen, if she was unhappy we need to know.”

Joel stood at the sink, his back to us, head down.

“I don't remember,” he said finally, turning around. “I don't remember. It was just normal chatter. She was talking about normal things, and I was distracted at work, so she let me go. She said she loved me and she let me go so I could get back to work. That's what Jessie said. The rest of it, I don't remember because it didn't sound important. I didn't think, oh, maybe I should decode this fucking conversation so later I can track down my wife. She let me go so I could get back to work.”

He turned around, mumbling into the sink, “This thing you did was nice and all, but I don't think it's going to help. I just missed something, I wasn't listening. Can you show yourselves out?”

David started to say something but I shook my head at him, led him to the door.

Outside we went to our cars, looked around at everyone that had come out, wondering what else they knew that we didn't, how many clues we'd have to get from each of them to get a complete picture. You could say we hadn't known her at all, but you could also say we each knew her completely and totally, in as much as she had allowed.

"Were you heading out?" I asked David.

"I've got a three hour drive back to Savannah so I should. It just doesn't feel right to leave yet."

"We could maybe grab a late lunch in the city. Have you tried Yumbii's in the park yet? They're good."

He stared at me, maybe wading through a history of bad feelings, but he nodded. At the food trucks, we ordered tacos and settled down on the fountain steps.

"Maybe she did want to disappear but I don't think she wanted to die," I said.

"I think she did at one point," he said. "But not anymore."

"But you think she still needed to..."

"I think she wanted a new life," David said, squinting into the sun at me.

He said, "She used to quote Shakespeare to me: 'These violent delights have—'"

"Violent ends and in their triumph die, yeah, yeah. She quoted nothing else for a year."

He stopped chewing and put down his food.

There was a man who I thought was sleeping on a bench behind us, but only a few jabs went by before he sat up to listen to our exchange.

“She hated Molly Ringwald,” David insisted.

“Well, I agree there,” I said, “She really hated Molly Ringwald. But she loved the MARTA.”

“No, she hated taking the MARTA, she loved the métro.”

“Dude, she always loved the MARTA. She even did a whole time-lapse thing last year.”

He sat up a bit, peering over at us. “Man, they're both shit,” he said. “Hey, can you spare some change? My car's out of gas.”

David absently handed him some bills from his pocket. He barked out, “Jes still wears my shirt, you know.”

I could see where this was going. “The vintage Pixies shirt? Jessica didn't think she should keep wearing it, but I told her to because it's *a vintage Pixies shirt*. Come on, don't read so much into it.”

“‘Here Comes Your Man' was our song, though.”

“What? No. It. Was. Our. Song.”

He threw the first punch. I ducked down and tackled him to the ground and after that it turned into an all-out brawl so that even after the adrenaline wore off and I could start to feel the bruised ribs and what was almost certainly going to be a black eye, even though he was streaked with blood and his shirt was torn, even after a crowd had gathered and were shouting, maybe cheering us on, just caught up in the fray, we kept fighting it out, emptying ourselves of all the

nuanced tensions built over years of resentment and jealousy but also of the week's anxiety and, yes, fear, mostly fear, until we lay back, exhausted.

He started laughing, and after the exhilaration of the violence and the release of frustration I started laughing too, once I caught my breath. The crowd started moving away. He maneuvered himself into a sitting position.

"We're going to get a call from Monaco one of these days," David said.

"I like to think so too."

"Want to get a beer?" he asked. "I'm buying."

"Thanks, but I'm just going to hang out here a while." I eased myself up onto my elbows and shook his hand.

It had grown dark, so after he left I lay back to stare up at the stars, the flecks of white on bone black, wondering about how often her head tilted back those early nights, how she'd say, *there, that's my star*, pointing through the moon roof of her car. I wondered if we were ever looking at the same thing. After a while I hauled myself up off the ground to the nearest bar, knowing I'd have to beg off work tomorrow anyway.



I woke up with a hangover, seeing only dimly, in fragments, with much confusion and an aching jaw in the middle of Piedmont Park. It felt like I might have pulled something and my left eye was swollen a little. I wondered how David was faring. Somehow my wallet was still in my pocket, and a little distance off I could see the food trucks setting up while a violin warbled nearby. At the entrance I saw Mr. Charlie was already set up for the day with his small TV

tray, the upside down fedora as a collection bowl, and cardboard sign offering a poem, a dollar per line, on any subject you chose. On the opposite side of the gate was a street performer dressed up like a statue, covered in a dusty gray paint or powder, located only by the cameras pointed at him and otherwise camouflaged and invisible. The world spun as I sat up on my elbows and took in the crowd, knowing I wouldn't see her but unable to stop myself from hoping anyway.

THE YEAR OF US

Jun is a first generation Japanese-American attending the local business school and from the left side he looks like a sad James Franco. His English is halting but still way better than my Japanese. The words I know from movies and restaurants don't really help with the work of editing: *samurai*, *shōgun*, *tempura*, *sushi*. We've been working together for two months already, in the one-room office I rent off El Camino Real, and have developed a kind of shorthand. He says something in English and I try to respond with some of the phrases I've learned from him. But then *he* responds in Japanese and I have to fall back on English.

I try not to play favorites, but compared to the self-helpers and occasional memoirists he is my most interesting client. He once wrote the symbol for my name, which is kind of a mountain with half a tree next to it and supposedly means fairy, or recluse. He didn't know the word for fairy, so he drew a flower and a stick figure with wings sitting on it. He did know the word for recluse though, and he knew hermit too. I wondered how he'd learned those. And the slang he uses is like nothing we actually use today, probably came from a top ten list dating back to the '70s. If I tell him a chapter was good, he says, "Solid." Every time I suggest a change, it's "Right on." We are both proficient with "okay" though, which can mean more things than I ever imagined and lets us get by just fine.

"Early?" he says, seeing the papers scattered on my desk.

“O-kay,” I say, stress on the first syllable as I clear the table, meaning that he is in fact fifteen minutes early and has caught me in a state of disarray but I am helpless to do anything about it.

“O-kay,” he says, gracefully acknowledging the situation while laying out napkins.

He has taken to bringing me pastries from the café downstairs, saying that I'm skinny, that I need to eat. I think it's a kind of thank you for the informal tutoring sessions on top of the editing. Maybe he thinks it is the polite thing to do, but I'm not being nice. I just like our time together.

“*Arigatō*, Jun,” I say, as I help clear the table.

“You are very welcome, Sián-san,” though he says it more like “shone.” I admit I like the way he says my name, as if I was some luminous thing.

He notices the fortune my grandmother mailed me, marked up with blue ink, and asks, pointing, “What's this?”

“Horoscope. A prediction of sorts.”

“Horror-scope,” he repeats back to me. “Okay.” Which means he mostly understands my attempt at a definition. “Didn't like?”

“*lie*.” I shake my head too, for good measure, because he says I say “no” like you're supposed to say “house.”

“Back in Japan, you tie bad fortunes to tree.” He rolls the paper into a narrow tube, demonstrating a knotting motion.

“Oh, okay,” I say, meaning I don't know of any trees near the office. He looks around my office and spots an orchid that Mo forced on me for good luck.

He kneels in front of the pot and gently twists the paper around the middle of the stem. I think about asking him out for coffee so he can tell me how this works and maybe surprise me in more ways, but the fortune warned against planned meetings. I don't even know if he likes coffee.

“Safe, okay,” he says, smiling, meaning this will have to do.

“Okay!” I say, as in, thank you for trying to rescue me but it's hopeless, so now can we please look at these line edits. Smiling.



Caution is the name of the game as impetuous Pluto dominates the new year leaving you especially susceptible to bad decisions. You may be feeling some yearnings but now is not the time for starting love affairs or confronting a relationship crisis. Consider instead a new way home, or at least a new pair of shoes.

Our grandmother Mo has been cutting out our futures ever since mom passed away when my sister and I were little girls. When I dropped out of college to move across the country, she just patted my arm, saying, “That Sagittarius wandering streak,” while Brigid hid a Sri Yantra charm in my luggage. They hadn't known I was only desperate to follow my girlfriend, Lidia, to her school in Palo Alto, so sure the distance would drive us apart. But we grew in different directions anyway, the process sped along by her silence and waning interest. After the break-up, a quiet, tiring ordeal, I confided in Mo and begged for a ticket home, but instead she sent me a check with “*wait it out, dove*” in the memo line along with a fortune calling for better things to come. An efficiency and a string of

waitressing jobs wasn't exactly the luck I was looking for, but it was a distraction, until a regular got me a temp job proofreading for his law firm. I bought a used *Merriam Webster's Collegiate* and found freelance work. I stopped scraping by and missing the snow back home. I took up surfing to fill the hours, though I still burn instead of tan.

Judging from the bohemian yet commercial tone of the recent horoscopes, Mo must have gotten a subscription to *Cosmo* or *Vogue* for Christmas. Usually they just come out of a weekly scandal rag. I can tell because of the faces on the back and bits of red carpet dresses. The paper is flimsy-glossy newsprint, and sometimes she forgets to send the clippings so I get months of fortunes all at once, faded from the sun. Always I can smell her perfume, *Inis Ór*, which is more of a bright lemonade than golden island and brings me home every time. Still, the fortunes are becoming decidedly ominous, full of *slow down's* and *wait's*. Jun can't possibly save me from them all, so instead I try to extract my own phrases, puzzling out the advice so I feel like I've earned it. I'm crossing out words at random—"Pluto," "shoes," whatever—when my sister calls. I hear water running, like she's doing dishes, and realize it's lunchtime already in Boston.

"Listen to this one," Brid says, "As a fire horse, you are too untamed and unpredictable to stay in one place. As Mercury rises, you would do well to move on rather than suffer through something for which you are ill-equipped. Detest mediocrity and dream inordinate dreams."

"Inordinate dreams'? Who says that?"

"*Elle*, the anniversary issue."

“Explains why mine told me to go shopping. Does this mean you're leaving Donnie? He's so nice.”

I finally met him over the holidays, and he said he liked the card I sent even though the gold foil flaked off in clumps. He taught me how to play “Greensleeves” on the Lowrey organ that no one had played in years. I expected the time away to make things awkward, but it had felt just as cozy as always, especially with Mo's homemade biscuits and tea, always served with fresh cream, and the layers of carpets and curtains that make her house more like a sleepover fort than anything else. While Donnie helped Mo with the dishes every night, my sister and I lingered at the table, absently braiding our hair together and gossiping like high school all over again. There ended up being so much food that Mo sent half home with Brid, who fed most of it to her Border Collie, Jimmy (after Jimmy Stewart, she's always had a thing for him). And I found a whole Boston cream pie in my luggage when I got stopped by the TSA and held up the line trying to explain. She tries so hard to take care of us.

“It's in the signs, sister dear. And nice is boring,” Brid says.

Nice is nice, though. How can nice be boring? How can x be y ? But I only scraped by in algebra, so maybe it was something that could happen.

“Is Mo around?” I ask instead.

“No, she went to the store. The crazy woman took up crocheting and now there's a doily on every surface. The microwave, the Keurig. She's working on a scarf for you, though I keep telling her that California doesn't get cold.”

“There's no stopping her.”

The kettle only flutes a few notes before she moves it off the heat, and I can picture the geese and blue ribbon motif perfectly, the wooden handle, the rising steam. Mine is from Target, all gleaming chrome and neon green. Which I thought was so cool until I discovered it more croaked than whistled.

“Can I call you back later? I skipped breakfast and just realized I'm starving.”

“Don't say that, Sián. There are people actually starving.”

“Okay, Mom.”

“You are the worst,” she says, and hangs up.

Looking down at the redacted version of my fate, it is still full of warning:

“year susceptible bad. crisis.”



I was looking forward to going to the beach over the weekend even though the waves this time of year were weak, just to sit on the sand and watch, or sleep, but the windchill makes me think better of that plan. Instead I pack a daybag and head for the Prairie Creek trails in the Redwoods, which is my second favorite place. Lidia took me here the moment I got off the plane, because it was her first favorite place. I follow a different trailhead that skirts Fern Canyon and it is easy to focus instead on my breathing during the steep part of the climb. A recent rain has swollen the creeks, so occasionally I have to cross on logs, my arms out like an acrobat, or so I pretend, staring down at my boots. “You dizzy me,” she'd said. Her words come back to me—some of them, not all—and I step into a puddle, deep enough for the water to seep through my laces.

I flinch away the thoughts with a kind of flailing motion, weirding out myself and what must be a gang of young elks, with short, hardly-there antlers, who had been grazing on the other side of the creek and now dart away. My sock makes a stupid sucky noise the rest of the hike. When I get to the northern edge I duck into the middle of a ring of towering redwoods to dry off. I think of the other times I'd taken shelter under the giants, the early times. Like when she'd croon songs into my shoulder, kissing the freckles there like they were just for her. The night we saw at least fifty shooting stars and didn't unclasp our hands until the sun came up. I wondered if she had taken someone new here yet, or if this was to be ours only. But Lidia wasn't the sentimental type, she was never the one to save ticket stubs or hold on to photos.

I remember also that these circles are called fairy rings. The parent redwood sends off shoots around it in a circle, and magic is supposed to happen inside. I'm not sure what kind of magic, but it is interesting to think that maybe Jun got my name right after all. I wonder if he collected anything. I wonder in what manner he would kiss my shoulder, and whether this was in fact even something he would want to do. But it was my daydream, so of course this is something he would want to do, had always wanted to do since laying eyes on me, but it was too forward to start off like that. We had to shake hands first, because that is what is done. I practice sketching the mountain plus tree in the soft soil under the pine needles on the ground, and let myself yearn, yearn, yearn.



When I get back, the light on the machine is blinking. I unpack then press play as I put on the kettle. Then Brid's voice is there, filling the room, saying I need to come home as soon as I can.

But I am home, I think for a dizzying second.

I misdial the first time, then use speed dial.

“What? What happened?”

I can hear her on the other side, but she doesn't say anything at first, maybe can't.

“It's Mo. She's in the hospital. Can you come?”

“Yes. Yes, of course. I'll catch the earliest flight.”

“I just happened to stop by after work because I was picking up some scraps for Jimmy and found her laying in the snow in her nightgown. When I asked her what she was doing she said she was waiting for Pop to pick her up.” Pop had been her second husband, a Navy Frogman who'd died in WWII, young. “The doctors say it looks like she'd been out there for over three hours! Something's wrong, she's just not remembering things right. I just don't know what to do.”

But I'm too far away to help, and can only say again that I'll be there soon.



Sometimes I catch Jun staring at my hair, which is naturally a coppery red but I dye it a brighter shade.

“Okay,” he says, meaning sorry, back to work.

I want to tell him that we don't need "okay," we don't even need words. We can just communicate with our eyes, and the shapes our lips will make, and maybe our hands for particularly difficult concepts. I close my eyes and think about how he could teach me the numbers by tracing them on the table then folding down the appropriate number of my fingers. *Ichi. Ni. San.* I've picked up that much so far, the rest wouldn't be hard. And when we get to five, he'd uncurl my fist and kiss my palm before starting on the other hand with six. But of course I would need words to tell him all this so I give up and open my eyes.

"Tired?" he says.

"*Hai*," I nod.

"Let's take a break." He learned that one from me, slacker that I am.

"Okay," I say, as in, anything goes. He takes out a KitKat from his briefcase, but the wrapper is covered in Japanese script with a picture of a tea cup on the front. He insists on sharing half with me. I take a small bite, and it reminds me of the matcha powder at Starbucks, grassy and sweet. Much better than the salted watermelon flavor he brought last time.

"*Oishii desu yo.*" Which is something like, this is super delicious.

"Thank you, Sián-san."

When I finish chewing, I say, "Jun, I'm leaving on a trip tomorrow. For a while. My grandmother is sick so I'm going to see her."

"Okay," he says. Meaning, no rush. "Family is very important. Not everyone understands this."

"No, they don't... How do you say grandmother?"

“*Obaasan.*”

“*Obaasan.* I like that.” It reminds me of dozing sheep.

“There's a saying. After rain, earth hardens.” He nods the truth of this, folding the wrapper down into a neat square.

“My older brother died,” he says before I can say anything. “Last year. He drowned, in the sea. All weekend he swims, and the weather gets rough, he ignores it.” He makes a fist on the table. “My mother tells me she is concerned, but I tell her I'm busy, I have work. He's a strong swimmer, I tell her. I regret saying this.”

I had never pictured Jun as having a family somewhere, much less having siblings. He was just Jun to me, kind and maybe a little quiet, but of course he would have grown up somewhere, and played with someone, lived a whole life, and, yes, even have lost someone.

“Oh, Jun... Why don't you write this down and tie it to my plant?”

“It doesn't work the same way. Regrets already happened, can't avoid.” He shakes his head.

“Oh, I see,” I say, feeling silly, but he gives me a gentle smile. I have another idea.

“Are you free now? To come with me?”

“Come where?” he says, but he's already standing and zipping up his bag.

“You'll see,” I say. We're on the fifth floor but I lead him down the stairs instead of the elevator, remembering the fortune. *Caution*, don't get too close.

Also, exertion does the trick of getting my mind off things, so perhaps it will make him feel better too.

At the ground floor, I wave to the receptionist and guide us onto the sidewalk, in the direction of downtown. The sun is relentless overhead, but I don't think Jun minds. There's a nice breeze today that makes it feel like spring and his apartment must not get a lot of light. He marvels over the two windows in the office that stretch down to the floor and wants the blinds open even when there's a glare.

"How do you feel about spaghetti, Jun?"

"What?" he says, laughing.

"Surprise," I say. "Okay?" Meaning you'll love this, I promise.

He asks me to name some of the trees as we walk—*maple, pine, oak*—and I wonder whether we look like a couple to the shoppers hustling past, or the students hanging around with slouchy bags. He's taller than me, so sometimes has to stoop down to hear. Maybe it looks like an excuse to get closer.

At the restaurant, I order two full plates of spaghetti alla carbonara, then show him how to tear off a piece of the thick crusty bread and dip it in olive oil.

"This is *really* good," he says, mouth full. "No bread like this in Japan. What's it called?"

"Focaccia."

"Focaccia," he repeats, relishing the term as much as his next bite. After the meal, when we are stuffed and smiling lazily at each other, I get a caffè macchiato just for myself, thinking it'd be too strong for Jun. But he's curious, so I

let him try mine. He takes a very small sip, and pauses long enough that I think he's trying to find a way to spit it out without looking rude, but he takes another sip, then a longer one, before handing the cup back to me.

“Okay,” he says, as in, I am *hooked*, so we share the rest.

I'm a little sad to see him walking away toward the buses, turning to wave every few feet, but before we part he promises to bring coffee to our next meeting, whenever that may be. I tell him I'll call when I get in back in town.

That night I stand in the bathroom looking in the mirror, trying to see what Jun sees when he says “Skinny!” or looks at my flaming hair. What Lidia stopped seeing, I guess. I feel for the small portions of fat on my stomach then hips, and think, *why bother with an American woman? Why bother with any of our lot, so wayward and half-lunatic.*



The flight is long, and when I get off the plane my foot feels fuzzy from sitting on it. I hobble to my sister waiting on a bench outside, trying to regain feeling in my legs. I didn't recognize her at first, in part because of the cigarette she was smoking and in part because she was wearing aviators and had dyed her hair ash blonde, so she looked more Nordic than Irish. She didn't have many freckles so pulled it off pretty well.

“Brid, that stuff will kill you. When did this start?” I say

She tosses the cigarette to the ground and stamps it out before giving me a tight hug, pulling me close against her. Mo had given me the same hug before I

left home, surprising strength in her thin arms rooting me in place and ferocity in her voice when she said, “Don't you ever, ever let anyone hurt you.”

Without letting go, Brid says, “The tests came back. It's not Alzheimer's, but it was probably a massive stroke.” My breath catches, trying to process what this means, how serious, but it can't be that serious, I'm sure, else Brid wouldn't have left the hospital. I try to pull away but she still doesn't let go and I'm grateful for that. We just collapse together for a while, like when we were kids and lights went out during a storm. Except now I am embarrassed by the spectacle we are making and just kind of pat her back until she steps away.

Inside the car, she scans the radio, then gives up and leaves it on NPR.

“They think maybe it was a blood clot,” she says. “They don't know what caused it though or whether it'll happen again.”

“How's she doing?” I finally ask.

“Resting a lot. Her left side doesn't want to work. Want to see her now or did you want to drop off your stuff first?”

I shrug. Noncommittal. A bonsai tree in the breeze, or something like that. But I'm scared to see her weak. When we used to belly-ache about doctor's visits and bad tasting medicine, she was quick to tell us how she drove a school bus without heating or air conditioning eight hours a day all year long—she did the summer school routes too. She said the cold hadn't killed her yet, and neither had the heat, and she reckoned the doctor's cotton swabs, or a little cough syrup, wouldn't do us in none too quickly either. I thought she was invulnerable, and didn't want to see anything bring her low.

Brid doesn't wait for me answer and takes the exit for home.

"I need to pick up some clothes for her anyway," she mumbles.



At the house, my old key doesn't work. By the time Brid lets me in I'm shivering and my fingertips hurt. I put my bags in the guest room, which seems unchanged aside from a lopsided doily under the TV. Mo's oversized remote had been moved in here, too, and I smile, thinking about her punching the huge buttons for the volume so she could hear Jimmy McNulty's parts on *The Wire*. Those are the only scenes she cares about. I look through the dresser, pawing at the old clothes and blankets in storage. I'd already seen all this, it was mostly just to feel her things and in a way be connected to her again.

There is a picture on the bedside table, one of the few with all of us at once, and not one or the other holding the camera. It was at some kind of garden party, and judging from the tragic bob and uneven bangs, I must have been about five, and Brid would have been two or three, her hair still blonde. Mo and I dressed in the same rose pattern, and Brigid in a matching color. The three of us were wearing ridiculous hats, gloves, and a string of pearls. I barely remember that day, only how hard it was not to fidget as the photographer kept adjusting the lights. When he bent near, telling us to keep our hands on our laps and above all to avoid *filth*, we noticed his mustache wriggled as he talked, making us laugh and ruining the whole set up all over again. In fact, squinting at the photo, I can see a few flowers had come loose from my pillbox, and there was a dark smudge on the edge of Brigid's pinafore that the guy had tried to hide with folds. Mo lets

us get ice cream sandwiches after, and only laughed when I wiped the soggy chocolate crumbs from my fingers down my dress. It'll come out, she'd said.



The hospital parking lot is confusing and terrible to navigate, but we find the right floor a little before dinner time. Donnie is sitting outside the room nodding as a woman with bright teal eyeliner talks at him in a heavy brogue. An even older woman, tiny in an oversized leopard print blazer, squints through her glasses at a magazine she holds up in the air to read.

Brid hides behind her sunglasses, but I didn't bring any so I'm left vulnerable; the confusion is obvious and, I worry, insulting. I wave to Donnie, who looks tired. He briefly hugs me before moving behind Brid to rub her shoulders, but she shrugs him off.

"Girls, you won't know me," the lady with the eyeliner admits, "I knew ye grandmother from when we were lasses back in God's own country. When I heard about Ruth, it put the heart crossways in me, it did. Oh, those freckles, I bet you're *Sián*, she said that one's outside more than she's in. Just like your mother at that age. And you must be Brighid, look at all that hair. You've got a nice young man, I'll tell you that. You know, that's all she ever talks about is the gran'kids."

She turns to the older woman, "Mum, this is Ruth's grandchildren. This is me mum, girls, Agatha."

"So pretty!" she says. "The both of you, just like a picture. Now where's the jacks, Orla?"

We point her down the left side of the hall, then Orla tells us about the time Mo lost the bottom of her swimsuit in the waves on their first trip to the beaches here, and about all the smart things she used to say to her first husband because the second was already wooing her. We wanted to hear more about this last part, as we never knew much about how Mo and Pop met, just that it was a very *carpe diem* affair, but when Agatha gets back, she interrupts.

“They can hear about that later, can't you see they want to visit? Tell you what, we'll pop in tomorrow with a nice shepherd's pie. Isn't that right, Orla? So long, girls,” Agatha says, waving brightly.

Brid takes Donnie's hand as she goes into the room first, and I think about the ground after rain, which I'm pretty sure is soggy for a long while but it does the trick, gets me steady enough to go in.

She looks comfortable enough. Her hair is brushed back as she naps, and she's got her crochet needles on the table next to her, but the bed is huge, making her look wasted and small. Was her arm always so small?

After fussing with the blankets, Brid sends Donnie to her place to let the dog outside, so it's just us. We talk softly so she doesn't wake.

“I don't want her on her own anymore,” she says. “What if I hadn't come by?”

“Let's not think about that.” I pull the covers higher.

“I considered moving in, so I could be around more, but Jimmy would destroy the curtains. And there's no yard, he'd be miserable. But she won't move in with me. She's already said she's not giving up the house.”

I guess that she's hinting at hiring a live-in nurse, so I'm thinking about how much I can afford to spare to help out when she says, "Have you considered moving back?"

"What? No, I can't just up and leave my job."

"Why? Do freelance here."

"I can't just leave," I say, more gently than before, and she shrugs.



We come home late, sleepy, and agree to take a few hours to rest before going back in the morning. Brid lays down on the couch while I go straight to the pantry for the White Lily flour to make Mo's biscuits. She taught Brid how to make her natal chart and trace the signs, but she taught me things too, like how to roll out dough to the right thickness, how to cut a pineapple. Then while things baked, we'd curl up on the couch and watch Gallagher smash watermelons, the old-fashioned heater glowing orange behind the grating. It wasn't as illustrious or lofty as reading the stars, but it was mine.

I put a pot of tea on while I wait for the house to fill with the smell of baking, and wonder if Jun knows his sign. If his *obaasan* ever taught him to cook anything. If he still gets pastries, or if he doesn't have any reason to anymore.

I know, *caution*, but I look up Jun's number in my planner and dial.

Almost immediately I go to hang up, but I hear his voice, "*Moshi moshi.*"

"Jun?"

"Sián-san, okay?" he asks. Is my ground solid yet?

"...Okay," I say. It's too soon to tell.

The line stays quiet, I can't think of anything to say, but after a few moments Jun says, "How do you say that coffee?"

"That coffee? Oh, from the café? *Macchiato*. Macchiato."

"Okay," he says. That solves it. "Thank you."

"Okay, bye."

I wait for the timer to go off, drawing my name on the floured cutting board. Soon Brid appears, lured by food.

"Who can sleep when it smells like this," she says. "Those look perfect." I set out the butter and syrup, but they don't need them. They taste just like the originals. We poke holes in the sides for them to cool, then sit at the table, suddenly starved, mouths chewing through flaky layers until they're gone, the entire batch. We laugh at ourselves and make jokes about dieting, but we know we needed this.

Earth, rain, okay.



Late that night, I walk down the hall to Mo's bedroom, half expecting to find her there with a lamp on and a book in hand. But she isn't, of course. I find my finished scarf in a basket on her nightstand. She'd threaded gold strands through the yarn, giving it a shimmery effect. Rooting through her perfume, I look through all of the odd-shaped bottles until I locate her usual and spray some on the knotted ends of the scarf. Then I change my mind and wrap the entire bottle up. She won't mind. I also see a pearl rosary with a tarnished silver clasp, laid out on a tray, and wonder at the astrology stuff.

Pulling out the photo albums from under the bed, I flip through the pages gone sepia with age. I don't know anyone in them, except the occasional shot of a young Mo—Ruth, really, she wouldn't have been a Mo yet in these pictures—with puffy skirts and long, curled hair. That's the major concern with strokes, what goes and what stays. It is just hard to think of all the stories that could be lost at any time. We never knew exactly what happened to mom's dad, just about the divorce. We didn't know anything about either set of great-grandparents, who died during a famine when Mo herself had been a very young girl, which she didn't like to talk about. We could sort through all of her things, clean and expunge the entire house, and never know what had made her so tough over the years or where the love still managed to come from.



Mo is groggy when we come back in the morning, reacting slowly, but basically herself. Brid goes to the vending machine for orange juice, and while she's gone I stretch out on the bed alongside Mo, careful of her left side, to tell her about Jun, what he said about family, and rain, and how he took care of my bad fortune. I asked her if she thought things would work out.

“Look in my purse,” she says.

“*Mo*, seriously.” I say.

“*Sián*, I am being serious.” She reaches for her reading glasses on the side table and waits.

She's laying out her tarot cards when Brid returns to the room.

“What's going on? Should you be doing that, Mo?”

“There's a boy. Your sister needs answers, Bee.”

“Don't we all,” she says, and helps Mo spread the cards.

“Okay, dove, choose.”

I linger over a few, but then I remember the whole thing is silly and let my hand fall onto a random one.

“Strength, interesting. This means you've overcome your challenges. It also means it's a good time to give up any bad habits,” she says, glancing at Brigid, who turns red.

“I don't even smoke that much,” she says, sniffing at her hair.

The next card I take without looking, just grabbing whatever.

“Moon. This means you want clarity more than anything right now.”

“Obvious. Next.” I hand her the last card in the deck.

“Oh, the Devil.”

“What, is that ominous?” *Caution*, I remember.

“Not necessarily. This just means there's a passionate attraction you can't resist—” I was about to say *obvious* again, but she goes on, “*or* it means you need more confidence in yourself and abilities.”

The next cards are the hierophant and the hermit.

“The hermit, what does that mean?” I ask, skipping ahead.

“It means you have a decision to make.”

“That's it?”

“It means you need to make the decision before the decision is made for you.”

“Oh,” I say. Brid yawns, but nods her agreement.



On the plane heading home, half asleep, I dream of dying my hair grey so I can shrug away the world and live off sunshine on a porch somewhere warm. I would be done with impossible love and certain loss. I would ask, “How do you say love, Jun?” But there would be no words, just a symbol traced on the back of my hand, and it would be painless. “And more? How do you say more?” And he would mold my hand into a cupped shape, open and soon overflowing. Maybe Lidia would come back then; we would forget our harsh words, our early insecurities, and I would wrap her up too, in this shorthand language of ours so there would be no misunderstandings. “Safe, okay?” Except there would be no words there, just a knowing glance. Except even dream-me knows that isn’t going to happen and revolts, so I wake up.

Before I left, Mo had sent my sister to find a directory, then hugged me tight with her good arm. She said she didn’t have much time with Pop but she never regretted going for it. When she let go she showed me his name tattooed on her upper thigh with an anchor, and I almost felt scandalized with this discovery but mostly impressed. We’d wondered why she wore shorts to the lake instead of a suit and wouldn’t swim with us at the Y, but all this time she was just hiding his name, keeping it close.



At home, I lean against the counter and dial Jun’s number.

“Okay?” he says, sounding sleepy. Caller ID, I guess. I look at the clock and realize it's only six in the morning.

“Hi, Jun. Yes, okay. I'm back in town.”

“Cool,” he says, “Coffee soon?”

“Listen, let's get out of here,” I say.

“Here?” he says.

“The city, I mean. Let's go on a trip.”

He's quiet on the other end. I never did ask Mo what the outcome card said. But finally he says, “Break?”

“Yeah, a break,” I say laughing. “A long break though. Do you have school?”

“Yes,” he says, “but let's go.”

A terrible influence, I pick him up anyway in my second-hand Honda, which is a little beat up but clean at least, smelling of pine. The seat has to go all the way back for him to fit. I show him how to use the radio and let him decide on the station. He turns the jazz up and, smiling, puts on a pair of my sunglasses from the dashboard. I shake my head at the rhinestones and give him a thumbs up, which he in turn gives everyone we pass until we hit the highway.

When we get to the beach, the sky is overcast but the wind isn't too bad. I leave the umbrella in the car and just bring two towels. Jun points to a spot outside the breakers but close enough to feel the spray, which is warmer than it has been. I explain a little bit of surfing to him, getting down on my belly in the sand to show how I would paddle out or duck dive, how to pop up, how to drop in

to a wave. He mimics me until he's out of breath with all the up and down movements, then I draw my board in the sand for him, tracing the tiki mask design.

We lay down on our backs to stare up at the clouds, and I expect it to feel awkward any moment, because what do we really know about each other? But the breeze warms up, and the salt and the waves and the easy silence lure me into a kind of half-sleep in no time. However long later, I feel the water at my feet, tide coming in, and when I open my eyes Jun is on his side, watching me.

I sit up too fast, and my vision goes black for a second.

“Okay?”

He kneels in front of me, in the tide, his jeans getting soaked, and brushes some tangled strands away from my face.

I look into his eyes, longer than I had the chance to before. I try to wonder various things but we're too close for that now, there's nothing but the reality of us, the grit of the sand, the background roar, the wind making a nest of my hair. I realize I've been holding my breath.

Leaning away, he sits back and busies himself with brushing the sand off the palm of his hand so he's not looking at me when he says, “I'm going back to Japan. In May. To run my father's business.”

“Oh,” I say, “okay.” Two months.

Standing, I rise and step into the water, pulling Jun after me, but he won't go deeper than his ankles. “Rain,” he says, pointing at the sky.

"I'm already wet, that doesn't matter," I say, and keep pushing out to the bottom hem of my shirt. The water is cold at first but once I'm under it's fine.

"Sián-san, come back."

"Enough with the with *san* stuff already," I snap. "Just Sián."

"Sorry, sorry," he says. "Sián, rain."

"Okay," I say, daring him to come out after me. Forget *caution*. Foam breaks around my shoulders.

"Windy. Dangerous. Please." A wave lifts me, and I'm under only for a moment, but Jun is already in the water, shouting, grabbing at me.

"No, safe, safe," he yells, pushing through the surf. Once we hit sand I stop to ring out my clothes hanging heavily on me, but Jun shakes as he picks up the towels and forces me toward the car.

"Okay," I say, pulling away from him. "I'm fine, I'm fine."



We finish the last edits over two weeks and 3½ more KitKats, but still meet downstairs.

"Coffee," he says, pushing the cup over to me. He gives me another danish, too, though I haven't touched the first.

"You need to eat," he says, nodding seriously. "Not dieting?"

"I'm not dieting," I tell him. "I'm just not very hungry." I take a bite to make him happy though.

On the day of his flight, I notice him looking at my hair, which I know needs a touch-up.

“Gift,” he says, with both hands proffering a flat, meticulously wrapped package. The paper has an intricate pattern on it and is folded so that it looks like a kimono robe. I manage to tug it open from the other side, mostly salvaging the wrapping. Inside, there's a lacquered comb with a cherry blossom pattern.

“Not seeing is a flower. Confucius, I think.”

“That's lovely, truly.”

He writes the characters down for me on a scrap of paper, and it's complex, too many lines for me to make sense of, but he makes me write it over and over until I can do it on my own without looking at his version. It takes a while, but he gives me as much time as I need.

“Right on,” he says. “Anyone in Japan could read that perfectly.”

He bows very low when he says good-bye, and I do the same.

Over my lunch break, I call Brid for a report on Mo's rehab and to let her know when my lease was up.

“I'm getting married,” she says.

“What about inordinate dreams?” I ask.

“Forget the stars,” she says.

Okay.

THE XIPHOID YEARNINGS OF ZAZEN

A navy blue, rectangular, wax-lined bag, sized a little wider than a paperback and a little shorter than a wine bottle, weirdly plastic to the touch and smelling of basements and attic spaces, with two white lines running an inch from the bottom below an encircled maple leaf logo, printed at the top in a bold sans serif large point font, "AFTER USE FOLD AWAY FROM YOU" and "FOR MOTION SICKNESS / *POUR LE MAL DE L'AIR*," then on the bottom, in less impressive smaller point, simply "DRG Packaging." When balled up it sounds like crumpled paper, but after all it is a paper bag, just a standard issue AirCanada flight nausea bag that happens to contain the true name of God.



Bitter already on the second day of a round trip four-stop leg from Toronto to Addis Ababa because this is a 14-hour layover and my radio will tune to nothing but talk shows and newscasts. For a pre-flight ritual, Charlotte takes a sip of bourbon, or "a swish of the devil's mouthwash" as she calls it. Annie just smokes cigarettes, nasty Gauloises reeking of moss and garlic, but in a manner that's practiced, half art. She can send these long spirals of smoke dripping imperceptibly from her lips before exhaling dusky, spooling rings that float and float. I share in both their vices, but only occasionally and not nearly as gracefully. So I just listen to the radio. I try finding classical programming and muzak stations, both dying breeds. If I have to, I settle for rock or rap, whatever has the least static. But here in Beirut, I'm getting nothing but monotonous speeches and church-chant drones. Occasionally they broadcast commercials

with tantalizing snippets of English, but the only ones I remember are the Coca-Cola ads, with the fizzing and sex noises and pop music.

Coke costs the equivalent of \$1.45 at the bar in Beirut International, just a small glass bottle. My per diem doesn't even cover a soda. This used to make me sad until I learned to look around the lounge and find someone to buy me a rum to go with my coke. But it was a red-eye flight, no one around at this hour except for the pilot. With his shock of grey at the temples and rotating collection of large-faced gold watches, I guess he thinks he's *desirable* or something. He winks my way but I work at unpinning my wings, shaking loose my hair. Truth is, he wouldn't leave Charlotte alone after a weekend in Martinique, blowing up her phone with 4am texts for months and waylaying her when she couldn't avoid being with him on the flight deck. I forget the rum and go back to my radio for another scan. This time there's yelling, maybe a protest. Sipping at my warm coke while I wait for someone to come along, I listen until my ears start ringing.



During the last leg nonstop from Lebanon back to Toronto, 42G keeps his head bowed low, talking to himself. He has what looks like small twigs stuck in his curling black hair, unevenly cut. When I bring around the service cart, asking him if he wants some water, maybe a soda, he says something about rivers, and when I say we have tea, too, he says the leaves there were sweeter than the warbler's song, so I don't know, I hold out a pack of peanuts. He stops his rant and accepts the snack, but continues to stare at me with dark, kohl-rimmed eyes. Across the aisle I hear 36B drunkenly accusing Annie of withholding his FAA-

given right to gratification in the form of denying him more wine, so I excuse myself and push my cart to the aft to go help her out. Annie ducks into the washroom to chain smoke. I soothe the man by giving him tonic water with a slice of lime, telling him it's Stoli. He passes out within minutes. When I glance back at 42G, he has already dipped his head down and gone back to his private whispers, his strange words. On the flight deck, Charlotte asks me if I'm still going out with the aggro. That's her petname for Eli, *trouble*. I think she actually likes him but her naturally sarcastic upbringing in Manchester prevents her from showing her true affections. She tosses together her signature salad of rocket, aubergine, and pine nuts in front of me while I tell her how the wife won't sign the divorce. They're still trying to sort out custody because she doesn't want her son around on weekends, but the promotion means he's working even more sporadically than me now. Giving me a look, she says, You said something about how it's messy so you weren't going to bang on about him anymore, what happened to that? I say, Yeah, no, I'm not going to see him anymore, all I want to do is sleep a few *years* after this trip. She laughs as I snack on some fruit crisps.



Empty planes always have a way of looking like a crash site. After taxiing the runway, everyone is suddenly claustrophobic, some standing up before the seatbelt light has even dinged off and acting like there is so much more air now that we've stopped moving. The discarded headphones and blankets, pillows, cups—the debris is unavoidable and inspiring in volume. I look for 42G during the deplaning, but an elderly lady needs help getting her carry-on from the overhead

bin and it's heavy, I almost twist my shoulder pulling at it. 36B trips, stumbling down the jetway, and Annie has to cover a laugh. When everyone is gone, though, he still hasn't shown. Charlotte says she can't be expected to remember the chavvy blokes on every flight. So I tell her I'll catch up with her when we're on reserve next week, and head back to his seat just to make sure he wasn't bent over and mumbling on.

Finding the bag, I don't immediately think anything of it. Just, *Oh*. His area is clean, not a brochure out of place, not a napkin or wrapper in sight. In the middle of the seat, though, the nausea bag is puffed out and folded over like it's full. The cleaning crew takes care of these things. But his ranting comes back to me and then, I know. Hovering my hand near, it floats to my fingertips, like my hair when on static electricity. Just a slight raising, a subtle movement up, but I know. I glance to the aft to make sure no one sees me take it, but suddenly it is weighted like a bookend. When I look at it again, it goes light. With the bag stuffed in my carry-on, a small corner sticking out so I can keep an eye on it, I walk down the jetway to ask the pilot about the manifest. He eyes me up and down as he asks me for my number, "to make it a fair trade." So I give him a number, similar to mine, and tell him just make sure not to call after midnight. He stuffs the number into his coat pocket and says that only an old lady had gotten on at the gates in Lebanon and that I should wear my hair down more often.



Grand Quay Lofts off Lake Ontario is really a gorgeous area, the only reason the rent is worth it, but going home always makes me feel a little tired.

After I've slipped off my heels, stretching a bit by rotating my ankles around, loosening up, I realize how much work I have left to do on the place. Sheets over everything. The counters are covered in paint cans and sandpaper. Two layers of wallpaper left to scrape away in the bedroom, and the Clawfoot tub still runs off a wheezy cast iron radiator. The solarium isn't quite done either, but it overlooks the harbor. It's sparse, for sure, just grey walls, a birch tree design hand-painted on the far side last year, white edging, a black floor lamp. In the center of the room, facing the bay windows, just a hand-me-down sofa with sagging cushions found in a thrift store. A pillow and heavy comforter stays folded beside it, and in one corner an old gramophone with a stack of LPs. The refrigerator just has some cheese, soy sauce packets, and a bottle of Beringer red. I clear off a bucket of primer and set the bag on the kitchen table. Unpacking then repacking my carry-on is second nature, so the toiletries are refilled and fresh clothes zipped away in a matter of minutes. I sit at the kitchen table with the thing in front of me. The blue of the packaging is so dark it blends in with the table's black laminate. Brushing a clean paintbrush against it, there's no sign of movement or agitation. It stays still, even when I poke at it, just seems to sigh a little. I stare at it so long the AirCanada logo turns to nonsense. Finally I pull the flap to open it, but the bag turns heavy in my hands and crashes to the floor. I pick it back up, bending from the hips like we were trained, and lug it onto the table. Making sure it's supported on all sides by paint cans first, I try again, but this time it tips the table over and sends everything to the floor in what has to sound like a double-homicide. The downstairs neighbor bangs on the ceiling with a broom or

something and yells. I really should talk to Eli, because he's smart, listens, and never doubts me. Should I tell him, should I bother, is it something that can be told: the debate lasts as long as it takes to stack the cans against the wall and right the table. When I call, lying on the bathroom floor with the cord around my ankle, noting disinterestedly the lint building up on the baseboards, I say hi, that I was in town, that I thought maybe I'd drop by for his birthday. He says, It's three weeks away. He says, Come over anyway.

He was already thinking about separating before we met, or so he says in more vulnerable moments. If not for his boy, he would have already been out the door and away from the wife years ago. But he's got to think about what's best for his son. So he watched me at the airport with a stainless steel band on his finger, when he was doing electrical upgrades and I was laughing behind my hands with Charlotte. He got my email address, somehow, he won't tell me from where, and messaged that blue was a good color on me. He wanted to talk, if nothing else. After work one day he brought over a fifth of Gentleman Jack wearing a fedora. (I'd jokingly said that these were my weaknesses, a man in a hat and three shots of strong liquor.) Looking at him, I said I didn't know if I'd be able to help myself. There was a trail to some cave systems in a forest ten minutes outside of Toronto, where the trees almost block out the city haze and a river thunders nearby, so we took the bottle and his Jeep, settling down on some stone benches there. We talked into the night, and when morning came the bottle was half empty but the hat was still on his head, and he said, See, you're stronger than you think.



I drive over after changing out of my uniform and grabbing a heavy jacket, and when he opens the door he's still sweating from a workout. He asks if I need a drink while he showers, then goes to the back bathroom. I look around the house, touching the things he's built, like the bookcases, the entertainment center, a set of bamboo coasters. He'd framed some of his son's drawings and put them alongside the museum artwork we bought at a festival last year on an early date. He is easily the best man I've ever loved. When he comes out trailing soap scents, his long hair dripping water down his collar and the couch, I hand the bag to him.

Joking, I say, It contains all meaning. But this comes out small. He turns the bag over in his hands, looking at the back then the front, reading the type, and asks if I'm going to open it. I tell him I tried, it wasn't a success. So he stretches us out on the couch and asks me how it was being in the air for so long and tells me about always being on the ground, as he rubs circles on the back of my hand. I tell him how transatlantic flights are darkest, how the ripples below could be waves or clouds but I always hope it's ocean, with dolphins, whales, whatever, freewheeling around down there. He tells me about waking up sad. I tell him about waking up in Beirut. He asks if the roar of the engine is loud and I want to say like the belly of a slouching beast, because it's not all false, but instead I say how close we come to the sun and how cold it gets outside the plane. His hand moves to span my back in slow circles, and he tells me to open it. And I say I tried, it wasn't a success.

Kissing him, there's an urgency, and the feeling that if I don't leave the house now, it'll burn down around us.



Lonely back at home, aching in new ways, I put the bag on a clean spot near the window and curl up on the couch. It sort of stares at me, seeming more deflated. Unmoved. The blue of the packaging is so dark, and the lines so white, I think of a pair of contrails in the night sky. Talk about Toronto, talk about Beirut.



Mother calls on the phone way early in the morning to say, again, that she wasn't born in a rabbit box, that Canada's a whole 'nother place and there's all sorts of mean people in the world. I tell her, rubbing my eyes, how I'm fine, really, that, yes, I'm keeping up with my dentist appointments. She talks about the church and the crazy thing the cat did last night, he's such a character, and the possum that scared her on the porch last Wednesday, and I say yeah, Mom. Wow. Crazy. I don't tell her that I know that I know.



Noon, he calls, and I have smoke in my hair from the blowtorch. He wants to come over, but I say the apartment's not finished, there's paint *everywhere*. The bag still isn't catching fire, even with the oil over it. I say I can't hear him well over this static. He says he'll put on some old jeans and help out, he's due some vacation time. The bag isn't drowning in the tub, either, it just floats. When he says he wants this to work, I know it can't so I hang up. He calls back, and I don't want to unplug the phone entirely, sever *all* lines of communication, so I put it in

the bathroom and muffle it with towels so the bag is still in sight. Within an hour, he shows up with pizza, and my stomach makes loud noises when I think about not opening the door. I contribute the wine from the fridge. He wipes a smudge of ash off my face. After lunch, we dry off the bag, which radiates heat like a furnace. He squeezes my wrist in his hand as he asks how I can be so scared.



On reserve duty, stretched unladylike over the couches in the back, skirt riding high, I try telling Charlotte about the bag, how I know that I know. Sipping out of a rose-patterned flask, all she says is, And I thought I was naff.



Pictures of it don't come out blurry or anything, but when shooting it with an old 35mm and a roll of Fujifilm I found under the bed, even against a white sheet makeshift background illuminated by a flashlight, the processed image looks flat. Not just two-dimensional, but like a picture of drawing. A picture of a picture of a drawing. It certainly doesn't look more important than your average nausea bag. I borrow Eli's digital camcorder and document it from all angles, zooming in on the details, picking it up and showing how the corners pull and are starting to fray because it is heavier than even a full vomit bag should be. I watch the playback on the tiny LCD screen, but immediately know this also won't work. The lighting is reflecting off the wrong places, and it looks concave from all sides. I have Eli take it to the grocery store early the next morning, before there's a crowd, and put it on a produce scale. Doesn't budge.

Questions are sort of piling up and science doesn't seem to offer any explanations. So we find his grandmother's old Bible, dated from the Great Depression with gilt edges and onion-skin paper. The front pages have his family tree written out in a woman's neat cursive in blue ink, tracing his line back to the Acadians. Toward the beginning some verses talk about Lebanon and cedar, but the index doesn't turn up anything useful. Eli reads me a passage that says it's permissible to burn the name of God when it's no longer needed, which cheers me up about earlier. He says the jury is still out on water damage though.

Reluctantly, I make him put the Bible away, along with the Tanakh, Talmuds, the Qur'an and various glosses from the library, because the closest connection we could find was the tree of knowledge of good and evil, with *good and evil* translating to *everything*, which carries a death sentence in every translation.



Stop me if you've heard this one before. A flight attendant walks into a bar with the name of God in a paper bag. I wish I knew the punchline.



The affair you're having is never the affair you're having.

Upon returning home, I seriously consider throwing the bag out. I drink the remaining wine straight from the bottle and make a list of the possibilities, with letting someone else have it at the top. Maybe give it to Charlotte or Annie, because it could have been meant for any one of us—I just happened to service the right half of the plane. I could raffle it off, put it in a museum. Except a

museum would need documentation from the Vatican or something, I guess. Sell it to a pretentious gallery, maybe. Or it could be useful. Eli could construct a frame for it to hang it over the fireplace. It could be a Christmas tree topper, or a paper weight, I think, flattened lately and heavy as a weightlifter's dumbbell. Or I could just trash it. When I drain the last of the bottle, in an especially ill-considered moment of intoxication, I wad up the bag and toss it somewhere over my shoulder, where it hurtles to floor with due din and racket. The neighbors employ the broom. I put my pillow over my head, and try to sleep.

Vanity is useless here.



We were meant to kneel, I tell him, on those rocks along the Tigris, no, the river here, I mean, *this* river, the name fails me, but I was meant to take your hat to bare your head and tug you down among the stones where the river meets bank, to reclaim myself you see, and I didn't. He tells me I did though, and even if I don't remember, he remembers for me.

Xeroxes of proof can be supplied first thing in the morning, he says, just come back to bed.

Yet I can't. I know that I know that I know, and run out the door into the night. I find my car on the curb under a busted streetlight raining sparks and my hands are shaking, I scratch stars into the paint before finding the keyhole. When the car starts, the noise surprises me. I drive carefully but above the speed limit to the forests outside Toronto, where I remember there are the darkest caverns. The dirt road runs at a curve along the lake's edge, and the turn seems to stretch

on past the Earth's possible circumference. I go on, further than it feels I can, until I reach the highest cave.

 Zipping up my jacket doesn't help, the wind still cuts through. I duck further into the opening and settle on a flat rock there, cradling the bag in my crossed legs. The flap is folded accordion-style several times and my fingers are cold and numb, but it parts for me, unfurls at my touch. There's a brittle piece of paper inside, not a note any human wrote because the paper is so brittle it feels like dust, it is dust, has just turned to dust on my fingertips. I can feel its years weighing the bag, what's been so heavy all along it seems, and it guides my hands to the inner folds, where I find more paper that in turn crumbles to more dust, a bag of sand, and it spills out of the top so fast I breathe clouds of it in. I feel it as it fills me up at last, and I *know* as my fingertips are bright and burning with glorylight and my hair is what is called radiant, the ends lashing like flames and, squinting my eyes closed, I taste honey on my tongue. I hear choirs of violins and harps clashing at angles and the ocean must be somewhere over my shoulder, salt-scent flaying my lungs. When last my eyes open what I see is a faceless man, searching for a door, his mouth about to shape words I want to understand but know I'll never be close enough to hear.

THE HORTICULTURALISTS

On witnessing the community of harvest, and the weird orange of the dirt roads, the gridded stretch of farm meeting forest, the soft barrel-shapes found in the fields and barns and clouds alike, the animal scents trailing off the free-roaming herds, and the moon huge overhead while the sun yet hangs low on the horizon: we decide we love the land and so should live off it. We sift out the rocks and pebbles a square foot at a time. We plow and sow the soil with our bare hands, knees bruising. We count seeds. We take in a cat to take care of pests. We pull weeds when we are idle. We learn to sweep, and rake, to a tune. The laundry hangs on a line outside and so we sleep on wind-stiffened sheets. The cat grows fat and lazy so we spray the large pests and curse the smaller ones, the persistent ones. After a bad day, we pray for rain. We like to think we have now become attuned to the rhythms of the Earth but truly we know only our earth, that is, the earth directly under our feet that we have held in our own hands. We are okay with this. We watch, and watch, as the crops swell and the fruit ripens almost to translucence.

When harvest begins: we know it by the heavy feeling in our bones and the extra weight in every hour. The days run long because we dream without sleeping and wake without dreams. We rise early, before the larks are out, and work until very late.

When harvest ends: we prepare spaghetti squash four ways. We make jams and preserves; we distinguish between the two. We eat only zucchini for a week. We host elaborate dinners with fresh bread and fruit butter, fruit curd, fruit

spreads. We freeze strawberries to ice our knees. We cut apples into heart-shapes, carrots into funny rabbits. We pickle and can things we are not sure are meant to be pickled and canned. We make odd stamps out of potatoes and build pyramids out of watermelon. Everyone who visits leaves with five kinds of tomatoes. But still some of the harvest is lost and we are guilty of the waste. Our skin, turned golden in the late summer heat, fades then greens. We lose the cat somewhere between the corn stalks and the parsnips. We choke on seeds and our lips are stained purple from raw berries. Our legs tangle beneath us easily in the vines rioting around us. We become bent and stooped. And when we have eaten and eaten of the harvest and have grown sick and weary, dusty and worn, and can hardly speak anymore, only whisper, only choke: we never think that what was wrong was us.

SOME CONVERSATIONS ON HEARTACHE AND NOTHING

Route № 1: Bar » Residence

The watering hole you choose says things about you, more than incidentals like clothes or a job. What if the laundromat is closed for repairs? What if you're forced into the family business because your girl has her heart set on getting hitched? Maybe you just want to be a street musician. Not that you look like a street musician—Say, you mind if I take Broad? 9th's had construction all week—Of course I'm just saying this because I have some experience with the various speakeasies around town and I think the reason you're looking so green is because you found yourself coming out of a disreputable pub well after breakfast is done being served in most places. That's enough to make anyone look a little green. A strong cup of joe would set you right though. Before I got my license, I used to run around town at all hours myself. Every night I started at Capri House and ended at The Redwood, near the railway station, so I'd hear the morning trains start up and know that everyone's day was starting when mine was winding down. Pretty demoralizing to a guy. The place came under new management, got a fresh coat of paint and soundproofing, recessed lighting, but it had already started getting old to me.

Thing is I'd heard some rumors floating around about a joint called Phillie's. I was out with a lady friend, Elly, after her shift ended at The Redwood, and she kept on about a place that was supposed to have the *ne plus ultra* burger. Her words. Sweet gal, but she'd studied some languages in college. So these burgers were supposed to be way better than your run-of-the-mill fast food

joint, better than your steakhouses, and better than Flip's even, was her suggestion. Have you eaten at Flip's? They're good. But see, I didn't care about any of that, as I'd just given up meat on account of it being bad for your heart. But she was set on this burger and said also that the drinks were the best in town. And I can attest they are very good. These cocktails, they're only top-shelf stuff. And the guy who runs Phillie's, makes the drinks, cooks, everything—he's this kind of a quiet guy, always slouching with a half-chewed cigarette in his mouth—he always makes the drinks with a heavy hand, straight. There's no ice in the joint. You ask for ice, you're told to go to the North Pole if you want ice.

So I turn off the meter for the night, and we drive on over to Phillie's. I'm unsure of the place because it's in a seedy locale but something about the heavy cherry-wood bar sets my mind at ease. The guy who runs the place, you'd think his name was Phil or Phillip, maybe? Get this, I find his name's actually Kovacs, but I call him Jack because it's easier. He says to us, looking down at the bar, and I'm not even sure he's talking to us at first but there's no one else in yet, he says, Want a burger, I have two left.

So I ask him, What do you mean you have two left. He says he makes eight every night, he has two left, do I want a burger or not. Elly wants her hamburger but of course I decline, on account of my heart and all. I take out a fiver for her, but he tells me to put it away and points to the back wall behind the counter, what has this pile of odds and ends and such. He says she puts something down and she can have a burger no problem. The lady ends up getting off cheap, just offers him one of the plastic bracelets off her wrist,

yellowed, scuffed from wearing it all the time, couldn't have been worth more than a few cents. He takes it, puts it with the rest and goes to fire up the grill. She doesn't tell me until later but it was the first thing she bought with her own money when she moved outta her dad's house. Elly's sentimental like that, but a true angel. She rubs her wrist while I look at the board with the names of the drink specials. I decide to snuggle up with something called an "aftermarket" then ask if I could maybe have some pretzels or nuts or some snack type thing with my drink. And Jack just looks at me so I look at him and we're both looking straight-faced until someone else comes in, and then he just laughs, slapping the counter. He tells me I want pretzels, I can go to the fairgrounds if I want some pretzels. He tells the guy who comes in, This guy wants pretzels! They both have a laugh, on my tab. He whistles part of "The Entertainer" then "Maple Leaf Rag" in quick succession as he pours me another drink though I haven't even started on the first. It's that kind of place.

I get three drinks in me before Elly's burger comes out. No lettuce, but otherwise looks pretty good, smells like a barbeque on a summer day. She pauses, after the first bite, just sits nodding at Jack, then proceeds to clean the whole plate another bite at a time. At least Jack's free with the drinks while I wait for her to finish, must have been at least an hour. This is you, right? Now I'm not saying you should go to a place like Phillie's. I mean go to a place like The Discotheque maybe, or 1106, where the lights aren't so bad and people will listen to you every once in a while. Don't forget that coffee.

Miles: 3.07 | Fare: \$8.25



Route № 2: Airport » Midtown Residence

Thing is I was renting this dump off Bleckley, okay, and Phillie's was the only place in the vicinity that was spilling its lights. And I admit, I was curious about this whole ordeal with the burger. My lady friend who was fond of the place was up North visiting her family, though, so I had to solo the trip after clocking out for the night. Where are you in from anyway? St. Louis? I hear it's a swell town, got that crazy silver arch? So I go back the following week on my lonesome and order a "retrograde," which sits very well and works very fast. After a few I'm beginning to loosen up and get on friendly terms with those around me. As Jack is pouring the drinks—well, Kovacs is the guy's name, but he doesn't mind Jack—as he's mixing the drinks with one hand, he's holding a book in his other and reading out loud though nobody is giving him an ear. I try to catch some of what he's saying, alighting on a word here and there but it all comes out sounding foreign, being mostly muffled by everyone else yammering on, and it doesn't help there's a young lady to my side with painted-on lips in a short glittery number, attempting to enlighten me about the finer points of the art of lock-picking.

Then this elderly man comes in with a grimy baseball glove under his arm, obviously well-loved and practically ancient, the leather faded, the webbing all cracked, what looked like a kid's scrawl down the thumb. A wrinkled old ribbon is tied around it, fraying badly. The old man pulls off his felt cap, kind of clutching it with both hands in front of him, and asks if there are any burgers left. And Jack puts down his book, says sure. So the elderly gent puts the glove on the counter

and takes a seat. Get this, Jack takes the glove, goes to the back, then returns in 20 minutes with a burger. Just a burger. No fries, no fixin's, no nothing. And the place is quieter than a goddamn dog whistle as the old man eats. Even Dugan next to him doesn't say a thing, who I find out later is a very anxious fellow, a retired slugger, and given to sudden outbursts because various injections experimental and illicit in nature have left him, shall I say, less than calm. So the old man finishes the burger in complete silence, wipes his mouth with a pressed handkerchief from his own pocket, says thank you, and leaves.

That's all that happens, which adds up to precisely nothing. Talk resumes. Jack picks up his book and whistles some ragtime tune. But I'm baffled, I'm without means to piece it together. The young lady next to me sees my perturbation and kindly explains that he's what they call a regular. For instance, you wouldn't call me a regular because I just went for the conversation and some drinks. This guy, he'd been a dozen times with an assortment of items, a compilation of waste and refuse you could say, always just coming for the deal with the burger. My companion of the hour tells me about the first time she saw him. He brought in this gold ring, not like yours, is that from Tiffany's? But a thin, cheap one, tarnished, old, nothing special, and he polished it for an hour before he could put it down. So the deal is, she explains to me, you give something that has meaning to you, maybe only to you, that you been carrying around and don't want to carry around no more because if you keep carrying it around you're not getting anywhere. Jack was running a veritable storage locker, see? Later that night back at her place, I asked, I inquired about it further. She used the word

sacred but I'm not a religious man so couldn't wrap my head around it. I just said, what, like a rosary? Which she thought was hilarious. She spilled her drink down my arm she was laughing so hard. Cute gal, and patient as hell. In the morning she tried to explain it to me again, illustrate it for me in various ways, but it was over my head. She didn't seem to mind though, made us some breakfast. I haven't had orange juice that fresh since.

I still can't figure out Jack's game. When my turn came down the line, I tried to write him a check for my retirement savings, right, but he wouldn't even look at it. If I offered him the shirt off my back it wouldn't do. I was real angry, back then. I go back to my place to look through everything, ready to shove everything in his smug face. All I had were some dishes and sheets and some clothes. The place came furnished, you must see a lot of those places, sometimes that's the only option you have with a short lease term. I just didn't have much to bring is the thing. But I'm a popular guy, I'm friendly with the ladies. I have numbers in my book, if you know what I mean. So I go out to prove him wrong. Only one name doesn't come to mind. I mean, there are names, but no one single name stands out. They were all the same, kind of running together. Wow, that came out wrong, I mean no disrespect to these ladies, they are all very nice, very sweet ladies. I mean, I had feelings for these ladies, and varieties of feelings for these ladies, but it still pretty much added up the same. And I remembered the one with the painted-on lips and the glittery number, who I only saw a couple more times, though she was a real nice gal, and I thought about

those church words she used. I was real mad back then, but the whole thing's a little funny now of course.

Flat Fare: \$32.00 + \$2.00 fuel surcharge



Route № 3: Hotel » Convention Center

It's not the exclusivity that attracted me. It's not the ritzy airs it managed despite the, shall I say, less than elite customers that broached the doors on a nightly basis. By this I mean the decked-out call girls from The Discotheque coming in shifts through the night, two or three at a time huddled in clumps, or the gamblers ready with a play-by-play of the latest pot or a spiel about a million dollar bluff, and of course there's your typical junkies, bums, derelict types, trickling in alongside pub-crawlers and general ne'er-do-wells. But this you'd find anywhere in the city, any city, I challenge, after the sun goes down and nice folks like you and I are in bed. If you don't mind me asking, what are you presenting on by the way? I mean, with a smile like that I bet a lecture on the growth cycle of grass would be interesting. You look nervous, but you shouldn't be, no way you'll be late on my watch.

What I think it was that brought me back so often was the sense of camaraderie. You see, I've gotten to know Phillie's pretty well over the years. I know what I'm talking about when I say there's nothing like it. There was a woman who stopped outside with a camera once and took a few pictures. I hammed it up for her, of course, always willing to oblige a lady. She gave Jack a twined package stamped *par avion* with genuine European postage, unopened,

and ate the entire burger in 3 minutes. After, she taught us all bawdy lyrics from her home country, what I took to be Switzerland or France whereabouts, and she then proceeded to drink me right under the table. Jack mixed me up something called a “monkey's paw,” which tasted about as good as it sounds but did the trick for getting me up to making it to bed without incident. There were other faces, of course, other nights, an endless stream of them so they all run together without much consequence. That's just the way it seems sometimes. Maybe that's one way to calm down, thinking that all this won't add up to much of anything after your conference is over and everyone goes their separate ways. It's like time is a built in Monkey's Paw or something. Wait, Miss, that your folder on the seat?

Miles: 1.35 | Fare: \$4.75



Route № 4: Convention » Bar

Even though I moved to the north side of town a few years back, my old place being turned into a parking garage for another high-rise office building, I still made it down to Phillie's every week, usually Tuesdays after I'd dropped off the cab and things were dead. Some nights Phillie's sold out of burgers but most nights people only came for the drinks and the kitchen stayed closed. Jack—well, his name's Kovacs, but that's what I always called him—he had a different book every time but tended to whistle the same songs, not that they ever got old. Same with the drinks. The old “aftermarket” was my favorite, but Jack was always making up new flavors and I was always a willing test subject. Speaking

of which, did you see a young lady present on exodontia techniques? I bet it was something, wish I could have sat in on it myself.

I guess I just thought I'd seen it all. I mean, one time there was this kid, barely even tall enough to climb onto the bar stool, he put down 37¢ in bright, new coins and Jack served him up a hot one. There was a woman came in with twigs in her hair, wearing a satin-like dress the color of my mother's old rubies. She brought in a small box topped with a lizard all crusted with round jewels that looked fake to my eyes but who knows. Couldn't tell whether anything was inside it but that was never the point with Jack. I wish I knew how it all started, what dark impulse kept him there, collecting broken things. It's way across town, though, hardly worth the drive. You want a drink, there's a place a block from the hotel I can take you to, and it has very reasonable specials for mid-day disasters.

Miles: 1.01 | Fare: \$4.25



Route № 5: Restaurant » Hotel

But this lady comes in, and I mean a true lady, *trés* ritzy, *trés* fashionable, not unlike your lady there, right, but with this little hat and gloves. She was regal as hell compared to the rest of us. I was still wearing last night's suit. This dame was probably nothing special, but she made a real impression on me. As I recall, she had the longest blonde hair I ever seen, reminded me of these wheat fields I passed on a road trip once, in mid-June, right before it was harvested. Her hair was all coiffed and curled like she walked in straight from the beauty shop instead of the bus stop downtown. She speaks very softly like the place is a

library, and is kind of folded in on herself, legs crossed, arms folded on her lap—
Is the air on too high for you kids?—Let me know and I can turn it down. I keep
trying to remember other details, like the shape of her eyes, maybe, but all I
remember is that she had this smile. Now, I only got to see it for a second when
she came in and then it was like it also got folded away, or maybe it collapsed
and crumbled like what happens to those sculptures from Ancient Greece, but
the smile, and I couldn't place it until later, but it was straight poetry. It was a line
out of Dickinson. 'Hope is a thing with feathers,' or maybe the one about the
carriage. She must have been pretty all right to catch my eye, don't get me
wrong, but it was nothing that'd make you glance twice in the street. Except for
the smile.

But it was gone before I could know what I saw at the time and she was
just another patron, albeit a glammed up one. I thought about pouring on the old
charm, but you know, she was all folded in, I could tell she didn't want to be
bothered and I'm not one to make myself a nuisance. Jack offered a burger when
she took a seat. Nine times out of ten he can spot the ones who'll be regulars
and she had the same look like the rest. But she stuck with her drink.

A couple of hours pass. The sky's getting light and I'm barely vertical, just
about on my way out the door and already thinking of how good the old bed's
going to feel, when I hear her ask if she could kindly have that burger now. And
Jack says, Sure. And he stands there waiting for her to put something down.
Except she doesn't have anything except this tiny purse, no bigger than a pack of
cards. Now, ma'am, now yours is a sensible size. Book size. Not too big, not too

small. But what are you going to put in a purse the size of a pack of cards, right? So she opens this tiny purse and I'm expecting anything else but when she pulls out this pair of silver shears.

I get this panicked feeling, I don't even know why. The scissors looked so dull they probably wouldn't give a baby a paper cut, dinky dime store things. But she takes them in her hand, and I'm freaking out, I'm in a panic, I feel like I'm practically shouting at the top of my lungs and waving my arms like a damn lunatic, but everyone else in the room isn't paying any attention and I realize I haven't even moved an inch. And she lops off all her hair. Just like that. She kind of had to saw through it, on account of it being so thick and I'm sure the scissors being dull didn't help. But I could hear it, hear this sick scratching sound as she sawed through her hair an inch at a time. When she was done, her hair was in uneven clumps around her face, sticking up all over the place, and she tossed the fistful she'd cut onto the counter where it kind of sat there coiled, like snakes do. Jack is standing there, too, just watching, doesn't pick it up, like he also knows it's a snake, and it's going to bite his fucking head off if he tries to pick it up. Pardon my language, ma'am.

Her voice is shaking when she asks if she could kindly have her burger now. And Jack says sure.

And she eats it, with tears streaming down her face the whole time.

All I know, that's the first time I ever stood witness to passion. Real passion.

How long have you folks been married? I bet it goes by real fast.

Miles: 2.46 | Fare: \$7.25



Route № 6: Uptown Office » Downtown Restaurant

All I know, after seeing such a display, I figure I need one of them burgers too, right? Just, wow, right, wow. So I come in the next day, and I start asking around, seeing if anyone can tell me what's up with this burger. I ask Dugan. I've seen him bring in pieces of wood, stuffing from a teddy bear, all kinds of things, but he pretends deafness until I start my line of questioning on someone else and his hearing magically returns so he can start a big brouhaha about the suspicious events that conspired to make the team he was betting on flop in the last quarter. So I go straight to Jack. I tell him about how I'm watching my heart and all and I say, Jack, I explain how I'm concerned about my heart but I'm also curious about this burger, very curious. I tell him I've been coming in a long time now and I want to know what the secret is.

And he says, "What, you want a burger, order a burger then."

But I'm not ready yet. I'm begging him. I'm not a begging kind of guy, but I've got my hands up like this. Finally one of the girls, Charlie, she used to be a sous-chef down at Flip's, she takes pity on me, says she doesn't like to see me so sad. So we go over to an empty corner and nuzzle up, where she gives me the rundown on the burger in this gorgeous breathy whisper, right up next to my ear, okay, and this really lovely warmth spreads down my neck, to where her hand kind of lays on my chest, it's innocent, but I can smell her perfume, a citrus type which I liked quite a bit but which honestly didn't help much with easing my

ensuing disappointment. And maybe it's not my place to say it, but I think if your client had a whiff of the stuff you're wearing, what is that vanilla? Some kind of spice? I don't think he'd be dragging you all over town this late just to sign some papers. I'm just saying it's nice, quite nice.

Well, turns out there is no secret, or no magic leastways. It's just a fancied up burger. He makes the bread fresh, in house, buttered up real well, lightly toasted. Then there's this garlicky aioli spread, which she tells me is a fancy mayonnaise and I hate mayonnaise much less fancied up mayonnaise but she says it works, and I trust her that it works. So you're sinking your front teeth into this bread, this fancied up mayonnaise, and it's melting in your mouth and you think this is it, this is heaven. But you haven't even got halfway through! So you keep going, you crunch your way through some thin-sliced red onion, three bread and butter pickle slices cut on the bias, not two not four but three slices, and you just have time to indulge in a generous slice of aged Gruyère, and there's no lettuce, I can practically hear Jack starting with the “You want lettuce, you can go—” but we all know where that goes. So there's no lettuce. She says lettuce is the most boring part of a burger and there's nothing boring about this burger. She says there is no more and no less on this burger than it needs to be the perfect burger. She's a philosophical type girl, Charlie is. So, you have your bun, your sauce, minimal yet satisfying condiments, and a complex yet smooth cheese, all before you get to the show, to the payoff, to the half-pound of hand-ground all-beef patty contained neatly in another perfectly toasted half of a brioche bun.

Or so she tells me. Thing is, I still haven't had one. Thing is, she tells me all this, and I don't really believe her. At this point I think he's lacing the sauce with, I don't know, some seriously hard drugs. I'm salivating. I tell him, "Jack, I am ready for that burger." And he says, Nope. And I ask him what he means, Nope. He says he's out of burgers. And I understand, there's an economy in the joint and I can't be the one to break the system. So I go back home and all night I'm dreaming about the burger, really weird dreams, like about the pickles can-canning off a cow's back into a pond and I think the pond was made of soda or maybe just rum but anyway I wake up, muddled and hungry. I skip work and kind of just slump around the apartment until Phillie's opens back up that night.

So I'm salivating again. I say, "Jack, I am ready for that burger." And he says, Sure. And then I remember I have to put something down. And I kind of feel around my pockets, pat my jacket down. I have a cigarette behind my ear, right? So I give it to him, I figure he could use a fresh one. But he doesn't pick it up. So I put down the watch on my arm, some wind-up thing, but he looks on as I fumble with the clasp then just pushes it back across the counter. I got nothing else on me, I realize. I'm sort of thinking through things back at the apartment I could maybe bring in, but Jack pours me my usual drink instead, doesn't even give me a chance.

And Jack, I like Jack, but it almost came down to fisticuffs over this. I tell him I'm good for it—I'm there every week, I can bring him something later, right? I don't know why it's a problem. But he's not giving me an ear anymore. I finish off the shot he poured me and slam it on the counter, not to do no harm or anything,

just to get his attention. It gets his attention all right. It gets everyone's attention. Dugan tugs on my shoulder, trying to pull me outside. Charlie has her hand on my knee, whispering things, but I'm not hearing. Instead I'm thinking about the gun I keep under my seat for when passengers think they can get a free ride, or maybe get grabby. Don't look so worried, the safety's on, I have a license. But Jack wasn't reading all that on my face, he was getting the abridged version that just said something could go off if he didn't back down. Listen, I hope you don't mind me taking the bridge. There's no toll this way. It's a bit slower, but we're making good time.

So he's got this cigarette always in his mouth, he takes out this mangled cigarette and asks if I'm sure. I tell him I'm sure that I'm sure. He goes to the back. We can smell the grill charring as it flames on, and we all relax. Charlie plants one on my cheek, then scoots out the door. Doesn't stick around for the second act.

When he brings out the burger, it looks like the rest, smells like the rest. I'm, you know, still disappointed there's no fries, I mean at this point my appetite is immense and I could use a side or three. But I know better than to ask for anything with it, so I pick it up and bite into it. It tastes like ashes to me, like if Jack crammed all his sopping disgusting cigarettes down my throat at once. I can't keep it down. Jack just takes the plate away and pours me a drink. I tell him, I explain to him, "It's just my heart, don't you listen to the Surgeon General, this stuff will kill you, there's studies done, it's just on account of my heart, I don't

need your burger, it'll kill you anyways." Just, you know, he doesn't know anything, he had no right.

Well, it was what it was, I just felt a little sad about the whole thing I guess. So I go for a walk down to The Discotheque, where I'm friendly with the 3am crowd and they have reliable drinks. Not creative like Phillie's, but reliable. And I go on down to The Discotheque, and I run into my old friend Elly there. She tells me how concerned about me she was as she hadn't seen me around lately. I of course tell her not to worry her sweet head, that I was around, we'd just missed each other. And boy did we. Turns out she had a fly-by-night marriage with a shoe salesman and was stuck taking care of a kid on her own. All on her lonesome. I told her to let me talk some sense into the guy with my fists, but she seemed happy, honest she did. Her face had puffed up a bit, maybe a little in her waist too, but she looked better for it. She laughed a lot.

I promised her I'd stop by more often. It was just I'd needed a change of pace, see? I'd been at Phillie's too long, I'd outgrown the place. But I found I liked The Discotheque just fine. It had a ring to it, too. So the guy who runs it, I never did pick up his name, nice guy though, but the guy who runs it has a full menu, anything you can think of he has it. What was it you said you were wanting, a milkshake? He makes great milkshakes. You want peanuts with your drink? He has that too. So I'm looking through the menu and I know exactly what I want. A burger. But the guy says he's all out of burgers, some sort of corn shortage, but he's got chicken. So I say, why not, I let him make me a chicken sandwich. It was just, you know, plain white bread, some mustard, one pickle, no mayonnaise

yyyuck, lightly fried chicken. Nothing fancy, but it just really hit the spot. You know chicken's better for your heart, too, right?

You've been really great about listening to all of this, a real sweetheart. If that client of yours doesn't keep you waiting too long maybe I could show you around town, take you by The Discotheque, because they do make good milkshakes. Not better than Flip's, but the rest of the drinks are better. What do you say?

Miles: 5.57 | Fare:

WINTER SONG

"Did you carry a body once it had died?

For how long and how far?"

—Mary Ruefle

"You know the lovely thing about you?" he said.

It was sunset when we reached the top of Mt. Fuji and decided to finish off the honey. I shushed him as I dipped my hands into the last jar and, with fingers syrupy and wet, scrawled sticky lines of unmei, destiny, that is, one of the ten words he'd taught me, over and over onto his skin, starting with the small exposed square of his ankle up to long line of his throat, washed orange in the glow of late summer. A long while later, after it dried, when the stars had reclaimed the sky, he brushed crystals from his eyes like sleep as he finished the thought.

"You never do things the easy way."



The doctors use words like *benign* and *minimally invasive*, they tell me they'll call in the morning when I can pick him up, but when they call instead they say only that they lost him. How do you lose a whole life, like car keys or a sock? Their words are all used up when they show me the body. I have no words, either, because I was not there when he went. I was at home, sleeping, waiting

for the call saying he could come home. At the end did he know how much he was loved? Or did he hear only the hum of terror?

Months pass, and I still have no words. I have only the keening, the ache. The silence. The flitting shadows, the shapes, that make me think *him* then realize I'm grabbing a doorknob instead. I start folding cranes, because if I can get to a thousand I can wish the shadows away. There's a word for an act this desperate, but I can't remember it.

The cranes I make with spare cardboard have a wing span almost two yards long, but most are sized like baseballs, easily palmed. Some are as small as dimes. I say the steps to the room as I fold, because I never learned any prayers. The folds are my prayers, murmured as I make each crease: mountain, valley, valley, inside, reverse, collapse. Soon I am low on paper, and cut magazines into squares, leaving behind smudged newsprint, scrapped articles and ads. It is the cranes that tell me the stock market isn't doing well. They tell me there were no survivors in the plane crash on the Atlantic. I become enthralled with these new words. When I get to a thousand, I keep going, so the room teems with cranes. I'm halfway through creasing a New Variorum edition *Hamlet* into 182 ping-pong-ball-sized birds when I realize it has to end.

The moving is easy; I sell most everything. The new town sits closer north next to a quaint marsh with real cranes. I pack my clothes into one suitcase and a few books into another. I also take his favorite sweater, worn in some places and needing darning but still holding his scent. The man next door, who walks his dog every morning at six, comes out to help, but I tell him I'm fine and carry the

suitcases down to the car alone, stopping only once to rest. I tell myself I am strong, like apricot pits. The couple above plays their music too loud and their kids run everywhere, at all hours, never walk. They watch me when I get the mail, then laugh glibly when I trip over their half-buried toys in the yard. It's a mess. There are green soldiers in the hydrangeas, tiny cars in the geraniums. The last thing I do before I go is pick the litter out of the comfrey and dig it up, replanting it over his grave across town. He always liked its nautilus curl right before it bloomed.



We took a brief rest next to a shrine at the last waypoint. A riotous sense of victory began to stir. Our hiking sticks had ten souvenir brands, one for every station.

We struggled up the rest of the mountain at a bullet climb, ignoring the altitude warnings and nausea along the way, wanting to make it to the top before nightfall. My vision went red more than once with sky-sickness, or maybe just the sun. The air was so thin, as if to say, there is no need for these struggles night after night.



The new town is colder, but the rented house I settle in is isolated, cheap, furnished. Small, so it doesn't feel too empty. The walls are eggshell white, bare, lacking in both dust and memories, debris and meaning. The ceilings are high, though, and I hear it is usually chilly these late months. I hang my clothes in the closet then put some tea on in the kitchen. While I'm waiting on the kettle's

whistle, I take a bath, as the new house has a sizable tub. The old place just had a shower, and that with two pressure settings: bruising and off. I briefly permit this joy, being gently submerged in the water on all sides, but the cranes' sounds come through the walls and scare me. Over tea I convince myself they are just talking, and of course they are miles away. Being echoed by the water, they only sound like they're near the house or waiting beneath the window.

I set a book on the table next to the bed, so the place feels more lived in, but when I go to read it the words just blur and fall away. I put many layered quilts on the mattress, but I end up sleeping on the covers, feeling suffocated by the sheets. Out the window, I notice the moon is dim, half-full.



There wasn't much at the ninth station, but we handed our sticks over to the brander and took a break to fuel up.

"I think the bees brought us together," he said. "Not kamikaze, not fate. I was thinking, maybe we should light incense for them on the descent, to ward off the ghosts of their dead."

I started to tell him they were just bees, but he spooned some honey into my mouth before I could speak.



In the morning, the cupboards are empty so I to drive into town on a grocery run, pulling his sweater on as I go. I always just want to buy milk, cereal, peanut butter, every now and then a cheap wine, but now I can imagine him telling me I can't live off that junk and at least splurge on a good vintage. I add

bananas to the basket and sack potatoes, and opt for a mid-range Merlot. A man sitting outside on a rusted blue trunk, hunched in the wind, wearing an oversized jacket and loose tie, calls me over. I listen to his pitch as he pulls native-style beaded things out of his case. Then he says, Name a blossom, any blossom. And it takes some cajoling but finally I say, Orange, because I haven't seen one flower in years. And with some flair, he places jarred orange blossom honey in my hands, labeled neatly in square handwriting with a straw bow around the lid. And the word comes to me: *hachimitsu*. The edges of things go fuzzy as I push the jar back into his hands, but it falls and clatters on the ground. I don't think it breaks, but he calls to me, Wait! I'm already ducking into the car, turning away, a little breathless and heart beating hard. On the way home, I feel silly and rude, but glancing in the rearview mirror I see a misty shape stepping out of the forest. Braking suddenly, I smell rubber, heat. Another glance and I see nothing. Going into town wasn't a good idea.

Back home, I fold his sweater into the suitcase. The corner rooms are wintry, so I turn on the heater. I try to pick up the book again but the words are still disordered. Instead I crimp some sheets into a drooping winged shape then turn into bed early.



We tried to nap at the eighth waypoint with our jackets under our heads, but there was no sleep to be had, too many hikers stomping past our heads so we just carried on under the noon heat.



I wake up shivering, when light breaks, having dreamed of frost. Snow was flaking in a field of brambles and comfrey, then a shrinking, and the sea boiling out my pores, and the salt surge drowning the cranes, the new town, the old town, the nation. I wake up calm, but disturbed.

It was just a bad dream, I tell myself. During the night, there was a whiteout; I must have heard the storm. I manage to eat some hot cereal with sliced banana, to help with the thaw. I pull on the sweater along with extra layers and thick socks so I can walk along the pier surrounding the marshes, crunching the snow loudly as I go. All the cranes seem to be in hiding and I am breathing deeper now, whether because of the distance or the air. On the third circle around, cheeks red with cold and numb, I resolve to come back later in the week when the weather clears, at least twice a week. Back at the house, on the doormat, I see the honey. The same straw bow. The block letters. I stop to admire the little petals swimming at the bottom, then take it inside to the kitchen. I dip a spoon in, once, clinking the sides as my hand trembles, to taste the sharp sweet citric bite, then immediately dump it down the drain, stomach knotted with guilt.

The remaining hours in the evening, I stay busy with digging at the hard-packed snow on the porch, wiping by hand the mud tracked into the house, and when night comes, I soothe my soreness with a warm bath. I wrinkle and lounge. As the water turns not quite cold, I open my eyes to find a skink perched on the spigot, probably trying to escape the snow too. I stare at the lizard, it stares back. We both blink slowly, impossibly blank, as the sky darkens then turns black.



As we sipped exorbitantly marked up tea at a small stall at the seventh station, he talked with the hushed tone reserved for inside shrines as he told me about the diaspora of the bees.

“I saw just a snippet of it on the news while waiting for the follow-up appointment, about the disappearances, how the whole society was collapsing. When they called my name I forgot all about it of course. It wasn't until I was outside that it sank in. A fear wedged itself in my spine, like a grenade with the pin half in. I mean, if I disappeared, a single person, who would know why?”

“I would know why,” I say, twining pinkies with him like a schoolgirl. “I'd disappear with you.”



With the jar washed, I return it to the hunched man. The weather is still blistery, but he is not so hunched as earlier, and has shaved. He accepts the empty jar, asking only whether I enjoyed it. But I cannot articulate the words, I stammer.

“It was good,” I manage to say.

“We need sweetness to live off of,” he says, and offers another, but I decline, thanking him all the same.

The next morning I decide to go back to the old town. I still have plenty of savings to find a furnished room there. I pack all of my clothes and the books, which takes less time than I plan. I finish the box of cereal, chewing each bite thirty-two times, then wash the dishes, dry and stack them. I unplug the heaters

and turn down the thermostat. Suddenly it's noon and when it comes time to turn the key to start the car, I find I can't.

Because it's just grass, I tell myself. Reluctantly I hear the truth in this, thinking through the logistics of actually throwing myself down on his grave and crying a long while. Someone would make me get up eventually, then where would I go? The cold lets up but I am in bed all day under the blankets. As there is no paper in the house, I only mime the usual movements, sometimes tangling my gown and the sheets. There's a creaking on the steps I pretend not to hear and tug the covers higher.

I stay in bed another day, coming out only to eat some peanut butter and pour some wine. I'm glad he always told me to get the good stuff now. I mean I'm glad I listened to him. I tear the bottle's label and start to arrange it into a tiny, lopsided crane, but give up halfway through and ball it up tight.

At night, I dream my hands turn splotched and grey then crack and turn to stone.



The sixth waypoint featured a shrine surrounded by a small lake. We watched a leaf fall, land on the water then circle out in tremors.

"The water here is the same shade of jade I remember from childhood," he said.

"The lakes back in the States are just muddy and brown," I replied, rubbing my calves.

"I bet this one's deeper than it looks."

He stuck his whole arm in water and we could see his fingers wiggling all the way down, scaring off the tiny darting fish.

Before moving on, we bought two jars of honey for a couple of yen from an older Japanese man in a western-style business suit, who kept gesturing at us, saying, "Carbs best, carbs best," which he explained took less oxygen to digest and was better for the altitude.



More snow has fallen over the night and blankets everything thickly but the sun has started melting the top layer, leaving it mushy and wet. I stretch on the bedroom carpet, noticing my muscles, my tendons, for the first time in months, taut, moving and working, rallying. I stand to pull my leg behind me, but almost slip. I move to a quick sous-sus I remember from ballet classes taken years ago but knock over a lamp, tumbling, bruising my ankle. These things take time, I say. And steps.

But knowing me, there are no steps, it is everything all at once, always.



Today I think it is warm enough to go out with just the sweater and my cashmere gloves, as the sun is out and water is dripping everywhere. Snow slumps from the roof, periodically, thumping wetly down. The trip into town is harder with the unswept snow melting on the road. I want to speed, but I make sure to keep both hands on the wheel, music off. Snow dusting the trees sometimes drops to the ground behind me creating ghosted clouds, but after the first time I stare ahead without wavering. When I near the main road, I see the

stoplights weighted with icicles. They all blink caution at me as I wait my turn. Many people throw snowballs at the cars, in jest. The honks are not in anger, only a mechanical laughter. One boy busily draws monsters onto all the post boxes. The man with the honey is in front of the store, building a snowman with a little boy and girl in the empty parking lot. I notice the CLOSED sign but watch for a few minutes, as the girl knocks off the snowman's head and the boy's face screws up in tears. The man takes a top hat and puts it on the snowman's body, giving him a head and a body or maybe a head and feet, but the boy stops crying. The man waves, and I give a small wave back.

I drive home slowly yet run up the steps, slipping on the ice. I take to my hands and knees, going up one at a time, until I hear a creaking noise beside the house. Shielding my eyes with a one hand against the sun glare, I think maybe it's just settling snow. Seeing only a mounded white blending into more mounded white and an endless horizon, I want to head inside and curl under the covers and run all of the heaters at once. But I stare at the whiteness as the snow seeps through my shoes. I hear the creaking again, which sounds more and more like a small cry I can't ignore. I ease off the steps and come around the corner, closer, pinpointing it to a pile of snow behind a dead azalea bush. Kneeling, I start digging. My motions start out careful, measured, taking a powdery mass at a time and dumping it in a neat pile before taking another. My slacks are soaked through in seconds, and in minutes I am sweating with the repetition. I speed up as I notice my hands are no longer in pain, are now completely numb, blotched and pale, but I push my worries aside and continue searching. The cry gets

louder. I lose a glove in the snow somewhere. The sensation of ants is marching inside my arm when I reach something softer than snow. I am scared to look but it has to be done. I find a skinny orange tomcat curled in a tight ball, except for one limp arm held at an odd angle, gashed, with a fight-torn ear. I look around, at the sparkling velvet white, the grey sky, the marsh in the distance, bewildered.

But I take him. I gently tuck him into the sweater, blood and gash and all, careful of his arm. He's limp and pitiful but nuzzles into the warm crook of my elbow.



"You know the trouble with you?" he said.

I didn't answer, concentrating on my footing in the lava sand, surprisingly soft and dark like potting soil. We were almost halfway up the mountain, having just left the last of the paved roads. Our hiking sticks had five souvenir brands. He'd tied a pink ribbon at the top of mine which he'd tugged out from under my shoe back in the famous suicide forest at the summit, where for a whole hour he translated all of the notes nailed to the trees as we went (like, Nothing good ever happened to me in life don't look for me, but also You think you die alone but nobody is alone in this world).

"You always do things the hard way."

NONFICTION

VOUS ÊTES ICI

I've never lived anywhere. But I've slept in century-old Colonial housing converted from slave quarters, a sprawling brick ranch, three apartments, a condo in a gated community, a partitioned bungalow, a townhouse for a week, and a cottage with weirdly slanting floors. These aren't places one lives; these are places one unpacks for a while. I like to think my restlessness goes back to artists flocking to New York after World War II and, before that, to Paris in the nineteenth century and to Florence during the Renaissance. That it goes back to home always being where you aren't.

In high school I was already making plans to emigrate to Japan. Then my arid politeness would be national, my quiet restraint rewarded as a kind of honor. My exhaustion would be called *mono no aware*, my second-hand furniture *wabi sabi*. There's a word there for every weird solipsistic condition. But the idea was easily crushed by ticket prices and a horror at having to learn the three thousand kanji characters needed to survive daily life, much less the ten thousand needed for fluency. And I wasn't sure they'd hand out visas to unskilled sixteen year olds.

I started thinking of France after that. Studying the language four years in high school then four semesters in college gave me decent reading and writing comprehension, and rudimentary (at best) conversational skills. I proceeded to fall in love with a half-British boy who watched Truffaut, often visited family in England, and had even spent a month in Paris studying film. I begrudged this time abroad, but only a little, because it was like it was fated—finally there was the prospect of going abroad myself. I walked into walls reading *Le Petit Prince*

and *Nausea*, Baudelaire and Beckett. I watched *Pierrot le Fou* and *Amélie* a dozen times each, back-to-back. I drank wine, in glasses, with meals. Camus, Lacan, Beauvoir, Godard: these were my people. Surely I would belong there, if anywhere. The year after college I spent in a cubicle, saving for Paris and building my vocabulary in the downtime. Soon I'd find that place I'd never found.

The following May, everything confirmed my impression. The plane not falling out of the sky and the surprise of sheep dotting the landscape on the descent to Heathrow. The old-world cobblestone streets of Cheshire, the extra vinegary fish and chips shared over a pint. The yellow fields rioting all the way to London's St. Pancras station. The Eurostar speeding us along impossibly fast to the City of Lights herself. Successfully ordering *deux pain du chocolate* for breakfast, from a small patisserie near the hotel, as *mon amour* knew only how to ask for Fanta and a side of fries. Every Parisian morning felt as intimate as a familiar embrace. The concierge at the front desk of the hotel even winked at me as if to say, yes, that is art on the ceiling, yes, you have arrived in a place that finally makes your kind of sense. Sorry it took so long, Mademoiselle, would you care for an *apéritif*?

Our first day I ordered gyros for us from a shop off rue Bagnole, run by what looked like a father and two sons. While the food was being prepared, the youngest leaned over the counter and asked if I was Canadian, like perhaps we were distantly related. The ticketmaster, too, understood my stuttering French through the plate glass, and soon every métro line seemed home to me. Home maybe smelled stale and sweaty, and there was the woman, well-dressed and

with shopping bags, who had peed behind the seats of Denfert-Rochereau station, but we all have those odd second cousins. I rode the fourteen lines and, like a veteran, didn't grab for the bars each time the train came to a halting stop. We hiked up to Sacre Coeur, practically sideways with the effort, to the panoramic view of my city, sprawled city. I felt I could stay there forever to rest with the lovers and hawkers, musicians and break-dancers, but there was always more to see. Back down the hill, we found graffiti stenciled by Blek le Rat himself and saw confetti burst over a café like Kerouac's roman candle. I wandered the streets of rue Pigalle as Edith Piaf surely did so many years ago. In the tradition of true *flâneurs*, we browsed along the Champs-Élysées and the endless floors of Galeries-Lafayette but didn't buy anything except an Etgar Keret novel. I didn't need the trinkets, the replica Eiffel Towers in five colors, ten colors, the scarves that said "I love Paris." I was Paris, I carried the very soul of France herself under my grey Pashmina wrap, felt her all the way down to the soles of my Converse One-Stars. Just watch a crosswalk long enough and you can tell the real Parisians and those pretending. All the self-respecting Parisians throw themselves in front of traffic because pedestrian signs translate differently to the natives. They know their flowing scarves will muffle all horns and anger; they never look at pigeons or the sky. So I walked in front of traffic. I never looked at the pigeons and at the sky only secretly, in bored glances.



Then it was two days later and our checkout was early in the morning. My winking concierge was gone, probably too heart-sick to get out of bed and say

farewell. I slumped to the métro, frumpy as hell and feeling heart-sick myself already. I said *au revoir* to the métro, taking the Pont de Levallois-Gallieni line to Réaumur-Sébastopol station for the transfer to Gare du Nord, having memorized every stop and wondering all the way what I was to do with this knowledge, how I could carry it back with me.

I arrived at Gare du Nord just before noon feeling sad and not unlike a traitor. But the train to London wouldn't be leaving until the evening, so we looked around for the luggage storage to maybe visit Tuileries, which we'd had to skip over the day before. I read the signs pointing to the trains, to restaurants, to the exits, back to the métro, but didn't see any lockers. I asked a Customs officer, "*Excusez-moi de vous déranger, Monsieur, mais où est les consignes automatiques?*" And he pointed to an elevator and said in English, "Two floors down."

I went to the elevator, wondering why he switched languages on me when no one in three days had felt the need to switch languages on me, to cast me back into my wretched American self. I was hurt, I was cringing—I was wondering how on earth we were supposed to go two floors down when the elevator only went one floor down. I looked around to make sure I hadn't missed another elevator nearby, but no, there was only Customs and the rails, and one floor up a restaurant. We went down as far as we could (which was only one floor) and read the signs here. They pointed to the métro, to the ticket booths, a help desk. No Consignes. No pictures of lock or lockers. Maybe if he'd said it in French we could have gotten this right. Maybe if, whatever. We walked to the

help desk, which had a line that stretched back about five meters. I could feel the spirit of France seeping out my soles. I studied the maps on the walls, but the diagrams didn't label anything, just emphasized the sprawl of the station. Fifteen minutes later, at the front of the line, I asked the same question. The woman told me, in English, "One floor up." Stunned, wounded, terribly confused, I lead us back to the signs to ride *l'escalier* up to where we started. I looked around, saw only a crowd that had places to be, that looked like they belonged, that probably knew where the damn lockers were.

Tugging our luggage behind us, we walked across the entire second level of Gare du Nord, making jokes about desert island situations. We went down to the bottom floor, but that ended in shops and opened onto the streets of the 10th arrondissement. We went up to the third floor which still only housed a restaurant, called O'Conway's of all things, playing American country music over loudspeakers. Demoralized, I guided us across the second level of Gare du Nord again until finally spotting a map with a label for the ever-elusive lockers. But when we walked down the halls it said to take, it ended up looping back around to the métro lines. I paused for a *croissant au beurre* and a bottle of water, and sat on the nearest bench knowing at last what it was to be lost in the middle of one of Paris' largest terminal stations, *une touriste*. The remaining spirit of France fled from me in disgust.

Where was the city that loved me only a few hours ago, I wondered. She must have finally seen me, maybe has always seen me, as I am, the homeless girl, one who made the mistake of starting her French education at age six with

the questionable integrity of Muzzy video tapes, who wraps herself in knock-off clothes and is unraveling like a loose thread on her cheap scarf before her eyes, and what about all that frizzy hair. Maybe France had finally disowned me. I didn't blame her.

We finished off the water and walked back to the beginning. We rode the elevator one floor down, the only option. We took some stairs but those only led to showers and bathrooms. We went back to the elevator, but instead of going straight I peeked behind it. Immediately, a sign pointing down to an escalator labeled *Les Consignes Automatiques*. At that moment, French humor made a little more sense, how it could be so dark. We took the stairs down and shoved our luggage into the locker, pushing in the required euros to lock it, then for a few minutes just sat there on the cold cement, feeling more exhausted than after the red-eye flight into England only five days earlier.

I rallied myself off the floor with thoughts of riding the métro again, reviving my spirits enough to make it to the gardens at last. The wind blew the sand into funnel shapes, and we sat by the fountains there to watch the toy sailboats race and tilt and sink. Mostly we just walked, admiring the view of the Louvre and the general ambience. We got back on the métro when the sun was a little over the tip of the Eiffel Tower. I wanted to see Montmartre again, where the magic first hit me hard by Place des Abbesses and all those winding streets, but the stop was in the opposite direction of the station so there was no time.

We weren't back in Gare du Nord for long before the boarding call sounded. I found the seats at the very back of the train for us and curled my legs

under me. I pulled out the copy of *La Colo de Kneller* bought earlier, but found I couldn't translate it anymore—the words were just letters and the letters just glyphs and kerning. As the train took off, I put my forehead against the window to try to read the graffiti on the walls, but it was too dark and the windows reflected the interior lights.

For three days in May, I called Paris home, but more accurately it was only largely unhostile and easy to get lost in. (There is a certain charm to feeling inside of something larger than yourself and I imagine some people feel this way about historical movements and communities, or maybe even the universe in especially profound moments.) Perhaps the idea of home, constructed as it is out of a complicated mixture of perceived acceptance and illusion of safety, isn't about a specific habitat. Eliot's "Ash Wednesday" reminds us, "...place is always and only place/ and what is actual is actual only for one time." Maybe home, then, is only about where you can go that it's fine to fall apart or, if you're lucky, someone who says that it's fine, you're fine.

YOU ARE HERE

Admissions

Outside the Hattiesburg zoo it is very still. No wind, no other people in sight, though there are many cars already here. At the front gate Tristan, my fiancé, points out a swan. It's not a live swan, just a cheetah-patterned, flamingo-painted swan sculpture, one of many. We ask, "What's up with all the swans?" but not to each other, not to anyone specific. We'd looked it up already, we just never knew what else to say. The swans are part of an art venture "designed to cultivate tourism and economic growth while promoting culture," but really I think someone just thought the opportunity to hide a giant swan smoking a cigar downtown was too funny to pass up. I'd read about a similar installation in London, where artist Patrick Murphy placed flocks of pigeon statues all over the city and colored them neon, only he did it to instigate questions of belonging and existence. On our trip to Europe earlier this summer, I didn't see any pigeons in London, much less neon pigeons, but I bet it was a spectacular sight, the jarring pinks and greens frozen, littering the pavement, while the real pigeons went freely about their business. Though the real swans seem small and ungraceful compared to the tidy curves of the sculptures, they are also more interesting for it. I especially like the scalloped feathers that look surprisingly like sharp scales, the dive of their crooked necks, the general meandering.

We see a small railroad track that runs the perimeter of the grounds. The girl behind the ticket counter, who looks my age, bored, a little sweaty, asks me if I want to purchase a ride on the train, but in the parking lot I'd already heard the

laughing and screaming and other half-articulated sounds that kids make on rides. I just pay the five bucks for adult admission and move along, taking a map. A little rebelliously, we stop on the tracks a couple of feet inside the entrance to unfold it, next to the sign that says "Please Keep Off Train Track." Looking further along the line, there's only a pine-needled trail. Very briefly I think of laying my head down on these tracks, and of *Anna Karenina*, as I always do around any train-like thing (even miniature toy train sets, oddly) then head on to the exhibits.



African Veldt

There are carved tribal masks around the wood-fenced emu cage. The emus hang back in the shade of a hut but we watch for several minutes as a large tortoise rhythmically takes bites out of the patch of grass in front of him, stretching out his neck each time instead of moving his bulk forward. However the exhibit quickly degrades into a cheap, abandoned version of the *Lost* set. There's a plywood box marked EQUIPMENT, rusted barrels with plastic labels, a jacket hanging in a tree next to a prop rifle. We see an ostrich pecking at the ground then neurotically pacing the length of the fence each time I lift my camera. Up close the zebra just looks like a small horse, tail swinging clockwise at flies. Seeing my first oryx, it is disappointingly not like a unicorn at all, and not slender and mysterious, either, like the character in *Oryx & Crake*. Then I feel bad for being disappointed, because after all the experiences of the bony, odd-shaped animal are far more real than the experiences of the novelized girl. I take extra pictures of it, as a peace offering.

We see a monkey who resembles an old man with his hunched shoulders and patch of white fur extending over his mouth, continuing down his belly. The sign says he mates for life, but there aren't any other monkeys in the exhibit. He sits at the bottom of the cage, fingers wrapped around the chain link fence. He drops his head when another couple comes up to look at him, suddenly shy. I'm reminded of how much I hate the zoo. I ask Tristan why we're even here, even though I know it was my idea, wanting to try out a new type of film. Instead he points to the cage across from the monkey where a serval cat is curled into a ball inside a log, and he makes a joke about our cat, who is terrible and fierce and often sits curled inside a log-shaped cat toy thing. I laugh, but inside I don't know what to think. It feels immoral to keep these animals here, even for education and conservation reasons. They're all solitary, inactive, probably depressed. And I feel immoral being here, engaging with the process, but also like I should maybe get my money's worth.



Petting Area

We move on to a feeding exhibit with farm animals like pigs and sheep. I catch two black and white goats nuzzling each other and take a picture. A mom puts some round pellets of feed in her son's hand, he's probably three or four, and all of the goats are suddenly his biggest fans. He stumbles back and just stares at them. Everyone should have this experience, I think, where you look up and there's a crowd, but it's okay! Everyone is buddies with you. Ha ha, you were

never alone. Wow, what were you thinking? He sticks his hand out for a brown goat that shoves its way in and cringes as its lips move over his hand.



Prairie Dogs

The prairie dogs turn out to be a prairie dog, singular, and it has a mound of sand to itself with constructed tunnels and scattered circles of grass. A concrete hole outside the exhibit leads to Plexiglas domed windows rising out of the lawn, so kids can pretend they are prairie dogs too, I guess. I picture all the faces that have pressed against the window between them and the sky, all the breaths that have clouded the glass. Toddlers crawl in the tunnels while I take photos of the prairie dog sunning himself. I try to keep the kids out of the picture, as well as the domes and the railing, to give the illusion of wilderness.

We walk by a gate lined on the left with more swan sculptures, some patriotic, some flowered and lunatic. On the right, a solitary swan stands as gatekeeper, dapper in a three-piece suit. His curved neck looks coy and awfully sly. He's instantly my favorite. The dark blue of his suit is like the small sapphire in my engagement ring, which still feels loose on my finger. The first ring I got from a boy was when I was sixteen, and I stayed with him for six years, wearing it though I didn't love him. There was the chance I did, though, because why else stay that long. *Anna Karenina* has a line that goes something like "if so many men, so many minds, certainly so many hearts, so many kinds of love." I know how strong yet false ties can be, and, even worse, true yet weak. So I hear "ring" and picture a metal enclosure, steel or silver or gold, a cage all the same though.

I see a container, circumscription, circles of captivity. At best, hoops to jump through, something to float through like a ghost. But I try instead to think *ring*, as in what a bell does. I remember the deep, resounding chimes of the Notre Dame cathedral in Paris, five kilometers or so from the proposal off Rue Bagnole. That's three miles, standard, just a short morning jog away.

I never expected to come back from Europe with another ring, but now that I'm wearing it, I find it's not so hard to make lists of the ways this is right. Of course, some days I find I still can't, even with his hand softly touching my back, like now.



Mississippi Swamp

We debate whether the crocodile is dead and whether we should notify a zookeeper and raise a fuss about animal rights and humane treatment until minutes pass and finally we catch the slow imperious blink of his eyes.



South America

There are three lemurs sleeping on a little stone house at the back of their exhibit. One climbs up to the fence in front of us and puts on an elaborate show of casualness, standing akimbo, swishing his tail then sitting with his legs splayed, arms propped on the fence, tail limp. He sits there happy to pose until a family comes up. He climbs down and goes over to one of his lemur friends and they run to where the family is standing, tails straight up in the air as they get in a leap frog position. I'm looking at the third lemur still sleeping when I hear the kids

asking, "What are they..." but the parents are already pushing them down the path.

I say, "So they were just..."

"Yes," Tristan says laughing, and takes my hand.

Next, at the bird area, we go fast past the cute but brutal kookaburra that bashes its prey to death, the red-tailed hawks, the birds that look like peacocks but without the fanned tails for show. A white swan, two black swans. They don't move much, as the sun is directly overhead and heat blankets over everything. I find myself paying more attention to the animals than I do the people milling around, but then I guess everyone does in zoos. I feel more connected with the animals though and the people seem ridiculous with their loud shorts and louder voices. But I see myself as ridiculous, too, here, next to these animals, with my camera and sheath dress printed with minimalist art pattern, carrying the knowledge it is really only thin metal that gives the illusion of separation.

The big jaguar exhibit is just made of one jaguar, who we find sleeping against the side of his cage, head resting on his crossed paws. On the opposite side, there's a crude stone statue of a big cat, with blank circles for eyes and even rows of teeth. Further down, the howler monkey hides his eyes behind his tail. The llama sits in the shade, blankly staring ahead, chewing, chewing. The capybara wakes up, looking like a big sleepy hamster.



Asia

At the entrance, small Buddhist statues and Tibetan prayer flags surround pagodas, along with lots of bamboo. The idea of the tigers seems most exciting to me, though when trying to articulate the excitement I can't think of the reasons. I just say *hurry up*. But when we climb the stairs to a wooden deck overlooking the exhibit, there's only water, a tiny man-made lake, and a ball sitting in the water with a tire swing overhead. Lots of trees. The tiger ends up being on the far side of the exhibit, sprawled along the fence line. His belly doesn't move, but we're sure he's sleeping. His back feet are huge, and curled, much the way our cat curls her feet when she naps, and one of his front paws drapes over his face to block out the noon sunshine. The scene reminds me of a line from *The Last Samurai* (2000), a book I have read and reread so much the cover has gone soft and lined like an origami diagram: "There are people who think death a fate worse than boredom."



Outside

When we leave, it is easy to pretend we are the last couple on Earth. The parking lot is quiet and still and the sun is very hot. I remember the first zoo we saw together, in Atlanta, Georgia, which covers about three square blocks of the city and is always crowded with waves of people. And I was queasy there, too, because the elephant exhibit is sized like a backyard and the panda munches on bamboo in a narrow enclosure only about fifty feet long. The black mamba, eight

feet long, is given seven feet of a fish tank and a short tree limb sprouting out of a plastic pipe.

Outside it is very still, but inside is another matter entirely.

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