

BIRKENSNAKE 4

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Joanna Ruocco, Brian Conn, and Roxanne Carter, editors. Joe Potts, cover design. All contents © 2011 their authors. Set with \LaTeX in Bitstream Charter, by Matthew Carter, and Cyklop, by Janusz Marian Nowacki. Cover photo by Eric Hill. Previous issues: *birkensnake.com*. Submissions: *birkensnake.submishmash.com*. Special thanks to Joe Potts and Kathy Williams.

My Education **Jenny Nichols**

My education began with a boy named Cyrus with whom my older brother was best friends. Our family had moved out of the city for a year because of a breakdown my father was suffering due to a sleeping pill he was taking, now off the market, that didn't allow him to dream. My father was unable to practice and so we moved into our uncle's country house in New Milford, Connecticut. It was there, in his second grade class, that my brother—and I, by barely recognized association—came to know Cyrus, who had the distinction of having been left back a grade and thereby knowing more than anyone else. Cyrus had squashed a particularly big bug on a flat slab of slate next to the pool with his bare foot. The insides of the bug were now on top of and alongside it.

“Look at its guts,” Cyrus instructed us. I asked him what guts were, to which my brother responded, “Guts are what bugs have instead of brains.” I had insisted on having my head shaved for the summer, like my brother, and I was wearing an old pair of his underwear as my bathing suit, but neither he nor Cyrus accepted me in my imitations. The door to my brother's room was often closed during what I imagined to be their most important conversations, but because of a white-handled penknife that folded up, stolen from a junk shop that my mother had brought me along to, I was allowed to accompany Cyrus and my brother on their expeditions around the house, through the neighbor's land, and down to the lake, which all that summer was covered in a completely still skin of peagreen scum. We needed the knife to take bi-

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ological samples, to mark the sites of our grafting and hybridization experiments, and to tap the sap from trees.

Cyrus's older brother, who was really a half brother and twelve years older than him, was living at home that summer, back from college, where he was studying biology and entomology. Because of his studies we learned about cannibalism in animals and suicide in insects, through Cyrus, who had mastered the pertinent terminology.

"There is a kind of fungus," he told us, "that lives part of its life cycle inside of an ant." We were just coming to the edge of a field of tall grass. "It attaches itself to the ant's mandible while the ant is eating and then grows up into the ant's head, where it reproduces, filling it, and at the same time taking over its mind." This was an idea that my brother and I were perfectly familiar with, having recently seen *Star Trek II, The Wrath of Khan*, in which Captain Kirk is forced to put his helmet on knowing that there is an alien bug in it that then crawls up his nose, making it bleed, and into his brain, turning him evil. "It makes the ant climb up the highest thing it can find," Cyrus continued, "and just when it reaches the top, the fungus explodes out of its head and spreads its spores." By then we were all three stopped in the middle of the grass, and later it would only be after my brother told me I was lying that I would remember that we had not really looked around to see a tiny headless ant corpse at the top of every blade.

Cyrus also told us how termites reproduce. This time we were in the slimy rocks along the river trying to catch frogs, an activity about which I was extremely conflicted, loving as I did to hold them in my hands, but being convinced as I was that the lightest touch of our skin was to

them a searing, torturous burn. My brother and I both knew what termites were and what they looked like because we had seen them in a bonfire running in a sizzling trail out of a burning log and into the flames that surrounded them.

"In female termites," Cyrus explained, "the vaginal tract is atrophied." We had no idea what this meant. "Because of this," Cyrus continued, "the male termite pokes a hole through the abdominal wall of the female," and he poked me lightly just below my bellybutton on my naked stomach, so as to this part there was complete comprehension.

"This process is called traumatic insemination," he concluded, and I think he could tell from our guarded reactions that this was the first we had heard of insemination of any kind, and so he explained the basic mechanics of the human reproductive act in terms we both understood. I didn't think much of it except to distrust Cyrus's source of information on that particular topic, but my brother was quiet for the rest of the day. He later confided in me that what worried him was that his understanding of female anatomy led him to think that when a man entered a woman, he entered directly into her intestines and organs, or, as he put it, "Right into her guts."

I don't know how my father came to know about the turn our education was taking. We rarely saw him, as he stayed in the upstairs bedroom that year, tended by our mother, and the few times that we had come across him, standing by the stairs or in the hallway invariably dressed in his bathrobe, we didn't talk to him nor he to us. I remember at the time imagining that my father had an antenna up on top of the house, directly above his bedroom,

Jenny Nichols

and that that was what he was doing all day, transcribing everything being said in and around the house for miles, picking it all up with his antenna.

However it was that our concerns were filtered through to him, the result was that the time had come for our father to take a hand in our education. He stood before us in his bathrobe pacing the short length of floorboard that ran from in front of the outside edge of my chair to in front of the outside edge of my brother's chair.

"When I was your age I wanted to know about things too," he began. "I studied the insects, I killed them in different ways to see what would happen, I crushed them to find out what they smelled like. I watched the way they behaved with one another and I watched my own heart to see how I felt when I killed them, and I felt nothing. There were some women, your aunt and your grandmother, who would tell me not to torment them, but that's not right, that's not real feeling, that's sentimentality and you don't ever have to listen to that. You crush that out of your hearts. You can't feel for everything, there's a limit. You can't feel for a virus, you can't feel for rabies. There's a line, and bugs are on the other side of that line and we're on this side of that line and frogs are right there on the threshold. We dissect them when we're kids, sometimes while they're still alive, pinned down and cut open. But you'd worry about your kid if he was doing that on his own. If I found you out there, poking around in a living frog with a knife, I'd be worried about you. If I found one of you in your room with a frog taped down to your desk all cut up and still alive I'd worry about you in a pretty serious way. I remember when a frog was the biggest thing I had ever killed. Your un-

cle and I caught two giant bullfrogs, just huge, I had to carry mine under its arms like a cat. We put them in a fish tank we had but it was much too small, we had to squeeze them in and they were just sort of sandwiched in there with their purple white bellies pressed flat against the glass and their heads coming out over the rim. We didn't mean to kill them, we just got distracted and we left them out there in the sun and when we got back they were cooked. Their intestines were so swelled up with gas that they were spilling out of their mouths and coming out of their asses. They looked like those long thin balloons that clowns twist up into poodles. I was your age when I did that and that was the worst I had ever felt about myself, about all of us. That's where the frogs come in to show us, because the frogs aren't insects, they've got skin just like us and when you're out there with the insects and you find yourself killing a frog it'll wake you up. You'll feel it in your heart and you'll know you're not a bug. The frogs are there to teach us something and you better listen to them. They mark the threshold with their thin skin that's so easy to split with a scalpel, just like ours, and a woman, a living woman, is all the way on this side of the frogs, all the way in, right next to us, and we don't treat one like she's a bug or we're a bug, because it's not like that at all, not if you're right and you learn what the frogs have to teach you, because some people don't learn that lesson and they keep on living out there with the insects. I worked in an emergency room before either of you were born and I saw a lot of things gone wrong. I saw women come in, prostitutes, in such a bad way that they had to use colostomy bags, that's a bag you attach to a hole you cut in someone's side for their crap

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to come out, and some of them would come back with herpes around those holes from guys who paid to screw right into their intestines, into their guts, and I tell you this because that's where we're headed if we don't listen to the frogs and that's not a place I want to go. I hope that you will listen to the frogs and always make a place for the frogs, because I've seen where we'll be without them

and that's not a world that I want to live in."

My father looked away from us and adjusted his bathrobe as a signal that we should leave him, and we did so, hugging him to let him know that it would be all right, closing the door behind us, and running down to meet Cyrus, whose lesson that day was on sea slugs, which are hermaphroditic and cannibalistic.

I Am a Robot Rolli

I am a robot. I live in the sea. My skin is metal yellow, though the seaweed makes this difficult to see. It covers me.

I am inactive during the daytime. At night, when the night swimmers step into the sea, my electrocells swell with electricity.

The night swimmers swim close to the shore. On occasion, one of them swims further out, out of sight of the others. *This* is when I rise up from the sand at the bottom of the sea.

I approach the swimmer. He is generally unaware of me.

My heart chamber slides open, drawing in seawater, and the swimmer.

My heart chamber slides shut, and expels only water. The button on my chest turns from green to red. There is no suffering.

When dawn comes, I move towards the shore. My heart chamber once again slides open. Seaweed emerges. A glistening new tissue of seaweed, that spreads over the skin of the water. In the early sun, the weeds shine as if berried with green crystals.

When the hotel doors open, I retreat. I glide back into deep waters.

I sink into the sand at the bottom of the sea. The button on my chest turns from red to green.

The Photographer & the Very Tall Man **Mathias Svalina**

The sunset was lovely. The photographer looked at it through his camera, then he looked at it without his camera, trying to decide which way was more lovely. The black foothills in the foreground were set off by the snow on the distant mountains & the snowcapped mountains were set off by the pink & golden clouds of the setting sun. A perfect calendar photo. The photographer climbed the hill to reach a better vantage point. He reached the top of the hill just as the sun dropped behind the mountains. In the fading light he could not see the path he'd followed. He knew he'd have to sleep under the stars. He took the candy bar out of his camera bag, broke it in half & ate half of it. Then he ate the other half. He was thirsty, but he had no water.

He spread his jacket on a patch of grass & lay atop it.

He pulled his arms inside his sweater & stuck his hands into the band of his jeans. He thought about the man's body that he had found last month, so yellow & dried, hanging from the noose. The high desert air had sucked the water out of the body, like those mummies he'd seen in Mexico, mouth gaping open, dried eyeballs fallen out of the sockets like old dates. The body swung lightly in the breeze.

It was getting colder & he wrapped the jacket around himself & zipped it. When he inhaled, the air stopped against his thick tongue & lodged there. He tried to think about women he'd loved, sweat beading on their throats, the heavy press of breasts in the dark. But he kept seeing the hanged man's desiccated fingers twisted into arthritic contortions.

Mathias Svalina

The photographer sat up to adjust his jacket. In the direction he'd come from he saw a faint yellow light. Through his zoom lens, he saw a window & the outline of a small shack. He rose up & slowly fumbled his way down the hill.

After an hour, the photographer reached the shack. He called out hello, but there was no answer. The shack was made of corrugated tin, held up with cinder blocks & sewn together with wire. It had a wooden door. He knocked on the door but there was no response.

Temperatures could dip low at night at this altitude. The photographer placed his ear against the door but heard nothing. He opened the door. A very tall man sat crouched on a red milk crate beside an electric lantern, reading a book.

The very tall man turned his head to the photographer. The photographer greeted him in English, but the man shook his head. The man spoke to the photographer in a language that sounded like Russian, but the photographer shook his head. The photographer tried Italian & then Spanish but the man only shook his head & smiled. The man tried another language, but the photographer did not know it either & he threw his hands up, palms raised, & laughed. The man laughed as well.

The photographer's stomach tightened painfully. He mimed food to the tall man, but the tall man shook his head. The photographer mimed drink to him, but again he shook his head. The photographer sighed heavily, like an actor. He pulled out his camera & absentmindedly glanced through the viewfinder. He set his camera for low light & took a few pictures of the interior of the shack: the pile of old quilts in one corner, a blue milk crate full

of cracked plates & tea cups, the tall man's knees bent up past his chin.

The hike in the dark had exhausted the photographer. He tried to remember the last time he had eaten a real meal, but his memory was blurry. It had been sometime yesterday. At the thought of food his stomach tightened again but this time more painfully. He gasped & doubled over, seizing his abdomen.

The tall man looked at the photographer & nodded his head. He held up a finger to him & stood up. His knees & ankles crackled as he rose. At his full height the tall man would have pushed through the roof of the shack by about six inches. Instead he crouched over. His back was so crooked it looked rounded.

The man came back with a child's cowboy hat of faded purple felt & a serrated knife, a table knife. He slit the knife across his wrist until blood popped out of the vein. He winced & then smiled wanly at the photographer. The blood flowed into the hat. He stretched his hand back to keep the cut vein open. Once the hat was about a third full, he pushed it into the photographer's hands.

The photographer held the hat, uncertain. The very tall man wrapped a blue bandana around his wrist & mimed holding the hat to his mouth. "Dreenk!" he said & smiled. He pulled a cigarette out of his shirt pocket & lit it with a book of matches. He licked blood from his palm, where it had dripped past the bandana.

The photographer drank from the hat. He got blood on his face. He licked around his lips, wiped the blood from his face & licked it off his fingers.

"See! See!" the very tall man said. He stood up, knees & ankles crackling again & dug through a pile of clothes

The Photographer & the Very Tall Man

& papers. He pulled out a photo album & with grandeur presented it to the photographer. “Pho-toe-gaff,” he said & mimed clicking the shutter release.

The photographer nodded & smiled. He put the hat & its remaining blood on the dirt floor of the shack & took the photo album. The album was leather, old leather scratched & worn to sandpaper tatters. When he’d lifted the hanged man up to cut the noose from the rafters, the dried skin had powdered off on the photographer’s hands.

The first page of the photo album showed a group of men in rural Russian clothes, heavy coats & fur hats, standing around a burning pile of bodies. Legs & arms stuck out of the fire haphazardly. The men held up rifles & torches in what looked like a cheer.

The very tall man smiled at the photographer & mimed for him to turn the pages. He turned the page. The next page was a print of a man & a woman in formal dress, holding hands & trying hard to remain still for the camera. Flames had scorched their hair away & the woman’s face was blackened by the fire. Fire sprouted from their shoulders & heads. Below their shoulders the formal clothes were intact, their pose of matrimony stoic & historical. The next page showed a black & burning mass in a large wooden crib. The photograph had been hand-tinted, the flames a pale pink & pastel orange, the room colored in soft blues.

The photographer turned the image up to the very tall man & shrugged his shoulders & lifted his arms questioningly. The very tall man smiled deeply & said again, “Pho-toe-gaff.”

The next photo showed men in suits sitting at a long table, all facing the camera. The three in the middle were

on fire. One of them was a blur of flailing arms. The man next to him was just starting to catch fire. His face was set in concentration as he stared at the camera with dark eyes. The next photo was of a gazebo in flames. Inside it women in wide-skirted dresses were burning, their dresses & upper bodies deep in flame while their petite stockinged legs held the flaming masses upright.

The very tall man lit another cigarette with the book of matches. He offered the photographer one & he declined. The very tall man stood up, knees & ankles crackling, & took the photo album from the photographer. He turned the pages reverentially, until he found the one he was looking for & showed it to the photographer. It was a young woman. Her legs had burnt away & the left half of her torso, the rest of her untouched. The flames had eaten away her clothes or perhaps she had been nude; her bare right breast had grey splotches of ash. Her face was untouched & pale. The eyes still open, staring into the camera with sensual dreariness.

“My love! My love! My girl!” the very tall man said & beamed at the photographer.

The remaining blood had congealed in the hat. The very tall man scooped it out & cut the mass in two with the same knife he’d used to cut his wrist. He handed half to the photographer & ate the other half. He built a small fire in a wide metal pot in the middle of the shack, pushing in old papers & branches & pieces of broken up furniture. The fire warmed the small shack quickly.

The photographer lay under a few old quilts that smelled of animals. The face of the burnt girl stayed in his vision when he closed his eyes. Her pale face & her perfect remaining breast. He thought of a woman he’d

Mathias Svalina

seen the last time he was in the city. It was morning & he was waiting for a friend, sitting on the stone steps of a walk-up & drinking coffee out of a Styrofoam cup.

The woman wore dirty sweatpants & a purple zip-up jacket. She was that indeterminate age of people who have lived on the street for their entire adult lives. Her hair, which might have once been blonde, was matted into dreads. She paced the street across from the photographer, oblivious to him. Suddenly she pulled her sweatpants down & leaned her ass over the wrought iron fence in front of a basement-level dive bar. Her piss sounded shrill in the morning stillness of the street. As she pulled her sweatpants up she saw the photographer & scowled at him. She crossed the street toward him, screaming unintelligible angry things.

Without thinking, as a kind of defense, he picked up his camera & pointed it at her. But when he did she stopped in the middle of the street. She stared at the photographer, then smiled, exposing bare gums. She began to pose for the camera, like a 50s pin-up girl. Her smile so pure & happy. He shot a few pictures & smiled back at her. Then she unzipped her purple jacket. She was not wearing a shirt beneath it. She pulled one of her sagging breasts up with her hand & put the nipple into her mouth, continuing to pose for the photographer.

He continued to take photos of her until a car approached & honked. She screamed at the car & walked away, her jacket still unzipped & her sagging breasts dangling out of the purple plastic cloth.

Rahul and Kishore **Gaurav Monga**

Rahul had a dream — of someone who wasn't his girlfriend. Rahul thought it was bad to have such dreams. He woke up and paced the room.

He then closed his eyes and went back to sleep. He had another dream — of his high-school English teacher. She was in his room — dry.

Rahul opened his eyes. He was still dreaming. In his dream, his teacher behaved a lot like his girlfriend. She was going away, she said, forever. Rahul's eyes fluttered open and shut. "What does this mean?" Rahul asked his dream. "And why was she dry?"

A long silence followed.

When he opened his eyes again, he found that he was still there.

"What if a porn star had the face of a child?" Rahul asked, staring into a computer screen.

He could only see who her old friends were, who her new friends were. He could not get on to her wall.

"Dear Nadia," he wrote, "You don't know me," and the thought of all the people who knew Nadia, and how, in comparison, she knew very few of those, came to his mind.

He decided to change his name to Sirtaj for Nadia's sake.

He called his girlfriend and told her that Nadia was his new name for her and Sirtaj was his new name for himself. He still needed a name for his high-school English teacher.

She could be Nadia too, Rahul thought.

Gaurav Monga

He went to bed before his mother awoke. When she came into his room, she found a piece of paper pasted on the wall over his head as he slept. He had drawn a large stick figure with permanent marker, under which was written: “Me, Sirtaj.”

When he awoke, he went downstairs. He sat at the dining table; his mother sat next to him. They waited silently while the bread toasted. The chair on his right-hand side was empty, but a vanishing crack on one of its legs indicated that the fat man who had once sat there had disappeared. The crack, more like a cut on skin, was mending as the sun’s rays gave luster to the chair, the freshly toasted bread and the white tablecloth.

“Mama, I changed my name to Sirtaj.”

His mother’s face was like round, flattened white bread.

“Mama, I changed my name to Sirtaj,” Rahul said, loudly. He sipped his coffee, swallowing some of the grime, and left the house. Before reaching the tall metal gates, he turned around to see if she would herald him good-bye. She was staring at him from the kitchen window.

Kishore then walked into her view.

Kishore and Rahul stood at the gate, one on either side. Rahul and Kishore waited for Rahul’s mother to come out.

Her head finally peeked out of a window in the roof. From a distance it seemed as if a bird had just landed.

“Kishore,” she shouted.

At the door, his mother flourished Kishore with kisses. As for Rahul, she plucked his cheeks with her fingers, barely grabbing any skin. They sat down at the table. Kishore sat on the empty chair.

When they finally walked out through the tall metal gates, Rahul’s mother smiled at them through the windowpanes. She went back to her oatmeal, which had grown cold. She tried reading the newspaper. Folded in it was a yellow brochure. She tried reading it but it didn’t make sense. She went into the garden to see how her flowers were blooming, to check on the maid, what was she busying herself with. Finding no one there, she remained standing outside the maid’s room for a few seconds, staring at the blue door. She then returned to the dining table and started reading the brochure again.

Meanwhile, Rahul and Kishore had made their way to Narjis’s house.

Narjis’s sister, Nida, was seated on a sofa, making calculations. She was good at arithmetic. Narjis was running her fingers through the many gowns they had designed to sell at their exhibition tomorrow.

The sisters were busy, running around the house, leaving Kishore and Rahul alone. Rahul and Kishore kept themselves busy by posing in front of the many mirrors in the house. Getting bored, they began to stare at each other.

It was getting late. Narjis was not around, neither was Nida. Kishore and Rahul decided to leave. They wanted to say goodbye but couldn’t find the sisters anywhere in the house. They waited some more. People walked by on the street alongside the river.

“Doesn’t it look like we are in Siberia? The white patches of snow drifting in the river.”

“But it doesn’t snow here.”

Rahul and Kishore

Kishore's eyes followed one patch until it was no longer in sight.

He wondered where will that patch of snow go. Will it settle down somewhere. Will it keep on going. Perhaps there is no such thing as the world. Perhaps there is only going. And if there is something like the world, it too, is also going. The world, like many other things, is going.

He wondered when will it all be gone.

They both stared in silence at the patches of white.

Soon they were walking down a street. Trees were lush, dogs were bathing, children came out to play. Kishore wanted to play too. Rahul allowed him to do so but at the same time reminded him that he would only be a reflection of himself. Rahul laughed at this so loudly that he became the center of himself. Rahul looked unto himself and found an empty center.

He held tight onto Kishore's arm.

They kept walking down the street.

Kishore told Rahul that he had dreamt he had died on the roof.

"Did you wake up when you died?"

"No, I just waited. I was dead."

They turned a corner, then reappeared.

Upon reaching the tall metal gates, Kishore waited for Rahul's mother. Although he could hear her voice, he could not see a bird perched on the roof.

In his room, Rahul soon found that his mother had removed the piece of paper he had pasted on the wall earlier that day. She had replaced it with a note: "Your sister has had a baby girl. Her name is Leela and she weighs six pounds."

There was no drawing of a baby anywhere.

He went out to his balcony and looked at Kishore on his own. He lit a cigarette. Kishore lit one too. He showed him his mother's note but Kishore merely took out an imaginary piece of paper from his pocket.

Rahul went inside.

Kishore knew something had stirred. He paced the length of his balcony and talked to himself at length. He tried to get some sleep. Then all of a sudden he left, coming out of a tree's cover.

Rahul sat on his chair. He thought of his sister and suddenly an unexpected glimmer of joy, like a warm sun, cut through his frame. He stared for some time at the empty chair downstairs.

RAHUL

Rahul wanted to have a look. At what, Rahul asked himself. Rahul looked around and couldn't find anything to look at except for himself. He couldn't stop himself from doing this. He thought the only way out was to not think about it.

Rahul spent the whole afternoon thinking of not thinking about it while looking at his whole person.

He asked his girlfriend to have a look but she wasn't there to have a look. So he cut himself off completely and dried the blood with what was once himself.

No one sitting in the room where Rahul cut himself off can possibly be in the position to even think of asking, even themselves, whether there was someone in the room.

Gaurav Monga

Rahul failed to understand how something can be bad for you. How is something bad or good when you, yourself, are nothing.

Rahul did at some point, however, think that he was not nothing.

He once thought that things would never come to a happy close.

He thought of his mother, who died too young, whom Rahul could have easily said goodbye to, alive.

There is nothing you can do, Rahul. Absolutely nothing, and perhaps also no one to share this with.

There is no point to even try to begin talking to the dead. They will not give you peace.

Rahul wished he had never received news of her death.

As long as he never returned home, she was still around.

Rahul switched his cell phone off and never switched

it back on. Instead he stayed away.

At a café (away) while he was sipping on his coffee, his stomach started to gurgle because of the coffee. He knew that it was the cause. He kept thinking of his gurgling stomach and then thought of what it would be like had he not had the coffee. Would his stomach still gurgle? It was possible that it would not. He never knew what pain felt like unless he found himself in a painful situation. He wondered whether it was possible to feel pain in a situation which didn't give rise to it.

A storm blew over. Nothing, anywhere, changed its usual position.

Rahul looked around. It appeared as if he couldn't tell the difference between himself and everything around him.

There was nothing to hold onto.

**Selections from *The Night Voyager* Thierry Horguelin
translated by Edward Gauvin**

Lisbon is a quiet city of narrow, winding streets radiating from a pretty square surrounded by arcades. My friends had given me a warning before I left. The people there are warm and welcoming, their ways open and inviting, so long as one local taboo remains unbroken: under no circumstances must one drink alone in public. This had completely slipped my mind the evening I arrived, and woe was me, for from the moment I sat down to an aperitif on a café terrace I became the victim of a courteous but unyielding ostracism. Information booths were stubbornly closed to me. Offices took up impossible schedules to discourage

any complaint. Passersby switched sidewalks, avoiding my gaze. Women affected beautiful indifference.

Ottawa does not exist. Taken aback by the unreal and factitious nature of the capital, my friends and I soon discovered that the setting of pure façade was mounted every morning and struck every evening by an army of carpenters. Even the locals were extras paid a daily wage to feign urban animation. This vast mise-en-scène aimed at tourists cost the federal treasury a fortune.

The Night Voyager was originally published as *Le Voyageur de la nuit* (L'Oie de Cravan, 2005)

Thierry Horguelin & Edward Gauvin

The Great Diorama is Venice's main summer attraction. Rising from the Piazza San Marco, it consists of a large panoramic screen on which, through a clever system of mirrors and lenses, images of the city's main monuments are projected, allowing tourists pressed for time to take them in with a single glance and photograph them all at once.

Brussels hasn't changed since the war. In this cheerless city, time seems to have stood still. The cars and advertisements are those from the forties; the ramshackle tram lines have never been replaced. The gray host scurrying toward the stations when the offices empty, still dressed in the fashions of the era, seems straight out of an old Gaumont newsreel. And even the city map they handed me at the tourist office dated from half a century ago. The index of street names was so obsolete that I could locate neither the neighborhood I was lost in nor the address of the friend I was staying with. This fact did not surprise the young guide who showed me to pitiful accommodations in the Marolles—a closet, really, left untouched since the bombardment: two windowless rooms and a minuscule entrance, all a typist at the time could afford on her modest salary.

Another time, we visited the caverns of Isernia. This is the name given to miles of natural galleries erosion has burrowed in a mountainous massif of the Abruzzo. Poor, backward peasants holed up there like troglodytes carry on their ancestors' way of life, raising a singular race of

sheep: very short of leg, with thick, greasy wool. Neither men nor their animals ever see the light of day. When night falls, ragazzi from neighboring villages converge and hold races in the tunnels. Their scooter headlights cast a ballet of fantastical shadows on the chalky walls, and the echoes of engines backfiring rebound in the passages, to which the herds soon add their chorus of terrified bleats.

Bucharest under Ceaucescu's dictatorship was home to one of the most beautiful movements of popular resistance in European history. As the tyrant had ordered the demolition of all edifices that might possibly overshadow his own greatness—belfries, steeples, campaniles—each and every citizen secretly undertook to build a pretend tower in his or her backyard, taking care that it rise no higher than the roof of the house, so as not to be seen from the street. One man made a small medieval keep from the cobblestones of an abandoned building site. Another erected a miniature Eiffel Tower with salvaged scrap iron. A little old woman lovingly tended a cactus which rose in her courtyard like a solitary candle. For ten years, a milkman collected all the oddly shaped pebbles he found on his daily rounds, assembling them on Sundays with the help of cob and barbed wire into a kind of lighthouse vaguely Byzantine in style. The most modest contented themselves with stacking fruit crates until they formed little turrets of uncertain equilibrium a few meters high. Most of these humble monuments were preserved, and may still be seen today. The rust, moss, or ivy that have overrun them lend them the added poetry of ruins.

Selections from *The Night Voyager*

The social life of Seville is entirely subject to the fluctuations of fashion. Every three months, the upper crust completely renews its wardrobe, making gifts of their old outfits to their valets and chambermaids, who at the next trimester pass them on in turn to cooks and concierges. And so it goes, down to the newsvendors and street sweepers. This fashion lag allows one to situate a person on the social hierarchy at a glance.

Thankfully, the confessions of a retired civil servant have at last shed light on the scandal of expurgated books in Budapest. The day after the communist regime collapsed, the government, under pressure from the IMF, began an intensive privatization campaign of state property. When all the railroad, water, gas, and electricity companies had been sold off to multinationals operating under shell corporations, the Minister of Finance turned to the final remaining property whose sale might fatten the country's coffers: the national literature, preserved in public libraries, the law having till then forbidden individuals to own books. The operation was conducted in the utmost secrecy, as protests were feared in cultural circles. Thus were most famous pages of Hungarian literature put up for private auction and sold to the highest bidder. Once they'd discreetly joined the collections of rich Englishmen, Americans, or Japanese, special teams of librarians working at night set about deleting in every copy, with permanent marker, the passages that had been sold, guaranteeing collectors the possession of a truly unique fragment.

As the average Hungarian reader scorned, like readers

everywhere, the company of great literary classics, only years later was the scam discovered. A recent exhibit at the National Library revealed the full extent of the damage. Thanks to a few samizdats circulating among dissidents of the former regime, certain texts have been reconstructed.

Until quite recently, the most refined form of capital punishment was practiced in Kazakhstan. Picture the crowd, on the morning of the execution, converging in silence on the theatre of the city. From a stage rises a giant aquarium in which the condemned man has been submerged, bound hand and foot, dressed as a diver. At the appointed hour, the executioner activates a mechanism that with a single stroke tears the oxygen mask from the poor man, who immediately drowns before the enthralled eyes of the audience. Amnesty International's protests have finally brought an end to this practice, which none considered barbaric. But it is whispered that a fanatic sect secretly continues the tradition with major criminals kidnapped upon their release from prison. Videos of these executions, furtively traded, are worth more than gold. Even today, it is impossible to verify this information, which may be no more than a rumor.

Each year, the volcanic island of Aru in the Indonesian archipelago sinks a few centimeters deeper into the sea, and it has been many moons since the tides swallowed the coastal village of Sumbaya. Once a year, during the great neap tides, the population gathers on the shores

Thierry Horguelin & Edward Gauvin

of the neighboring isle and turns its binoculars on the beaches of Aru. For a few hours after sunset, the retreating ocean uncovers the remains of the ghost village, like a wreck wreathed in algae and jellyfish.

To sidestep the religious ban on the reproduction of images, Qatar's tourist industry has come up with an ingenious stratagem. As all trade in postcards is officially prohibited, postcards are illicitly sold in hermetically sealed envelopes. Tourists are asked to write their messages on the back of the envelope. Although quite aware of this practice, the powers that be close their eyes to it: thus appearances are preserved without any suffering on the part of this minor industry.

To spice things up, good-natured pranksters have a bit of fun at tourists' expense by selling postcards unrelated to the country's sites and monuments. Thus your addressee may be surprised to find a picture of the Eiffel

Tower or Trafalgar Square—or even the pinnacle of refinement, an immaculate rectangle of cardstock, virgin to all image.

After leaving Barcelona, Antonio Gaudí set himself up in Lyon and designed his final masterpiece, the station square. It is a vast undulating esplanade, paved with a mosaic of multicolored tesserae that sparkle like the sea in sunlight—such that, on crossing it, one seems to be walking on frozen waves. It gives onto a great staircase of serpentine steps across from the station, and is bordered by heavy panels of doubly curved glass that multiply space and with the artifice of their reflections push the surrounding buildings back into infinity. The city seems so distant that when you reach the top of the stairs, you are stunned to see the Croix-Rousse quarter suddenly appear, with its narrow houses closely shelved as books, rising in rows along the hillside in the orange morning light.

Alex Rose Nafkote Tamirat

I didn't meet Alex Rose until I started working at Condom World during my fourth attempt at living in Boston. It was my second day, and he came in to ask about multi-speed vibes. I asked him if he had ever used one before, and he said no, but his brother had told him that it would help him out with his problems. I recommended the Velvet Touch and he asked me if he was the only one who always thought of *The Velveteen Rabbit* when he heard the word "velvet" and my heart melted a little bit, because I could tell that he was already a little broken.

Alex Rose and I were abruptly shoved into each other's psyches in the first grade when I threw up on his head.

Some cunt named Stephanie Deputy kept asking if I liked "seafood" and opening her mouth wide as she chewed a never-ending cream cheese sandwich, and when she sneezed and became a vision of snot and cream cheese I threw up and down onto the head of Alex Rose, who was cleaning under the table. I pretended that I had accidentally wiped the table too vigorously and that the pasty stream splattering onto his scalp was just the detritus that others had left there. Alex Rose wasn't fooled, and neither was the lunchroom monitor, who punished us with five Silent Lunches in a row because we were taught in religion class that vomiting was a sinful body's way of shamelessly telling the Lord Our God that it scorned the gifts of sustenance that He had initially bestowed upon Adam and Eve, who were sinful in a different way. Alex

Nafkote Tamirat

Rose was the only person who continued to speak to me during that week, and would sit next to me under the table during Silent Reading.

I met Alex Rose when he was eighteen and I was nineteen and a half. I walked into my apartment and I saw him sitting on one of the couches eating raisin-walnut bread. He ate each slice of bread, six in all, by taking out the raisins and walnuts first, consuming the bread part, and then finishing with the mix of raisins and walnuts that he had exiled to the far side of the plate. I was struck by how beautiful he was, but he'd have to be for any of this to be memorable; I remember and admire in those what is absent from myself, no pity, just truth.

"This is Alex Rose." My roommate designed perfume bottles and had a knack for picking up interesting and beautiful people on the side. My roommate had met the interesting and beautiful specimen in our living room at an Afghani restaurant where he had been playing and she had been networking. She had heard him say that he needed a place to stay for the night and had offered our apartment. I wondered again when I would go back to school.

"Delighted," I said, and began to touch his arm whenever possible, which he didn't notice; because Alex Rose was too used to physical intimacy, it was easily lost upon him. There was no hair on his left arm, which he said was an accident, and when I asked what kind, he said of birth.

"Alex Rose plays the tenor sax," my roommate said later that night, continuing her role as the self-designated tour

guide of the Alex Rose Playland.

"I see," I said.

"You do." Alex Rose was steadfast in his affirmation.

I was twelve years old when I crashed into a parked car as I was biking down a hill, because my body is retarded and I didn't really learn how to ride a bike without training wheels until I was about fifteen, and that's not supposed to be a joke, that's supposed to be the saddest story that you'll ever hear about lost youth. Alex Rose lived on Talbot Avenue and came running out to ask if I was okay. He and I had become neighborhood friends because we were both afraid of Tyson, the fat-ass who lived three doors down from me on Lorna Road and who still hadn't made it through fifth grade, even though he had to be about fourteen.

"I'm fine." Blood was pouring down from my chin, and my cousins had run screaming and laughing into the house because they're useless people with pretty faces and witty jokes.

"Do you need a band-aid?"

"No."

"Do you want to cry?"

"Yeah, but I'm not gonna."

"It's okay if you cry. It's better for you."

"That's weird." That was when my mother came running towards me, wailing that I was going to die before I bought her a nice house and a nice life. Alex Rose held my hands until she wrenched me up from the ground and, still sobbing, rushed me into the house where she reverentially washed my face with rubbing alcohol and soap.

Alex Rose

Alex Rose and I didn't speak again until after we had graduated from high school, because my mother remembered the strange American boy with large green eyes and wouldn't let me outside unchaperoned.

I first met Alex Rose in the Beta House bathroom when I stumbled into it by accident. I was looking for the wave pool, and if the Beta House didn't have one (which I strongly suspected) then I was going to head straight to a bedroom and jump on the bed and scream out, "Fuck me right now!" and see what happened, and I wanted to do this, not because I had seen it in a movie or anything, but because I was really into the idea at that point in my life.

"Hello." This was Alex Rose.

"Jello!" This was me, mainly because I was drunk.

"I'll get out of your way." He moved to leave the room and I propped myself up with one arm against a wall, thus blocking his way and confusing me greatly about the placement of my hands.

"Don't bother, don't worry." I meant to explain that I was leaving myself and so he didn't have to leave if he wasn't finished or if he just wanted to hang tight for a minute and sit in the bathroom and think about rugby, because our rugby team was doing really well, but I didn't say any of those things, so it just sounded like I was saying that I didn't mind if he stood there watching me pop a squat, even though I'm not really into golden showers or chili dogs or shit like that (no pun intended). Alex Rose looked worried and I forgot which of my arms was right and which was left.

I first met Alex Rose in a waiting room while my mother was having her fourth doctor's appointment of the week. I was sixteen, he was getting there, and we were both sifting through the shitty paperbacks, hoping to find a somewhat up-to-date celebrity magazine.

"Why are you here?"

"Why are you here?"

"My mother thinks she has cancer."

"Does she?" Alex Rose's bluntness was the talk of the land.

"I don't know. She thought I had AIDS last week."

"Do you?" Alex Rose didn't look frightened, just intrigued.

"No. I used someone else's razor though, and she found out, and then she decided I might have it. AIDS, I mean."

"Jesus."

"Why are you here?"

"My mom thinks my appetites are askew."

"What the fuck does that mean?" Swearing was still a novelty to me then, I did it as much as possible.

"I don't know. She just kept using the word 'appetites.'"

"Jesus."

"What kind of you music d'you like?" Alex Rose's attention span was the talk of the land.

"I'm not into music."

"What are you into?"

"Stuff you can hold."

By the time my mother came out of the office, still cancer-free and still looking disappointed about it, Alex Rose and I had gotten through one magazine and one Roald Dahl book.

Nafkote Tamirat

Alex Rose and I met when we smacked into each other in a turnstile in the Red Line station at Davis Square. It turned out that we had both just come out of the same Danish movie about children, and dogs who became cats, all of it being a commentary on urban air quality. He was going to a nearby Indian restaurant and asked me if I wanted to go with him, but I get nervous about eating in front of people whom I've never eaten in front of before, which is to say that I don't eat with other people very often, and so I said no. I walked back to the station, and as I was about to enter he yelled something and I turned around.

“My name is Alex! Alex Rose!”

“I'm so glad.” New knowledge never tasted so sweet and flaky.

Alex Rose's sister lived with three children in a dilapidated farmhouse at the edge of Emmaus. I was on a road trip to Augusta from Destin, because I was avoiding school with my friend Quavé. Alex Rose's sister sold us homemade cottage cheese, and even though it looked horrible, it tasted like daylight, which is a rarity for cot-

tage cheeses of all varieties. We began talking to her, and she told us that she was nervous because her brother was going to visit her for the first time since she had moved out of their parents' house. She asked us to keep an eye out for him, he was tall and emaciated-looking and had green eyes. I asked her what his name was and when she told me “Alex Rose” I felt as though there were balloons being blown up all up and down my spine. I hoped that we would see him as we drove, maybe around New York, and maybe we'd ask him if he was the brother of a woman who would be likely to sell cottage cheese on the street, and maybe he would nod and maybe we could tell him to keep his head up, because he was going in the generally right direction, and we would share our weed with him and he would tell us that his sister was lucky to have met such lovely strangers as us.

Alex Rose had a lesbian best friend who fell in love with my lesbian roommate and that's how we met, when our lesbian counterparts started fucking.

I don't remember how I first met Alex Rose.

Woman I **Sam Duda**

I was trying to get the shading right on a pineapple when she came and sat next to me, hair the colour of turkey wattle, a ladder creeping up her tights. She dragged her easel closer with a flatulent scrape and ignored the sidelong glances. Her fruit bowl was charcoal banana and grape bunch, a fuzzy rush of muddy curves and circles, thick black hairs crawling from a plughole. She looked at my pineapple and nodded.

I could tell she wanted to say something, but she just sat and sighed and sniffed and coughed her boredom until I looked at her. She scrawled *this is shit* under her drawing and then shut her eyes as tight as claustrophobia until her cheeks leapt out.

“When are we going to get a chance to use some paints?” she finally asked, her eyebrows arched. “I’m sick

of all this precision.”

“It’s still life.”

“I get that,” she said. “But where’s the colour?”

I shrugged and sloped a curve around the pineapple shadow. I aimlessly scratched at the paper and watched her out of the corner of my eye. I remembered her from the first class. Her name was Meg and when she laughed she honked like a goose. She was rolling a cigarette on her knee, her head tilted as though she had found something totally unexpected: a tiny person playing hopscotch on her fingertip, a flower that could sing, indisputable proof that the sun was a giant glowing onion. Her plaits were wound as tight as the rib-cage lobster pots we had drawn the week before, and her eyelids creaked under mascara when she blinked.

Sam Duda

She turned and held a cigarette out to me. “Let me paint you,” she said. She pointed at the fruit bowl. “I’m bored of this banana. I want to paint yours.”

“Brilliant,” I said. “You’re a genius.”

She laughed. *Honk honk*. “Let’s get some tea.”

“Nothing’s open now.”

“Mine’s open,” she said.

I wasn’t sure what she meant.

Her flat was splintered wooden floorboard, paint-spattered and a whorl of severed branch knot. Canvases littered the walls and lined the skirting boards, furious flurries of colour and texture, phlegm-coated treetops, bruise-blue seas and skies and sunrises, jaundiced mannequins. She painted and repainted until the surfaces got so heavy they sagged like jowls.

“Lobster pot,” she said, pointing at a tangled mesh of golden cog. The paint crawled from the canvas, crooked limbs reaching forward, dragging you in, keeping you out.

She was so much better than me, but I didn’t care; it was all so fat and desperate that I wanted to steal it, rip it apart, get inside it. Her red hairs ran through the paint strokes like capillaries; they were her signature, proof that she was part of her work. I wanted those hairs in my sheets, on my shower tiles, winding through the threadbare pile of my carpets. I wanted her hairs in my hairs.

We went and sat in her bedroom, opened the skylight, had a cigarette, looked at her recent work. She told me that earlier that day she had been using red and she’d been a bit clumsy. It looked like she’d spent the morning

killing. The floor was juicier than an abattoir. I wondered whether she’d used her hair to mop up.

“Red,” she said. “Red is definitely what I think about.”

“So that,” I said, pointing at a splash of offal, “is anger.”

“No. That’s an apple,” she said.

Then we took our clothes off and got on top of each other. I spread myself across her, hoped I could soak up some colour, suck in some strokes. I held her hands above her head and played with her thumbs until they cast branch shadows across her face, I twisted her onto her side so she curved like a palette, I bit down on her hair. I wanted her to come over me like a brushstroke smearing across my stomach canvas, my chest canvas, my face canvas. We mixed like oil through water.

A couple of weeks later she took me to meet her family. We got an early train and watched through the carriage window as the butter sun spread across the toasted fields of rapeseed. Meg told me not to be nervous about meeting them, but that I should know in advance they had been through a difficult time of late.

“They’re lovely, I love them, they’re lovely,” she said, “but both my sisters have had accidents in the last six months and it’s been really tricky for everyone. Olive had half her face burnt off when a chip fryer exploded, and then a few weeks later Minnie was in a car crash and saw her boyfriend decapitated.”

“Fucking hell,” I said.

“His head landed on her knees, but she couldn’t move it because she was trapped. She hasn’t walked since. They think it’s got something to do with his head being on her

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legs.”

“Well, shit, I can imagine.”

I patted her hand and whistled, I tried to imagine her naked. Outside, trees and crows and pylons flashed past as though caught in a hurricane. There was a pile of stones stacked like skulls. A fox had dragged a rabbit under a hedgerow and was wearing it as a hat. I thought about drawing. Somewhere nearby Meg was telling me about her father’s recent brush with meningitis, her mother’s ongoing malpractice trial. There was a *honk honk*. I was pretty certain there was nothing worth honking about.

“Dad deals with stuff in a strange way. He’s always wanted to be a writer, so he tries to brighten any family tragedy with literary colour. I think I get that from him.”

“Are these family tragedies common occurrences?” I asked, my voice hitting a higher octave than usual.

“Mm-hmm,” she said.

The house was big and warm, with a log fire and soup on the stove and a dog with a missing leg. Meg’s parents hugged and kissed me when I stepped in the door, asked me to call them Mum and Dad, said I had lovely blue eyes and I should make myself feel at home. They mentioned that they had received some sad news earlier, that a friend of the family had drowned in the bath, but they were positive people and they were going to show me a happy household.

I was introduced to Olive, the sister with half a face, and she shook my hand and dropped her head. In profile she was both beautiful and terrifying, serene and

stretched. She smiled and gave me a balloon. It was purple and languid, it had a bell attached to the bottom and a message on its front: *Welcome to our family*.

We had some lunch and sat at the table playing whist. The dog jerked past, saliva hammocking its blue-black gums. Meg’s father sat opposite me, occasionally laughing to himself and scrawling words into a notebook. He told me three times that he would be offended if I didn’t call him Dad, that he had once had a son but he had only lived a week.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I said.

I rolled a cigarette, but it was terrible, warped like a sodden plank of wood.

“Can you not roll?” Olive said, one side of her face mocking, the other gravely serious.

“His cigarettes are Picasso,” Meg said.

Dad poured more tea and dealt the cards with a flourish. “You should meet Clive. You’d love Clive,” he said to me. “He’s my brother. He recently would’ve won the lottery, had the same numbers every draw, but his wife, Sandra, forgot to pick up the ticket that week.”

“That’s awful,” I said. I wanted to add that it was an up-to-the-attic-with-a-shotgun-in-the-mouth-type scenario, but I feared that might be following.

“He felt like a man who has lost his childhood teddy bear, like a girl who . . .” Dad paused, looked up to the light bulb, pressed his thumb and index finger together and swirled them in front of him like a spoon stirring tea. “Like a girl who has been jilted at the altar,” he said triumphantly. “Anyway, Sandra decided gluten was to blame, so she started making these gluten-free sausages. They were a hit at her dinner parties and eventually the

Sam Duda

village butcher offered her one hundred pounds for the recipe. They're now stocked in every supermarket in the country. Britain's number one gluten-free sausage. The butcher made himself a fortune, but he never offered her another penny."

"So they *could* have been millionaires," I said. "That is unlucky."

"You make your own luck," he replied, quick as a click. I worried that perhaps he was right.

Minnie was asleep in her room when I popped in to say hello. It was a mishmash of dolls and dance shoes, ketchup-encrusted plates and empty bottles, smothered under the sickly smell of weed. Next to her was a pin-board covered in photographs. The legs had been ripped off the girls, the heads from the boys. I left quietly and found Meg.

We packed paper and went to the park to paint. The sky was a cracked egg; broken yolk was seeping through the clouds and spilling yellow light over the treetops. I sketched the line of trees whilst Meg rolled cigarettes. After a while I grew tired and lay back. She looked at my drawing, head tilted, then opened some oils and splash splashed across it. Twenty seconds. She gave it back to me, nodded, and lit her cigarette. I turned the page and started again.

The park stretched down to a stream on one side, a road the other. I watched buses lope past for a while. Meg was painting; her brush was nightmare orange, her head so close to her work that her plait was dragging through it. I imagined the red cracks that would be creep-

ing through the paint. A Frisbee floated above us, a dog barked and jumped up at a pram, a group of shirtless teens drank cider and shouted nearby, but Meg was oblivious; she gazed at her painting and told me about her mum's brother and how he had been bankrupted by a recent stock market crash, a cousin that had climbed a mountain and disappeared, a neighbour who was murdered by an intruder in *their* house whilst feeding the dog during a summer holiday.

"We were cursed by a gypsy," she said.

I said nothing, but she was waiting for an answer, so I nodded, scoffed, feigned a little laugh.

She told me to forget about sketching, that planning was for those who always needed to know the time, that pencil was protruding bone that needed smothering in daubs of colour. She remembered a gallery of protruding bones the family had collected over the years: snapped clavicle and cracked scapula, fractured femur and twisted tibia, patella flipped over, metatarsal tipped under. I felt sick to fucking death.

"I've got a hole in my heart," she said.

"Shit," I said.

She shot jets of paint as she told me about her first boyfriend impaling himself on a railing whilst climbing for conkers, her pedigree Labrador that was stolen by carnies, the time her great-grandmother was tarred and feathered by Cossacks. I wanted to put my fingers in my ears but her voice was too loud.

I looked at her tights, the freckle on her lip, the way her teeth jutted out when she painted, and tried to imagine fucking her in the fetid park toilet, watching her face in the mirror as she grabbed onto the taps. But I kept pic-

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turing her with a crystal ball and large hoop earrings, her face burnt off, septicaemia blotching her skin, my head on her lap.

I started to get the uneasy feeling that she was painting me, so I stood up.

“Have you been painting me?”

She put her brush down and turned the paper to face me. It was a painting of a burning building. In a top window, arms clawing at the air outside, was a figure, trapped, flames licking around its head.

“Is that me?” I asked.

She didn’t answer.

That evening Mum and Dad returned from their seaside trip with solemn faces. There was muttering, then the chafe of thumb on lighter. Dad had been stung on the mouth by a bee and his lips were hideously swollen.

“We’ve not had a great day, I’m afraid,” Mum said, running a hand through her hair before reaching for another cigarette. “Someone died right in front of us on the beach.”

Dad nodded lugubriously, his huge lips bouncing together like gluten-free sausages. “It was beautiful down there. The sand was whiter than seagull, the sea glinting like crisp packets. Your mother and I were drinking cappuccino in an alfresco beachside café, shading our faces from the high, hot sun, and watching a young girl flick sand off her spade and catch it. Flick and catch, flick and catch.”

“Get to the point, Dad,” Meg said softly. She put her hand on his.

“A breeze blew up, rough like stubble, like a builder’s palms, like rusted iron. It began to pump at the wind-breaks; it affected the flight paths of birds. The parasols were bucking like frightened horses, booming like the revered voice of a grandfather, spinning like the wheels of a bus inexorably treading the monotonous grey lines to which they are condemned.”

He paused for a moment to write something down in his notebook. Mum sighed and took up the story.

“A parasol wasn’t tied down properly. It lifted up and impaled an elderly gentleman through the neck. I gave him mouth-to-mouth, but he died with my lips on him.”

Dad drummed at the table. “It comes to us all. We just have to hope it comes later rather than sooner.”

That night Meg and I fucked but I couldn’t touch her. I didn’t know what she would leave on me, what stain would be tattooed across my skin at the end of it. Her legs were hot, her lips ashen, her weight falling beams and brick. She crackled when she came, she spat ember, scorched my face.

Afterwards a breeze filled the room and fiddled with the purple balloon Olive had given me, turning it round to face me; the bell tinkled and I imagined grabbing hold of it, letting the helium take me up and away, out of the window and back towards a place where whooping cough was the worst I knew. I couldn’t sleep. Her painting had found its way onto the inside of my eyelids and I couldn’t stop thinking about that top-floor window, the flames, the solitary shrieking figure little more than a fleshy brush-stroke, raw as a pork-gristle stretch mark.

Sam Duda

The next morning I said no. I said it was not working. I told her she was great, and her family were lovely, I loved them, they were lovely, but I wasn't in the right place for a relationship. I said I would get my stuff together and leave for the train in an hour. I packed my bag, tried not to look at her. I felt like a worthless piece of shit, a coward, but I could feel that fire creeping up to the top floor. I hid in the toilet for a while, and when I came back she was at the easel, working on the burning building again, giving the trapped man features. She looked at my face before she added the eyes.

I said goodbye. She was sad and her mascara ran. She looked like a chimney sweep. As I left, she turned to me. "You can't leave the balloon. They'll think you left

because you didn't like them."

I wound the string around my palm and walked out.

I stood on the platform. A sad *honk honk* told me the train was coming. I could hear the tracks stretching, anticipating the gnash of electricity. The balloon was still in my hand, its string wrapped around my knuckles, the bell pressing into my palm. It was shrivelled like a dying pomegranate, the crumpled buttock of an old woman. I looked at it, saw that a red hair was winding around the string, a snake up a ladder. *Welcome to our family*. The sky was clear and high. I unwound the string and listened to the bell ding once, twice. And then I let go.

Boy with a Propeller Head **Kristine Ong Muslim**

You probably started at dawn. You cranked the shaft attached to the propeller blades, waited for the engine inside your head to warm up, and went out to the world.

Soaring, you realized it did not matter if you did not look like everyone else, with those propeller blades sticking out where your eyes and ears should have been. To us, you would have been ugly, a mechanical monstrosity; yet you could feel the wind over the woods, you could hear the ocean and the sloshing of the great fishes beneath it. Your arms were free to touch the rustling branches of treetops, the tips of smokestacks and church steeples. You were even higher than the highest mountain peaks, although only for a while, because the air was thin at those heights.

No boy in the world could get this far. That made all the difference.

Some nights, you would have thought about what they said before you left home: *When the wind stops churning and the propeller motor fails, where will you go, little boy? Will the journey be worth it?*

The foragers discovered your body near the creek bed. A squirrel nuzzled your foot, and a toad had found its way inside your open mouth. The contraption you had welded upon your head until it finally grew into a full-blown propeller was now a tangle of crushed metal and skull fragments. Even your parents found you unrecognizable. They said it could be just any boy who had played a prank that went wrong. It could be any boy who'd had the nerve to fly away from home.

A Date in the City **Marream Krollos**

She opens her eyes and sees the sky. Today is a perfect day. The window is right next to her bed and she keeps her curtains open, so she can always see the skyline in the morning. Today has a perfect sky. It is a very blue sky and very clear. She doesn't have anything to do today either. Everything is fine at work. Everything is fine. Her mother is fine, not sick again, so she doesn't have to worry about her. She has friends, and her feelings haven't been hurt by a friend in a while. She has a good job and a nice apartment in a great city. And she had a date yesterday. She had a date with a perfect man. He is not too much younger, or older, than she is. He is good-looking, educated, and charming. He cooked for her too. And he was charming. She can still feel where he was on her bed.

She gets up to go to the bathroom. She looks in the mirror and wonders if she looked that messy last night. Maybe it was good to look that messy though, unnoticeable at least. She has to do something about her hair. Her hair is too straight to really do anything creative with. Her hair is just too straight.

Today she wonders, for the first time in her life, what animal, if any, she most resembles. Not a pig really, but a warthog, maybe. Maybe she looks like a warthog. When she smiles, the way her cheeks curl, it can possibly look like she has tusks. She smiles and frowns repeatedly in the mirror. Her nose can be very pig-like too, the way her nostrils are so obvious. And sometimes she thinks she has no mouth. No, she does not have a very prominent mouth. Yes, she kind of looks like a warthog. Even

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her forehead now is obviously the forehead of a warthog. How could she not have noticed this before today? She has a big warthog's head on a frumpy boy's body. This must be why she hates dancing in public. One of her friends always makes her dance when they go out. It starts with a simple come dance with me.

You go dance and I'll watch.

Fine, I don't want to dance alone. We'll just sit here.

No, you go dance. Honestly, I just don't feel like it.

Come on. Come dance with me. Do it for me, please.

All right, I will later. Let me drink first.

You can drink while we're dancing.

I'll just finish my drink first.

She ends up on the dance floor eventually, feeling all eyes on her. Her uncomfortable body, and its uncomfortable movements, are judged by all the men watching her. Men who are thinking about women and how they move their bodies. This is a dumb way to move an ugly body. Suddenly she realizes that all those men who have ever watched her dance must have been thinking exactly that. She does not ever want to dance but she does it, she dances sometimes. It makes her feel dumpy.

In the future she will do something with her hair. But first she has to brush her teeth. The brush seems especially rough against her gums today. It seems as if the brush will move her gums up further and further until there is a small ridged space between her teeth and gums where blood will slowly dribble down. She can feel her gums get tighter and tighter as they are being pushed back by the brush. The brush has a job to do and it is to take away the gums, take off all the gums, move them back, whether they want to go or not. Maybe she will

stop brushing her teeth for a while, a couple of days or so. That way her gums get a rest. Unless, of course, he calls tomorrow and wants to see her again tomorrow, or in a couple of days. Maybe it would be good if he doesn't call her for a couple of days. Yes, that might be good so that she doesn't have to brush her teeth and her gums get a rest.

Maybe she should shower too. She usually showers before she goes to bed though. Maybe she should put on some clothes, go out and do something. Maybe she should even put some perfume on today. She never really wears any perfume, but she always has one bottle somewhere. She doesn't like how everybody can tell she has perfume on when she puts on perfume. She obviously does not smell that good naturally, nobody does. She also never knows if she put on too much. Years ago her college roommate would spray perfume on her even when she had said she didn't want any. Her roommate wouldn't even ask if she wanted to put any on, she would just spray it on her. It would sometimes get in her eyes and mouth because she was unprepared for it. And for the rest of the night she would have to smell like whatever her roommate sprayed on her. She knew that as finicky as her roommate was about her perfume, if she had sprayed her with something that she liked the smell of, her roommate would have been furious. What could she have done though? Some conversations don't seem worth having.

Why did you just do that?

Do what?

Spray that stuff on me without asking?

I'm sorry. We're going out though, I thought you might

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want to smell good.

But you didn't even ask me first.

I love this perfume.

But you didn't ask me.

I'm sorry. I didn't think it would be such a big deal.

Don't spray perfume on me again.

Fine. What's wrong with you tonight anyway?

Then maybe her roommate would feel bad about having sprayed perfume on her. Maybe her roommate would feel dumb. She wanted to avoid all that. It is better to just allow people to be themselves around you, without making them feel dumb. So she would just walk out with the perfume on and explain to herself why it might be a good thing to have perfume on. It made her sick sometimes, all that perfume would get in her eyes.

Shower. Don't shower. Shower. Don't shower, don't shower. She resists the urge to try and scrape at her skin because she feels there is no reason to indulge that urge. Something is wrong with her head today. It is making her sick.

She needs some music. The stereo is across from her bed, also by the huge window. With only her underwear on, she bends her body so she can fiddle with the dials. This she does most mornings so she can listen to music while she is getting ready to go to work. Today, however, she becomes more and more anxious as she imagines her body as a target. She imagines somebody watching her from one of the other apartment buildings. He is chuckling and snickering, planning to shoot an arrow at her. He will shoot an arrow into her anus because she is bent over, she is a target. If she does not move away quickly she will be in a great deal of pain. The arrow may go up

and out through her mouth if she does not move away.

She turns off the radio and goes back to bed. She was so proud of her bed yesterday. All the shades of blue on one bed made such a beautiful bed. The fact that she chose so many shades of blue and put them all on one bed is one of the signs that she has a good life, a life of her own making. He must have noticed that.

Maybe she doesn't feel well just because of the wine. She usually doesn't have that much wine, but she got caught up in the moment yesterday. How many glasses of wine were there? One before he came over, because she was happy and nervous at the same time. One on the couch with him, one at the kitchen table, one on the couch again, with him. A total of four glasses of wine, but they may have been very full glasses. Maybe it was really more like five, or six, glasses of wine. She shouldn't be drinking that much. She can't be sure what is going on with her because she drank so much. Maybe she is too old now to be drinking that much and that's what's making her sick. She can smell him still on the bed and that doesn't seem good for her stomach. Something is not right today. But it is a perfect day. Everything is right in her life. Work is fine, and she has friends, and she even has a boyfriend now, maybe.

If he calls and she is happy to hear his voice, then nothing is wrong. If he calls and she does not feel sick when she hears his voice, then there is really nothing wrong. It is no big deal to her. She is probably just nervous because he may not call again. Yes, if she knew whether or not he would, or wouldn't, call she wouldn't be so queasy. Maybe she should wash the sheets because her stomach is off today. Then she can stay in bed all day and think

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about him.

She recaps in her mind. She starts from the very beginning so as to anticipate the moment he walked in the door yesterday. He is very good-looking.

She met him through Margaret at work. Margaret told her that they would be perfect together because he is so mature and so ready to settle down. He has been one of Margaret's best friends for a long time. He and Margaret tried to date and see if anything was there, but fortunately for her, there wasn't. Margaret told her about the time they tried to have sex. Years ago they went back to her place drunk and slept on the same bed. He darted his tongue in and out of Margaret's mouth, which turned Margaret off. He kept trying to rub on Margaret's hips with his groin and she could feel him limp against her. Margaret was so turned off at that point that she had to turn around and pretend to be sleeping. He stopped rubbing up against her then. This story made him seem impotent and feckless. But Margaret insisted that he was very mature and very kind. There was just no chemistry between them, she told her. She also told her about the times he had been there for her without wanting anything in return. He is just one of those people, a good friend, a rare catch. So Margaret took her along for a drink. She and her friend had already planned to meet up. She could meet him and see what she thought. He was surprisingly good-looking for somebody who would rub his dead groin on his friend's hip fecklessly. His voice was very deep and his movements were very slow. She liked him. He looked at her intently when she spoke. But he didn't call right away. He waited a week, which was good because it made her very excited to hear from him

when he did call. He decided they should meet at a fast-food restaurant. He ordered a coke, that he paid for, and she had a hamburger, that she paid for. The conversation was good though. He could talk about anything. She knew she really liked him when they were talking about why people have children. She thought it important to bring up all kinds of philosophies and theories on why childrearing is, and is not, a selfish act. He said it was all very simple.

Children just make some people happier.

Not all people. You are making a human life, you know? The implications of . . .

Children make people happier because they make their day-to-day lives about something other than theoretical implications.

He spoke slowly, moved slowly, and always seemed sure of what he thought. He could talk about his work, but without complaining, or seeming too enthusiastic. He could talk about travel, and the cultures of different countries he'd been to, but without being judgmental, or naive. He knows all kinds of things. He is a man of the world.

They talked on the phone a few times after that. Mostly to work something out so they could see each other again. He turned out to be very mature. He called when he said he would call. He called at the exact time he said he would call.

Yesterday was their second date. He came over to cook for her. This made up for the hamburger. It made him perfect. It was very reasonable to not spend money on somebody you don't know yet. It's not like he's desperate. But when they got to know each other better he cooked

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for her, an intimate giving gesture. He is thrifty and loving. She was so nervous that she had to have just one drink before he came over. No one had ever cooked for her before. Usually she has a couple of dates with a bad-looking person, somewhere mediocre, and she never gets called again, and doesn't really want to get a call most of the time. Here was a real man coming to make pasta for her. They talked about ingredients and wine like a team. He made her feel as if she was part of a team. He walked in and he looked good. He is good-looking. He brought his own spices for the sauce, but no flowers. That was good though because flowers are a waste of money, and he is too sincere for superficial gestures. He is not interested in superficial gestures and the spices were necessary so he could cook for her. They drank wine. He cooked. He looked especially good cooking because he was moving very slowly and he was making the kitchen warm and nice-smelling. They could talk about everything and laugh a little, not in that silly way though, in a very mature way. They laughed the way people do when they are having a mature, adult conversation. He made her feel as if she could be herself, but not get away with anything. He lets her know when he thinks she is not thinking logically, but he lets her express herself patiently.

If they had money then they wouldn't be saying that ...

That is not necessarily true. Lots of people who have that much money know what to do with it, and what it is really worth to them.

It must be hard to work for something like ...

If you are only doing it for the money, maybe.

They sat on the couch after dinner and he got close

to her, facing her. He looked into her eyes as she spoke, he smiled perfectly. It was not too big a smile, one that would be on the verge of immature, but not a smirk either.

I think it is easier to travel alone if you're a man.

In certain ways, maybe, but not in every way.

I have a friend who has a geography degree and she said it hasn't been difficult at all to find jobs in this area.

Isn't it always less difficult to find jobs in some areas than in others depending on what you do?

I'm sorry about the books on the floor. I always think I will get to them but I don't.

Why don't you?

You know, I just get busy.

Doing what?

By the time I come home from work, relax for a while, eat, take a shower, it's time to go to bed and do it all over again the next day.

It's all about momentum. It would only take an hour out of your day to pick something up and read it.

Then he reached for her face and kissed her. So he does dart his tongue back and forth in people's mouths, but she thought it was cute. Kissing him felt really good actually because it meant that he really had come over to cook for her, and that the pasta meant what she thought it meant. Then everything he did to her felt better and better as he kept doing things to her. He made wonderful noises too. He was not enthusiastic enough to be gauche, but not quiet enough to not be enthusiastic. He got up and slowly moved into the bedroom silently. She followed him. Despite the wine she was still so nervous that her heart wanted to beat right out of her chest. Here was a

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good-looking man who wanted to cook for her and have sex with her. Everything was perfect. Then suddenly she wondered whether or not they should be doing what they were doing at all. Besides the phone calls, last night was only their second or third time in the same room with each other. But it was all so wonderful, him standing over a stove in the kitchen while she watched him move as she sat on the couch. She thought it would be a good idea to see how he felt about what they were doing. She should just bring it up, ask him quickly. He had only been inside her for about a minute when she asked him to stop. She whispered, Wait, stop. She thought he would stop and she would explain that she thought maybe this wasn't the right thing to do. That's when he would kiss her and talk her out of it. It's right because you are wonderful, and this has been wonderful, he would say. It's right because I have never felt so much for someone so quickly. She would stop him and say something pithy, or witty, about whether or not people should be doing what they were doing so soon after meeting each other. Stop, she whispered. Wait, stop. Stop. Stop. Stop. Stop. Stop. Stop. But he still kept going. Then his wonderful noises started to sound like loud grunts. He couldn't hear her, maybe. Maybe he just couldn't hear her. "Stop," she had whispered. He still kept grunting. Was she there? He didn't know she was there. Stop it. What to do? What to do? She could scream.

Stop it! Stop it! Stop! Just stop!

What, what are you screaming for?

I wanted you to stop and you didn't . . .

Sorry, I was just trying to make love to you.

Are you deaf or something?

Actually I am. I lost my hearing in the same car accident that took my little brother two years ago.

Sorry about that.

I have to go.

I'm sorry. I didn't mean anything by it. It's just that I had been asking you to stop and you didn't listen so I thought I should scream so you could hear me.

I have to go. I feel stupid for coming over in the first place.

Instead of having that conversation she decided she could just stop asking him to stop and lie there. He would stop eventually and she could stare at him in the meantime. No. No. No. No, stare at the walls. This is taking a while she thought. One. Two. Three seconds. The walls, she realized then, had billions of little, faceless, fast-crawling, mindless, colorless insects darting all over them. Maybe every surface does if you really take the time to stare at it, really look. She wished they had turned the lights on. She always gets a little frightened when she is alone in the dark.

He stopped when he was all finished eventually, and rolled off of her. Everything was fine though. He wasn't rude or anything afterwards. He even rubbed her back while he was sitting up to get ready to leave. When she told him that he could stay if he wanted to, he turned around maturely smiling.

I think I better take off so I can wake up early tomorrow, the drive from your place with the traffic . . .

He kissed her goodbye. So, everything was fine. He didn't think there was anything wrong, obviously. What to feel about this? After all, not being heard is something she is somewhat used to. She always has to shorten her

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stories because everybody acts like she tells really long stories, but she doesn't think she does. They begin looking away mid-sentence, or they finish her sentences for her. All her friends do this to her.

He's the one that I told you . . .

The one that was married to Sandra, I know.

But I didn't even want to go because . . .

Because you thought Andrew would be there, I know.

One of her friends even thinks that she talks too loud and hushes her. She just tells her to hush while she is speaking. She will be talking while they are having lunch at a restaurant, or coffee at a coffee shop, and her friend will hush her. So she can't even finish her sentences at all when she is out with this particular friend.

This is only the feeling of not being heard. Last night may be making her sick only because of what her friends have done to her in the past. It must be residual discomfort and embarrassment from having been hushed so many times before. It has nothing to do with him. She shouldn't take it out on him. After all she has actually been told before to get off of a chair she was sitting on because one of her friends wanted to sit there. He didn't do anything like that. He was never rude to her.

Can I sit in front I need the space for my crutches?

But if you sit in back then you can lay them on the back seat.

Can I just sit in front?

Can I sit by the light I'm reading?

But I'm reading too.

Well, do you need all that light?

And why shouldn't this man want to be with a woman who wants him so much, all the time, that when he is in-

side her she would never want to ask him to stop? Why wouldn't he want to be around somebody who could react to him not stopping by being flattered? Everybody wants that woman. Nobody wants to feel stupid. Everybody wants someone who will react the way they want them to react when they do certain things. That is what makes her feel loved, it is probably what makes everybody else feel loved too. When somebody reacts to something she does in the way she wants them to react to it she feels as if she was not stupid for doing it. And she is tired of waiting for people's reactions to be what she needs them to be to feel loved. She seems to always be waiting for people to touch her when she's sad, or call her when they're angry. It is just silly. It is not mature. She can't live her whole life feeling like this.

She rolls around in her bed and smells him. The sheets have kept him preserved the best. She imagines him hushing her, like a mother hushes while trying to put her baby to sleep in her arms. He is hushing her as she asks him to stop. Stop. His hands move slowly towards her to gently cup her face. He looks right into her eyes, kisses her mouth gently over and over again. Then he brushes her cheeks faintly with his lips as he moves his lips closer and closer to her ears so he can whisper, hush. Hush, he whispers, as he kisses her ears slowly. He moves so slowly. She looks at him and whispers stop, breathlessly. Her mouth is barely touching his mouth as she speaks, her eyes begging for him. Stop it. Stop.

Stop.

Hush. Just hush.

This Furniture Is a Dining Room Table and a Daughter Called Mountain J.A. Tyler

We set the table with all its accessories. We put our friends one next to another, in case they forget. Standing back we rearrange the flowers in the center. Those are the blooms in this field where the grasses are wild and rise above our shoulders. Our friends arrive two by two and we seat them accordingly. We say to them Hello and Thanks for coming and Delightful that, this bottle of wine, you are such wonderful friends. When we fight we raise our voices until no one can hear the mountain range sneaking in. I say to her That is not your fucking decision to make and she retorts, her mouth open to show all those crocodile teeth, tying a flower stem around her ring fin-

ger. We bought this table in a Kansas thrift store, cross-country when we were traveling. We strapped it upside down to the roof of my car, driving legs through rain. The tabletop was wood-weathered and I could see our little girl running her hands over its wear-out. Her giggling. Her smiling. One of our friends said We love you both but we could not say the same for each other and the fields swallowed us in their dirt. They raised a toast. We were buried in living, colliding with earthen worms like ceramic feats. When I touch her cheek in this soil she recoils, makes of her face another face, a sickened face with my fingers on her skin. There are too many S sounds under this ground, so all we hear is Sail and Sun

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and Slight and Saved. But there is nothing salvageable and our friends they dig fork and knife into the table. They carve their names like we ask them to, proposing messages, an early-wedding present for a wedding that we will not have because she will grow cold feet seven hundred nights before and the ring around her finger is a rotting garden. Their messages say Love is between the two of you, and we hold pretend hands on top of the table, watching them whittle out meaning. They should carve our death there too, while they are at it, since that is how we are going to go, when the knives are all finally put away. And the mountains, when they are up on us, they smile girl smiles and our friends Oooo and Aahhh then shrink to flowers. Our friends become the bouquet that she will never hold never walking down an aisle laden in a white. Our friends see that the smile that looks like a girl-smile is instead a treachery of smiling, more and more teeth in solid blood-smearred rows, that we are involved in something bigger. That in the mountains there is a new mountain, one that only rose in the last forever, our daughter, our daughter called Mountain. Mountain looks at us and our friends turned to flowers in this field, the dining room table smeared sharp with their names, the love they announce to us that Mountain never knows. Mountain only looks like the girl we would have had, would we have had her. Mountain only looks down on us. Mountain judges. And I say to Mountain, to apologize, I am so sorry that we never made the mountain that is you Mountain. But Mountain looks away at my words. Mountain seems to hate me more than any of our friends who have disappeared, who have forgotten themselves in this moment. We tried to use nameplates, to keep our friends attached to their places, but this is an in-

finite table set up on its edge, and the flowers always keep stemming, leaves in new ways. But Mountain's mother doesn't say anything to Mountain, does not even look her in the mountain-face, where birds reside on her cliff's lip. Daughter her mother does not say. Mountain putting her mountain's fist onto our dining room table, meticulously writing her name, M-o-u-n-t-a-i-n. Mountain is a good girl at spelling and doesn't misplace a letter. Her treetops snow white and she is still growing. Our Mountain who will one day be a peak we can pick-axe our way up. But her mother is still not saying anything, never will, not until she reads it in a book and the book says to speak and then, at that point, the book will tell her what to say. Mountain picks a flower. Mountain looks at me as if to say something. Mountain doesn't. Our friends who have turned to flowers turn down towards the ground, snow falling. Mountain felt it before all of us, this way of being cold. And then there was a blank light, the whiteness of snow, the ice covering her mountain-heart. Is that how it felt I ask of Mountain but she has rocks stuffed where her mountain-mouth should be and she is coughing up evergreens and curdles of dirty glacier snow. She is growing so big and we have grown so small, or not in the least, Mountain overshadowing us. Mountain scrunches up her face and there is an earthquake, and we fall down into the world, the two of us, our endless fake love a symbol of forever. This dining room table. Mountain falling asleep beneath the snow. I'm sorry I say, but Mountain does not want apologies. Mountain only wants mountain-things now, trees and rivers and rocks. Mountain only wants to see the snow fall everywhere around her. Mountain only wants to forget that she was never born.

Infestations **Mark Rigney**

London,” said my beautiful friend, “is infested with foxes. They get at my garden, they dig things up, they leave their little messes . . . it’s awful! And at night they bark, like seals, raspy and quick. Last week one hopped my garden wall, right there at the back. I can’t let the cats outside after dark.”

I went for a ramble. A fox darted from an alley, zipped under a Vauxhall, and disappeared into a storm drain. Later I saw one in the underground, tail like a flag, trotting off into the tunnels. That night, entangled with my beautiful friend in sheets so soft they flowed, I heard one bark. Raspy, yes. And lonely.

I wanted to trap them, take them away, both for their sake and to spare my friend the agony of living in a city infested by foxes—but there were so many! Where to

begin?

Before catching the long flight home to the U.S., I gave my friend mortar, a trowel, and a pallet of bricks. “Wait for me,” I implored, “and build a higher wall.”

One year later, I visited London again. This time it was infested with gorillas. “It’s awful,” said my languorous friend, as she poured a waterfall of pure white sugar into the depths of her steaming tea. “They’re everywhere, and they’re so strong, like enormous children. They damage everything they touch.”

When I went out, I discovered gorillas at the Wimbledon tobacconists, examining the hail of morning news with critical, crinkled eyes. A young male sat in a King’s Cross off-license, crushing pints of Tetley’s Bitter with his massive, pink-gray toes; the place smelled of yeast, and

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foamy suds draped the shelves in all directions. Passing through Brixton, I spotted two females furtively attempting to converse with the harried commuters in sign language, and outside of Green Park an entire gorilla family followed the horse guards and took turns sniffing the horses' bottoms.

I gave my exemplary friend a parting gift: a bespectacled teddy bear with tufty brown fur, very unlike a gorilla. "Gladly, the Cross-Eyed Bear," I said, dropping the comma to be sure she'd spot the joke. "I already miss your laugh."

On my next visit, I discovered London to be overrun with poets. "Oh," complained my sated friend, "it was wonderful for a week or so, but now? You can't go anywhere without getting *The Idylls of the King* hurled at you. And all these vast sentiments of love, you can hardly breathe. It's awful."

I went out and discovered she had not exaggerated. Poes of all sizes and descriptions recited from every street corner. They gathered by the hundreds on Hampstead Heath. In St. Paul's they drowned out the services, and at St. Martin-in-the-Fields they were down on their knees perfecting brass rubbings and crowding out the regular homeless population. They quoted Wordsworth and Goethe and Shakespeare and Goss; they leveled Levine at you one minute, Sappho the next, then Neruda and Milne, Marvell and Sandberg, all in spitfire fashion, littering pyrrhics and spondees like so many gum wrappers. Bullets of poetry, bam, blam, wham! Stein, Homer, Tucker! Keats, Pound, Brooke! A constant snowstorm of earth-rending,

heart-shattering words.

I also noted a plethora of gorilla-skin boots and fuzzy silver-black chapeaus, but opted not to buy. For my long-suffering friend, I left an envelope, stamped, addressed to Outer Space. "We must be messages in bottles," I explained.

"Must we?" she said, and I, chagrined, wept into her shoulder.

When I returned the next year, there wasn't a poet to be found. "London," said my wistful friend, "is swarming with table-tennis tournaments."

I thought about this, then made my announcement: "I do not have a return ticket."

"How will you get home?"

"I love you," I said.

"Don't you want to go out? See the horrors for yourself?"

"Marry me."

Such a smile, then: not raspy or damaging or stuffed with Taliesynic meaning, but a warm smile nonetheless. We married within the week, and the bells rang out just as they do on Christmas Day, but spontaneously, with no one there to pull the ropes.

"Would you call me insane if I said I missed the foxes?" asked my wife. "If I were to say, 'Here, they need more foxes?'"

But we stood alone in London, for everyone else had gone. Now London is infested with us.

