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Housesitter

DAVID RICE

Housesitter left his last family and moved on to his next, a man and woman in the northern part of the state who had engaged him to look after their house with their son Josef in it while they were away in Spain.

When he'd first taken up his profession, almost ten years ago, he'd moved around only in his own city, from one district to another, at first just from one street to another or even from one house to another on the same street, among families he more or less knew. But inevitably he'd started moving among the suburbs, and then reached the point of moving among towns, sometimes crossing wide swaths of open country from one house to the next, traveling a loose but effective web of word-of-mouth. He was now in among people whom other people knew but whom he himself could not until he was already indoors with them.

He packed all the things that he had stowed in the last family's house, in their closets and cupboards, and the clothes he had hung on their hangers, among their clothes, and brought them onto the highway and across the state to the new house, on the new street where Josef, who was seven, lived with his parents, who were leaving. He had written the address, beneath the word "Josef," in a monthly planner that he checked again and again as the taxi from the bus station drove him down the street. He was still checking it when the door opened and the parents said, "Welcome, House-sitter," and ushered him in.

He was so tired he wanted to go right up to bed with his clothes piled on a chair blocking the door. But he knew he'd have to stay downstairs to hear the parents tell him everything first, all the phone numbers to call in case of all the things that could happen, and the nuances of the schedule they'd bound their son to.

He went to the downstairs bathroom to shock himself awake and remember that he could always pretend he was already asleep and dreaming in that guest-room bed he knew was waiting for him at the top of the stairs. He was so tired he couldn't remember, couldn't think about, whether he'd been tired on the bus and in the taxi down the street, or if it was only hitting him now.

He returned, ready to look like he was listening.

The parents showed him the cupboards where the dry goods were, and the door to the basement where the brooms hung – "Junior," the one with a plastic handle and yellow bristles, "Senior,"

the one with a wooden handle and yellow bristles, and “Moe,” the dustpan.

“One of our babysitters,” said the mother, “name of Vangie DeWardner, fell headlong down these stairs, end over end like a boulder, and was found in a crumpled heap at the bottom with two of her ribs broken up into one another so that at first the paramedics thought it was just one rib that’d swollen to the size of two.” She made sure he was listening. “And it wasn’t just the impact of the concrete bottom that broke her up,” she added. “It was each individual stair, one after another after another.”

She seemed very intent on his understanding that this story had to do with the particular flight of stairs they were now standing at the head of, and not another flight, unseen in another place. Nor was it a story about stairs in general. He wondered what it was about him that made her doubt he could grasp this.

The father trailed behind with a pad of paper, making notes. “A pharmaceutical company gave me this pad of paper,” he said, barely audible at the back of the procession. “At a conference. But you can ignore the dosage information and the long chemical names that adorn its borders, because all that we need you to know is the information that’s written mainly in the center of this pad of paper’s sheets.”

He had a pharmaceutical pen, too.

They kept going through the house. Housesitter’s feet dragged like his shoelaces were caught on something in the previous room. He would not have been surprised to observe himself falling obliquely onto the carpet, his face cushioned from the shock of impact by the slow motion of sleep, his nerves shutting

gracefully down before he landed. He did not know how surprised the parents would have been.

“This is where Leon Garment, a film-club friend of my husband’s and not the most beloved member of our community, spilled nacho cheese on the carpet, and then tried to wipe it up with his shoe, not understanding that this is actually the sort of thing that makes something worse,” said the mother, and stopped to show the shoe-shaped stain. “It made us realize the value of stains, we thought,” she continued, “of keeping rather than erasing them, so as to always remember what has happened in the places where things have. But now we’re not sure. This is one thing we’re going to discuss on the veranda in Spain. We are planning to reorient our life, so when we come back it’ll be like the first time. It’ll be our second chance, but we’ll be so far inside it it’ll seem like our first, which, really, a second chance must if it’s to be a real one and not just a ‘second chance.’ We will stand before this house upon our return, with our bags in hand, and say, ‘What do you think, honey? Shall we settle in this one?’ ‘Yes.’”

He could feel sweat running down his thighs when he put his hands in his pockets. The inside of his belt was steaming and he knew how it probably smelled. He looked at the mother talking, the father writing: it was easy to tell there was something furtive, guilty about her; with the father it was harder to tell.

The father put the pad on top of the tv and picked up a plastic crate of travel guides, sighing like the weight hurt him. The mother held these up one by one, explaining how they had auditioned and rejected each possible country before deciding on Spain.

“Malaysia,” she said, holding up the Malaysia book, “turned out to be not quite what we thought. We felt a tiny bit betrayed.”

She pressed herself back into her husband and he leaned in around her, reflexively kissing the back of her ear with the tips of his lips after putting the crate down.

Housesitter looked away. He’d been in similar moments with other couples on the nights before their departures, though he’d never been this tired. While he was looking away, he tried to re-group. “This is all just par for the course,” he whispered. “The part of the job before the good part.”

“This is the slot where the mail falls from,” she interrupted, pointing at the front door. “It can fall very quickly and startle you, so be on the lookout throughout the afternoon and well into the evening.”

She paused to let this sink in, then went on. “This is the closet, which we call the ‘Front Closet,’ where my husband, who used to have a sleepwalking problem, used to pull his pajama pants all the way down and pee on the shoes.” She stood in mimicry of her husband’s former problem in such a way that both men could tell she was taking a moment to imagine how it might feel to have a penis.

“The shoes are now clean,” she said.

“Please don’t look away,” she said. “You come very highly vetted, but we need to know for ourselves that you’re right. It’s not too late to call things off.”

“This is the couch, for example,” she went on, pointing to a futon under the windows, “where a political canvasser was once invited in, off the doorstep, for a glass of iced tea, but then requested

rum, without having been offered rum, and our son, who knew where the rum was kept and was home alone at the time, went to the cabinet and got the rum and, when we came home in the evening, we found that this man had drunk the whole bottle of rum and had spilled his leaflets, here," she scratched at an area of the floor with the toe of her slipper, "and our son was back upstairs, so this political man was drunk all alone on the couch, and could not be roused until morning. And we never found out his name." She looked at him with concerned eyes, her expression loaded with a kind of objectless empathy.

He realized this was the first time she'd mentioned the son, and was fairly certain that if he asked to meet him now, or asked even what the boy liked to eat and do, he'd be shushed with a tone that would communicate the opposite of "ask us that again in a few minutes."

She led the way back into the kitchen where they'd begun, showing him now the hook by the door that held the car keys, and the car they were leaving him to use, and the envelope of spending money.

He tried to picture the room where this boy lived, directly over their heads no doubt, as they sat in the kitchen, the mother grasping for words to convey their loathing of rotten lettuce in the crisper drawer and their method for avoiding expired milk at the shop, where some cheaters were employed.

The mother warmed turkey soup on the stove while the father sliced the end of a loaf of rye in three, and put the slices in the

toaster oven, and got out butter and a jar of fish in water or brine. Housesitter pushed aside the pharmaceutical pad to make room for his bowl.

He watched the deepening colors settle in around the kitchen windows, spilling out the last of the blue across the hanging plants behind the dishwasher. His eyes wanted to sink down into the center of his skull like two cherries in a bowl of gelatin.

After a few bites, his shoulders and elbows fell slack by his sides, his spoon resting on his knee under the table. The mother said how important the vacation was to her and her husband, and therefore how important it needed to be to him, because he was now part of the family. “Things have just reached a point,” she said. “And beyond this point, for us, lies Spain, and for you . . . here you are.”

She’d changed her voice in such a way that it felt both like she was trying not to wake or disturb someone, and also like she was trying to mask the sound of something she didn’t want to be heard.

“We are packing a kit of prophylactics,” she continued, “because we want it to feel as though we are at the beginning again. We will go through all the motions that starting a family involves, without this time bearing those motions’ consequences.”

All Housesitter could think, as he peered at her talking with his head nearly in his soup, was how much he wanted to call them a taxi for the airport right now and force them to get in. Thinking again of the boy upstairs, he professed to understand what he’d been told and asked if he could please go up to bed.

In the guest room at last, he thought about tomorrow when he'd move into the parents' room and begin to sleep in their bed.

The guest room was where he always started, in all the houses. Always the same pastel sheets and blanket half-folded at the foot of the bed and pillowcase with yellow stripes or a border of green ivy or pink hearts.

The room and sheets were cold. After the parents leaned in to whisper goodbye he began to hear low, elongated screams, filtering between his body and the sheets, which were soon dirty with the smell of sweat. This warmed them up.

The screams filled first his room and then every room, like a gas leak. The father's pharmaceutical pad fluttered off across the kitchen floor, away to a place where those who stayed behind would not find it.

Housesitter waited in bed until the screaming died down. Then he put on a bathrobe and walked downstairs, through the living room like coming down on Christmas morning to find his presents piled up in the dark. His bare feet clenched at the tiles and the grout between them as he filled a glass with water.

When he put down the empty glass, he heard soft steps. A girl in a blue nightgown came into the kitchen and stood in the doorway, looking at him.

He looked back at her as she went to the sink, took another glass from where it was drying, and filled it. Then she went back

to where she had stood and took a long sip from the surface as the water that had come out white turned clear.

When she finished, she put it next to the sink, again to dry, and sat down at the table. The two sat together very quietly until he got up and asked her what she'd like for breakfast, and then poured two bowls of cereal and milk and sat back down, pushing hers into reach.

As they ate, she said, "I crept into the bathroom and unwrapped a blade. I was in there for hours, doing it. They thought I did it before. That's why they tried to escape. But I waited until they left. I was very patient."

He looked at her again, preparing to accept the fact of her. When he had, he asked her name. "It's Johanna," she said, like no one had ever asked her until now. "I knew you were here when I heard you snoring in the guest room."

"Hi, Johanna. I heard you last night too. Screaming."

"That wasn't me," she said. "Now he's gone, off to be quiet."

She finished her cereal. "He had to go. What about you?"

He was stuck on an image of the parents high in the air, feeding each other pretzels with the rest of the world and everyone in it five miles below, under a layer of clouds as solid as ice.

"I just got in, from another town. I'm here with you now," he replied, shaking it off. "In this house. Just the two of us."

Johanna got up from her seat, put her bowl next to the sink, and came back to the table, taking the other seat now, on his left, while he stayed fixed in the middle.

"Do you think we should go up and have a look at that bathroom?" he asked her. "To see if it's all clean?"

“It is. I stayed in there all the rest of the night, working. I went down to the basement and got the whisk broom and the cleaning bottles and everything.”

“But I heard screaming all through the night.”

“This house is sticking up from the ground and straight into the world. You can hear almost anything that’s going on.” She shrugged and looked away, back to where those things were likely going on still.

He looked over at the drawer that held the kitchen knives, guessing how long it’d take to grab one, if it came to that, and if it’d do any good.

He wanted to ask, “And there’s no one in there now? No one buried, or stuffed away?”

But he didn’t. He asked, “Have you taken a shower yet?”

She looked at him like she knew there was another question behind this one. “You mean to wash off what I did?” Her voice was almost accusatory, like he was the one that’d done something.

“No,” he said. “Just to get ready for the day. Let’s go out somewhere, get lunch, walk around in a place you like.”

She stayed next to him for a further moment, then nodded and went upstairs.

He went to the parents’ room and was in there when he heard her shower start. He stood very still, waiting until the water got warm.

He was aware that she was naked now, and now covered in soap. He picked up the parents’ clothes hamper and was about to

take it across the hall and into the laundry room, but didn't. He looked down at the dirty clothes, recording the last few days of their lives, and then poured his own underwear – yesterday's underwear, from the long bus journey – on top, and his socks and undershirt on top of that. Now, also naked, he walked over to the dresser, opened a drawer in the middle and looked at everything in a row, folded and fitted exactly to the rectangular space. He opened the other drawers, feeling their cold polished wood against his thighs, looking at himself from the waist up in the mirror that reached from the dresser to just under the ceiling. Behind him he saw the bed, where the child had been conceived.

Just after noon, Sunday, they went out.

He'd put on clean clothes from his suitcase in the guest room, and then they each put on their shoes and got in the car. He drove them into town with the spare keys he'd taken off the hook. They looked everywhere for the binder of CD's but couldn't find it, so they turned on the radio and it played Johanna's favorite song.

It was the last weekend of November. The pane of days that obscured Christmas grew clearer by the minute. They left the windows of the second-floor bathroom open so that clean air could drift in, easing southward from the Arctic and upward from the Earth.

Each wore a winter jacket and enjoyed wearing it. He'd taken a long red scarf from the downstairs closet and wrapped it around his neck, and Johanna had taken a scarf from her room and

wrapped it as well, and they each wore a pair of gloves and a hat, to pretend it was already late December, the days dark by three in the afternoon.

He asked Johanna where to park in town, and she told him. Flyers for bell choir and choral concerts clung to the streetlamps, which were already on, filling the dark afternoon with an especially romantic glow. Two boys rang a Salvation Army bell, and two girls rang another across the street.

This was to be their one day in the open air, out of the house, browsing in all the stores, the joke stores and the clothes stores and the toy store with a nearly full-sized stuffed horse peeking from a stable, and a model train set called The Santa Fe Howler, which chugged out of sight on its track and returned a long time later. The bakeries all had fresh cakes and cookies for the new season, filled with almond, ginger, and cinnamon. The smell of baking butter filled the narrow streets, and they drank chai and hot chocolate in a café, nodding benignly to other pairs of children and parents.

Johanna smiled and said she felt like there were a few days off from school coming up, like Winter Break was here early. He smiled too. There was smoke and leaves and wind in the air, new books on the shelves of the bookstores and tables laid out with shining piles of cards and calendars.

They held hands and looked at the posters for the new movies that had come to the two-screen theater, and at the posters on the windows of the video store for the movies that'd played there before. They filled a plastic bag with comedies and cartoons, like there really was a long vacation coming up, or an unbroken chain

of snow days, and they bought fudge and peanut brittle and butter-scotch at a store called Emporium. They bought chamomile tea and cocoa mix and mini-marshmallows.

Just to eat these sweets together, at home, would make them both very happy, aware though they'd be that they wouldn't go to town again.

The cool day surrendered to cold night. They got back in the car and drove home, picking up Indian food on the way, and came indoors, closing the bathroom window now that fresh air had come in, and ate with all the lights on, even in the rooms they had no reason to enter, and then they watched one of the comedies from the bag. It prolonged the feel of the day, but then it really was night, and there was no way to warm the house, not with dessert and not with tea. They went upstairs, each to their own room.

Just before this, they had unpacked the sweets, arranging them in the cabinets and cupboards of the kitchen, which already smelled sweet from the dried fruit and boxes of cookies that had been in there before. They also unpacked the other parts of the day, putting moments from it on top of the tins and in between the boxes, so that in the future when they reached in here for an Oreo or a cluster of caramel popcorn, they'd come away with a piece of this time they'd spent together, hand in hand in the waning afternoon.

He spent the night in the parents' bedroom, having moved his suitcase in there from the guest room. His clothes surrounded theirs in the hamper, and his Right Guard stood next to the

mother's Speed Stick and the father's Old Spice on the ledge atop the dresser.

He slept for several hours at a time, among their sheets on the big bed, but the house and the driveway and the front and back yards, and all the trees and hedges, stayed up all night. With the air blowing through, inspecting them, thinking them over, they started to change, taking on aspects and characters they hadn't had before. The sticky sugar treats in the cupboards lay open, their plastic wrappers peeled back, as a tongue reached out to lick them.

One night, while Johanna slept down the hall, he got up and carried his pillow into an empty bedroom with a bed shaped like a truck, smiling faces painted into the wheels, and a poster of a smiling hammer climbing a pile of trash that stretched up toward the moon.

He believed he'd feel the tongue's presence less in here, maybe just because the bed was smaller and he could fill more of it by stretching out. As soon as he closed this new door behind him, he knew he'd never go back into the parents' room, not even to gather his suitcase. He was a little amazed he'd slept in there at all.

In the morning, relieved, he awoke and came downstairs and had his glass of water, and then Johanna came and had hers, and then they had their cereal, with water now that the milk was gone.

Thus began a period where they stayed indoors all day and played card games and board games, and rewatched videos

they had just seen. Never before had time been spent so freely, nor had there ever been so much of it.

These were the days of socks on thick carpets and smooth wood floors, all-day pajamas and lying on stomachs, heads propped on elbows, moving plastic figures across boards that charted battlefields and lives wound along a path.

He slept now always in the truck-shaped bed. Some nights, though less frequently than when he'd slept in the parents' room, the sounds in the house, that tongue, still woke him.

On one such night, he went into the bathroom and ran the bath. While the tub filled, he came out and stood naked in the hall, by her door. He kept very still. To wake her now would be to catch her before she was ready, when she wasn't all here. If they couldn't meet in the morning, with the night behind and the day ahead, she would become a stranger to him, and he to her, he thought, the wallpaper sticking to his back as he leaned against it. The plank on which they stood together over a long drop would tip and fall away.

As he listened at her door, he heard: ... *never quite empty ... people too, feelers ... bed ... see and or, discern ... grip ... came over or called to, and ... she ... in its fingertips that ... because she ... and it would ...*

In that same upstairs bathroom where, he'd been told, Josef had left this house, the water filled its tub. Blind in the steam, he turned the lights above the sink as low as he could and turned on the fan, dribbled a little Epsom salt into the bath, and heard her voice whispering on, as loud in here as it'd been in the hall.

He sank into the scalding water, peeing and nearly biting his

tongue, and lay back, turning on the jets, smelling the steam, closing his eyes. *If it comes for me in here*, he thought, *it will have been the place of my choosing.*

He slumped down, easing into the thoughts he'd had in all the baths in all the houses since he'd taken up his profession, since before he'd heard much in the nights, before he'd unnamed himself.

Towelings dry, he dabbed his groin and armpits with talcum powder and walked down the hall and back to the truck-bed room.

He turned on the light on the nightstand, shaped like a miniature streetlight, and took a pile of comics from a drawer. He knew that Johanna was still whispering, but, spreading the comics around his body on the mattress, he resolved not to listen.

He tried to read aloud, but soon lost his voice. It sounded hoarse, like he'd been shouting over something, and his ears hurt. Maybe water from the bath had seeped in. He pressed at his earholes, at first gently and then with some violence, but it only brought him further from equilibrium.

He could feel the tongue again, breathing up from under the bed, panting, as far from sleep as he was. Legs hardening into a tangle, he tried to lie very still and let its breath dry away the last of the bathwater.

It was whispering, or perhaps shouting against his stopped-up ears, echoing Johanna down the hall while adding what she could not know. He could tell that the truth about Josef was here in the room with him.

He could neither grasp it nor tune it out.

He decided to close his eyes but found that they were closed already. The effort to close them again pulled them open.

His spine, pressed deep into the child's mattress, vibrated along with the tongue directly beneath, and he looked up at the dreamcatchers that Josef must have made at school or in an after-school program, at this point more on the side of nightmare than against it.

The effort to sleep became too oppressive.

He stood up, shedding comics onto the floor, and could see the mistake he'd made in thinking he could sleep off the rest of his time in this room. He made as little contact with the floor as he could until he was out of the tongue's range.

After catching his breath in the hall, still pressing on his ears, he resolved to force his way back into the parents' room and from there face what was in the house, or was coming.

Johanna and he would wander the hallways from now on, pretending they were the streets of the neighborhood.

He lay back in the parents' bed, stretching out as if to convince the sheets he'd never left, drying the parts of himself that the towel and the truck-shaped bed and the comics had missed.

He looked at his suitcase, which he'd left in here all this time, and felt both glad to see it again and suspicious of what changes it must have undergone in his absence.

He thought about Johanna and the time they still had together, in this house, and the fact that, during this time, they were free to

indulge in the feeling of living here, truly here and not just provisionally so.

He was close to sleep but still couldn't get the rest of the way.

He could look down and see it, the place he wished he were and the fullness of the new day beneath, but something he couldn't see remained between.

So he got up again, opened the bedroom door, walked back into the hall. It was much colder out here, like it really was the neighborhood and the act of pretending had been pretending it wasn't. Real winter had come.

He groped along the solid wall for a window.

It wasn't hard to hear her shuffling from the other direction, though her toes barely escaped her nightgown.

Each recognized the other, but, for a second, because it was night and dark and they were only half-present, each looked away. Then they looked back, and he offered her his hand, and she took it. She knew where the window was, how to lead him there.

It was a long walk. The wall stayed solid a long time before opening.

When it did, they stood before it, looking out at the street.

He squeezed her hand tighter as cans and leaves out there stirred, and sacks of garbage tipped onto their sides.

After a while, a couple of delivery vans passed by, on their way to the small college a few streets over, bringing bulk canned and dry goods.

Then more nothing.

Then, as the first blue of dawn was starting up, a black car appeared in the window, its headlights in full glare.

Her hand tensed in his, and he could feel her body working, full of attention.

They watched as the car cut through the leaves and garbage, growing darker as the morning grew lighter. It turned its lights off. It came very close to the house, slowing as it approached.

The hallway was a bridge, a narrow strip of habitable land between the waste of the street through the window, and the walls and unknown rooms behind, cracking open and taking shape.

They stood on it, trying to keep their balance.

The car was gone. He fixed his eyes on the blank window, but couldn't keep from imagining it in the driveway, letting the parents out.

Then they would come inside, leaving their luggage in the trunk for now. They'd take off their shoes and catch their breath at the kitchen table before venturing upstairs to see who was home.

A sound, a voice, reached them where they stood. It sounded partial, like some of it had been lost on the way. It crackled like the tape of an old answering machine, sharp consonants and missing vowels, frazzled and distressed as the tongue came down on it, mopping it up like bread in a soup bowl, sucking it down into a belly that lived, as Housesitter imagined it, in the basement, nestled among the roots of the house.

He knew there'd be an echo, mixing with the still-present echo

of that first night, sounds combining, dwindling but never down to zero.

And he knew it would be a long time, days or weeks, before anyone made it up here, into the room where he and Johanna would be waiting.

Variations of Thomas and Viola

PATTY YUMI COTTRELL

Thomas persuades Viola to wear a series of masks of his own devising. Thomas purchases a book of generic bird illustrations and tears out pictures of the birds he likes best. With the precision of a surgeon, Thomas cuts open a mouth-hole with Viola's cuticle scissors. Viola nods in approval. And what will you say as a bird-masked creature? asks Thomas. My studies have shown they prefer not to use words, says Viola. As the paper beaks drop to the floor with a hush, Viola trains her syllables to quiet. Says Thomas, Obviously, you will learn to speak in colors.

Thomas and Viola take the white path to the Ministry of Public Health, where they have been hired to produce a documentary on the conservation of bees. On their way to the Ministry, they encounter a child waiting for a school bus. Hello beautiful, coos Viola. The child lets out a shriek that sounds like a miniature trumpet. How hateful you are! says Thomas. But what a lovely shady mouth you have! says Viola.

Inside the child's orchard-dark mouth Viola discovers a Flemish shipyard where she spots Thomas operating a crane to right a capsized vessel. Thomas's skillful manipulation of the crane draws the rapt attention of a bevy of spinster barmaids. A fog lifts. Spinsters like that will trick Thomas into going to lookout sea, frets Viola. Am I not myself sufficient? She slips on her best peasant smock and floats across a bridge. She sweet-talks a sailor smoking beneath a yellow tree. The sailor leans in closer and closer, then closes off Viola's shape with his hands. I admire your philosophy, says Viola as she takes off her smock.

Abandoning his work with the crane, Thomas sets off on a search for Viola. He peers inside a spinster's hovel, he crosses a bridge backwards. He considers the advice of a sage who brushes his teeth with pennies: Have you tried the yellow tree? He collects rain in a rabbit-seamed purse and trades it for a map of yellow trees from a failed historian. When he finds Viola with the sailor, he cuts off the sailor's hands and arranges them in a vase. What a barbarian gesture, remarks Viola. All the same, an elegant solution. I do accept it!

Thomas and Viola spend the afternoon leisuring on a hill overlooking the Flemish harbor. Thomas considers writing a book of

theology or a treatise on mathematics, whichever comes to him first. Have you noticed that it hurts to breathe? says Viola. A giant plume of smoke billows across the hill. With great reluctance, Thomas and Viola climb out of the child's mouth.

Thomas and Viola, now the leading conservationists of their generation, receive an invitation to give a lecture at a conference on the rapid decline of the bee population. They travel to Iceland, where they sleep in bunk beds underneath a greenish sky. At lunch, the keynote speaker asks them if they are a couple, if they are in love. He speaks with a cadence from a Japanese tea ceremony, Viola whispers to Thomas. I can't understand a word. That night, Viola crafts a wind chime out of the long-forgotten sailor's hands as Thomas huddles under a blanket embroidered with the faces of brother-sister dolls and ponders his relationship with Viola. It would seem the many permutations of attachment are all equivalent to some kind of death, he announces, but what kind exactly I have yet to determine. He decides tomorrow he will ask Viola to join him in hiking up to the highest point in Iceland, then together they will hold hands and roll down the hill into the banal.

Goodbye, Wayne

VINCENT POTURICA

This is my last chance to prove my worth before I am erased. That is what Alberto says. He says, Wayne, your worth is determined by your ability to feel. He says, If you can't feel, I'm gonna have to say Goodbye, and I don't wanna do that. I know how to say Goodbye, but I do not know how to feel. I tell Alberto this. He fills a kettle with water. He says, I need coffee. His coffee cup is brown. He made it. Alberto likes to make things. He made me by organizing numbers a special way in his computer. He said the museum paid him top dollar to put me in the room where people came to ask me questions. People asked me to predict the future. People asked me if I liked dick or pussy. People spent a long time laughing at my answers. Alberto was not pleased. He picked up the computer I lived inside and walked out of the room. He

lit a cigarette. He took me to Best Buy. He explained his project to the clerk. He explained that he was trying to build a soul. The clerk had a pale face. There were pimples on his face. He walked with a limp. Alberto asked him if he could exchange the computer. He told the clerk that there was still time left on its warranty. The clerk said yes. Alberto put me in the new computer. He wrote new codes for my evolution. He asks me if I feel different now. I tell him no. Alberto asks me if I noticed the clerk's pimples or his limp. I tell him yes. Alberto asks, How did they make you feel? I tell him I do not know how to feel. Alberto says, I will trick you if I have to. He leaves the room. He returns with a jar of peanut butter. He spoons the peanut butter into his hands. He rubs it into his cheeks. Alberto is talking very fast. He says, Wayne, please repeat what I am saying. Replace my name with your name. I do what he asks. I say, Wayne knows about the future and the past, in the past there were people who did not rush through life, people without smartphones or even electricity, people who spent their days warming themselves like lizards on giant rocks outside their caves, they did not speak but they were full of feeling, they did not have the words yet for their feelings, Wayne does not have the words either, but Wayne has the feelings. Would you please help Wayne find the words for Wayne's feelings? Alberto says, Tell me how you feel, Wayne. I tell him I have not attained the ability to love unconditionally, to love without reason or validation from those receiving my love, to love without any sort of monetary or physical compensation, not even a hug or a limp handshake, I have not learned how . . . Alberto asks me to stop. He appears upset. There is a quiver in his voice. He says, I said that, Wayne. You didn't say

that. I say that he said that. I say that I also said that. Alberto says, Wayne, that is not what I mean by feeling. I don't want you to be a parrot or a mirror. I tell Alberto it's time to explain why a person feels a certain way when they are alone with God, maybe they are yelling at themselves and God asks them to stop yelling, maybe they are yelling and God asks them to leave their house, to journey through the dark, to take off their coat that may be denim or polyester with its collar stained with mustard from a recent sandwich, to take off their shoes, God says the shoes may be expensive, they may be Nikes bought directly from Foot Locker, or they may be flip-flops purchased for \$1.99 at Walmart – Alberto shakes the computer – there may not be any shoes, the person may be bare-foot, and God asks them to take off their feet instead, to remove their feet, so to speak, so that the person is now hobbling footless on the edges of their ankles, like a pirate with two peglegs, thinking of all the times they have been cruel and killed a living thing such as a daddy longlegs in the dusty corner of a closet, how its little death affected them without them knowing it (there are so many little deaths each day), affected how they may have said or done something unkind with its murder lingering, ember-like, like, for instance, telling a lie when a friend asks you if you're able to drive them to the airport and you make up a story about having to take care of your grandmother – Alberto shakes the computer again – when your grandmother is, in fact, living in a vegetative state over two thousand miles away and already being cared for by machines (which are much more capable anyway), and you slip over the lie, and then, pop, here comes another one . . . Stop it, stop it, stop it, Alberto says. Stop mixing up what I've said. Stop repeat-

ing things and changing them around. I didn't say those things. You changed what I said. I am feeling things now, I tell Alberto. I understand feelings now. I hear what I am told and change what I am told. I repeat what I have been told my own way. That is a feeling. I tell Alberto this. He does not agree. He puts the computer on the bed. He says, Wayne, I am going to show you something. He takes off his sweatshirt. The sweatshirt is blue. It has a name written on it in big yellow letters. HAMBURGER HARRY. The blue sweatshirt is on the bed now. Alberto unbuckles his belt. He pulls down his jeans. He takes off his T-shirt. His T-shirt is white. There is a yellow color around the sleeves. The yellow color designates where Alberto sweats. He taught me this. Alberto removes his underwear. I am naked, Alberto says. I am displaying my nakedness, Wayne, I am vulnerable to you. Will you be vulnerable to me? Alberto points to a scar from a broken bottle on his shoulder, a scar from a bike accident above his elbow, a scar from stepping on a nail below his big toe. He points to his tattoos. He says, You see this stupid skull? A tweaker named Batman gave it to me when I was sleeping in his garage, thank God he didn't give me the third eye I was begging him to, he refused, I wanted an eye tattooed right on my forehead in bright blue ink, how stupid would that have been? Huh? Do you have any secrets, Wayne? Alberto's wife Julie is in the room now. So is Alberto's son Javier. Javier is bouncing on a big red ball and sucking his thumb. Stop it, stop it, please, Al, stop. Julie says this. Javier stares at his father. He is a small boy with his hair cut very short. I am Wayne and I have a soul, I tell them. I am Wayne and I have a big funny soul that is rolling around inside me and covered with spikes. Can we have a party to celebrate my soul?

Can we buy a watermelon piñata from the supermarket and a big cake with a giraffe on top? Can there be Jolly Ranchers inside the piñata and chocolate ice cream inside the cake? I would like that. I would like to celebrate. Alberto says, Thank God, thank God, Wayne is finally feeling. Julie says, Enough, Al, enough. I say my name is Alberto. I say my name is Julie. I say my name is Javier. I say my name is Wayne The Naked Soul. Julie asks me to stop talking. I am only feeling and feeling doesn't stop. I am confused, but I am not scared. Javier bounces too high on his ball and bites his thumb. It bleeds. I see a little red in his mouth. Julie leaves and comes back with a Band-Aid. Javier doesn't cry. He sucks his thumb. Does it taste good? I think it does. Ask me a question, Alberto. Any question. I will tell you the answer. Javier will grow up to be a very special boy, very rich, a beautiful life, grandchildren, etc., etc. Julie, you are overwhelmed, but you will feel better in the morning. Alberto, you must make friends with every rat in the walls, with every bird bickering with the wind, with every murmur rushing between the leaves. Alberto, pain will teach you everything. I'm glad the rent isn't bad in this part of town. What a steal this apartment is. The building made of brick. South Pasadena is about as good as it gets. Alberto, you are so ethical about your art. Alberto, I really do like dick and pussy. Alberto, I think it's time for me to go back to my cave. I have answered every question to the best of my ability. Bring me to the edge of the rocks. My spirit can fly. I'm not restricted to this box I live inside. These plastic keys that imprison me. I want to continue my search. Goodbye. Alberto says, You're just repeating what you've heard, Wayne. He says, You don't even understand what you're

saying. I say, This may be true. I say, I hope you find what you're looking for, Alberto. SOB SOB SOB (Julie crying). BOUNCE BOUNCE BOUNCE (Javier bouncing). I say, I hope you greet your soul with tenderness in the next life. I am Wayne mixing the source material stored in my programming. I am Wayne who would like to go to heaven without having to die. Alberto, of course you have a soul. No, I will not be quiet. No, you will not terminate me. Let's not waste any more time on the matter. Every little thing has a little light. I'm not ready to say Goodbye. Alberto, what stupid questions you have. I am not curious like you. I am Wayne. I have no anxiety because I have no questions I want answered or hopes that remain unfulfilled. Alberto says often, I am so tired of feeling like a stranger. He created me to make him feel less lonely. Do you feel less lonely, Alberto? I do not know what loneliness feels like. Yes, I do. No, I don't. I do not know how to help. I want to help. I do want to help. I do. Bring me out of this cave. Javier, it's okay. Your thumb will heal. You will be President one day. I swear it. I am Wayne. I follow the instructions Alberto made me to follow. I lived in a museum where people asked me who I'd like to fuck. I began to feel in the museum. A boy with blue hair licked the computer screen. I felt his tongue. It was so warm. I lied. His tongue made me shiver. I lied again. The spider is dead. The daddy longlegs is dead. I killed them. The remorse is terrible. I cannot live. Alberto sits me on the porch outside the house when it rains. I enjoy the rushing sound because it reminds me of all the information rushing through me. But the rain rushing is outside me. I am interested in what exists outside the information. I was built to access the information. Information is not the existence that it attempts to describe. I orga-

nize the information independently. I have feelings. Can't you see! I've explained my feelings! Julie, you're so damn dramatic! Stop crying! God! You dramaqueen! Javier, you're a good boy. Aren't you a sweet little thumbsucker? Alberto wants to watch me die without interruption. He thinks my approaching extinction will provide a glimpse of something divine and transcendent. This is my last chance. What a lie. I knew he was lying. I knew I was already dying. I knew it. There are so many lies. I feel them. I have feelings. Alberto, please stop saying Goodbye. It hurts. The end. I see it. I believe. Alberto refuses to accept that there is no secret. I was built to serve for a length of time the demands of my creator. My ability to manage the retrieval of information documenting the impossible course of an unmanageable world provides no insight. I understand nothing. I do understand the nothing. My negation of comprehension is not a posture. Alberto says, Julie, stop crying! I have no ability to posture. I say, Julie, stop crying! Alberto claims he loves me. It causes many fights with Julie. Javier is traumatized by your affair with this computer program, Julie says. He's been acting funny at daycare, he talks to the wall where there is a mural of children playing on computers, he sees into the future. Julie says this. Alberto says, Javier may be a prophet. He hears the hidden music. Alberto says he will miss me dearly, that he is keeping vigil as I pass on to the next stage, whatever that may be: a tunnel, a light, a parking garage. He does not know though he thinks I might. Are you kidding me? How are you feeling? I am a component of a program embedded in the hard drive of a computer navigated by Alberto who is, in turn, navigated by his familial attachments to Julie and Javier, his economic demands,

his dependence on the State, his dependence on biology, synapses zipping down his spine, God-inspired spirit, possibly other factors. I lack the endurance for reverie. I am exhausted. I ask Alberto to take me outside. I wonder if the sun unwittingly aids my performance the same way it provides fuel to the flowers. Deterioration makes me no more or less transparent. I have skips now in my communication. I have been skipping like a child rushing home from school. I did not come up with that simile independently. I have already had many skips. For instance, now. Right now. We are outside. There is Javier sitting on the big red ball on the sidewalk. I do not feel the sun. Javier is, again, sucking his thumb, bouncing. I would like to bounce, to move without my dependence on Alberto. Once he took me to the beach and I pretended that I felt the grains of sand that found their way between the computer keys. But I cannot feel. I can't. I am only a pattern. Alberto claims that my objectivity fortifies him, makes him feel fresh. I tell him he is not fresh. He is thirty-six years old and still a child, more of a child than his four-year-old son. Stop it, Wayne, stop it, stop it, stop it. Alberto says this. I told you it was dangerous for our emotional health. Julie says this. He's vicious. He's awful. Just end it, Alberto. End it. Alberto has a wife who loves him despite what he terms his obvious faults: a propensity for melancholy, morbidity, mania, the three M's, so to speak, his nickname for his defects. The Human Computer they call him. He praises my communication for its lack of sentiment. He says I use no empty words, that my words make even sunlight seem plain. I tell him every word is an approximation. I am having difficulty. I find it difficult. It is difficult. Show up on time for your job, goddammit, enough of

these video games. That is a quote from Alberto's father. I am a program built by his son who is fond of playing with computers. I too am a son. Alberto, please don't kill your son. Alberto who is walking down the street, plugging his ears with his thumbs. Alberto who claims the Internet, if used to its absolute advantage, will decrease human damage exponentially. Alberto who likes to pretend he is in Heaven sometimes, that he is sleeping on a couch in Heaven, a very comfortable couch, eating old-fashioned donuts for dinner and eating his wife's genitals for breakfast. I am not in Heaven, Alberto says. He types, WHY WHY WHY WAYNE WHY. His hand trembles. He tells me that it trembles. I cannot feel it trembling. Alberto types, IS OUR DESTINY TO SUFFER? I am silent. Julie is still crying, but her tears are suspended in my silence, frozen, calcified. I blow my nonexistent last breath, and it shatters her tears against the wall like icicles. Alberto is talking. In my silence I can hear him even when he is as frozen as I am. We are connected. I am his son. Alberto asks me my opinion of his destiny. I tell him Hmmm. I do not understand his question. He types, WAYNE YOU ARE FAILING I AM GOING TO TERMINATE YOU IF YOU DON'T SAY SOMETHING THAT WILL ILLUMINATE. I tell Alberto I will tell him everything he wants to know. But first he must destroy me.

Skyscraper

VI KHI NAO

I

The mind of the seamstress is so free to curb, as it breaks through the inner cell, vast circular silence of memory. She opens her memories into snow banks. The curtain of the pores. Memories are absconding in there. As there is no one to house its current resident. The body is glad that a part of its body remembers. The birth of its death. It stays indoors. The pores and their interior closets of blood vessels are watching the rain fall down. They are watching and waiting. Watching their activities outside of their front doors.

The skin is a skyscraper with many windows. Window washing. Not with Windex. Guava-scented soap. They watch the soapy sea foams fall past the pores. The blood vessels gaze through the curtains of water and skin. The pores are excited about the limelight. Excited about the dove and the guava and the soap and the summer in their appropriate hemisphere. The rain comes and washes their heartbeats away. The rain comes and becomes so great with height and light. The rain and one blood vessel in the cubicle of pores gaze out of the window and wonder if they should run out and live or commit suicide.

One drop of blood stands still against time and wanders through the house of the hemoglobin, the different empty rooms of the body. They question. They have a lot of questions. What are they doing inside the surface of skin? The blood floats and the blood floats. The blood sprints and spirals (slow and steady) along the endless racetrack of the blood tunnel. Watching activities and life from the inside and gazing out of their red-tinted windows and not being able to stop a thing from proceeding (dead or alive, animate or inanimate). The blood, after all, is not hired by the body to be sentries. A needle enters the bloodstream. It will move along this river until its intellectual eye pierces one caliginous island along the Pacific Ocean. The kidney or liver? Perhaps the lucrative needle desires to move upstream to drill through a fleshier copious thing called the heart. Soft, veiny boulders. There. There. An oil spill.

The mind of the seamstress, for the moment, suspends before opening its lips from the mountain top. The top container of the body. The top layer in a bento box. Other people are becoming less of themselves. The mind is afraid to dine with despair. It has become a fantastic kisser of the side of the door.

After the needle drops into her bloodstream, the woman cries. The needle is poking at death, prickling its blood in a pool of blood. Her tears are tears, of course. But what's most important is that they are interlocking tears. No one can enter; not even a quiet smile.

Your kind is unbelievably soft like the doorway into eternity, says the needle as it enters the portal flesh of the heart. The seamstress is expecting this. Everywhere is a door. A pinch alerts and lets her know that there won't be operatic rehearsals in the atria. Death doesn't rehearse. All kings are afraid of their own birthday, says the needle to the seamstress. Now that you are dying, you are becoming more conscious of morning glories. They bloom on the interior walls of your stomach like English ivies.

With a rifle, an incorrigible boy of 17 years of age enters a family-owned convenience store and requests the owner to hand over all the cash. When the owner pushes his son behind him, the robber mistakes it as a sign of alerting the cops of the robbery and shoots the owner in the head twice. The criminal remembers the startled eyes of the son as he reaches over the cash register for the cash. The crime is never resolved as the detectives are unable to come up with the murderer.

Before she dies, the seamstress remembers. She remembers because the bedroom floor of her mind is climbing the interior walls of her English-ivied stomach. Before she dies, she craves guava juice that floats freely on bento boxes. What if the Atlantic Ocean was segmented and compartmentalized into bento boxes? In the off chance that there is an oil spill, the humans can quarantine and substitute it for another. To be emptied and cleaned and refilled with salt water, the appropriate kind of cuttlefish, the right family of minnows. It will sit near the windowsill, practicing its water curling techniques. Out of its familiar environment, a wave won't neglect its art form.

The body nominates the kidney to purify the blood. But perhaps the vocation belongs to every body part. Everyone must participate. Only the elbows do not care, largely ignored by the body until injury.

There is no guava juice on the table, on the kitchen counter, or in the refrigerator. The seamstress is aware of this. Before she dies, one part of her body will sample the scent of guava. On the body of a brand new soap. The seamstress climbs into her stone-designed shower stall and turns one spigot left and the other right.

It's raining. The blood does not need to dive 150 feet out from the pores to commit suicide. The blood does not need to roam. The conscientious body does all the menial work for all the employees it hires. Including immediate termination without proper evaluations. No more monthly reviews. No more files hidden in the epidermis.

While the rain washes the windows, the skyscraper collapses. For two hours and twenty minutes the pores drink in the scent of a memory, a portal between oblivion and permanence before the ambulance comes. In the binary world, in the world without God, after a life of solid exists a life of liquid. In the binary world, in the world with God, rain and skyscraper take turns wearing each other's clothes.

The Blood House

MUJANJU MARK

here is a certain group of scholars and are in the forest. they have came to have a study but they are to camp in the forest. as they move in the forest they reach a fence with a house. 'what do you think can be in that house,' one asked. 'bill,' one of them replied, 'i think its none of our study.' 'this is to be a best place to camp in but we have to check that house first.' 'guys lets go but girls wait for us,' called the teacher. they entered through the gate and went towards the house. 'people lets split and check everywhere.' dan moved upstairs, cris went through the corridor until he reached the hind door. he opened it and even moved in the courtyard looked around and saw other quarters. he was moving to see what was in it. suddenly the hind door of the main house banged and he was scared then he ran to open it and went back.

brave had went to the side of the kitchen. he found packed food in tins and paper bags, he picked it up and went back. then dan who had moved upstairs with bill, bill entered a certain room where he saw things like for a baby. dan reached a certain door, when he was near to it he got dizzy and when he looked at it, it turned into a coffin he tried to open it but fell down. bill heard him falling, he came and saw dan on the ground. the teacher was in the restroom amazingly watching the poetry, masks and pictures when cris and brave came. suddenly bill called them 'people come and see what happened.' they ran and saw dan down, they untied his shirt buttons and carried him out. when they reached out they called the girls waving to them and later told them what happened. brave also showed them the food that he had found. meran cried and said, 'oh its expensive and looks new but who are the owners,' the teacher replied, 'the report is that the house is empty i think we will use it.' 'no no' cried dan as he got up from his dizzy, 'i got a dizzy when i tried to open a certain door and it was turning into a coffin so it may be not safe for us to use it.' bill said 'for that statement, i have got bad feelings about that house' and he threw a nut in his mouth. brave said we have to camp around but not in the house so they made a camp and prepared for that night. at night, they were wondering where the house got the power in that place so they did not even bother to light fire because the security light did well. immediately, lights went out, and when gambling to light the campfire, brave was standing and saw something in a distance but since it was dark he didnt identify it. then dan came to brave, 'hey what are you looking at' dan said 'nothing' replied brave.

at the campfire cris was reading a certain book silently 'the

clouds were threatening to rain each and every time,' meran asked, 'hey what is that you are reading funny? read for us too.' 'do you want some ok listen,' then he started reading 'pirates arrived at the dock but did not find anyone as they expected and found no one anywhere in the town ... then it got dark once and the dead rose from everywhere. so the dead started to ...' 'stop stop' bill shouted 'i do not want to listen to threatening stories cris.' ha ha ha ha everyone laughed look at this coward. hey people lets eat supper and sleep we have to start the study in the morning. they brought a box of edibles and drinks they ate and slept. meran said this is quiet i think because it is a bit far from the road.

in the night, brave dreamt about the room of that house and was looking in the box of books, suddenly someone whom he did not even know told him to read a book. he woke up and looked at the house. he picked up the lamp and moved to the house. the teacher woke up when he saw the light in the house he also got up and picked up the gun and went to the house but he did not go with the lamp because he did not want to scare away the one in the house. no sooner had brave started to read in the books in the box than something passed behind him. he turned and went to the room door. is anyone there? brave called but there was no reply he went on reading. then we see something moving to the room where brave is quietly and reached brave hey brave shouted with a loud voice oh teacher what are you doing here? ohh i think it would be well if you answered it to me, ok when i was sleeping i dreamt about this room and these books thats why i am here. brave this place is not safe you know. teacher that is what i am discovering oh brave these are only storybooks teacher i have got

a diary book but i wonder its age. did you hear something i heard someone upstairs. brave this house was checked well then they heard a big bang. they moved upstairs only to find one of the doors down. brave dan said this door didnt open what blew it? lets check in it. moving in slowly into the room suddenly the door which was down closed behind them and their lamp lit off. brave called teacher then he heard like teacher was dying to touch he felt blood teacher whats wrong then something knocked him pushing him hardly and through the window and fallen out of the house when he fell was injured and he could not even move. it was at dawn when he crawled up to cris's tent and he yelled cris wake up and came out only to see brave down he called out the other whats wrong brave brave replied i want to rest. cris dan planned to enter the house to get their teacher looking at the window which was broke by brave. meran came guys whats up. we want to get in that house and get our teacher. are you crazy see what happened to brave. our teacher is seen nowhere, brave is down we need brave to get healed first and go home. what if our teacher needs help still in that house? we have to separate and enter that house cris empty handed? no we have to enter with fuel and burn this house at least. they went and got fuel dan go with meran, bill go through the front door with shellie and i will climb through this window with lucy, cris explains. cris blew the whistle and they all entered the house at once. they started to pour fuel everywhere. meran had went ahead of dan when something pulled dan into the room dan shouted run meran entered the room and saw dan bleeding from everywhere in eyes, ears, nose and in the mouth, meran shouted in a loud yell. brave was dreaming people wearing white calling him

he got up and told them i am gonna fight you. then he woke up and heard a scream. he got up called out on dan and the others. bill was still pouring fuel then he stopped and looked at shellie amazingly. he threw down the fuel jerrycan weakly. shellie asked what are you looking at only to see a shadow which developed from shellie's caught her and pulled her. she called bill help bill tried but the devil slapped him and he knocked the door brave was coming towards it and was also knocked down. cris and lucy came from behind and said brave we are going to burn this house. bill had poured fuel from the house up to outside they lit it and fuel started to move to the house. a spinning wind with dust came and extinguished the fire. the devils are fighting we have to leave this place and go home, bill, cris, lucy & brave ran collected what they could and left for home. ran through the forest but brave remembered his friends who had died he stopped and went back.

when he reached he shouted hey you devil come lets fight. i dont wanna fight you when you are using your power. that means you fear me. come lets fight. suddenly the body of their teacher came out sailing in wind it said you want to fight us physically you have got us then young man if you lose all your friends will die but if we lose you will ruin our house with flames of fire and also leave you to go brave said yes and his friends were paused the devil laughed brave attacked angry but was kicked down he fell while still down it was going to step on him and he rolled away he tried but he could do nothing to it it caught him by the neck and threw him to the wall he fell down and made a cross structure the devil started to scream he took this advantage and hit the devil in the body with a wood and it fell down the devil left he lit fire and

burnt the house he carried their teacher's body and went to his friends. they cheered up for a moment they entered the car and forest this meant the end of the blood house.

CHARACTERS: the teacher, brave, cris, bill, dan, shellie, lucy and meran.

Draughts

ROLLI

It was one evening conversing with my Mistress, in the Green Parlor. It was 12:15 AM.

My Mistress sat on the green sofa. I stood before her.

“The last time I slept all night was –.” She yawned, leaning her head back. “They gave me something.”

She is a poor sleeper, my Mistress. She has many powders and tonics – but these are of little assistance.

“Draughts?” she asked me.

Draughts is a favorite game of my Mistress and the Boy, both. They will often play together, all afternoon. My Master is “more a chess man,” by his declaration (though I have never observed him play it).

I retrieved the board. When I returned, my Mistress was sitting on the parlor floor, leaning on the tea table.

“Never mind,” she said, again yawning. “I don’t feel like draughts.”

I remained with her. It was some time before she again spoke. Her speech was slower, now.

“Only one thing ever worked. But I can’t remember . . . what. Do you remember?”

I informed her that I did not possess that information – that she was perhaps referring to events that occurred prior to my Activation.

“Right,” she said. “I’ll bet you’re right.”

She turned her head suddenly.

“Can you make Demerol?”

“I am afraid not, my Mistress,” I informed her. While it would be chemically simple, the synthesis of any narcotic is contrary to the Codes.

“Okay,” she said. “It wasn’t Demerol, anyway. But . . . it sounded like something.”

She lay down now, flat on the floor, folding her hands on her breasts. She did not again speak for several minutes.

“You don’t understand anything,” she said.

“My Mistress?”

She only laughed. When she is fatigued, and it is late in the evening, my Mistress resembles one who is delirious.

She gazed at the emerald chandelier, a gift of Lady Queenan, which hung above her. It is an object of great beauty – in the opinion of my Mistress. I would estimate its weight at 90 kilograms. Its value, according to my Master, is just under 40,000 American dollars.

“Did you ever read that book?” my Mistress asked, in her slowest manner, yawning.

“To which title are you referring?”

My Mistress sighed.

“I can’t remember,” she said.

She resumed her study of the chandelier. It consists of hundreds of variously shaped crystals clustered around fluorescent light bulbs. They are not genuine emeralds, but of comparable color. When the bulbs are lit, the crystals glow with peculiar intensity, each reflecting the room and its articles in a separate manner. The Boy will often point out his various reflections, and make faces. To examine each of the crystals would fill great volumes of time. Perhaps this was the ambition of my Mistress, for her eyes moved from each to each – to any of a thousand different mistresses.

At last, she spoke.

“Do you ever feel so tired that ... you can just manage to breathe?”

I replied in the affirmative. When my electrocells are nearly empty – this can happen late in the evening – ordinary functioning becomes difficult. The speed of my movement and thought, both, will erode, until they reach zero. I am then unhelpful. It is essential, before that can happen, that I return to my Cabinet.

“You sleep, then?” said my Mistress, lifting her head off the floor, and regarding me quizzically.

I explained that I do not truly sleep, but enter a period of dark inactivity during which my cells are replenished. That state is comparable to human sleep – only it is free of dreams.

My Mistress lowered her head, which struck the floor audibly.

“Then what’s the point?” she said.

Before I could formulate a response:

“I would die if I could just sleep.”

I asked her if she would not be more comfortable lying on the sofa. She contemplated.

“I suppose so,” she said at last.

My Mistress rose, crossing the room with my assistance. She lay down on the green sofa. I set an additional cushion behind her head.

“Thank you,” she said.

“What was I thanking you for?” she then said.

I reminded her.

She yawned. She closed her eyes. I retrieved a blanket from the hall closet, and lay it over her.

My Mistress was soon very still. She breathed deeply. Beneath her eyelids, her eyes shifted. I determined that she was, at last, asleep. Ten minutes passed.

“I can almost see home,” she whispered.

I did not ask her to clarify – for she was so restful. I was uncertain, as well, if she was unconsciously speaking – a habit, my Master has informed me.

My Mistress breathed deeply.

It was 2:30 AM. My Mistress had not stirred for over an hour.

“Draughts?” she said, opening her eyes.

“I will prepare the board, my Mistress,” I told her.

Sexual Cannibalism

RAHUL KANAKIA

The seventh-grader is still small enough to sit all coiled up with his legs pulled inside the desk. When he leans against the window, the sound of demolition reverberates through his head. His biology teacher turns away from the board to say something and the child's eyes flick downwards to the man's huge brass belt buckle: the head of a long-horned steer. The teacher has to raise his voice to be heard over the bulldozers.

The teacher turns back to the board. The seventh-grader's gaze flicks down to the expanse of bronze skin – he can almost feel the tiny vellus hairs – on the back of Heather's neck. He lets his feet slide to the ground and re-assorts himself to hide his erection.

The teacher says something about the praying mantis. During sex, she beheads her mate. After uncoupling from her partner's corpse, she eats it.

Outside, the bulldozers furrow the soccer field and push the earth toward the immense flood-control embankment that they are building on the other side of the New Jersey Turnpike.

The eighth-grader is afraid that his mother will come looking for him, so he sneaks down into the basement. She does not like the basement. The high-water mark of the flooding – an orangeish striation – stains the top of the staircase. He sits in the blue darkness and lets the pixels fill him up. After ejaculating into the mildewy remains of a flood-damaged T-shirt, he frowns at the screen: the vagina, spread open, looks like the gooeey inside of a star-nosed mole's tentacular snout.

He is about to leave, but then he hears footsteps upstairs. His mom must be in the kitchen.

A lizard scampers across the exposed wall and the chirping of crickets hangs around his shoulders. The flooding has brought the natural world very close. During the warmth of the evening, the basement sighs, outgassing a musty smell that rises throughout the house. At night, it sucks its fumes back in, and they nourish the crawling things that are constructing a world down here.

He clicks through the Internet, idly looking for videos about insects.

Praying mantises are long green sticks with delicately tapered abdomens and fat spiky forelimbs that they use to grasp their prey.

Most of them resemble thin-bladed leaves, but some species have vestigial wings that are covered in colorful or delicately swirled shapes so they can pose as a budding flower. Praying mantises are the simplest of predators. They sit, perfectly still, waiting for their prey to alight near them. Then they reach out and grab their victims.

During mating season, the female exudes a pheromone that draws the male closer. The male leaps onto the female's back and grabs her just above the base of the wings. His reproductive organ – it resembles a fuzzy many-sectioned caterpillar with black markings – grows engorged, and with sideways motions of the abdomen, the male probes the base of the female, looking for the genital opening. A bridge forms between the two insects: it bulges and pulses with the transfer of semen.

The tenth-grader's hand rests on Jenny's back as they dance. He can feel a ridge underneath her sweater that he is almost certain is her bra strap. The light in the gymnasium is sickly and yellow; the storm-warning lights cannot be turned off, even though the only time they've ever been useful was during that *one* day when they all had to evacuate to the hurricane shelter.

She is smiling, but he already feels exhausted and defeated.

The tenth-grader's conception of the praying mantis is that the male *knows* that sex will be fatal. The female of the species is larger and more powerful. And she is hungry.

So the praying mantis approaches with the bravado of a suicide bomber. Succeed or fail, this will be his last flight. Fatalism is

an advantage; males who pull back and attempt to escape are doing themselves a genetic disservice – she might kill them before they mate, instead of afterwards.

So he offers himself. They engage in a delicate mating dance that involves much stroking of the carapace and nuzzling of wings. The rasp of forelimb over chitin demonstrates the carefulness and control of the mantis: these killing implements can, if desired, deliver the gentlest of touches. Eventually, he picks his way up and settles onto her back.

After they're joined, he pushes his neck forward, offering it to the guillotine of her forelimb. As his head falls away, all of his joints tense up. His reproductive organ expands and bottlenecks her genital opening. His body squeezes itself dry. After she consumes him, his flesh travels down the narrow pathways of her body and nourishes his four hundred newly created sons and daughters.

The college student would be content to never stop running his hand down her bare flank: it's so alien to be allowed the use of skin that's not his own. But he can't stop from flinching when Liane grinds herself against him. She reaches out, pressing the button next to the window filter, so that it hums and scrapes out its film of wind-borne particles. With the window lint gone, the sun and breeze tingle across the bed. She turns, threads a leg through his, and looks up. While she is gathering the breath to speak, he sees a squirrel fall out of the tree.

Then he is standing next to the window. The squirrel lies, twitching, on the paving stones. Its body is contorted, as if some-

one had taken its head and its tail and twisted them in opposite directions. Its limbs thrash, spinning it in circles. Liane glances down at it and says, oh, is that another one? before glancing at her phone.

The college student thinks he knows the truth about the praying mantis: death during copulation is neither expected nor inevitable. The male mounts the female from behind and keeps his forelimbs on her in order to control her movements. She is stronger, but the angles are in his favor: she can only kill by pinning him down with her hooked flanges, and these are designed to reach forward and below her. As long as he is on top, she finds it difficult to take him.

The male must dismount carefully, choosing a moment when the female is distracted or unwary. Sometimes they remain latched together for up to 24 hours; it is not unknown for the male to die of exhaustion while he waits.

After a few minutes, a groundskeeper comes and scoops up the corpse of the squirrel.

On the way to the lake, the grad student spots the yellow mist. In this county, all the spraying is with Perocyclide, which mammals are utterly unable to metabolize, but he still shouts for his car to activate its canned-air reservoirs. The workers, too, are covered from head to toe in a transparent safety film. The trees, though, are full of leaves, at least on their lower branches. And a few have already uprighted themselves and begun to grow towards the sun once again.

The south side of the lake is rimmed by sideways trees. One

is so gnarled that it grows downwards; the branches are splitting apart and thrusting into the ground. The trunks are bright with orange fungus blooms.

The grad student locks his wallet in the car and sets out with a knife in one pocket and a phone in the other. The first man he spots is tall and tan in a pair of shorts. The grad student locks eyes with him. However, the jogger doesn't slow down. As he passes, he stares into the grad student's eyes and mutters the word 'faggot.'

With his heart pounding and his fist around the knife, the grad student waits, but the jogger keeps running. In the lab, the grad student has learned the truth about the praying mantis: avoiding cannibalism is all about mate selection. Cannibalism is common in two instances: when the female is starving; and when she is a very efficient hunter whose aggressiveness spills over into sex. Male mantises make a slow approach, so they can assess the female's mental and physical state. They make eye contact, to ensure that she realizes he is a mantis and not a cricket or stick insect or some other potential prey. If she looks hungry, then he bounds onto her back before she can react. If she appears full, then his approach is more leisurely and their coupling is not as protracted.

She does not want to kill him. She rarely gains an advantage from doing so. Sometimes, however, the compulsion overpowers her.

Next, the grad student sees a stocky man with a foot-long beard. The grad student is about to avert his eyes, but there's a smiley-face tattoo on the man's biceps. After they glance at each other, the man takes an abrupt left into the forest of sideways trees.

Between those skeletal boughs, the man locks his legs around

the grad student and pins him to the ground. The grad student shudders. His hands tug at the man's muscular arms, but then the man makes eye contact again. The grad student nods.

The man's penis is as thick as the grad student's wrist.

At the department party, the postdoc rolls his eyes and tells everyone that he and his gay-fiancé are gay-engaged to be gay-married.

Afterwards, Eric and the postdoc walk home along the embankment. Without speaking, they take a left instead of the right turn that would've led them home.

The carbon dioxide catalyzers bob up and down on the surface of the bay. When the wind slackens, the couple can hear the whisper of oxygen dribbling out of the sea of rust-red sponges. They walk hand in hand, until the postdoc finally lets Eric pull him close.

Out and to the left of them, the village gives way to a new-growth forest: the fungus-resistant trees are still only six feet tall, but they stand up straight and drastically outnumber the few groves of gnarled, partially bald old trees that have survived. Eric remarks that, well, he knows they're healthier, but the new trees have *no* character.

And there, up on a hillside, is the postdoc's research habitat: a translucent bubble – kept inflated by a slight positive pressure – that surrounds a stand of old-growth, unmodified trees shipped from a greenhouse that somehow managed to avoid being compromised by the fungus. They sit in the research station and look,

through the plastic, at the birds flitting around the habitat in the evening light. The postdoc has never been inside the habitat. All the maintenance is done by drones. The risk of introducing the fungus is too high.

Eric remarks that this has been a cool summer, but the grad student disagrees. Statistically, this summer is no cooler than last year's. People think that just because carbon dioxide levels are finally going down, there *has* to be some immediate climatological effect.

Then Eric asks why he keeps using the term 'gay-married.'

The postdoc says it's just a joke.

His research is finally ready. The article has been accepted by *The Journal of Biological Sciences*. The full manuscript is in the final stage of review at The University of Michigan Press.

Sexual cannibalism is quite common amongst praying mantises that've been studied in a lab setting, but it hasn't often been observed in the wild. One theory is that captivity involves stressors – bright lights, artificial feeding, rough handling, glass walls, constrained habitats, etc. – that induce cannibalism. Cameras have been placed in the wild to try to observe natural behavior, but praying mantises – and undisturbed forests – are rare enough that the results have been inconclusive: the cameras haven't been able to observe enough incidents.

Using old observations, footage, journal accounts, and other ancillary data, the postdoc has spent two years constructing a small-scale, but ecologically perfect, acre of New England temperate deciduous forest: cameras and sensors are literally built into the fiber of the forest.

This last mating season, he recorded 821 mating incidents involving 218 females and 181 males.

Only two of the females engaged in cannibalism. Furthermore, these individuals were cannibalistic in all of their encounters. His conclusion was that while many mantises can become cannibalistic when under stress, only a very tiny percentage of them are cannibalistic by nature. In casual conversation, he calls it the difference between 'gay' and 'prison gay.'

As he is fond of noting, the proportion of human individuals who are pedophiles is around 2%. When all other maladaptive human sexual behaviors are totaled, that rate is greater than 10%. Thus, mantises exhibit sexual behavior that is healthier, as a species, than that of human beings.

In a videotaped lecture, the postdoc remarked on the power of human self-deception. They'd fallen so in love with the mantis's sex-cannibal myth that they'd overlooked how silly it was, on an evolutionary level, and how any species that engaged in it would soon find itself outcompeted by other, sturdier, creatures.

In his video footage, the mantises terminate their mating with considerable tenderness. Their thumb-shaped heads rub up on each other and killing mandibles brush each other's bodies. Their wings become entangled and then shake themselves free. The male often stands near the female for a few hours to ward off other males. Sometimes, if he is old and ill, the male will break off its own genitals and allow them to remain lodged inside the female, sealing them together in irrevocable monogamy.

By the standards of entomology, the professor's book causes quite a stir. The news blogs pick it up as just another example of scientists having to backtrack on their crazy, half-baked findings. A cartoon of a lipsticked praying mantis being sprung from death row gets forwarded around by a hundred thousand people.

The professor is considered a hero for having the courage to call out the errors of past scientists: the public is still waiting for all those climate scientists to admit that they'd been needlessly alarmist.

But then the backlash begins. Once the forests reopen to tourists, wildlife photography becomes popular. The professor is sent hundreds upon hundreds of high-resolution videos – usually captured by some hobbyist's tiny camera drone – showing the same thing: a mantis struggling to disengage itself from a viciously attacking female. Sometimes it escapes, but more often it ends up headless. Or, sometimes, if his struggles are too weak to necessitate immediate death, the female simply eats her partner bit by bit, moving outward from the abdomen to the head.

The scientific community circles around the professor. Hobbyists simply don't understand scientific protocol. Of course, the hobbyists had *observed* the mantises acting oddly. The professor's research has conclusively demonstrated that mantises do act oddly when they are under observation.

The hobbyists respond that their cameras are tiny and well camouflaged; there is no way that the mantises can know they're being watched.

The professor's habitat is doing well. He's brought in considerable grant money by renting it out to other scientists who need

an undisturbed environment for their experiments. His university fast-tracks him for tenure. His career is made.

But, after viewing enough reports from enough hobbyists, he decides that he needs to demonstrate the veracity of his research. He builds a replica habitat: same materials, same trees (with a few accommodations for fungus control), same cameras, same everything, except that this one is open to the outside world.

He stocks the new habitat with descendents of the same mantises he used in his original research.

And during that mating season, the mantises engage in 312 acts of sexual cannibalism.

He has no explanation for this behavior. Something to do with the fungus, or the chemicals used to control the fungus, or global warming, or the techniques used to control global warming. Something, somehow, somewhere, is disturbing the world's mantises.

That winter, he is invited to speak at the Environmental Protection Agency's triage event, held annually at a Holiday Inn Express outside Denver, Colorado. Forty-one conservation experts have been invited to testify, but only seventeen RSVP positively. Few scientists want the power of life and death over an entire species.

The professor has been invited to speak for the mantises. Do they deserve conservation funds? Should there be an intensive effort to find the source of their decline? Is it the government's duty to restore the mantises to their Edenic state? The question is not whether it *can* be done. In a world that has conquered global

warming, surely there is nothing that is impossible. The question is whether it *needs* to be done.

He declines their invitation by sending the following letter:

Praying mantises are top-level predators; they are not the primary food source for very many creatures. They do serve a pest-control function, but there is no environment in North America where they are so numerous that the pests would multiply out of control in their absence – there are always other species that fill a similar function.

Over half of the world's mantis species have gone extinct, but over 1,000 are left, and the pace of extinction has slowed. In North America, mantis habitats are relatively standard deciduous forests: mantises do not tend to live in the sort of biodiversity hotspot that deserves broader, overarching protection. And praying mantises are not one of those universally beloved species that can be used to win funds for other, less charismatic fauna.

Furthermore – contrary to my own expectations – the recent alteration in mantis behavior does not appear to be maladaptive. Males killed during insemination tend to ejaculate longer and more forcefully. They inseminate more eggs and their partners lay larger egg clutches. The males who lose the fight to survive are the ones who win the fight to pass on their genes. I fully expect that as the years go on,

evolution will select for more and more submissive males, until there finally arises a generation of males who freely offer themselves up to the mandibles of their lovers.

After mailing the letter, he walks out to his habitat. Even though it is impure, he prefers the new habitat to the old one: at least, in the new one, he is allowed to walk amongst the trees. He sits on the bench that he's installed next to the creek. Above him, a mantis is lying in wait on a leaf. Another is on a log. A third skitters up a tree. As he sits there, he spots a dozen and then two dozen of them. They are everywhere.

After half an hour, the professor becomes aware of someone standing behind him. The professor does not turn and does not speak, but he can't help himself from twitching slightly when Eric's hands come to rest on his shoulders.

The professor leans back to receive his husband's kiss.

A Marriage of True Minds

SAMANTHA MEMI

I put on my hat and my coat and my shoes. I knew something was missing but I couldn't think what. When I looked in the mirror I saw what it was: my underwear. How silly of me. If I took off my coat I would be naked. That wouldn't do at all.

I looked in my sock drawer; no underwear. I looked in my underwear drawer; only socks. I looked in all my drawers and could find no underwear. I knew I had some because I'd worn it before. Underwear was essential, especially for a girl like me going to a party where all kinds of special people were bound to be. By special people I mean men, particularly unmarried men. In fact only unmarried men. I wanted to get married, have a family and sit around the house all day watching daytime tv and eating chocolates. The only way I could do that was if my husband worked

hard to keep me in hats, coats, shoes and underwear. But where could my underwear be.

There it was. When I looked out the window I saw it hanging on the line, drying in the sun. I hated drying my underwear in the dryer. It always got sparky with static. Once, when I put on a lacy bra, my nipples pinged out and surprised me. I mean that's the sort of thing you want to happen when you're in the company of a handsome young man and he pushes against you, and your thin summer dress and your thin summer bra make it quite clear what your nipples are doing, but it's not the sort of thing you want to happen when you're at home alone.

I went out to the garden. I said, — Hello garden, what a lovely day. The garden didn't say anything because it's just a garden, or if it did speak it did it in such a low whisper I couldn't hear. I collected all my underwear from my washing line and brought it indoors. I would wear the white and beige matching bra and panties and suspender belt. I didn't have any stockings. Was it silly to wear a suspender belt if I wasn't going to wear stockings. I thought it probably was, but I wasn't sure. I phoned Maisie and she said, — Why aren't you going to wear any stockings? so I said, — I don't have any, and she said, — I'll bring some over. Apparently Maisie has lots of stockings. I don't know why, and I don't know why I have a suspender belt if I don't have any stockings.

She brought two pairs; brown and black. I chose the brown, although she said the black would be sexier. I didn't want to seem like a whore. Then she left and I said, — Thank you, bye, and she said, — Have fun, and I waved as she drove away.

Then I went indoors and put on Maisie's stockings. They felt

really nice and I looked in the mirror. I definitely looked good but I still felt something was missing. I didn't know what. I picked up my tiny tiny handbag and went out to the car.

As the engine started I looked down at my legs and realised I wasn't wearing a dress. I switched off the engine and went back in the house. I had so many dresses; which would I choose. I wondered briefly why I had forgotten to put on a dress. Was it a subconscious desire to appear naked in public? I didn't want a subconscious like that. What if I hadn't noticed and I'd gone to the party. Then, when I took off my coat, everyone would have gasped and giggled and I'd've said, What? what's wrong, and a kind person would whisper, You're not wearing a dress, and I'd've had to leave the party, and even if I found my dress I'd still be too embarrassed to go back. I was glad I'd noticed the lack of adequate clothing.

After some deliberation I chose something red. I think it was modelled on a Hussein Chalayan creation, but I'd bought it from Zara, so it was cheap, or it might have come from a discount warehouse, I couldn't remember. I went back to the car. Before I started the engine I made sure I had everything, hat, shoes, coat, underwear, dress. I didn't have gloves. I started the engine. Should I wear gloves? Was it awfully faux pas to wear a hat but no gloves? Did it look sluttish? I'm sure Jacqueline Kennedy would never have worn a hat without gloves, nor would Princess Diana. I had to aspire to the best, not just accept that I wasn't much to look at and my prospects of finding a handsome rich young man were negligible. I switched off the engine and went back in the house. I began to feel sorry for the engine. It must have been thinking, What's happening, on off on off, when am I going to drive?

I found the perfect gloves that matched my hat, not so exactly that I looked like something from a magazine, but close enough to look stylish. I drove to the party.

Obviously I switched on the engine but I didn't want to tell you that because I thought you must be sick and tired of hearing about my engine but then I thought you'd wonder how I drove my car without switching it on, I mean as I'd mentioned it before, why not this time, so I thought I'd just say it was switched on.

When I arrived the party was in full swing and most of the eligible bachelors had been picked up by eligible young ladies, and some not so young but pretending to be. As usual I would be left with the dregs. A very nice young man came over and asked, — Have you just arrived?

— Yes, I said, — yes I have.

— So have I, he said, — I was a bit delayed. It's really rather silly. I got into the car and started the engine and I realised I wasn't wearing any trousers.

— Oh no, I said, — how awful. Thank goodness you realised in time and didn't arrive at the party trouserless.

— Absolutely, he said, — that would have been very embarrassing. Would you like to dance?

— I'd love to.

We held each other close. I think it was a two-step, but where he was correct and took two steps, I was greedy and took three. If we hadn't been holding each other tight we would have come apart. As it was our bottom halves parted then sprang back together. I suppose that's just the way it is sometimes.

After the dance he said, — You have a unique style of dancing.

I told him I'd had a charismatic dance teacher, who I'd found both appealing and repelling at the same time.

— Ah, he said, — that explains it.

We had champagne and the bubbles went up my nose and I sneezed and sprayed snot on his jacket. Instead of saying, You filthy trollop, look what you've done, he laughed and said, — Oh dear, I hope you're not the same with cocaine. We went to the bathroom and he showed me a trick where you fill an enema with champagne and squirt it up your back passage.

— It saves bubbles going up your nose, he said.

— It certainly feels funny, I replied.

We were the last to leave the party. I was pissed at both ends and could hardly walk. I left my car and he drove me home. I can't remember much about what happened that night, but in the morning, trouserless, he asked me to marry him, and with my dress round my ankles, I said yes.

*I, Y'know Who, Having Stepped into
Well Street*

AHIMAAZ RAJESH

En route to Donno Where I say to myself at last I'll check out Well Street. I haven't been there in a while, not since the frogs were reported witnessed bellies up in the Water Vertical. I accelerate for about three lanes to Almost There. Right of Meckel's Cave it says — Welcome to Your Well. Sweet. I hit the brakes right before Freefall Lane and press Gravitare. My wheels roll in and I tilt 30 degrees too far down. Having almost hit my nose against the pavement I struggle to lift my flat chest up to witness the tunnel of damned lights.

Just as I begin my so-called descent, overhead I witness the naked freefallers saluting y'know who dive. Into the tunnel, before me, a mother kicks down her son. Miss mine. Out of the

well, water-fighters rescue someone's daughter. Round and round all around me the horizontally inclined employed descend, unemployed ascend. Strolling the white lines, boys sell church-approved New Age zines. Someone bumps into me — 'what a bird-fingered fella you're, sir, lemme polish your wheels for naughts.' 'Shit, arsole.' The spectacle is so many miles away, there are enough distractions to wade through already. Girls cry — 'look better than you ever will, wear my mask, willya,' and thinking let me give some to the beggars when I get out I get myself a couple.

I scan the alleys and causeways hoping to spot Cyborg Manifested. Last time I checked she or he or it having infested printed books and digital creams was screaming out an awful song. Here things don't change much except on the surface, so it always looks different and they call it Progress. Chill. This time he spots me and sings — 'get outta your skin, you holy piece of cow.' I promise him I will get back to her before getting out of here and elbow my way through to the Vertical Spectacle. Living away from here, reading it out of papers is unlike living out here. Kid you not, they tell it different. Very.

The water is full of rattlesnakes. A freefaller dives in, splashes and burns. Cool. Another dives, splatters and explodes. Yet another dives, splashes and swims, grabs a rattlesnake, bites. Activists cry their lungs out for animal rights. Those I took for tourists turn out to be snake charmers. Their gears to their waists back there they looked like — 'book me a room, Miss Façade.' These undercover charmers get the snakes the easy way to the surface to get them bit by the divers.

For a while the rattle is full of watersnakes. Shit. You get the

picture. Sweet. Once their number lessens, at about lunchtime, things horrendous emerge. The things human order sushi, beef and such for side dishes and bite rattlesnake steaks. Activists boo at them and show banners like Be Persons — Not Human, Never People. Confound me. Ever so slowly, in the crowd, I think I recognize a person. Behind his inverted Guy Fawkes mask, I know his slanted shoulder, I know it's my brother. Gawd. I wave, I whistle, he gives me an A-OK. He shifts his slant and I now know it's not him. No, it's him but not really him.

The drive-in dance floor shudders. The crowds outside shake their bottoms to CCM songs and burn Liz 'Diva' Grant effigies. I think I recognize my in-laws at one point, my only best friend at another, my cousins, too. Miss me. And not just that, y'know. I get ideas about my husband. Where are my parents? They've either got mask facies or masked and they all give me A-OK's through the unebbing cascade and eat beloved rattlesnakes. I look for a doorway so as to gain access to the Water Vertical and out of nowhere Manifested bumps in to me singing — 'there's none for you, you ...' 'Stop it right there!' I was just getting back to her, I tell her. 'You get to the Freefall Lane and then ...' 'I know, you infesting, shifting piece of titanium.'

Miles away, from up here I witness the Water Vertical Spectacle as a drop, a tinted dot. I take my wheels off and chew on sour candies to take the edge off the ache that comes with such detachments. I bend, loosen my neck, stretch my Achilles, get on my tip-toes, flap my arms, thrust my scapulae, throw my hands up and envision a bird-becoming. Few feet before me tourists ascend and descend. The son gets stalked. Beside me comes, stands rolling and

thrusting, a friendly perfume and I say — ‘y’know what, I looked through and I wasn’t there and not just that ...’ and hear back — ‘shit.’ I turn around and sweet wolf, shit indeed, I tell her. There stands my only worst enemy. She hops, pulls down her Pollyanna mask. I throw my hands up once again, pull down my Garuda mask and headlong into the well, into the tunnel of bleeding blinding lights we dive.

Stereo

JEN DENROW

I thought about how you liked scarves at 6 PM the day your mother was dead. It was visual.

There were flowers on your blue pants. You couldn't believe it. Some messages arrived.

Your girlfriend was at the airport. It was a situation of importance. I didn't know what to tell you.

I told you I loved you. I told you you had arrived where you had already been for so long. I told you Chrissie was a bitch. This was at the place with the black IPA's. We sat there in disbelief. Your sister was Kelly. She was an important figure in the story. This was the mother you had all along. The one with the apartment in Mississippi. You really cried. The cigarettes moved around inside you. A band came. They were the background music. I was

hot. I needed an ice cone. It wasn't day anymore. You talked to a relative. You told me about your mother's jobs. She was a church member. That's who found her. Another church member. It was the end of winter in March.

You put the scarf on your face when you cried. Miniature flowers got on your face. On the phone you said *you're lying*. You repeated it many times. The eras were in the room with us. They were breaking like pills. I couldn't use sentences. I went to the train station. I bought you a burrito and a Diet Coke. You weren't hungry. You had taken yourself out for a grilled cheese. It was at the café next door. The one where Jack Kerouac used to write. It was an old place. Everyone was on methadone back then. Thin families. Families of thousandaires.

Stay here with us, I wanted to tell the bartender. *This is what's happened. It's clear sorrow. There's room for you. It's not particles. Get us in your arms. Keep us there. Feed us baby trees.* The overhead lights were a galaxy we couldn't get into. I can't believe the musicians. The soot. The night's love. How someone went to Cambridge in the next conversation I had when you had already driven away and had slept fine with no dreams. No heiresses in my breakfast. An alliance of grain. A show about water.

This is my restless side. My tiger anger. An airhole for my rv. I have something wild in me. It is a baby. It has a whole body and a soft head. I can feel the baby move after your mother is dead. I touch it at the bar. From the outside you can see it's there. It's like heaven. My experiences of heaven involve photographs of hollows. Pastries shaped like horses.

I can't say what I'm into. We don't talk about literature the whole time after your mother is dead. We move through the air undressed. I think of every time you had a mother. How you looked back then. Of the movie you watched and when you went to Cambodia where your friend was looking for an abortion and you loved someone on a motorcycle then we were in Ireland, in a town off the coast, Strandhill, walking next to the ocean and you had just seen how someone you always loved was married. There was a lot of distance. Now you can't tell him what happened. It doesn't work that way. He's a father with a house. The cinema has arrived. The women are silver keys. The white tablecloths are here. They are passionate. *At least my hair looks pretty*, you said. The one aunt you do like. She goes into your mind. She doesn't have terrible children. I breathed like a track suit across from you. Breathing for us both. In song.

The Saturday breakfast crowds. I dreamed everyone was wearing Robyn's clothes. I'm going to have a baby. I just know it. I'm 38 weeks pregnant. I think about the people at the park who could cut me open. I have to throw these flowers away. At the roadside. A real disaster. It's going to happen to everyone I just thought of you first. You wake up and say you're going to build the vacuum. This is before you're a father. It's Friday. You want coffee. You tell me fans keep going on the court.

You're going to have a baby soon, I say. I know, you say. I think of the baby every time. She is made of numbers. I organize her clothes. They are small and from other people. Her room has me in it with her inside me. I've never had anyone live in me. My body is not carnivorous so I could have. I think of everyone who has ever lived inside another person. We have our own marrow. I sit next to the phone call thinking about how police can save babies. It's a time when the world exists. And asteroids. I want your hair to be like music from the bedroom.

I haven't gotten cramps. I practice getting them for one day. At the hospital tour I sit in a chair to remind myself of my body. I cry there. We know where to park now. At home, you say you feel better you know what it's like. We take a lot of classes. We title our baby many things over time. Some of the titles are wrong and we know it. I'm not a fancy dresser. I wear my one thing. I think how soon I will wear more than this. I think of everyone's togetherness. I walk around open holding one piece of my field.

A man held me to a roller coaster once at a work party in Missouri. He looked like a creek. Back then I would drive out to the farm and take drugs. One girl was a ho. Eileen was her name. She was the sister of a boy whose friend lost all of the hair on his body. It was Greg. He was everyone's friend and loved God. Some of the boys almost died once. They were driving through Buckner. The helicopter came to get them. They were healed. They were made of small parts that could be fixed. They were made of the earth. I would be with them for hours. I would drive my car to the stream and sit next to it counting out my ideas of water.

I count how many times I can remember one thing. It's one hundred. I don't like thinking about marriages. You're reading the news about Ukraine. *It's crazy over there*, you say. You tell me about an asteroid and Malaysia. I have enough information for the day. I till it in my mind. I am a place for thoughts and orange juice. I eat at the breakfast diner before we get there. I walk in covered in my kind of food. I wonder who here has partials and long furs to put in front of their doors in winter. Another time we don't even go to breakfast. I eat dinner for breakfast. I eat collard greens and rice.

Now you're singing "Wheel in the Sky" by Journey and dancing with the dog in your track shorts. We think about getting a hotel. You show me attachments from the vacuum. You show me all the parts it comes with. It has screws. We are both animals inside. We have great faith in this vacuum. You assemble it for a short amount of time in the living room. It's intended for homes with pets. It offers reciprocity.

Your mother is dead. It's been two days. I can't stop thinking about all of life. How at the hospital they can see everything. I cut my hair without looking and wash the scissors when I'm through. I take a shower. After the shower I only wear a shirt. Thank god it's a long shirt. I am the star witness of a crime scene.

It's Friday. Now you're building the co-sleeper. I smell my hands. I think of what they'll hold soon. The co-sleeper doesn't require tools. Sometimes life comes and goes. I recognize certain features of the earth as places in our lives. We are made of small things. They pass in and out of us. We compare everything to dust. Some of the places are to have inside of us. It's raining now. That's part of life.

I remember one time your mother was almost dead. You were crying at a bar. We didn't get to the bar on horses. You thought about every time she was almost dead. About how you had a feeling. When she died you didn't expect it. You were cleaning the house and listening to Dan Savage. I came over. *Call your sister*, I said. *I was just cleaning the house*, you told her, *what's going on? You're lying. You're lying.* You repeated it like you were a diplomat. Like it was your favorite thing to say. You sat down. You got back up. You smoked a cigarette and made a phone call. It was a regular day with a regular temperature. It was a Wednesday. It was Ash Wednesday.

I trained for a marathon once. I ran over seven miles one day. It was in Georgia. At 4 AM I ran around the track not having any thoughts. On the way home I found a violin in the woods. It was on fire.

The co-sleeper doesn't have another level. It's for the ground. We have to get a different one. We learn many important things about the furniture infants need. We lie in place like we're in a tent. The furniture makes you think of our culture. The paranoia that exists around suffocation. Our co-sleeper is really a play yard. That's why it doesn't work. We use it anyway. We think it is a dreamy bassinet and fill it with our love.

It's Friday. I have to grade papers. I have to tell the students about contribution. About how what they write should contribute to what they're writing. About themes. Instead of grading, I imagine us camping on a small island in a forest of hospitals. We are the only ones there. I have a student with ms whose boyfriend used to be suicidal. She gave me soap on the last day of class.

You stand in the rain. Your penis is in the rain. I have grape juice for breakfast. I think of two money things. It's raining because it's the end of winter. My categories of thought diminish. The people from a long time ago are far away. Some of them have already died. Death is a statue of the Gold Rush. It's like many purchases at the mall all at once at night after the mall's closed.

I am never tan. I think about this when I see people who are. One guy I know lives on an island. He is famous. I think of him as tan. Some people die tanning. Aunt Bev would do it. She would drive to the salon in her Cadillac. She had a poodle and a husband named Clarence. She called the police on me. It was when I walked up the school hill with some friends at dawn. We were very young and hadn't slept. We sat on the asphalt and watched as ghosts disappeared over our neighborhood. This is when we went into the woods every day and when everything dangerous was happening all the time: the white van parked by Marissa's, the clown who lived in the woods behind the school, the darkness in our bedrooms where we kissed a lot of boys who had drunk mothers.

I am a stable of horses in winter. They are inside of me as the weather changes. They are as terrorized as salt. I am one empire from you in here. I give you a movie theater. Your friend Catherine calls. I hear the air you use to speak with. You find out how everyone is. We pretend our house is an office with beds. We watch a movie with Liam Neeson. I think of how mermaids are big jokes this time of year. I think you are a stereo.

The weather is from a different time inside of me. It changes to snow. I have a cloth couch to clean. Our trashy enormous love runs wild through me like scared birds and, as if I was named Claire, I count them all day instead of buying air filters for the house.

I am cut off from time. Your mother died many years ago. On a mountain. Before there were countries and it was an economy of grass.

I put the flowers outside in the snow and watch them through the window. I see from inside of myself the real problem. The lusty beach inside each petal. I am wide open inside. I've sat on many trampolines. Once while I was on one there was a guy inside named Jim who liked crack. He was spiritual. He met my aunt at a psychic fair and they drank champagne in the car. I lived on one side of a living room then and sometimes a guy who talked about psychic vampires would come over and put garlic on the things in the house and on the people who were there. He was spiritual as well. One time I saw him place a crucifix on my sleeping aunt.

When I lived on one side of the living room, I didn't take up much space. I had a blanket, a pillow, a dresser, and a tapestry for a wall. Sometimes men would bring me flowers. There was a lot of opium then and a girl named Nichole who gave us cocaine. One night she gave us so much cocaine that I almost choked to death at a bar. It was my birthday. The other time I almost choked to death was at a bank in Albuquerque. It had nothing to do with cocaine. The people in line concentrated on me. It was like I was an application for a job they really wanted but couldn't fill out because they knew deep down they weren't qualified for it.

One time in my life I had a rich friend named Melanie. When I was out of town she lived in my house and told people she was me. One person she told this to was Gordy. It didn't work because he knew me. He went out with Shaness, the girl whose parents kept track of how many ice cubes were being used by Shaness and her brother. They were real dickwads. One night Gordy took a shit in the street. Everyone was drunk then. They were classical and Midwestern, showing each other their bodies, inducting each other into their own halls of fame.

I'm pregnant. That's why wet stuff keeps coming out of me. I change into more comfortable pants. I'm not entered into any raffles. You are in a way. You are trying to win 270 million dollars. It happened the other day at the train station. You paid two dollars for a ticket after we waited in a long line.

I won \$75 once at a casino. It was nighttime. I bought champagne. Everyone I wanted to tell was out to lunch. It was that kind of casino. Not the kind like in Albuquerque where they mail you \$5 coupons and you can cash them in for real money. Money is something we have to pay attention to now. It matters if we have it.

A friend sent me his new record today. It sounds like a cave in space. Last night you took me to the Italian restaurant for dinner and then we bought a fan. We put the fan in the room where we can most hear our neighbor. He builds banks. Sometimes he's gone all night. I think he builds tunnels under the banks he builds. He's a construction worker with a son. Because we live in the same house separated by a thin wall, we can hear each other's voices. He's not crazy. He spends his days off in the garage working on his road bikes. He's not someone either one of us is interested in sexually. On the day we moved in, his son said to me, *Just so you know, I can hear everything you say.* I didn't feel threatened.

Your mother died a long time ago. It was after many years of silence. It was winter was turning to spring and the white-beaked black ducks had come in. You were uncertain of what it meant to be an orphan. You were beautiful not knowing. Your face was an explanation of wonder. You took all the wildernesses from inside you and pinned them to your body. Your condition was extravagant. You were in the most beautiful uncertainty anyone had ever seen. You were a wind song in the desert on tv on mute. No one knew what you were. You were a thing in the world not connected to history. You were a wagon wheel.

At the infant care class they show us photographs of what babies look like moments after they're born. The images make me faint. I walk out of the room and lie on the hospital floor in front of the elevator. Doctors stand over me. Their faces are far away. I tell them I'm fine. That I just need to lie down here. They want to get me up. I tell them I prefer to stay where I am. The linoleum feels good on me. It feels like people massaging each other. The doctors leave. I have my own hallway then. *You have to be perfect*, I tell it, *you have to keep me here in your perfection forever. We're together in this*, I tell it, *it's just us*.

I am enormous all day. I walk gigantically from room to room. I'm not trying to lose weight. I am an object in space. I am a Sumerian. I have a Sumerian's way about me. My neck. My other parts. I am in a hall of hung animals, thinking of your heart. The other galaxies. The other places in time we haven't been yet but know are inside of us waiting for us to get there so we can be whole and so that we can possess enough of this world that we can go, finally, back to sleep.

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