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The Crooked median

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THE CROOKED MEDIAN

by

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Bachelor of Arts
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign
2001

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the

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THE GRADUATE COLLEGE

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ABSTRACT

The Crooked Median

by

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Words search. There are specific points designated by written language, where one might stand for just a little while until the satisfaction of a pattern is revealed. In this collection of stories, one of the forces that serves as a catalyst for this search is the outside gaze. The gaze exerts itself onto characters. The characters may or may not be conscious of it, may or may not welcome it, but they must grapple with it. The gaze projects its needs and desires onto the characters. It seeks to control them, and it desires to be viewed with admiration, lowered eyelids, and moistened lips. Luckily, there are other invisible forces at play that bring levity. These stories seek to explore divergent places, moments, individuals, and the threads that loosely connect all of them. It is the threads that hope to bring levity. The six short stories were written over the course of three years. The novella is a working draft and an attempt to push out of the short story form.

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To all Mafafians...for many small and grand acts...

To E.T.

...thank you...

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PART I:
SHORT STORIES

The Turn

One

The beginning of the first inversion of the mountain was marked by when the clothes drying on the line hung at an odd angle to the ground. Our feet ached from walking on a slant we were not yet aware of, but as night fell and our hair hung the wrong way, we realized we were upside down. The mountain hung from the clouds by its base; it no longer touched the earth. Below us was the sky, above us the valley. Quietly, we looked up at the valley that we were so used to always looking down on with its small houses, green fields, and thin rivers beside which people sat and worked and into which they immersed their feet to cool off from the heat of the day. We held each others' forearms and waists until impatience emboldened us. The water running in narrow canals between our houses continued to flow, which comforted us and made us believe we wouldn't fall. We scooped up handfuls of water and tossed them up, which was down. They fell to the valley, loose raindrops. This worried us. We threw flat stones in the direction of the valley and they came back. This comforted us—until we launched them full force. It was then that the mountain released them and they became dense objects falling through the air.

We crept past the fowl and llamas still sleeping and breathing out wisps of warm air. They showed no signs of disturbance, as if this position was natural. Only their tails and ears stood resolute. Our fingertips pressed into the ground to steady us as we looked up and down, as we swiveled our heads and crept along together, heading upwards towards the base of the mountain. Our ankles rotated outwards and inwards as we distributed the weight of our torsos onto our limbs. The weak ones fainted, unable to

bear the tension of being pulled by two opposing forces: that of the center of the earth, which the mountain was now detached from, and that of the center of the mountain, which was now located in the middle of the sky.

It felt like my head and body were close to exploding. I imagined my innards bursting out in bright, glowing pink while my face remained partly intact, laid across the rocks. Nobody comforted us, the children, because everyone was being ground like seeds between two calloused hands, yet with the wonder of reaching the bottom of the mountain, the pressure eased. One by one we forgot everything except that the sky was so close we could squat down to touch it. All night we ran our fingers across the sky, made circles in it with our feet until we drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, we were right side up again with no damage suffered except that those of us who had gone to the bottom were now in the valley and had to climb back to the top. Before leaving, we looked for dislocated areas where the base had broken from the surface of the earth. Naively, we thought we could lift up the edge of the mountain as if it were the edge of a dress, but it was as it had always been, heavy and impassive.

We made up theories about why it happened. We argued about it and stood on our heads in imitation. We didn't believe such a thing would happen again until it happened again, one year later, then again, another year later. Finally, we accepted the Turn as a natural unsettling and resettling of the mountain. It became a normal part of our lives, the way we'd always lived.

Two

Ariana sucked her tongue at me, saying my dress wasn't tight enough to draw attention to my body, but I told her the black lines she marked around my eyes were what mattered, right? The sweat dotting my skin when we sat around the fire was what mattered, right? She nodded, then looked out the window: hexagonal and small. I'd experienced her heavy silences before. I shook away her hostility and changed into the flaming orange she had pulled out for me, but not out of weakness. She loved crookedly, but it didn't make her need for love any less pervasive. I offered to braid her hair, so thick a person could be kept warm beneath it. With each stroke of the brush, her happiness increased and this was better than her sullenness. It came naturally, a flame catching flame.

The next day was the Turn. This was the first year we wouldn't be rolling up and down the terraced sides of the mountain or drinking while standing sideways, or running upside down, sweeping our hair against the space between the valley and the sky. The night would mark our complete potential to seduce and to exist, so we prepared ourselves by rubbing oil into our skin until it glowed. We soaked our feet and palms in boiled petals. With sharpened picks we cleaned between our teeth and parted our hair into zigzags, braids, and hemispheres. We outlined our eyes with black ink and this was all for the evening, all for the fire by the light of which we would examine the shapes of other peoples' toes, the sizes of their hands, the lengths of their torsos, the way cloth laid against form. Fingers would trail lightly against each other, bodies would pass without staying, and flitting eyes would watch the shadows made in bodily crevices, the rough

palms, the smooth palms, the song. Which song? Who to dance against? Where to rest our limbs and insert our breaths?

All day we prepared, and by the time it was dark we were ready. Unable to help ourselves, by verdict of nature, of the mountain itself, we were all upside down, different for that night. In the early part of the evening we stayed close to the people we knew, but as night deepened people split off into new pairs and moved away on lightly treaded paths that disappeared around bends. Ariana and I were among the few still sitting around the fire just as we had planned because, as she put it, the ones with the most to offer waited until the end.

Apaec examined me from the other side of the shrunken circle, but I was too scared to look at his face and instead focused on the spirals inked into his skin and the thin band of metal around his wrist that flashed when he moved his arm across his torso and as he lightly rested his fingers on his ribs. At the start of the night, he had stood at a distance from everyone else. His back was to us and he was looking up at the valley just as I looked down at it on normal days when the mountain was right side up and when Ariana and I would race to the top. While she lagged behind, I would already be looking down at the valley. It was flat. It split apart and chased the river that stretched onward out of sight and that had houses nestled contentedly beside it. I was at the highest point looking down. From there, I couldn't see if the people in the valley had their faces tilted up or not, but I raised my hand at them in greeting anyway. It was my way to acknowledge them from up there on my perch, where I could see that what we lived in were tiny cubes, and where we planted were simple lines in the earth that could be easily erased. A thin stream of panic shot through me, but just as quickly elation took its place

as I thought of thousands of cornstalk leaves reaching their green bellies up to the sun, their tips drooping down like the healthy tongues of well-fed animals. Life couldn't be so easily erased.

I knew about contemplation. I understood Apaec as he stood on the edge while everyone else laughed around the fire. All of us saw how he stood alone before joining us, but I was the only one who understood, completely, the beauty of solitude, the ability to inhale in one breath the present and the future. I knew I was the only one because when he came back to us he walked towards me. He sat perfectly placed across from me beneath a hexagonal crisscross of branches.

Ariana was silent. She watched, encouraged me with glances. I knew that she would help bring him even closer to me, because she knew about such attractions and how to casually draw one person to another. She would get him to say the first words that would begin a natural conversation between us, one that would last for many hours. By the time the mountain turned right side up again, the morning light skipping, he and I would be held precisely together in an hourglass.

She rose and moved in front of him almost causing me to snort out loud with laughter, so I turned my head. She would charm him into coming over to me, because she said that's what she could do for me. I was proud of her friendship and the way we were able to play this game: her bouncing questions off one edge of the circle and me bouncing answers back to her. *You like that one under the tree? Yes. The skinny one? Yes. The quiet one? Yes.*

People didn't know we were a team. Their obliviousness made me want to giggle. The giggles wanted to explode from my belly, so I turned my face away from the

fire and smiled into the darkness. My head was turned as if I had one face for the dark and one for the fire. I wanted to laugh so hard at the way we played with the boys. I smiled so hard. My teeth showed. My eyes squinted. Spasms of laughter pranced in my belly, gurgled in my throat, and the only thing that quieted it was the thought of Apaec coming closer. I pulled the excitement out from the back of my throat, patted it into the ground, assured it that it could sprout later, but first Ariana needed time to sit by him, to motion towards me with her head. *My friend*, she'd say. He would listen with his gaze already spread over me. I told the laughter it could come out later when the hourglass melted away and I was back home combing the smoke from Ariana's hair. Then I would laugh as we re-spun the evening and the games we played, the prize I won.

The scene was ugly when I turned my head back around. His face was level with her belly. If he thrust out his tongue, he could lick her belly button that spread itself open to him, because it was a wide, embracing belly button with its edges smoothed down by Ariana's tracing of it when she was lost in thought. Oily words I couldn't hear spilled between her lips, cascaded over her breasts and stomach, down into his hands that were cupped in his lap. The fabric of her clothing was tight enough to show the sliver that split her into two thighs and legs reaching down, which was up. She fell onto him. Tongue, humid breath, hair that could wrap itself around his neck and blanket his face. She glanced at me over her naked shoulder before turning completely away.

She was the one I trusted to line the thin rims of my eyes. She would always do this for me, even when I no longer wanted her to. I no longer wanted her to. I understood. The way she loved was crookedly. When she reached out her hand to him

she proved this to me, and she proved that he—the quiet one, who answered as soon as she propositioned—was false to me.

Three

Nearly a year after Ariana walked around a bend with Apaec, I stepped outside into a morning that should have been filled with the sounds of running water.

Stories had been trickling over to us from places far past the valley of long-limbed strangers with chicken claws strung around their necks. They arrived quietly, studying their surroundings in an impartial manner. They were scientists, or travelers, or barterers of some sort with baskets of copper pieces. They were harmless until night fell and everyone's eyelids became too heavy to keep open. Their numbers rapidly multiplied in the dark as if they were birds flocking to a field of exposed seeds. They swept through the villages, putting axes through heads, lighting the houses on fire, and ripping up crops. They squatted down and ground up bodies with remnants of stalks and leaves, until all that was left was a fine dust covering every surface. The strangers moved on to the next village, leaving some of their people behind to erect new homes on the burnt but fertile soils, to plant the seeds of non-native crops, and to mate so that soon the ground was crawling with their offspring. These were the rumors but we laughed at the idea of chicken claws worn like necklaces and the impossibility of grinding up bodies into dust.

Dust covered me. Putting my hand to my cheek, I felt it twitch. I licked my finger and immediately it was covered in dust again. Looking down at my feet I saw that the water in the canals had stopped flowing. The dust in them clumped like dough and formed into sludge. A woman began to scoop out handfuls, screaming *Help me salvage*

the water! It ran down her arm in thin veins, this woman with her stooped back and silver braid. I pressed myself against the outside wall of one of the houses.

I blinked, shook the dust from my eyelashes. I licked it off my lips. It coated my tongue and mixed with my saliva. It tasted like blood. Smoke rose from the valley, burning my eyes and lungs. We ran to the look out. There could be no doubt that the valley was on fire. The houses on the valley floor winked and the air rising from below smelled like burnt meat and hair. Nobody rushed to put out the fires, which burned steadily beneath the sky that was the same dull color as the dust that suffocated the plants and broke their leaves. Animals pounded their hooves and flapped their wings, which were too heavy to lift up in flight. Babies screamed and the ones holding them screamed. Men who prayed dropped to their knees. Their own spit sprinkled their hands as they rapidly moved prayer beads between their fingers. I pushed past the people kneeling in the dirt and called out for knives and anything sharp to use against this imaginary enemy that was now real, now close us.

Four

The strangers are coming, rumbling. They do not know, but their attack on us is timed with the Turn of the mountain. We know they do not know. How could they? We know they will not know how to stay on. The mountain will hold us to her, but she will not hold them. She will hold me. I look up and draw precise lines that darken the edges of my eyes. Even with the rumbling, my hand stays steady. Ariana is too pregnant to crouch outside where I am. She stays inside but asks me to draw the lines for her anyway. All of us are getting ready because the strangers mapped the route and are coming to look for us. In their minds, they smash our buildings, puncture holes in the

walls, fling our bodies through them. They see our faces and push them down into the dirt. They think this, believe this. Already they see it happening as they move up the sides of the mountain, stealthily, the chicken claws around their necks thumping and scratching against the ground. We prepare so that the last image they see before falling to their death will be our marked and rigid faces, our hair hanging upside down from the sky. Waiting there in the dark, we are complete potential. The wind brings their scent, light as dust. We clap our hands over our mouths, denying entry to the finite particles. We hold our breaths. We feel the mountain begin her slow turn.

Strands

As always, Imelda sat on her cushioned stool in front of the window perfectly framed as if the house had been built with her at its center. Long ago, the room had been decorated with gold and velvet, all of which was now faded and frayed. Vines climbed the walls and shoved their way through the floors and ceiling. Imelda still wore embroidered dresses that spilled over her knees and extended to her wrists, their shapes held together by the strongest of stitches. She had hemmed up the dresses so that they hung above her ankles and in this way didn't fall into the porcelain bowl of water that her roots drifted in.

She was a woman except for her feet, but still she called him "gardener," because it sounded more elegant than "attendant," or "helper," and most especially it sounded better than "servant." He wore rubber gloves and used a silver comb to weed through her hair. The old strands came out easily as he worked the comb from her scalp down to the tips of her locks that came to a rest in the middle of her back. At first his hand was steady, but the longer he stood behind her observing her still form as she stared out the window onto the empty street, the quicker and more uneven his movements became. The comb caught in her tangles and jerked her head back. She stiffened her neck and cried out, "Don't pull my gaze from the window! The children are coming to see me!"

The gardener paused with the comb midair.

"Is it so important that they see you fixated on an abandoned road?"

"My pose is essential to the story. And the road isn't abandoned. It's waiting."

Bringing her fingers to her lips, she leaned forward and rested her elbows on the windowsill. The color drained from her face, moved down through her body, through her

legs, and out through her roots, turning the water in which they were submerged a rosy brown. In her mind she returned to that day of farewell, that brilliant day with all the shining steeds and men in leather boots, the women dressed in lace, their hair falling in thick waves as they twisted their parasols around. She remembered the way Juan Carlos Figuerra sat on his horse, his left hand high in the air waving goodbye, marking the westward path that he was going to lead the other men on as they headed to fight in the Grand War. The sun was behind him and burned her vision, but she kept on watching with every breath concentrated on him, every step of his horse imprinting itself on her brain as his white-gloved hand cut through the sky and blazed a trail as clearly as if the sky were made of paper and his hand were a flame.

“Juan Carlos Figuerra, with his gold canine tooth and his sword that spears apples, will return for me.”

This was always her answer. The gardener returned the comb to her hair, moving it slowly once again.

“There’s no greater honor than waiting for intimacy.” She resumed her upright position so that the color could seep back up to her face.

They continued on in silence, the gardener and the lady. He had tended to her ever since he found her five decades ago, slumped over the windowsill, dead except for one fluttering pinky finger. He knew how to care for her. When he was finished combing, he knelt down to rub her roots that curled out as long as his thumb, as long as his forearm. The oldest roots were long enough that he could have used them to climb from the second story down to the ground. Some roots were thin as a pencil tip; others were the thickness

of a hog's limb. Out of each one grew miniscule hairs that sighed and breathed as he carefully massaged the thickest and most gnarled of the roots.

Imelda stared outside. It would be on a clear day that Juan Carlos Figuerra would return to the edge of the wheat field where the western end of Kiwi Street began. Closing her eyes, she imagined it was him there at last, kneeling beside her. If it were him rubbing her roots, she would wrap them around him. She would consume him.

“Your gloves are still on,” she whispered.

How tempted she was to curl her roots between his fingers and around his hands. How his blood would pulsate if she were to tighten herself across his palms and around his wrists. Then it would be only natural to slide her smooth bellied roots up his arms to his shoulders and neck. Her thinner roots could curl up in the coves of his face. More slowly then, she would move down against his torso, press against the muscles and the veins. Then she would know the gardener as intimately as he knew her.

But the children. Tomorrow, they would come to this abandoned street expecting to find a woman waiting. When they arrived, they were supposed to find her so that they would know that she wasn't a myth but a fact: Imelda, who smelled of roses, who sat beside the window, as dazzling as the sun she faced. Their innocence and joy would be fertilizer and their purity would allow them to understand the beauty of her vigilance.

Abruptly, she pulled her roots from the gardener's caresses.

Earlier that morning, the gardener had been in town to conduct his weekly observations. Mayor Jones stood on a box in the center of town inaugurating its bicentennial.

“Children! Do not forget our loveliest patron saint, Imelda!” He pointed to the City Hall mural that showcased fleeting glimpses of the town’s history. A loin-clothed hunter aimed upwards with a bow and arrow. A gatherer looked fondly at the nuts in her basket. A sweet faced factory worker held up a round tortilla: the perfect specimen of her hard work. A bear rose up on its hind legs and pigeons flew from the bottom right corner of the wall, making a diagonal arc across the mural. In the center of it was Imelda’s window. Her hair was painted as a black waterfall. Her face was featureless, a simple pale oval filled with light.

“Children, you know the story of Imelda whose General left to fight in the Grand War. She was so lovely that when she wiped the perspiration from her face with a silk handkerchief, she left an imprint of a swan. She waited beside her open window. Did she lose hope? No! Did she cry? Yes! Salty tears that fell in a pool around her pale feet and turned them, because of her immeasurable depth of passion and fidelity, into roots. Did she bemoan this metamorphosis? No! She rejoiced in her evolution from mere woman to a woman with the capacities of a living plant. Ginseng! Dandelion! Rhubarb! More than any other individual, Imelda exemplifies the importance of roots, romance, and keeping a staked eye on the dusty road. Children, we must remember our history so that our history will not forget us, and it will serve as the foundation upon which we build into the future.”

After Mayor Jones' speech, a reenactment of life on Kiwi Street flashed across a projection screen behind him. As the projector whirled around, it flashed images from 1796, when the street was at its peak of elegance. The children saw a street so wide that carriages stood eight together side by side on it. Sixteen houses with columns, balconies, marble statues, and doors carved with cherubs, mocking birds, and cherries, presided on the street, eight on each side. The houses faced one another like sentries by the gates of heaven. This was a street that connected to no other street. It was intentionally removed from the rest of the town, nestled between an apple orchard to the east and a field of wheat to the west. It was a strip of glamour hidden in the frontier. It was exclusive. Here, once upon a time, lived the successful miners, the genius capitalists, the adept explorers, the skilled dog breeders, the graceful dancers, the highest donators to the church. The women had open faces with smooth foreheads and bright teeth. They wore hats with feathers that drooped to their shoulders and that grazed their silk and lace dresses. The men in these artistic reenactments prepared to fight in the Grand War, so they sat proudly on horses with rippling muscles and braided manes. The children, two hundred years later, saw the best of their town, the proudest jewels from the mud of its history.

The camera began to focus on one house in particular. It revealed a second story window immediately above the door. In the street, the gentlemen and ladies tilted their heads towards the window. The camera moved in for a close up. Rays of light filled it. Locks of hair could be seen streaming out from the window. Imelda. The gardener listened as the children exhaled in unison, "She was so beautiful," even though they could see nothing but the hair, a delicate elbow resting on the windowsill, and a white star where a face and upper torso should have been. It didn't matter, because they had all been

told, over and over again, how beautiful Imelda was. They swooned as they had been trained to do: “She was lovely! Lovelier than we could ever hope to be!”

There were only three children who didn't echo these words. They sat in the very back row where the most raggedy of children sat, hidden by the rows of the other children. The three of them huddled together, a chubby boy, a bossy girl, and a pretty one with long, black ringlets. From time to time, they glanced up, but immediately they hunched back down again. The gardener drew closer so that he could listen to what they were plotting. As the final sepia images of the street flashed across the screen (a sunset, a trail made by horse hooves) the three children nodded at each other. Their lips mouthed, *Imelda. Tomorrow.*

Their words chilled him. If the townspeople found out she was still alive after two hundred years, they would lay her on a table, dissect her roots, and cut open her legs. He felt the danger, just as he had that day in 1968 when the hoodlums came to Kiwi Street looking for something to do. The street had long been abandoned. The townspeople knew it had existed at some point, but that point was far in the past. It was not in their nature or agenda to wander. When they had a free moment, they were content to stay beside the river. Then came the hoodlums, young and briefly brave, feeding on the energy of the times, that decade of protests, cars, and rock and roll all of which gave them the courage to push out past the apple orchard into the abandoned street.

When the gardener saw them, he quickly pulled Imelda away from the window even though she fought him. It was the one time he gagged her, fearful that she would call out to the hoodlums. They threw bricks through all the windows, smashing the glass. They scrawled their names and figures of naked women on the walls, set fire to the trees,

beat on the doors, all of which were locked because only Mother Nature was permitted to enter those hallowed doors. The gardener himself had gone one day and locked every single door, then crawled out through the basement window of each house. The locks did not deter the hoodlums who beat and kicked on them. They surely would have succeeded in entering, too, if not for the heavy heat of the summer sun and the luxurious, lazifying effects of beer. Hot and dehydrated, the hoodlums slumped to the ground, scratched themselves, and then moved down the street towards the apple orchards looking for food.

When they were gone, the gardener untied the cloth from around Imelda's mouth. She had wilted. It took him a year to nurse her back to health.

Prior to and since that day, nobody but the gardener had been to Kiwi Street. He made sure of that, taking great pains to monitor the townspeople's movements towards the street. He beheaded cats and strew their decapitated bodies around the perimeter. When anyone came near the edge of the apple orchard, their feet caught in traps and they fell into deep pits. So successful was the gardener in his campaign of protection that nobody dared go near. They preferred to remember what through pictures and reenactments from the period before the Grand War, what had once been a strip of exclusivity, a place both beautiful and meaningful. Now, the three children were plotting to break what had been a perfectly distant relationship between the people and the street.

*

"The dry spell must end," Imelda had responded to the news of the three children.

"But the last time..." he began to argue, preparing to bring up the 1968 incident.

“Gardener,” she shrilly interrupted him, anticipating his next words and refusing for that year to be spoken into existence. “Juan Carlos will come. We will be reunited and when we are, we deserve the presence and honor of all the townspeople as witnesses.

Once the children knew and fell in love with her, it would not be long before the entire town walked the several miles through the apple orchards to come and honor her. The wind blew the curtain in and she pressed her face against it. How badly she wanted them to find her.

“Clean up the dead animals. Take away the traps.” She turned her head away quickly, but not before seeing the surprise on the gardener’s face. Of course she knew that he’d been guarding the perimeter of Kiwi Street. The gardener didn’t realize how sharp her eyesight was, how far reaching her sense of smell and hearing. This declaration had ended the conversation, and that evening and the morning prior to the children’s arrival was spent cleaning up, primping and priming.

Even though the children were still in the orchard she could hear them singing and laughing. She could already feel how much she loved them. The bossy girl with her fuchsia ribbon, the boy with his ripe red hair, and the pretty one with her long black locks just like—Imelda stroked her own hair. Who better than these three to spread not only tales of her legacy, but of her continued existence? She was ready to become flesh, blood, and roots in the minds and hearts of the townspeople.

When the children finally reached the border between the apple orchard and Kiwi Street, their singing and giggles died out. They carefully parked their bikes then looked down the shadowed street and its row of parallel mansions. If they looked hard enough,

and squinted their eyes, they might have guessed that she was there, on the south side of the street, the third house from the east end, but they were too entrenched in their plotting. The bossy one declared that they should search each house one by one and that as soon as they found something good they should leave. All they needed was one historical relic to make them heroes, but it had to be a good one, like Imelda's diary or her bones.

“Should we take weapons?” asked the pretty one.

“It is wise,” they said nodding to one another as they somberly gathered stones and put them in their pockets. This gesture startled Imelda. Unwillingly, her mind flashed to the 1968 incident.

“Gardener, perhaps you should go down to greet them. Let them know there's nothing to be afraid of.” She folded her hands expectantly and sat without moving until he left the room.

Imelda was eager to make contact with the children, but their first encounter had to be under the correct light, the precise angle, the perfect sliding together of two moments. The pigeons always flew past her window, and if she waited patiently she could lean out just as they passed. The birds would rise higher and higher and the children would follow the flapping of their wings moving in unison across the house and past her window. As the birds swooped up, the children's eyes would trail off the tails and fall onto her. They would immediately recognize that she was the one whom they sought; she was the one who waited, the one of everlasting beauty who requested only a small cup of water, because she knew that with infinite patience intimacy would eventually come. It would. Come into her arms. Rise up from the street.

The sound of footsteps startled her. It was the gardener running towards the children. What was he doing? She told him to greet the children, not chase them away. Even after he had spent so much time with her, he still didn't know how to follow her directions correctly. Now, there he was charging at the children. They screamed and pulled out their rocks, but even though a small shower rained down on him, he was still able to grab the dog by its neck and run back inside the house. The children stood with their arms raised and cried out after the dog, "Punto Final!"

Imelda balled the curtain up in her hands. It was all ruined now. The children would leave before she even spoke to them. A touch to her arm made her jerk. Swiftly, the gardener had crept up behind her. He pointed outside to where the children were bunched together, moving towards the house.

"Where's the dog?"

"Sitting by the door. See, the children are coming quickly now to get him. Then they will see you. Remember? That's what you wanted?"

"I had a plan."

"What plan?"

"The pigeons."

"What pigeons?"

She clamped her lips shut.

"Show yourself to them." His lips felt warm and flat against her ear. The words fell precisely in the folds. The words were correct. Even if the children did not see her when the pigeons flew past, they needed to understand that she was real. They needed to

know history, to learn what truths survived and extended beyond the past and which ones died.

Once again, Imelda leaned forward. Her arms fell into their habitual positions: one folded across the window sill and the other one upright so that she could rest her chin on the back of her hand. As the children came closer, she gazed at the road, not directly below, but at a point in the distance. She knew at what angle to tilt her head so that part of her face was brilliantly exposed and part of it was hidden as she imagined the return of Juan Carlos....

There he stands at the end of Kiwi Street with the wheat waving behind him. His gold canine tooth flashes in the sun. The apple he spears with his sword releases a sweet aroma. The sun is grandiose and fat. It moves down the sky, providing a canopy of colors. It's the end of the day and the sky is streaked and miraculous, but it is only Juan Carlos who matters. He stands with his hand on the hilt of his sword, his boots weary from travel, but he is smiling. His moustache is thick and bold, his eyes kind and loving, his hair is black oil with the sea rolling beneath it. He kisses the fingers of one gloved hand, then raises the hand high as he begins his final steps towards her. The houses dissolve as he walks past them. He walks, and then he can no longer wait. He is running. She feels a crack inside herself like that of a glacier. She feels the spilling of herself like yellow leaves to the ground. There he is standing before her, looking at her, holding his hand up to her. All time shrinks down to a finite point and disappears. She tilts her head, raises her face to the sunset once again and allows the rays of light to illuminate her.

“Huuuuuuhh!” the pretty one screamed. “She’s still waiting!”

Imelda looked down at them. Her mouth fell open. She wanted to tell them to not be afraid, to come upstairs and give her water, and that yes, she was still waiting, but that he was coming soon. They just had to be patient.

There was the pop of her jaw as she opened her mouth to speak, but Soundless. Her mouth was no mouth; it was a cavern. She felt time inside of it, moving through and carving out more space, more dark hollows. The tunnel of space between the ground where the children stood and the window where she sat, shifted and exaggerated their shapes. The children were so close now. Which was her gaze and which was theirs? Who was who? Why was why? It was all twisted up and she couldn't tell what one saw and what the other saw until she looked down at her spotted hands. She reached up and felt the sparseness of her hair, felt the brittleness of her bones and roots. She touched the roughness of her skin, and finally she understood herself as the children understood her; she was rotted.

“Run,” the bossy one pushed open the front door releasing Punto Final, who bounded out and sprinted away with her toward the road that led back to town. The boy and the pretty one followed, looking one last time over their shoulders at Imelda, their terrified faces as bloodless as roots twisting underground.

They ran and the sun kept slipping until it was lower than the sky, lower than the trees, lower than the road. Along with the light, the children were gone to the end of Kiwi Street, on their bikes and pedaling past the end of Kiwi Street and into the apple orchards.

Imelda rested her forehead on the windowsill, still remembering but differently now. The men had returned, but not in the way expected, which was riding in the same parallel rows that they had left in, the horses lifting up their hooves and clopping them

solidly to the ground. Instead, the men returned one by one with missing limbs and carved up flesh. They dragged themselves down the street to their homes as their women watched from behind scalloped curtains. Once they reached their front doors, they were pulled in by their collars and the doors slammed shut. The exhausted horses collapsed on broken ankles, and lay on the ground, heaving through their dry mouths. Flies infested their orifices. The people left the horses where they'd fallen, packed up and moved to the anonymous cities where they could hide the scars and missing body parts, and where nobody would know how far they'd fallen from prancing around on their private street of luxury. The women carried the dead men away. Imelda was the only one who stayed, but Juan Carlos didn't return.

Beneath her folded arms she stared into the porcelain bowl where her roots rested. The gardener was slowly filling the bowl with cool water. Watered now, watered later, left to wither, or left to blossom, it did not matter. The children screamed when they saw her. What would they tell the others? Brusquely, she ran her fingers through her hair pulling out strands that the gardener had missed. Holding them up, she examined their lifelessness before dropping them in the water. They sank and became tangled in her roots. She stared at the lines of the decrepit houses. The window framed her perfectly as if it had been built around her as she sat on her frayed stool, looking out.

“I wanted them to remember me in a beautiful way,” she said.

Eggplant & Ruby

She recognized the man in the truck because he used to buy fishing line from *Don's Shop*, where she used to work selling hooks, bobs and miniature rubber squids, and where her boss kept busy fiddling around with fishing nets. They kept each other company, the boss's wife having passed away many years back and them not ever having kids, and her father busy working, gambling, and picking up french fries for the hungry little brothers to eat. Like the brothers, she was a skinny thing only taller. It was the boss who told her she had a robust spirit.

This was, of course, long before she moved herself over the Martin Luther King Bridge to the city. By then her father had taken the little brothers and moved away to a place called Rantoul, another small speck of town that you only know if you know. Once you know, then it truly exists, a pin point of a place. You feel as if you'd always known such a place as Rantoul with its small houses and large yards, tire swings, broken toddler toys, and screen doors that squeaked. Other strange things were there too, like the Solo Cup Factory, and the school for juvenile delinquents, which had a cot that, at that very moment, she was supposed to be lying down on.

The boss had come to the city looking for her, but she was a rat: she knew where to hide. She'd seen the boss's car rolling past, and so she hid behind a wall, peered around it to see where his car was going. He was a nice enough man, sure, but he wasn't blood, he wasn't kin so she stayed hiding until the taillights headed back east over the bridge. She stayed on the west side, the Missouri side of the bridge that arched over the Mississippi River. Nobody she knew—and she didn't know very many people, just the boss, the old neighbor, the crosswalk guard, the mechanic at 49th and Buxit—none of them ever came

out to the city. Maybe somebody came once every six months to the farmers market, maybe once a year to catch a game, but otherwise, no, they didn't cross the bridge to come to this city filled with tall, vacated buildings and clean streets empty of street sweepers. Even better, the city was too far away for the legs of little brothers to ride their bikes over, so she could stand against the wall of the Old Spaghetti Factory, cross her arms and look up at the voiceless buildings that towered above her and feel that—in the end—all things were equally bad, equally good, equally neutral. Leaning up against the brick wall in the cold wasn't harmful to anyone, not to the small brothers in Rantoul, or the father, or the boss in his shop, or the girl in the street, or the man in his truck. Oh, the tired eyes.

The truck slowed to second, then first gear. The man inside leaned his head out. His gaze ground her into the wall. Neither of them smiled and this was fitting. If she were another girl she might have been at home asleep, but she was there where the wind whipped around her ankles and swirled up her legs. Then, she was inside the truck where the man turned the heat on full blast. She felt her skin tight against her bones and his hand warm on the meat of her thigh.

The motel sign was half burned out, of course, and the walls were whitewashed as high as somebody's arm could reach. The room popped open, the door pushed along by old cigarette smoke that had been waiting as patiently as an old dog, ready to limp outside with its tongue hanging out. The weak light of the lamp rolled along the surface of a painting—a strange painting of a fat eggplant lying on a wooden floor close to a dark wall. The shadows in the painting were long. The angle was off, so that it looked as if the eggplant might roll awkwardly down the floor and out of the frame. The painting hung

above the bed that sunk in deeper on the right side. This was where he sat and slipped off his shoes. She unfolded her arms and let him pull her onto the bed.

"Do you need anything?"

What she needed from him was money for food, a new winter coat, and leggings; she needed a styrofoam cup filled with water to moisten her cracked lips and the fibers of her throat; she needed heat. The warm air in the truck had only traced the surface of her skin but hadn't penetrated it. She needed more warmth, and now she couldn't help but get it as he rubbed her in the places where her bones jutted out, punctured her in the places where she was mostly flesh. She placed her hands on the sides of his back, just where the fat would have peeked over his belt if he still had his pants on. There was heat, his bones against her bones, and the wooden bed frame knocking against the wall. From where she lay, the upside down eggplant became a large splotch expanding and contracting. What a rare color it was. There were flowers that color, and berry stains. It was the color woven into strands of black hair but that was only visible in the sunlight. There were parts of the human body that seemed like they'd be that color, like the liver, if healthy, or the deep parts of the ear where the tiniest bones lay. Bruises at the middle stage were that color, so were the upper layers of a twilight sky expanding and contracting until the man stopped.

The eggplant took its shape again. The heat between their bodies evaporated. She was cold. She put her clothes back on, then lay back beneath the covers on her back with her limbs completely straight, palms down, and fingers spread flat. Fresh cigarette smoke filled the room. It rose and disappeared past an invisible line that marked the top of the room from the bottom.

"I'll drop you off some place."

In that wild imagination of hers, she had seen herself lying under the covers for a little while longer, but she nodded and sat up. He cracked his back and the bed springs squealed like piglets as she turned away from him, swung her legs over to the side of the bed and waited for him to dress, to put out his cigarette, and to check his watch.

"Where to?" He was on fire now, riding with his window all the way down, so she re-crossed her limbs to contain the shivering.

"That IHOP over there is fine."

He pulled up to the curb and pressed two bills into her hand. He turned the radio dial back and forth while she unfolded herself and opened the door to get out. As she slid off the seat and reached one foot to the ground, she looked at him once more before slamming the door shut, cutting the line between them.

She felt as she did every time after. It didn't matter how long she and a customer stayed in a room. There was always a web of dried semen on her thighs, which turned her moles into flies with their wings ripped off. If she could, she would unzip her suit of skin and step out of it for a little while, hang it up to be washed and dried. If it were her choice, she would step out of her body, be safe and silent as she had once been while dusting off shelves in the sunlight.

"Damn girl must have run in quick," mumbled the man in the truck. From the rearview mirror, he saw no trace of her, only an empty bottle on the sidewalk.

*

All she had done was blink. Now she couldn't figure out where she was, only that it was warm without the rubbing, moving, and opening of vents. She pressed her hands to

her eyes to see if they were open, but she couldn't tell where her hands were, so she tried opening and shutting her eyes, but she couldn't tell if she had eyelids. Pausing for a moment, she inhaled and decided that she could see after all, whether it was by means of her regular eyes, additional eyes, or sensing vibrations. What she saw was what she felt, which was glass. The floor was glass. She extended herself sideways. The walls were glass. What she saw was what she sensed. Above her, the glass extended and narrowed until at the very top there was a perfect circle of sky filled with its familiar dim stars. She was inside a bottle.

She pressed herself against the side of it and was surprised that the IHOP where the man in the truck had dropped her in front of was still there, only it was of a monstrous size now. It still welcomed with its warm lights calling to outsiders to come and sit in the glow of the lamps that hung from the ceilings. The same waiter with long sideburns was still moving around inside, his antennae-like hands wiping down the tables.

A flicker at the top of the bottle caught her attention. The opening was covered and the sky gone. The bottle rocked back forth, glass scraped against cement, and then she was lifted in the air. Whoever was carrying the bottle walked with an easy gait, and she moved smoothly back and forth. The movement was soothing, rather than malicious, like being on a swing, braids flying high beside the ears, tips lifting past the temples. There were no inner alarms, no shouts of panic, only thoughts of rising to the tree tops then dipping down to ant hills. This went on for awhile, tumbling with ease, no bruises, no pain, a lotto ball blowing in the machine. Whoever she was, she was not anymore. However she'd come to be there, that moment had ceased to exist. With each rotation, each flip, she lost any memory of being touched, either beaten or caressed. She swept

across the bottom of the bottle, then somersaulted through the narrow neck and propelled herself off the top, back down to the bottom, a trapeze artist without the burden of ropes tangling up her feet—if she even had feet. She spun, a puff of air, a bubble, a mist, a thought rolling down a blade of grass.

The movement stopped. Again, she was at the bottom of the bottle. There was the sound of a cork popping out of glass. The top was open again, but the night sky didn't return. In its place was flat alabaster, but before she had time to contemplate this new surface, she felt the bottle being lifted and turned over. The movement was abrupt. All the sensations she had of herself smashed together and whooshed downwards. All of her mass gathered together. For a moment, she was compressed and hysterical as she slid and flew off the lip of the bottle. If she had eyes, she closed them. If she had a stomach, she lost it forever as she free fell through the air and landed on a wooden surface.

*

She woke up to the vibration of the surface beneath her and heard: *Who are you?*

She searched for the source of the voice. A flat, circular form was lying next to her. It caught the light and was bright and the rich color of eggplant. The form vibrated again. So did the wooden surface.

You are?

She wasn't sure if she still had a voice. She wanted to speak, but didn't know what name to give.

Don't know.

Each sound she made was a snowflake that blew towards the form next to her and melted against its surface. Maybe the form next to her knew something she didn't or

maybe it at least had a name. She spoke again.

You are?

Don't know.

*

They spoke for a long time, telling each other bits of stories that they knew, though how they knew them was every bit a mystery as their own actuality. She told him of feeling cold to the bone marrow, of trucks rolling slowly, of small towns with broken toys, buildings that housed children with no parents, and parents of children with no parents. There were children behind walls, quick fondling beneath skirts, and the loss of a flip flop. There was running barefoot through dirt, sucking on a straw that had root beer at the other end of it. There was the lift of a hand, the drop of a hand onto the lap of a somebody who'd fallen asleep and forgotten what brought the girl there.

The eggplant-colored form beside her spoke of a river whose river bottom was coated with cement, its natural muddy state strangled. The river ran through a place called Los Angeles, where at night a young man walked beneath the freeway and alongside that same river. From this lower position that almost felt underground, he could appreciate the glare of the street lamps on the dark water and the sound of vehicles driving above him. Beneath the shifting reflections, the river manipulated itself. It flowed and moved like diluted soy sauce. It was a shadowy scene except for ruby drippings oozing from the young man's arms. Everything of importance was this color, from fruit punch and chips coated with chili powder, to the skin beneath ripped cuticles, to the sacred heart of Jesus hanging on the wall past which his mother walked in her work uniform. And then there was the juice of tomatoes, the lining of uteruses, lacey bras with

small bows, pointed nipples, dog penises, devils, STOP, letters painted on cardboards: "SAVE OUR RIVER!" There was smeared lipstick, half a face blooming larger than the other half, and an ambulance with flashing lights.

The young man crouched by the inky river that smelled of sewage and that gurgled in drains stopped up with dead leaves and plastic bags. The river choked on layers of slime. He slid too near the edge, and the water stabbed through to his toes so that he dropped the razor in the water, and closed his lucky eyes to the cold.

They shared these tidbits of life with each other, frame after frame, picture after picture, moment after moment. None of it was of any particular importance, not in that place where there was nothing much to do but study the surface above them, flat and pale alabaster. Shadows and light made cyclical paths across it. Then, too, there was the surface on which they lay, flat and wooden. There was time to study its texture, to find out where it was smoothest and where it was marked. If lying between these two parallel planes went on forever, they would be happy because, here, it wasn't cold and, here, they weren't hungry. Sometimes, they thought of a young woman on the abandoned side of a bridge, or of a young man leaking blood beside a river. In these moments they felt sharp twinges inside, so together they gently studied the pattern of shadows and lights in cycle after cycle until they felt smooth again. There was a whooshing sound like the ocean or the wind blowing through palm trees. If this went on forever, they wouldn't mind at all, because they chased the shadows until they became part of them, and floated off with the sound that was the ocean and wind blowing through palm trees.

We are?

What we've always been, two stones lying together on a wooden table, one ruby

colored and the other eggplant. The stories we know are the ones we heard as people walked past, as they stooped to pick us up, tossed us into a lake where ducks paddled above us and a fish swallowed us. Somebody caught the fish, cut the flesh open, dug us out, washed us down drains that led to the ocean. The tide carried us back to the shore, where we were collected once again, and words continued to fall on us, dripping. Each sound was distinct, melting when it touched us.

The wind blew around and between them, creating a passage. It carved first one, then the other, until it seemed as if they were made from one piece, then split, each one worn smooth by erosion.

*

She cleaned between her legs with wet paper towels, and she wiped the crust off her thighs. She counted *one Mississippi, two Mississippi*, until she reached 120, all the while rubbing soap into her hands. After this, she splashed water on her face and through her hair. There was no mirror to show her reflection, but she caught a version of it on the round knob of the hand dryer. She used it to reapply her lipstick, then returned to the booth where she sat with her legs folded underneath her. It was warm here, and the waiter with the sideburns passed by again.

"More hot water?" The gentle hand kept pouring.

All the muscles and bones in her body ached. She played with quarters. Moving the change around in small circles, she decided. She would try just a small thing, a wee thing that would not mean much, or amount to much, a simple phone call to the boss, who was probably at that moment untangling a ball of fishing twine. Probably, maybe he would answer and then maybe she could take a shower, fall asleep in a safe place, get up

in the morning, and then—then what? The momentary confidence she felt from the friction between her finger and the quarter evaporated. Then what? Too far, too much, too call, too shiny a quarter, too long the bridge. Her heart broke from its rhythm. Her hands froze. Her pupils widened. Eggplant splotches expanded and contracted in the dark. A young man crouched beneath a freeway, beside a roaring river. She waited. He dropped a sharp something into the water, stood up slowly. When he began climbing up the slope of the hill, her heart returned to its usual one. two. one. two. Her index finger pressed again on the quarter, and now she slid the coin across the table into the open palm of her other hand. Numbers rang and spun through the air. As she scooted out of the booth and stood up, ruby-colored words dripped off her body. The young man listened as they spilled to the floor, then he pushed on forward towards the darker but closer sky.

Curios

Shiloh is changing. This is why it's important to have codes of dress and codes of behavior, otherwise, we get someone like the woman who lives—lived in 402. Even after we convinced her not to paint her house kiwi green, she committed more behavior code violations. She lived alone, worked as a bartender, wore mini skirts, smoked cigarettes in the front yard, and had been seen leaving with different men on *numerous* occasions. We surmised that she might be working as an escort lady, so we tailed her. Turns out she was on a date. But, dating like that at her age? We all agree that dating is more trouble than it's worth, but some people don't have hobbies other than—well, no, that's wrong. It turns out Ms. Georgia Saipan Jackson did have a hobby besides dating. She was a collector, but we'll get to that.

This story begins when the García family in the house to the left of her, and Ed and Veronica to the right, noticed they hadn't seen her leaving the house for a good three days, not even to go on one of her dates. We really started suspecting something was wrong when a coworker of hers came to the neighborhood. Nobody around here drives a car like that, with those spinning wheels, so naturally we approached him right away. We were friendly, of course. We always are. It's not about being antagonistic. It's about being open, knowing what and who is going on, so we introduced ourselves as representatives of the Good Neighbors Association. The young man seemed nice enough, too much cologne, but he was polite, saying that Ms. Georgia hadn't been to work the last two days, and hadn't called in either. Not that we assumed anything about her, but it was good to know that at least she was a responsible and punctual worker, even if “work” meant wearing a low cut shirt and standing on the other side of the bar. We accompanied

the young man to the front door, rang the doorbell, and peered into the windows, but the glass was thick and blurry. We couldn't see anything through them but vague shapes and shadows. There weren't any funny smells or pitiful cries of a trapped or injured woman. Really, the place was a hair past serene. We went around back, but the only things out there were some slippers, a rocker, a rickety table, and another locked door.

Well, we were just about to give up, but turns out the young man had a spare key. We didn't want to offend him, but we weren't born yesterday. Why he couldn't have been older than twenty and Ms. Georgia was well into her 40's, maybe even older. With women like that you can't always tell their real age. Usually they aren't forthcoming about it either. It seemed more than a little curious to us that he hadn't told us about the key right away, so we told him go to on ahead and use it, just to see if he'd bite and show us the way in. We gathered around the door, knocked one more time and listened to the knock fall flat. We rang the doorbell one more time and listened to its hollow ring. Then we gathered tightly together as one, behind the young man, as he unlocked the door.

Ms. Georgia lay on her tiled kitchen floor beside a shattered glass bottle. She was on her stomach with her palms pressed to the floor as if she had attempted to catch herself but failed. Her eyes were open, turned towards us as if she had heard us standing out there and had been trying to pull us in by the string of her dead gaze. A single shard of glass stuck out from the white of her left eye. Clear liquid, most likely from the broken bottle, puddled around her cheek. From the corner of her mouth trickled blood that touched the floor and mixed in with the puddle. Her faded lipstick told us she had been on her way in rather than on her way out. Her nails and toenails were painted bright orange (tacky, but a suitable color for her). She was barefoot and wore a clingy

wraparound dress that exposed her neckline (not surprising) and revealed how gravity was pulling eagerly on her skin and breasts.

We decided not to call the police yet. At first the young man protested. He tried to wrestle his cell phone back from us when we plucked it away from him, but we calmed him down by pressing our hands down on his shoulders. We pointed out that there was more going on in there than just Ms. Georgia's body lying on the floor. The house was filled with hundreds, thousands of bottles that sat on every windowsill, shelf, countertop, and all along the floor boards. Even more disturbing was that inside of each bottle was a doll that looked just like her. We looked in every direction and there she was over and over again: Ms. Georgia reflected off the bottles, Ms. Georgia as a tiny plastic doll, Ms. Georgia dead on the floor with her eyes open.

*

My life wasn't spectacular. Nobody will understand it completely. I barely understand it at all, but I can see it a little better now that it's gone. I can step back, hem and haw, and study it if I want to, not that I was ever one for studying. I'm just here to pass my hand through it one last time, hold it up to the light, let it fall between my fingers. People will forget me, as is natural to do. Eventually, I'll be nothing but a lipstick stain on glass.

On summer nights I used to sit out on the back porch with candles burning sweetly, a silk robe wrapped around my body. I liked to breathe the thick, humid air of Illinois summers with a cup of tea in my hand, a shot of whisky stirred in, a final thought. I'd sit with my slippered feet resting lightly on the wooden planks of the porch, and sip and rock while staring contentedly at the trees shifting shape in the deepening darkness.

For a good half hour that's all I would do, so that the tension from my body could escape and become lightening bugs weaving above the blades of grass. Then I would lean down and pull out my bottles from a basket beneath the table. Inside those bottles is where I kept my memories of Reginald. My memories were safe there in those bottles. Peering inside of them, I could relive my happiest times with him. I could keep the best part of my life close to me...

Bottle #1 The Richmond Pier

It's a regular old dirty day today. The tips have been shit and after four months of living in Oakland, it still hasn't gotten to be any more like home. Being stared at by strangers while I dance doesn't count as companionship. I drive to the Richmond Pier. Nobody ever talks about going there even though they do, so I figure if nobody talks about it then there has to be something special to it—everyone trying to keep it such a damn secret. I drive up the gravelly road towards the water. It's so windy out that my hair is a mess as soon as I step out of the car. Low lying waves race over the water. There's only one person out here, sitting slumped in a foldout chair with a blanket. He has a cap pulled down over his eyes, but I catch their hazel glint when he glances up. He's floating a toy boat on a rope. There's something in the salty air, and I sit on a bench near him. We barely speak, except for a few comments on his part about how the weather affects the movement of fish. Somewhere in that sparseness of conversation I nod off, my mouth falling open, still conscious of the air coming off the ocean and down from the hills. The air curls up inside my mouth and touches the surface of my teeth. His boots scrape

against the wooden boards, and his ring clinks against a bottle as he lifts it to his lips. He touches my arm with a beer, which at first I don't take, but then, why the hell not. It's alright to drink a cold one while sitting with another soul watching the wind make waves.

Bottle #87 Easter Sunday

Reginald never comes to church with me, but today he sits beside me in a back pew and flips through the pages in a songbook. We drive with the windows down to my house. My place is small. The bed is small, so is the window. Through it we hear the sounds of cars driving past and shopping carts crashing into brick walls. We're too far inland to hear the water. I used to be thirsty for that sound every day, but now: such liquid things are tongues and thighs, such heat floating and rising.

Bottle #172 The Oakland Pier

It stretches on for a mile. We take our time walking it. This night is the best of Oakland nights with the warm air, a light breeze carrying the sounds of dinner parties in the hills and barbeques in the flatlands. The pier stretches on for two miles, but we take our time walking and listening to the clop, clop of water against the legs of the pier, the tap of our dress shoes on the wooden planks. At that hour, and on this night, there are few fishermen and women, even fewer fisherchildren who like pulling their hoods over their heads and wearing fingerless gloves so that they can pick up their playing cards. The pier moseys on for three miles and we talk over dream matters like driving the Thunderbird

across the continent from West Coast to East. We talk about easy going matters: the cocoa in the chocolate cake, the berries in the wine, the first draft picks. The ocean laps against the bottom of the pier. The fisherpeople wind their lines up tightly, then toss them back out again.

The pier slowly curves up, then glides down towards its end, which is boarded up with parallel, wooden beams. We put our faces in the gaps between them and look out at the body of water that moves continuously in search of the Pacific. The sky is black with silver punched in it. Turning, we see that behind us are thousands of golden points dancing on the hills and along the shores. The pier goes on for light years.

*

Ms. Georgia surely must've been crazy.

Some of us, thinking to give us more light, pushed back the curtains and lifted up the shades. All those bottles with the sunlight glinting off of each and every one of them. Rays of light shot into our eyes. We blinked and shuffled, tried to shield ourselves. In our blindness we were like a mess of pigs in a pen blundering about, knocking up against each other. The daggers of light jabbed at us. We could sense the weight of Ms. Georgia's body on the floor, the weight of her death pulling us down with her, against her. Those of us who were by the windows, quickly pulled the shades back down and shut the curtains.

We could see again and we didn't like what we saw, none of it.

The dolls inside the bottles were like toys from a gumball machine. They had plastic nubs for noses, ears, and mouths, and slight indentations where the eyes should have been. Each bottle had two dolls in it, one that was clearly Ms. Georgia with her

orange fingernails and flipped out hair, and the other one that was an unidentified male doll. A chill went through all of us. What man had she bottled herself up with? What man had she replicated herself with over and over again? We couldn't help ourselves. We couldn't control our reaction.

“Is that you?”

We questioned the young man who claimed to be her coworker.

“You have a spare key. Is that you supposed to be in the bottles with her?”

We avoided looking at Ms. Georgia's body on the floor and thinking about the antics she must surely have engaged in with this young man half her age. Oh, the fright in his eyes when we surrounded him. We were driven by confusion, by the oddity of those dolls, and maybe even by whatever strange liquid on the floor that formed the puddle around Ms. Georgia's face. We surmised that it was possible that whatever had killed Ms. Georgia was still in the air, slowly corrupting our systems as we tried to get to the bottom of her death.

“Did you make her do this?”

“Not me.” And he pointed to the skin on his arm. It was true. He had a fair complexion compared to the male doll in the bottle. He pointed to his facial hair and earlobes. It was true. The doll didn't have his wild hair or earrings. We surmised that the man in the bottle was an older, more conservative gentleman.

“You don't know who he is?”

“No idea. Maybe there're some pictures lying around?” The young man had hit upon something. Maybe there were clues around the house. We were about ready to call the police, but we knew that once they arrived we would be shooed away, the house

closed off, and then we might never understand what killed Ms. Georgia. The young man was right. Surely there'd be some picture lying around of Ms. Georgia and the unidentified man. We stepped back, gave the poor kid a little space. He didn't know a thing. We posted him close to Ms. Georgia's body. He couldn't stop looking at her. Poor kid. Probably hadn't ever seen a dead body before, especially not of someone he cared about, someone whom he maybe even believed he loved. A few of us sat with him and kept vigil. We prayed tentatively. It wasn't our job to make sure she got into heaven, but still, we could show our respects to the dead.

The rest of us spread out, examining the bottles and the house. We found everything but photographs. In the stand beside her bed were a mess of prophylactics. On her dresser were bottles of massage oil, scented candles, and glitter spray. There were bags and bags of make up. In her closet hung more low cut dresses, high heels and thigh-high go go boots.

None of these personal items prepared us for what we found in the bathroom. Inside of the medicine cabinet, behind the mirror, where there should have been cold creams and Tylenol, were more bottles. There were more Ms. Georgia's and more unidentified men, over and over again only—and really this shouldn't have come as a surprise to us, given what we knew of her—all the dolls were naked and in the most pornographic positions. Doll faces pushed into doll crotches. Doll lips glued to doll nipples. Doll faces shoved into rear ends. Dolls spread eagle. Dolls bent over and panting on all fours. Doll fingers stuffed in doll mouths and vaginas. Doll feet clutching doll heads. Doll anuses on doll faces. We shut the bathroom cabinet. There are some things we just shouldn't know about each other.

*

It was a slow day for bartending. Thunderstorms kept people at home, busying themselves with fixing things, gluing model airplanes, painting toenails, and piercing noses. I wasn't surprised that it was a slow shift. Shiloh wasn't like Oakland where you might have one or two days of bad weather in a row, but that's it. I liked the quiet and the calm that went on inside while the rain droned on outside. I busied myself in the rhythm of wiping water spots off the glasses, shining them up, and stacking them in two parallel towers. The man in the suit who walked in and asked for a Crown on the rocks didn't catch my attention right off. Once I really looked at him, though, I couldn't stop. I stared at him a little bit too long, and he caught me looking. It's just that he looked so much like Reginald in the face and body, though not in his flashy style of dress or in the way he held his glass with his fingertips, swirling the liquid around, clearing his throat between sips, loosening his tie. Still, I'd always heard that everyone has a twin out there in the world, and it seemed that Reginald's was sitting at the bar in front of me.

I asked him what team he was going for. It took him forever to pull his eyes off of ESPN, but when he did, he ran his gaze down the front of my cleavage, took in my nice pair of legs, and probably wondered if my skin was as soft and good smelling as it looked.

"Broncos," he said.

I kept on shining the glasses. The more he looked, the more he must've liked, because little by little, he spent more time talking to me than he did watching the game. My shift was coming to an end.

"Let me buy you a drink, beautiful."

I stood at the sink behind the bar and watched the suds slide off my hands under the fluorescent light. Beautiful. Now that was a nice word to be called. I moved on around to the other side of the bar. The Long Island Iced Tea he bought me made me feel like I had a virgin tongue in a hot desert. I sat on the stool next to him and we toasted to thunderstorms and to touchdowns made in the final seconds of a game. Alcohol had its old magic again. For years, it had lost its potency and left me feeling dry mouthed more often than anything else, but that night, with Reginald's twin, David, the lights danced again, and the few people in the bar looked elegant and fascinating. The rain was coming down harder in a steady beat, and when I squinted, it was Reginald there beside me. Sure, his voice was a little higher, but that was a minor detail, one that, the more I drank, the less I noticed. David even wore the same cologne as Reginald and I toasted to this.

This was what I wanted: to burrow myself deep inside of his warm body and curl up like a tiny worm laying and hatching eggs. Me and my hatchlings, we'd be a family and he would be our universe. Wouldn't that then be love? What else could it be? Dozens of bodies crossed paths with me every day, but his was the only one that pulsed in my ears and in my stomach, in between my legs and in the soles of my feet. His was the body I wanted to burrow myself inside of so that I could lie there deep in his stomach, or liver, or heart. It was no coincidence that he sat down at my bar, so I wanted to curl up inside of him with a smile on my lips. I wanted to enter him and multiply. A hundred little me's burrowed inside of him. We would nibble at his organs with our small mouths, so small that he would feel only wave after wave of a million gentle tickles made by tender lips. Would this not be love?

I set down the shot glass and tried keeping my eyes closed. The magic of alcohol carried me from the bar, to his car, to the Motel Six.

I tried opening my eyes, tried squinting them, and tried wiggling into the chant of *Reginald, Reginald* inside my head. But none of it worked to turn me into a hairless, sliding invertebrate. David became impatient. “If you can’t come baby, you can’t. Try again next time.”

I rolled off of him, out of breath, naked, looking up at the ceiling. Well, yes, there was always next time. I turned my head and smiled at him. He smiled back and rolled out of bed. He pulled on one sock, which got me thinking how most folks put their underwear on first, but why not the sock first? Why not the hat, then one sock, then the shirt? Why not the shoes and then the underwear?

“Gotta go pick up this couch early tomorrow morning.”

There it was. The hammer was down and he was leaving. The jury was already chewing on a verdict behind closed doors. In two weeks, if my flat ass, soft skin and smooth legs still held appeal for him, then maybe he would call, but not to invite me to the movies or dinner. Maybe he would take me for a bite to eat, but not to dinner because the two are not the same. Dinner means spending money and dressing up. Dinner is a restaurant by the pier. A bite to eat is curly fries and a shake from Rally’s. It’s the #2 chicken special. I knew this. I’d been through it a dozen times before. Oh, I didn’t hold on to bad memories. I let them go their way. I didn’t cling. I didn’t toss them around in my mind or roll them around in my mouth. They weren’t the precious memories, so I didn’t keep them bottled up. I let them all go.

This was all I wanted: for him to knock me down then wipe his hand off, even if there was nothing on it but the touch of my skin and pressure of my bones. Already, I could see my bulging eye, my split lip, my stomach shoved into my spine, my twisted ankle, my purple forearms. I could see a ripped earlobe, an unfocused eye, a crooked finger, a neck with welts, a rib snapped in two. That's all I ever wanted, to know the body inside and out and if it couldn't be his, it might as well be my own.

I got him, just by asking, to give me one good one, right in the jaw. It knocked me back and the wine I'd been holding splashed on my face. It was jarring, but not painful. The second molar on the right side of my mouth fell from my gums. I spat it out, kicked it away, cupped my hand under my mouth to catch the blood, and when I looked up, he was staring at me with his belt hanging open.

"My tooth," I cried like it hurt even though truthfully it was a relief to have gotten rid of that rotting thing. For all David knew and needed to know, that tooth had been knocked loose by his hand. It disgusted him and so did I, naked with blood and wine all over my chin, neck, and breasts. My body was a dirty pulse.

"Get up off the floor."

He commanded, but I crawled around, whimpering for my molar. A small dribble of blood came out of my mouth. I didn't look at him, but heard him grunting as he put on his shoes. I felt the warmth of his body as he crouched near me. He brought his face almost level to mine.

"Would you get up, please?"

What sudden softness.

I looked up at him. Such a blank face should never have reminded me of Reginald. I turned my head and spat more blood on the rug. I kept on crawling until I the door clicked shut, announcing his departure. The molar was nestled in the carpet beside the bed. I reached out to pick it up and cupped it in my hand.

There were memories like the night with David that I never put in the bottles. Those memories could have evaporated for all I cared. I didn't want or need them. But for all my not caring, some of them stuck.

The last time I went to knock on Reginald's door, there was none to knock on, just an old sheet nailed to the doorway. This was the first time I noticed my molar give a little wiggle when I pressed my tongue against it, feeling a sense of foreboding. All the glass in the windows, all the hinges and nails had been removed. How quickly a home becomes the bare scraps of a house. Then again, by Reginald's own words, that place was never his home. I can't lie and say his leaving was a surprise. He'd told me he needed to go back to his family to see if things could be worked out. I waited anyway because I couldn't do anything against the knowledge that, for me, it was no coincidence that we had sat on that pier together. Even when I moved back across the country, I left a note, so that when he was ready to make his real home, he would know where I was. For three years I waited for him to come, sit down at my bar, and buy me a drink. What did I get but his twin and a knocked out tooth.

"It didn't go as planned," I told the molar and finished off the wine and the night by myself.

*

Ms. Georgia's death, like all deaths, was a wake up call. We went home that night and lectured our families, especially our young daughters. We weren't sure of the cause of death, but we let our families know that a woman in the neighborhood had come to a wrong end. Her death was a lesson, one example of how a woman who violated behavior codes left and right could easily end up with an uncertain death.

There were three possibilities: natural causes, murder, or suicide.

Maybe she'd had a heart attack. If this was the case, then her death was a wake up call to cut down on our red meat, take our vitamins, and increase the amount of time we spent at the gym and walking our Chihuahuas.

If it was murder (our prime suspect being the man her coworker said she had left the bar with two nights prior), then we needed to triple lock our doors. We needed to get a profile of the man and staple his face in every supermarket, on every corner, until we caught the S.O.B. As for the women, we needed to be conscious about our dress, and about whom we went home with (not that we would ever go home with a stranger).

Many of us thought she had committed suicide. We surmised that she stood in her kitchen, depressed at the state of her life, and drank from one of the bottles. We guessed that inside the bottle was some sort of liquid poison (once we had public access to the coroner and police reports we'd know for sure). As we imagined it, she gulped down everything, including the small plastic dolls and whatever objects might have been in that bottle (a miniature boat, a velvet ribbon). All the items in the bottle broke into lethal fragments that went down her throat, one after the other, festive and deadly. She drank until she heard carnival music throbbing in her veins and saw a sky ripped open with

silver. The poison entered her bloodstream. She dropped the bottle. She fell. Her cheekbone shattered when it struck the floor.

If it was suicide, then we needed to make sure there were no copycat suicides, especially among bachelorettes of that age, of which we only had a handful: Mrs. Breyer on Magnolia Avenue, who was a widower; Beatriz who lived with her sister's family and helped take care of the kids; and Rebecca Jones, who was planning, in May, to go on a cruise for singles.

All of us attended the funeral. The Good Neighbors Association watches over all, welcomes in the new, and waves to the departing. Ms. Georgia was a part of us, even if only for a short time, even if she violated the codes. We still felt to go. Her coworkers were there, including the young man with the fancy car. They seemed to have loved her well enough. They each brought a rose to throw on her coffin, a gesture they must have picked up from the movies. Standing beside her coffin, we noticed that she was shorter than she appeared to be when she was alive and in her high heels. We could almost forgive her indiscretions, seeing how pretty she looked with her hair fanned out across the pillow.

*

I put the molar on the nightstand for awhile, but it looked funny sitting there all by itself. What tooth wants to be all alone? Even the first one growing out in a baby's mouth knows it's being followed by half a dozen more, ready to push out through the gums, out into the world. Well, I sure couldn't shove the molar back in my mouth. For years, it had been on its way out. I wasn't going to leave it with the empty wine bottles and the twisted up bed sheets of the motel. I could just see a handful of fates for it, none

of them good. It might get sucked up by a vacuum, or be picked up by the next person in the room and strung on a necklace, or it might stay nestled in the dusty carpet for years, undetected. No, I couldn't do that to my molar. Even though it was rotted now, it had once sprouted clean and well-formed inside my mouth, so I rinsed it off in the bathroom that was small and stained, like most bathrooms are in these types of establishments. The soap was about as soft as sandpaper and so was the water, but the shower did just what it needed to, and I stepped out of there glistening.

After getting home, I changed into a bikini and went roller skating across town. After the night I'd had I normally would have felt bad, but normal wasn't always good and I was tired of that kind of weight. This weight was why women my age didn't roller skate, but I was never a woman to be my age. What needed to be, needed to be. A tooth fell out, a body washed, a sense of cleanliness. I rolled through the streets. I stopped and had a beer with Thomas who works the counter over there at *Chocolate Mexicano*. A fine man. The type of person who makes me glad to be back here in this cow dung town. He's the sort who doesn't take your existence for granted. He's the sort who if you came in with one tit hanging down and bleeding, he wouldn't drop his jaw but would wrap a blanket around you. Then I wandered over to Lily's. I've know her since high school. She was watching her grandbabies crawl around in the dirt. Little pumpkins with cherry noses. Another granddaughter was soon on her way to being born. I ate another blueberry tart then helped Lily hang up her laundry of cloth diapers and burp cloths.

After leaving Lily's, I rolled on through the cemetery. The sun filtered down through the leaves of the trees. Blossoms floated to the ground. While I wove between

the headstones, I left whiskey for my mother, cologne for my father, a string of chocolates for my brother. Somewhere in between, I dropped my molar in the grass.

I skated on over to the community college, not that I was ever one for studying, but something like mechanics might be good. Since I'd moved back to Shiloh, it was pick either house or vehicle but not both, so I opted for the house, but I figured if I took this class I could maintain my own car, and that way save some money. Martin, my coworker was selling his car. It was a sleek ride. I'd even leave the rims on...or better than a car would be a bike. Reginald and I had talked about hitting the highway. We never did it but it had always been something I wanted to do. I could see myself with some boots and a leather miniskirt, riding up and down the streets. Oh the neighbors would be scandalized then! I nodded at the information lady and asked her about motorcycle classes. They didn't have any, but I'll be damned if she didn't know of a place. Normally, with women like her, I look at the overly done up face, fake nails and turn my head away, but that day, I couldn't believe it. She helped me out and I meant it when I said thanks.

The hole in my gums was finally done throbbing and the other teeth had nicely settled around the new gap. As I roller skated home, my mind whirled with thoughts of silver wrenches in my pockets and a leather seat under my butt. It was time to clean all those bottles out, time to sweep and mop the floor, wipe down the shelves and repaint them some bright color. I would need space for my riding gloves and high heeled boots, plus that house had just gotten too darn dark and moldy.

Slide

From across the school yard, Mr. Gómez can feel the other teachers admiring his muscular form standing on the blacktop that glitters from two million shards of glass ground into tar. Two girls from the first grade class flutter around him. He imagines that the teachers' hearts also flutter across the yard to kiss his ankles. This is an arrogant thought he knows. It is because of his territorial nature and his view of the other teachers as day workers.

The little girls exclaim, *Maestro, there's blood on the slide! Is that blood on the slide, maestro?* While he would have preferred to handle this situation alone, he waves over to the group of teachers. They speed walk over. More kids will be arriving soon. He directs the other teachers to keep everyone inside. He's sure that their nipples harden as he takes charge, his voice cradling but firm. It is time to hustle, to bustle because he said so, because—*Is that?* One of them notices. *Is that blood on the slide?* Mr. Gómez holds up his hands. Calm. It is four days to Halloween and it's probably fake blood squirted from a tube. *Direct everyone to the front entrance and then move them into the cafeteria. Keep everyone inside until I tell you otherwise.* He flips open his phone. The other teachers, the little girls, and the fear that threatens to clutch them all by the throat move away again and he is left alone.

After dialing the police he clicks the phone shut. This click marks the beginning of his wait, the beginning of another life interval. As usual, he doesn't know how long this life will last. He bends down to examine the slide. It surely looks like blood. He reaches out his middle finger to touch, but stops—hepatitis, ketchup stains, menstrual blood, evidence, a red streak on yellow plastic that begins in the middle of the slide

where it dips, then drags all the way to the edge. It emerges from nowhere and ends abruptly. There are no red stains on the woodchips or the surrounding blacktop. There are no clues as to the source of the streak of red. It begins and ends on the slide, but before that, after, above, and below there are no clues.

The police will take their time, so Mr. Gomez walks the premises, circles the yard. One of the recycling bins has been knocked down. Stray papers cling to the fence, ready to climb over and out into the world beyond the school. Broken bottles surround portable #8. The prostitutes have been taking their clients to the roof tops again. Now there is a dirty, white couch up there. He doesn't want to disturb the premises, but he circles the portable again. Broken bottles, condom wrappings, and a cap-less lipstick rest in the gutter. He bends down closer. The lipstick is tangerine orange. It is a gaudy color that only a fast girl, at ten years old might wear. And yet it also makes him think of a bird of paradise.

There are always fast girls, but for Mr. Gómez there is only one: Dada. He knew her when he was Maximiliano, no mister, no military stint, no degrees, no two bedroom house. The two of them were just kids among a bunch of other kids in yet another generation passing through. This was when the school was Washington Elementary, before it was Chavez Elementary, before the additional portables, and remodeled cafeteria. Despite the surface changes, it was always the same school, always the same arrangement of classrooms, the same view of the mountains to the east and scent of the ocean to the west, and the same flat grounds that burn under the sun.

Already, in fourth grade Dada was wearing lip gloss, hoop earrings, and she had hair that frizzed out and trailed behind her across the yard. The senyoras eyed her as she

roamed the yard, and paused to bend over and pull up her sock. They watched the way she sprinted around with her skirts blowing all over the place, and the way she ran past one group of boys then another. They said, *Watch out for that one*. Maximiliano heard them, and he agreed completely. Watch out for her because with her orange lips and plumage of wiry hair, she was a bird of paradise hovering low to the ground. Better than this though, she was his friend.

They didn't talk the way two girls might have, sharing stories and secrets. There weren't giggles or notes passed between them. They did handstands in the grass, Maximiliano and Dada. They played Pac Man and Pong, rode their bikes past the pit bulls and between the backyard gardens, climbed up trees and scaled the branches to get to the rooftops. At school they rolled colored pencils back and forth over the crack between their desks, split oranges in half, and stood next to each other in line.

Is that your boyfriend? Is that your girlfriend? The other kids would hunched over in laughter because Dada kept growing taller while Maximiliano kept getting fatter, so that when they stood next to each other she was like a hairless, female version of Don Quixote and he was a brown Humpty Dumpty who barely came to her shoulder. She suffered her thinness and he suffered the baby fat that covered him and that questionably still even belonged to the category of baby. Meanwhile, her breasts budded, she played at swaying her hips, and she kept on with her dangling earrings and cute shirts, and she kept on with her prancing and looking for adventure on the schoolyard.

When he moved away he thought—no not thought—he remembered with his knee, the way her knee knocked against his when they sat on the detention bench, in trouble for having jumped the fence to get the soccer ball. Most of all he remembered the

sensation of spinning on a tire swing, both of them clinging to the chains, their torsos curved outwards. It was impossible to keep their mouths shut, and everything was so blurry and fast that their eyes watered. Spinning was Dada's favorite motion. Even when she was sitting she spun pencils around her thumb and pennies on the desk.

The city he moved to for high school was a better place than where he'd come from. Almost everybody had all their teeth and syringes on the ground were almost nonexistent. He gladly thought of Dada, but gradually he thought of her less and less. Thoughts of her trickled away until by the time he graduated high school, they were comparable in size to grains of salt. What made him think of her again was a bird that built a nest across the street from his house. It was a bird that was too big for the city. It was twice the size of a crow. It was only there a couple of weeks, as if it realized it was misplaced and belonged out in the country but had to lay her eggs first before taking off permanently. Maximiliano watched her one day in flight. She was an ugly bird but bigger than the rest. She left from the tree and flew away lazily, bobbing in the sky like a tired hen that knew she was the only hen in the world that could fly, but not caring. He never spied the baby birds, but he got it into his head to go look up Dada.

It wasn't hard to find her since she lived in the same house. The door was open a crack. He tapped on the screen door, heard the creaking of a couch, and there she stood, simple as that, as if the last time they'd seen each other was Wednesday and now it was Saturday. They were the same height. She was still skinny, but he was no longer fat. Her chest had rounded out a little. Her hips had widened just barely. Her hair was dyed orange blond.

They sat on the couch together, shoulder to shoulder. She wore lots of bracelets that jingled and flashed every time she changed the channel and lifted a cherry coke to her lips. Maximiliano hoped the soda wasn't rotting out her jagged and endearing teeth. During a commercial break, while he watched the bubbles made by the color guard detergent float up on the screen, she straddled him and her tangerine skirt rode up her thighs. The fabric was thick and crinkly like it had been cut out from a vinyl tablecloth. It wouldn't have surprised him if she had made the skirt because as a kid, she'd made earrings out of paperclips, and she'd rolled tortillas into skinny tubes to scrape out the last of the mayonnaise from its jar. Her bracelets jangled and her hoop earrings trembled slightly as he examined her angular face and felt her bones press into his body.

Outside, the cars honked. Mrs. Flores watered her rose bushes, pausing to gossip with anybody who passed by. Somewhere away, always came the sound of accordion music and the chirping of parakeets in a cage. Kids shouted as they pedaled past on their bikes, and the popsicle man clanged his bell. All these sounds were pieces in a board game that anyone could pick up, observe, and position wherever they wanted to. There was only one fixed point: Dada on his lap, facing him. She reached up her arms and rested them on his shoulders. The air between them smelled of cherry coke. This point where Dada was with him was fixed, everything else was game pieces moved around and knocked over carelessly. He stayed quiet and in his place, while she examined him as a bird of paradise would, with her head cocked and feathers raised.

It's boring here, she said, then rolled off him and sat beside him again, shoulder to shoulder, facing the television with her arms crossed.

They didn't do anything else on the couch. He didn't push it. This was a unique circumstance because his understanding of her and hers of him extended beyond that moment and beyond that place. Their understanding went all the way back to the schoolyard, pre-puberty. They barely spoke of anything but he stayed all day with her. Late in the afternoon, she stood up from the couch and pulled her shirt down over her flat belly and her hip bones that poked out. *Do you eat your eggs scrambled or fried?* After they ate, they took her clothes to the Laundromat because she didn't have a car. She didn't say thank you, but she sat next to him and commented on every news story that flashed across the television on the wall. There were fires on the other side of the bay, a police shooting on the south end, a walk-a-thon across the San Mateo Bridge. They watched and folded laundry, which was a simple activity, inside of which Maximiliano saw Dada begin to spin. He recognized the distant look when she was inside herself, cotton candy spun around a stick. It relieved him to know that she hadn't changed.

When the laundry was neatly stacked in the backseat, they drove fast down some roads. Dada had said just after they left the laundromat, *Do you want to drive fast down some roads? I know all these roads.* She laughed, and so to keep her in that mood he raced down the muddy streets with the car windows down and the stacks of folded towels and clothes swaying back and forth like they were thrilled children on a roller coaster ride.

It was a frigid night. *It's boring here.* Suddenly, he didn't know why, Dada had stopped spinning. When Maximiliano looked over at her, he saw that she was hunched down into the seat with her arm over her face. *Dada.* Maximiliano pulled her arm. She opened her eyes. *Let's park somewhere now,* she said, so they parked down by a pier that

was rotted but still good for fishing off of. As they got out of the car, a drunken couple passed them, squeezed between the chain link fence, and then disappeared into the abandoned watch tower. *Nasty to be doing that in there.* Dada said. *Let's go to the end of the pier where we can't hear them.*

They dangled their feet off the edge of that old rotted pier. There were lots of lights twinkling in the distance, on both sides of the bay, while where they sat was in the middle space where there was no light. They swung their feet. A cold breeze lifted from the water and rolled down from the hills, then danced across them. Heat flashed inside his body as she straddled him and her fingers tried to insert themselves in his rib cage. He gripped and crumpled her tangerine skirt knowing that it was happening fast because the moment had been embedded in them since they were kids. She was faster than he was and so she unzipped his pants for him. He gripped her rounded buttocks, but she was moving so quickly and digging her hands so hard into his ribcage that he gave up trying to help and leaned back while her passionate bones bounced against him. Immediately around them it was dark, but there were lights across the bay, and lights in the hills and, of course, a few in the sky, and then the white he shot inside of her. They breathed heavily. The breeze lifted their sweat. Their lips rasped together and she slid off—into the water he thought at first—but then she was there beside him on her back, her arm over her eyes. *Dada.* Hand stands in the grass.

The entire drive home she kept her arm close to her face. Sometimes love was quiet. Sometimes it brought clarity. *I'm leaving for boot camp November 10th.* He glanced at her. She was still in the same position. *But once I get my orders...if you want to move with me...I'll be making steady pay,, plus have a housing allowance and base*

privileges. Still, she leaned against the passenger window, her temple pressed against it, her arm bent and covering her cheek and ear. *Do you get migraines?*

No, no migraines. Still she kept her arm there.

When they got back to the house she perked up some. They watched reruns of “Sanford and Son.” She sat with one leg under her, nodding her head to opening music, smoking first a cigarette, then a joint, then a cigarette. Her hair was pulled on top of her head. Maximiliano hadn’t known she smoked or that her hair could pile up that high. After the third episode of watching Fred and Lamont, she started talking about nothing it seemed at first, but then he listened as she explained how life came and went in marked intervals. She’d lived a hundred lives, each one measured by a standardized unit: one foot, one yard, one inch. Never one half of another or a quarter left over. Each piece had a definite beginning and a definite end. The bad lives were short and the good ones were long. Take the time some girls at the park had held her down and poked around in her mouth with a nail file saying she thought she was so pretty but she was so ugly with her crooked teeth. She bit some fingers and kicked the short one in the head. That life lasted a foot. Then there was the day her family formed a caravan and drove down to catch the Raiders game. This life began with a burst of black and silver, whistles and cars beeping, flags waving out the windows. They parked the cars and pulled out the grills and the coolers, the cold drinks, the carne asada and pansit, the sticky rice and mango. In that life, she ran around with her cousins, hid between the bleachers and popped out from hidden stairways. They taught each other how to yo-yo. They clapped and stomped like cheerleaders. This life lasted for miles.

Maximiliano picked up Dada's hand where it had fallen lightly on his lap, so that he could touch the bumps of her knuckles, and the blood that surged in the interstices of her palm lines. She jumped up playfully and pulled him with her up the staircase. They stuck their heads out the window of the second story bedroom and found that it was a night cooler than usual for October. They climbed on the roof and looked at the clean stars. One of them laughed and threw a bottle off the roof just to hear the smashing of glass on the pavement, the popping of a star. The other one smiled, then shivered and rubbed closer. His fingertips touched her hips and he could see the waves in her hair. He closed his eyes once, then looked up at the sky for the duration of that life: one light year.

When he went to see her the next day, the neighbor Mrs. Flores, who was leaning on her fence, shook her head. *She's not who you think.* That's all she would say. When he went back the next day, Mrs. Flores shook her head again and gave him another ominous statement *People don't change.* Maximiliano kicked in her fence, because that leathery bitch was worse than all the senyoras had ever been.

Every day that he went, he found the house dark and locked up, the door cold against his hand, the window cold against his forehead. He went back at night too, but there was no answer. Sometimes he thought he heard rustlings behind the curtains, but they were short-lived and mouse like.

He drove slowly away from her house, so tired from working an extra shift that his eyes crossed and he took a wrong turn down 23rd. The moon here cast a perfect light. The street was mostly empty except for a stray dog trotting along as if it had somewhere to be. The buildings were quiet, all settled in for the night. Maximiliano needed to get home and lie down on his bed with its feather pillow. There went a feather, floating down

from a streetlamp, floating down from the halo of light. A skirt and mess of wiry hair bobbed up and down the far end of the street. She was so far away she was the size of a Barbie doll, but who else could it be but her? Maximiliano sped up, but he was too late for the race. Another car pulled out from some side street. Maximiliano pressed his hand to the horn and it screamed down the street which looked vacant but was so heavy with the presence of the two men and the one woman. She turned and looked at him. He was sure of it. How quickly she bent down to the window then opened the door. Her heels and skirt, all of her dissolved inside the car. He beat on the horn again and sped up to catch up to the other car but it had taken off, turned down a corner and disappeared. Maximiliano drove around the neighborhood, but didn't see it or her. He went and knocked on her door again, but the house was colder and emptier without even the rustling of imaginary mice. His knock rang hollow as he caved into the small point from which he'd begun. This life measured one inch.

It was a long time ago that Mr. Gómez was a boy. He continues to walk the school premises until he is back at the slide. Who knows what happened? He can only imagine. The morning and the sun, the sparkles and the slide fuse together.

Mr. Gómez has a vision of what happened. It plays for him as clearly as if a television hangs in the sky before his eyes. It is night time, when the basketball courts are empty and there are no more adults meeting in the cold cafeteria that smells of processed cheese. It is the hour when women walk in leotards and leopard printed high heels, when one of them takes her client up to the rooftop of one of the portable classrooms that is covered with bird shit and broken rocks. They lie on that used-to-be-white couch and look up at the clean stars.

Mr. Gómez sees the last night of the woman's life as she walks in her heels gripping a watch and leather wallet to her chest. Nervous and limping, she moves as quickly as possible away from the portable with its couch and drunken client flung on the cushions. On the black screen before his eyes he sees the client come up behind her with a broken bottle in his hand. Mr. Gomez's mind works slowly, so that he considers what the man might have been like as a little boy. Which first grader might he have been? He might have been the chubby one with dimples, or the one who always remembered to say thank you, or the one who ran around in circles screaming and knocking books to the floor, or the one with gel in his hair and shiny new shoes. Which cute first grader would the woman have been? The one with strawberry barrettes in her hair? Or the one who colored serenely, all things yellow?

The man on the television screen in Mr. Gómez's sky smashes the bottle against the woman's head. She hits the middle of the slide where it dips, and she slumps down to the edge. *Are we molded for a particular destiny?* wonders Mr. Gómez. Tangerine lipstick on tar, birds of paradise, hair in beaks, nonsense and salad, nonsense and pie, cherry coke on the slide, a hundred life intervals, and Dada.

The Cup

Naughty, crude individuals passed the corner of 42nd and G Avenue, where the boy lived in a peach colored home bordered by a fence that leaned in. An old man in a wheelchair was stuck on the sidewalk incline. He pressed the go button and rolled back onto the street again. He pressed the go button and rolled again, until a gang banger flopped past in his house slippers and pushed him up. The old man sped away towards the liquor store. It was the same destination as that of the punk rockers with wailing spiked hair that cut through the atmosphere. Three times a day, they passed: in one direction empty handed, in the other direction clutching cases of beer. Sometimes, they paused on the corner, set the alcohol on the ground, and smoked. They left their cigarette butts to smolder on the sidewalk. In the afternoons, children, high from syrupy sodas and greasy potato chips, danced around the cigarettes and kicked a soccer ball. All afternoon, they kicked the ball, spun in circles on their bikes in the middle of the road, and screamed "Marco! Polo!" The sun set and the daytime fiascos faded into night. A woman squatted to pee beneath the streetlight. Her amber liquid glinted as it trickled over candy wrappers and straws. The urine moved in an even motion past the couple against the wall and down into the gutter. Mr. Jackson observed all the people, but most especially he observed the boy who lived on the corner of 42nd and G, at the bottom of the tea cup.

It was strange how quickly Mr. Jackson had become routinized to him. Every morning, he lifted the cup from its shelf and peered down inside to see how the boy was doing. Throughout the day, Mr. Jackson caught himself doodling tea cups on napkins, and he fell in love with late afternoons when it was finally time to slide his house key into its lock and enter his home. The evenings were pleasantly filled with the quiet scratching

of his pen moving in tiny slopes and arcs as he recorded his observations of the boy, believing that if he could understand how the boy's mind worked, then he could help the boy turn into a great man.

Normally, he didn't take the cup to work, but today, he carried it in the pocket of his jacket, his right hand caressing its curved, porcelain surface. Lately, the boy had been scooping gel into his hair, sniffing at his armpits, walking with his chest thrust out. Whoever was affecting the boy was doing so during school hours, the same hours that Mr. Jackson had to be at work. Today, Mr. Jackson took a risk. Today, he brought the boy with him so that all day long he could watch him, be with him, and discern who was making him agitated.

Standing near a window, Mr. Jackson lifted up the cup and turned it so that the sun illuminated the bottom. . .

The recess bell rang. The children broke out of the classrooms and raced outside to the yard. The boy was surrounded by a drove of girls.

“Kiss her, Carlos! Kiss her!”

In front of the boy stood a doll of a girl with cherry lips and one sock drooping slightly lower than the other, exposing a well-formed kneecap. She twisted her body back and forth, a blossom turning in the wind. Her eyelashes swept downwards and then up to the boy's face. The boy looked to the side, then wiped his hands on his pants. The sunlight lit up the dust on the children's skin and the sweat in their hair.

Mr. Jackson did not want him to kiss the girl. It would mean the kicking open of a door, a stepping out into the dangerous territory of children at play in adult activities, risking pregnancy and, subsequently, poverty. He did not want him to do it, not after

having invested so much time into researching how he played, studied, slept, and ate. Of course, sexuality was inevitable, but if only the boy would wait a few years during which Mr. Jackson could whisper the secrets of lovemaking down into the cup.

The boy leaned forward and pressed his mouth against hers. A shrill whistle screamed across the yard. Mr. Jackson wasn't the only one who'd been watching. Dozens of children ran, followed by a stout woman who panted towards the ring of girls, which now broke apart and scattered, a handful of marbles. Mr. Jackson saw the way the boy and girl looked frantically around them, then innocently at the ground as the yard monitor began her interrogation. Neither felt remorse. Mr. Jackson saw this in the way the girl twisted back and forth, her hands clasped together as if she held a tiny bouquet of roses between them, and in the way the boy shrugged his shoulders as if shrugging off the touch of a concerned hand.

Mr. Jackson watched this afternoon scenario unfold, as he had watched many a scenario at the bottom of the cup unfold. As always, he desired to communicate with the boy as directly as possible. If only he could put his lips right to the boy's ear—of course the boy was too small for that—but if only he could lift him from the cup, hold him, squeeze gently, and say:

Carlos, I am listening. Share your thoughts with me. I do not want much, just that when I say, "Turn left," you go left. I want that when you eat ice cream, you eat strawberry flavored. I want that when I say, "Don't kiss the girl," you don't press your lips against hers. I want that my voice is in your ear without you realizing it. It cannot be too obvious, as if I were your conscious or your subconscious. It cannot be so clear as all that. It must be you kicking a ball, a minimal action. You searching for an idea, an

answer, and as you are kicking the ball, you suddenly feel as if the point where your foot touches the rubber, that very place, is a meeting point where the foot touches the ball and comes together with the force and the dirt , with the wind, the bounce of the ball, your thoughts which are my thoughts. They melt together seamlessly so that you are the ball, you are the dirt, you are you. You are the ball, you are the wind, you are the dirt, and you are the bounce. You are the dirt and you and you and you and me and me and me and you are me and I am you and we are the center of the world.

“Mark, who are you talking to? Mr. Jackson shrugged the heavy hand off his shoulder. People could be so obtrusive. Still—his heart raced. He’d almost been caught with the boy in his hand.

*

At 2:50 Mr. Jackson unlocked his door. At 3:02 he looked down into the cup.

Do your ears hang low?

Do they wobble to and fro?

Can you tie ‘em in a knot?

Can you tie ‘em in a bow?

bow?

The recording from the ice cream truck skipped, but Mr. Jackson didn’t notice, focused as he was on imagining his voice as a funnel of golden sound pouring forth into the cup.

EAT A STRAWBERRY ICE CREAM.

Carlos jiggled the change.

“What are you getting Carlitos?” It was the girl with cherry lips and one knee sock lower than the other.

EAT A STRAWBERRY ICE CREAM.

“Dunno...maybe something with strawberries.”

“Really?” She scratched her thigh. “I thought boys liked chocolate and nuts.”

“Fruit’s alright.” He counted out \$0.50 in nickels and began licking his ball of strawberry.

*

So! This was the life!

He experimented. He took a risk. He believed in his powers of influence, and in believing, the boy ate just what he told him to. Monumental! He, Mr. Jackson, was the link between the real world and the world in the cup, the world of the boy. Only Mr. Jackson had dominion over the cup and could make the boy eat strawberry ice cream every day if he wanted to. Of course, he would not be wasteful or abusive with his influence. Now that he knew what he could do, he would steer the boy in a positive direction, towards a life that was good enough. Get him to help himself by recognizing the many destructive forces that culminated on that corner where he lived. The booming cars that raced around the corners, apartment buildings that caught on fire, unattended children, crowds of eyes peering through window screens, break-ins and drug raids, helicopter search lights, minivans that never drove away but rocked side to side. All the negativity that unfurled daily, unrestrained, would be nothing against Mr. Jackson’s new found influence on the boy’s mind. Mr. Jackson now had a hand to play, and it was a

large, powerful hand, opened up and casting its shadow over that entire world held in the porcelain cup.

Mr. Jackson rode his bike around the block. How strong his legs felt, like they used to when he was twelve years old and could painlessly sprint hundred yard dashes. When he took out this rusty bike, he thought he would feel a fool, such a tall old man pedaling about, trying to push forth the memory of motion from his muscles and turn it into action. His anxiety dissipated once he caught his fluid reflection flitting playfully over the parked cars. At last, he fully understood that existence is only a state of mind. There was no reason why he could not ride a bike or smile into the wind that blew his teeth and gums dry. Why shouldn't he roll up his pant legs? There was no law against showing his socks or leaning forward, clasping the handlebars in his hands. In some countries, old men rode bikes for a living, pulling along wagons of cabbage heads and rubber wares. In some countries, people had no other mode of transportation other than bikes. There were no restrictions on what he could do, not when all he was doing was living.

Living was watching children play inside of a tea cup. Living was a hovering eye in the sky. Living was a cup waiting on a shelf in the rays of sun shining through the kitchen window. Living was a bike between your legs and a plan in your mind and a cup and a shelf and a boy with ice cream in his hand and the far side of the world folded neatly into an infinitesimal space.

The bike chain ground together—a minor problem. Today, all problems were minor. Earlier it had rained and the quick dance of the wind promised to bring more, but for now, it was Mr. Jackson pedaling beneath a heavy sky on pavement that smelled of

the potential for another season, another way of life. Potential—he was filled with it. He was ripe with it, gushing. Up and down the streets he rode with his hands in his pockets, allowing the precipitation to strike him as it would.

What he wanted was a female and music, so he took his bike home again, locked it up, and prepared to go downtown to a smoky place where people wore their shiny shoes, a place where people went on the nights when they felt hot behind the knees. It had been a long time since he'd been to a place like Seymour's, a long time. He was fearless. For once, he did not feel like drinking as quickly as possible in order to drown in his drunkenness while gripping a thick-bottomed glass in his hand. For once, instead of admiring the details of the upside down glasses hanging above the bartender's head and thinking, *look at that*, he left a twenty-five percent tip and turned to face the crowd. His eyelashes swept upwards as he scanned the room, finally settling on a dark haired woman with cherry lipstick. Soon he would approach her, for now he knew that existence was not chance, but a state of mind.

*

It's Thursday morning. Everybody is at school. Except me.

I'm outside standing on the baseball diamond with my soccer ball.

The toe of my tennis shoe digs into the dirt.

I'm not angry!

There are six of us here at the park: me, the three cholas sitting up in the stadium seating, the two senyoras pushing their baby strollers, and the homeless lady muttering, "Watch me, I know they watch me." If you count the homeless lady's dogs, there are eleven of us.

I kick the ball. It hits cement, bounces on the ground, orange dirt rises.

Yesterday, the funny feeling like hook worms crawling up my anus took over my stomach and I stuffed my stuffing with strawberry ice cream.

Yesterday, from my window I could see the ice cream truck driver's fat hands. Everybody stood around the truck like piglets to their mama, sucking on her teats. I saw tails and pink behinds. When I looked at Samantha, I wanted to put my hands on her shoulders and say

Wipe thy face. There is sugar pasted there.

Wash thy hands. They are stained with marker.

Clean thy cheap lip gloss off thy lips.

The hand cups my brain. When the fingers wiggle, my sister is a fat girl. When the fingers wiggle, my father is sick, leaving blood on the rim of the toilet seat. I look for movement in the spider web tattooed across his right shoulder. Who can be the fly? Mother. There she is, leaning against the porch post with her arms crossed and one foot bent over the other. Her strong teeth flash in the dusty air as she bites into an orange and lets the juice drip down her arm and fall next to her flip flopped foot. On her shoulder are the stars and sun of the flag of the P.I. On her leg is a snake winding its way down. How pretty she is, scrubbing at her flag, stars, and snake with a brillo pad saying, *This life is not good enough*. When the fingers wiggle, it is all I can hear her say.

I kick the ball. There is the motion of the cholas' heads when they turn to look at me. The homeless woman stops muttering and looks at me. The senyoras pause in their complaining about husbands and suegras and look at me. They are seeing me now; they weren't before, but now they are seeing me. We are all planning our comeback: the

cholas line the rim of each other's eyes, the senyoras talk about marinated beef, and the first of May, the homeless lady says, "Fuck you, invisible people who turn on the water sprinklers."

*

The noise startled Mr. Jackson. He had come home on his lunch break and was sliding his key into its lock. Through the door, he could hear it: a rattling from the kitchen, from the shelf beside the window. Without bothering to take off his shoes, he hurried over to the shelf. He grabbed the cup, just as it was working itself to the edge. What was happening in there? An earthquake? Another fire? A car accident? Mr. Jackson bit the back of his hand as he realized that it was possible the boy had been injured. He flipped the cup over and felt a stinging in his eyes. As his eyes watered out the foreign substance, the cup continued to tremble in his hands. His vision cleared and he held the cup a safe distance away, thankful to see that Carlos was still down there kicking a ball, except that the boy was at the park, not at school where he should have been.

Surrounding the boy was a queer mix of women: one of them, clearly homeless, was as filthy as her dogs that were humping each other in the grass; two of them were short and pregnant, each one of them pushing a stroller; three of them were adolescent girls in tight pants and white t-shirts. The boy seemed to be ignoring all of them. Pure innocence protected him. For this Mr. Jackson was thankful. Still, he was startled at the force with which the boy kicked the ball. Every time the ball struck the ground orange dust rose so high that it rose out of the cup and fell onto Mr. Jackson's hand. This contact was a new phenomenon, further evidence that every day their worlds were overlapping more and more. Control over the boy was essential. The mere fact that he had temporarily

blinded Mr. Jackson was disturbing, and yet he was not worried, for the boy was ignorant of the effect of his own actions, whereas Mr. Jackson was entirely aware.

The boy needs to calm down.

He reached towards the drawer for the pen and notebook that he used to record the boy's behavior. The cup continued to shake, striking hard against his ring. The porcelain knocked against his bones and so he gripped tighter. His hand became hot, his fingers sweaty, so that now he needed both hands to keep the cup still.

Stop it you little fool.

The boy caught the ball and held it, his tiny body heaving as he caught his breath. Mr. Jackson, having once again dictated the actions of the boy, felt triumph spread through his body. It began in his groin and spread up to his stomach, warming him as it went. Triumph moved up through his chest and outwards through each arm and finger. Further it went, upwards through his neck and to his face so that his cheeks became flushed and his eyes glistened. His lips spread into a delicious smile. He looked down into the cup at the boy who stood with listless arms and a sweaty body that was at a loss for what to do. Mr. Jackson licked his lips. He told the boy, *It's time to leave the park. Keep on walking. Go all the way to your house. Go inside. Lock the door behind you.*

Once the boy was inside Mr. Jackson would decide what else to do with him...except...the boy was tilting his head back. Why was he tilting his head back? *Put your head down!* Shouted Mr. Jackson. *Put your head down!* But the boy did not. He kept on lifting his head back and then he raised his eyes so high

high

Drop the cup, Mr. Jackson. Drop it.

PART II:
GUTTER PEOPLE
A NOVELLA

Gutter People

You are on the bus going anywhere to see and you have been on the bus for 18 hours traveling across the plains and between the mountains. You will ride for longer still. Others board the bus and they give off loud sweat smells. Odors cling so that by the time you de-board you will have the layerings of many people, including the pregnant woman in the aisle who is sweating fat beads of sweat. Give up your seat to her. The fabric scratches the back of your neck and the backs of your legs.

The city is stretched out on her back on the desert floor, glittering, and you are looking out the bus window and you are approaching, your heart pounding.

Mile 0 “Mari with no Panties against the Wall”

The city’s eyes are closed, head turned to the side. Her lips are painted blackberry. Her hair tightly coiled. Her hands form a cushion beneath the small of her back and the top of her buttocks so that her back arches. The sun rises and she opens her eyes, although she’s been awake the entire time.

The city hears the wind blowing over the mountains. It carries the scent of thousands of cars spewing exhaust on the California freeways and, much fainter; it carries the scent of the Pacific Ocean with his bright coastal cities and oil rigs. She strokes all the jewels lined up on her spine. The Pacific Ocean has remained an ocean, but it will eventually evaporate. She knows with certainty that the Pacific Ocean will cease to be what he is, but then she has to admit that she will eventually become crushed glass and flattened cement cracking in the desert. This knowledge of eventual death doesn’t make her sad, but it makes her a little hostile.

For now anyway she is a marvel, a gem, low, and ugly. She is beautiful in that way: bent over, skirt flipped up, hair brushing the sidewalk. She wears a tight, pink leopard dress with a hood but no panties. It's too hot for panties here. No panties in the summer time. Only thongies in the wintertime, and those cold nights are long in coming, for it is the middle of July. Elbows sweat, ears sweat, koochies sweat, and that is why there are no panties. No panties for anyone! There should be a law! Whenever, quite frankly, the city happens to notice with her lazy eyes any panties hanging up to dry, she knocks them to the ground with the whirl of a low flying helicopter or the bass of a passing Impala, or the shriek of a gracklen bird. The sound startles the hand that drops the panties to the ground. Once fallen, it's only a matter of time before they will be run over by a double decker bus, or gnawed on by dogs, or picked at by grackens, or pulled over the head of a teddy bear loved by a mean child.

Panties have many uses, such as hat wear, arm wear, nuzzle for dogs, bandage for a cut hand, handkerchief and, in times of need, maxi pad. If the city could have made it law that there be no panties used as panties from April to September, then she would have. Understand, of course, that she would never make any such law because the only law of the city was

1. Do what you feel.

Oh yes. And

2. Do it big.

Oh yes and

3. Dog eat dog

And one more.

4. Prizes to all the mcfuck fuckers!

The Blue Angel Motel across from the McDonalds was where the fertilization occurred. There was a wall between the parking lot of the Blue Angel Motel and the McDonald's drive-thru. The woman pressed up against the wall heard the box speak as the man who pressed her against the wall pulled on her hair, right at the roots. *May I take your order?* The speaking box was, in its own way, lovely. It was lovely in that the woman couldn't see it, only hear it. She could hear it and she could picture its circular form cut into the rectangular frame of the drive-thru window. The box made the air between it and each idling car vibrate, while the woman's hair was being pulled and the sun was full on her and him, the two mcfuck fuckers. His metal belt buckle, her elbows and her back scraped against the wall. The wall held her up and, *Give me a #2, no mayonnaise.* Hump hump hump. A baby boy was conceived there against the wall by the two mcfuck fuckers.

Mile -1 "Before Mari with no Panties was Against the Wall"

Mari had cultivated the ability to walk through crowds and mute the sounds and mute the faces, all except for the important ones. Some were obviously important like Terrell's, weaving through the multitudes, coming at her, planting a kiss on her lips. There were other faces that glowed among the crowd. She didn't always know why. Take Bart, Bartolomé. He was a plain boy with regular old dark hair and brown eyes, and he didn't do much other than sit there in music class and wait for the signal to lift his flute up to his lips. At first, she attributed his face standing out in the crowd to a sexual attraction. But no, he liked boys, and no, when she stood close to him and when she talked to him, no there was no physical chemistry. No physical chemistry but

understanding, yes. They both played the flute with their pinkies in the air. Minor connection, yes? Minor connection, no? She put her pink up because she had sprained it and couldn't straighten it. He put his pinkie up because he was a dainty clown. They talked Latin music and the way flutists would get five minute long solos. They both would have relished playing a flute solo.

With Bart, she realized that the people who stuck out to her did so because of some connection between her and them: Love (Terrell). Friendship (Bart).

Erika glowed from out of the crowd. Erika slithered up to her from the sidelines, then slithered away, a snake with an ass, and Mari didn't know why she didn't like her but she didn't like her, but who did? Who sure enough did like Erika, the girl in tight white pants? Well, Terrell sure enough did like her. Oh yes, he liked her very much. He liked her in her white pants and he liked peeling off her white pants too. Right in the middle of the peeling, her snake's ass in the air, here came Mari. Mari had very good night vision and Mari never second guessed what she saw.

Mari trembled with white rage. It blotted out her vision and she realized that lesson number two had just been taught. Some of the unblurred faces in the crowd were friends and some were enemies.

The next natural question was how could she tell the difference between the two? Mari split with Terrell. She did. Later in her life, looking back, she knew this was one smart thing she'd done—until she went back to him. Terrell was very adept at working his way back to her. Erika smirked at her in the halls, but Terrell pushed past Erika and chased after Mari, trying to reach the door before her so that he could hold it open and make her feel like the better woman. At first she ignored them both. It was difficult since

they glowed out from the crowd. She wanted to attach herself more tightly to Bart, but he was caught up in his flute practicing and in working out new haircuts that best accentuated his face.

Terrell came and kissed the back of her neck.

It was a funny thing being impregnated. The first time it happened was normal style, on the bed. She threw up, she peed, she was pregnant. After a short blip she was back to her non-pregnant body except now her womb was scarred. It wasn't the doctor who told her this. She felt how her insides were marked post baby. Before passing out of her body, the baby had pressed its unformed hands and cheek against the sides of her womb. How much the baby had wished to pass through her alive and into the world. It had waited patiently to come and finally it had arrived in a pocket of love between her and Terrell. Something made the child leave again, but not before it raised its unformed hands and cheek against her womb.

Mari didn't have patience for morbidity. She closed her eyes and instead of a womb with a cheek print and the prints of unformed hands, she envisioned a cave with prehistoric paintings. That was that. The baby she lost became another moment in life of falling down, and scraping the knees, and getting up again, and limping a little but not bothering about the blood or the small bits of gravel in the flesh. The baby had been a blip.

Mari developed a crick in her back, a hole in her shoe, ice in her chest, so she exercised, quit smoking, and became less reckless, like she wore her seatbelt and she got on birth control. Every day the feeling kept growing that she was going to untangle

herself from Terrell permanently. She felt good about his kiss on the back of her neck, knowing that it was sweet and among the last that she would receive from him.

The city watched Mari through the windows. The city rarely peeked in on her citizens, but when she did she would pick one and follow it for awhile, until it moved away or in the case of Mari, the city became so exasperated watching the citizen that she struck it down. What did it was the waiting. Waiting...ah, anticipation. Ah, patience. Ah, a too slow death.

Terrell held Mari up against the wall there between The Blue Angel Motel and the McDonald's.

Bartolomé was the second child Mari carried, named after a flute player, and he was perfectly formed and came out all the way.

The city killed Mari after that, because Mari had the kid and then she gave up trying to leave.

The city could not admit to herself what she was like, or the reasons for the things she did because she was not a self-analytical entity. What she did, she done. What she felt, was felt. She did not co-exist with the concepts of guilt and admission.

The city watched through the windows. It was always the city at night watching through the windows. One night, Mari strayed from her routine, and instead of getting off at her usual time, she left an hour later, and instead of parking her car in the driveway and going inside she had to get off the bus and walk two blocks. The car had a blown out tire, a rattled muffler, and it needed coolant. The city killed her off that night. It was easy to do, because Mari had to pass a construction site. The city conjured up a strong gust of

wind so that a poorly connected hook from a small crane dropped itself on top of Mari. Mari bled in the rubble, and as the city watched she flicked her hair and thought vaguely about squandered potential. After the kid was born, the city had seen in Mari's slumped shoulders that she wasn't going anywhere, wasn't even thinking about getting on the bus anymore. The city wasn't a sentimental type. People were always coming and going. It didn't hurt her feelings any when people moved out. The way she saw it, why stay in one place forever? Why not stroke her jewels and then move on to ride the crest of a wave on the Pacific Ocean? The woman, Mari, just happened to catch the city's attention maybe because she had jeweled green eyes, and the city just happened to start watching her regularly, in just the way humans got hooked into a soap opera because they happened to sit down in the same place at the same time every day, and so they would end up watching the same soap opera like *La Gitana* or *Amor y Diamantes*. Soon they would wake up mornings wondering what happened to Maria Luisa & Juan Carlos. But it was just as easy to forget about the soap opera if, say, there was a new night job or a new hobby like belly dancing. Then it was no longer possible, or even desirable to sit down in the same place at the same time and peep in on the lives of Maria Luisa and Juan Carlos. There was no loss. Watching that soap opera was something to do for awhile. It was not a need, not a hope.

Mari was a soap opera. She was just somebody the city watched for awhile, but the city didn't need her. When Mari give birth and became stationary and didn't pick up a broom to sweep the floor, didn't check the bus schedule or save up her tip money for the ticket, the city, spit and smited Mari because she had finally done the unforgivable when she curled up in a corner and wept.

No crying.

That was rule #5, the city forgot to mention.

Her citizens don't cry. Tears come only as a small release that is necessary, not for emotional reasons but for the physics of it. Any short bursts of "tears" is out of physical necessity so that the full body stretched tightly against its skin might have a release valve turned, might be allowed to slacken for a bit so that it doesn't burst. The city, when she must, releases a few fat drops, each one self-contained and exploding into a hundred minute pieces when it strikes the ground. Each drop immediately evaporates when it touches the hot pavement because each drop is a brief, inconsequential release of pressure.

Mile 1 "Dumpster"

Other than it being quiet, it was a regular night of pickings for Ivy. There were plenty of crushed Tecate and Coke cans. Sales on root beer were still going on because she found plenty of those cans in the dumpsters, along with a box of books by Alfred Hitchcock and Octavia Butler. She didn't like to read. She was three decades out of practice and those books were so heavy and their print so tiny. She collected them anyway so that she could add them to her bookshelf that was sitting out there on the open desert, underneath the starlit sky. She would act as the gatekeeper, but a kind one who would let most anyone pass and grab whatever book they wanted.

Ain't it a grand idea? She had said to Fabian who nodded as he squatted and stared into the fire. Fabian didn't care about anything else but that fire. Even in the day, he slept or stared up at the sun and waited for it to get dark again so that he might better

see the fire. She kicked dirt in the fire. I said, *Ain't it a grand idea?* This time Fabian looked up slowly and nodded just like the old turtle he was.

Ivy could see it clearly: her bookshelf stacked up with books, rising out of the desert just like all the flashy twenty story buildings with swimming pools on the rooftops rose out of the desert. The bookshelf would have its own sort of flash. Not the flash of lights, but a flash of mystery that in any other place would not be so magnificent, but beneath the shadows of those great columned structures that were magnanimous and expensive, free wheeling and luxuriously deceptive, why her little bookshelf sitting in the shadows of all this would be a welcome sight, a welcome release of ideas to the mind. Some day, most likely after she was decomposing under the brush somewhere, somebody would come along and they would find the shelf in the middle of the desert and wonder who'd thought to put it there.

That night, beside the box of books she found a swaddled baby resting on a couch that jutted out from the dumpster. The poor child had pooped and peed his pants. He'd sucked his thumb to a brown shrivel. She lifted him up from the dumpster, all the while hearing Fabian's voice saying *I wouldn't do that. You'll catch attention, a woman like you carrying around some baby.* Ivy picked him up anyway. In her mind she retorted back, *A woman like what?* Knowing he wouldn't answer, knowing that he knew that she understood perfectly what he meant by *a woman like you*, which was that she hadn't bathed in almost a month and she had the large open eyes from roaming in the night when it was cooler and when she felt safer. Her clothes could best be described as rags, but they were her rags that suited her so well they seemed to have grown from her body.

She lifted the baby free from the smells and the cockroaches of the dumpster. The baby was pleased and smiled at her, so that without realizing it she was cooing at the child as if she lifted up babies all the time. The tiny babe had a chain around his neck. The gold letters hanging from it said *Bartolomé*. Such a long name against that little chest. She felt a cold breeze on her and the white light of a streetlamp clicked on. She needed a bottle and milk, and to heat the milk and of course she needed a sterilized nipple. She cupped her breasts. In their forty-two years of life, never had they given milk. She gently lay the baby in her cart, and hid the cart beside a black van with tinted windows, then scurried over to the 7-Eleven.

These convenience stores were widely spread pimples on the city, oozing with employees in their red vests who always glanced at her in the rounded mirrors hung up in the corners where the ceilings met the walls. On this night she didn't bother looking back at them in the mirror. She grabbed a quart of milk, no bottle. She already knew where she'd get a bottle from. Her nights walking these streets hadn't filled her head with nothing. She knew the neighborhood as well as the city knew it and so she knew where to get bottles and where to get sterilized nipples. One quart of milk would do for now. She went up to pay, not looking at the cashier's face. She glanced at his nametag: one of her favorite inventions of modern life because they were simple, accessible markers, just like Bartolomé's necklace. Frank's hands were thick-knuckled and wide. His wrists and arms were too. Only after she'd paid did she look up at his face. Even though this trip was for the baby she couldn't help but look up, otherwise Frank's departing image of her would be of a woman with greasy hair hanging in her face as she shuffled away. She lifted her head up and took in his face: flat, dumb, but noble.

Thank you ma'am, he said.

She nodded back at him cupping the politeness in his voice in the spoon of her heart.

The baby was whimpering when she got back to him.

She took the shorter rather than the less conspicuous route down to Le Cove Apartment Complex, where she knew apt. #1206 always kept a rack outside of baby bottles turned upside down and rubber nipples balancing on plastic posts. The trick would be climbing over the balcony, grabbing one, and climbing back over. She was not as agile as she used to be. Another challenge would be where to hide the cart and the baby. Le Cove Apartments wasn't like the Sunrise Shenandoah Complex where she'd found baby Bartolomé. At Sunrise Shenandoah, half the apartments were empty and of the ones that did have people, most of those were filled with the elderly who lived alone. They stayed inside all day watching game shows or they sat in their doorways and watched the streets. Sometimes a nurse would come to check on them. It was a sullen place, Sunrise Shenandoah. It made her glad that she lived outdoors where she might not be the cleanest person to walk the streets, but all the space was hers and she knew the ways that the city might protect her.

Le Cove was a different sort of complex. It always had people walking between its buildings and standing on its balconies. It was 24 hour complex. If she left baby B somebody was sure to come along, because although she was the one who had found Baby B, in the spoon of her heart doubt pooled as to whether she was really supposed to take the baby to her mound of earth that she called home. Finding the baby, sure that was her role, but was her role over and done with now? It was likely, and she was always

open to alternate possibilities because the most obvious option was usually not the option meant for her. Whatever worked for others was sure to go wrong with her. Take Christmas. Folks celebrated Christmas around a tree. She sat around a fire, no candy canes or strung up lights, just her hands tucked under her armpits. It wasn't better or worse. Her life was simply not the way of most lives. Still, there was a part of her that wanted to be this baby's adopted mother. Not that she knew much about mothering since she hadn't had one herself, but she couldn't help but feel an affinity towards the child. After all, she'd been a dumpster baby herself. His life wouldn't mirror hers, but maybe the city wanted her to be the adoptive mother. Then again, her sole purpose might be to bring the baby to Le Cove where the real adopted parents could find him. She wasn't opposed to this, even though it would make her a little sad. Hard to tell what the city wanted.

Baby Bartolomé looked up peacefully at the cloudless dark sky, at the streetlights tall and arching, and at the gangly branches that held sparse leaves.

Gently, Ivy let go of the cart and watched it roll slowly down the street and come to rest behind the bumper of a red pick up truck. The city would watch over the cart and the baby until Ivy got back with the bottle and the nipple. She scampered along the wall, through the gate, all the while hiding in the shadows until she was by apartment #1206. She half expected the man from #1206 to break from his routine and not come out and smoke, as if he knew what was occurring and so to be insolent and difficult would change his routine. But he came out as always, flicked his ashes over the rocks as always. A handsome man: he was unshaven, wore a wife beater, and even though his gut was

starting to get big, she admired the cut of his arms. A fine specimen, the maker of all those babies inside apt. #1206.

He flicked his last bit of ash and turned to go inside. Had she ever had a lover like the lover she imagined that man would be? Oh, what would he see if he turned to look at her, but a ragged woman, a pile of bones beneath rags? The man slid the door shut behind him. The street light behind her flickered. Ivy moved again, straight to the balcony, her plan already in place. She would take two bottles, she decided, and three nipples. Normally she wasn't so extravagant when stealing. It was better to take the minimum to keep the odds in her favor. If she took only what she needed then 50 % of the people wouldn't notice. Another 45 % would scratch their heads and wonder and only the remaining 5% would definitively declare that they had been robbed.

Two bottles, three nipples. She would drop a few more nipples to the ground to give the impression that a cat had knocked them down.

Ah, how her back ached as she looked for a stone or a stump to step on and get her over that balcony. The tree was the only thing of use so she scrambled up it. It scraped her skin as she climbed, stretched her arms up, then reached one raggedy shoed foot over. Ah, but she hadn't climbed a tree in decades and her back hurt but the pain was nothing next to the air billowing inside of her, lifting up her head, freshening her vision, raising her arms. Now she was on the ledge. Carefully she squatted until she was sitting on it. Then using her arms, holding her breath, she eased her way down. There was a small puff of dirt as her feet landed, but it was a quiet landing.

When Ivy returned to the street, the baby was still there silently sucking on a thumb, looking up at the few visible stars, though Ivy was sure that he couldn't really see

that far. It pleased her that he was still there, but she got to work right away filling up one of the bottles and putting it to his mouth. He began sucking on the nipple and closed his eyes dreamily. She pushed him along the streets, taking her normal route west past the school, then north to Tropicana, then over the pedestrian bridge and on towards the edge of the city. She was aching to run, and itching to go a less visible route but she didn't want to invite bad luck by changing up her routine. The cart was covered with its Tweety Bird blanket, but she risked folding back one little corner so that the baby wouldn't suffocate. The pedestrian bridge extended into forever: the gridlocked traffic beneath them was ceaseless, so were the flashing signs, sequined buttocks, and legs spread in upside down V's. All of it offered to swallow them up, but she declined and finally the bridge sloped downwards and she was on the west side of the Boulevard and she could push her way past the corner where the limos at the Palace were waiting and the taxis at H2O were idling. She pushed on into the dark and into the bushes. There were less and less people, but still she dared not peek at the child but simply lifted the corner of the blanket up further and folded it back so that he could breathe as she kept on pushing north to the edge of the city.

When the boy was seven Fabian started saying, *It's time you got rid of him already*. Ivy resented him saying this even though she wondered if it were true. Still, Fabian didn't have to say it in that way.

Bartolomé clung to her skirts. He lay curled up beside her at night and sometimes woke up before her and had the water boiling. He was young. He would be able to adapt to any environment without even knowing that was what he was doing. Ivy began to

believe that it would be cruel of her to keep him out there on the periphery of the city. She knew this, but his small hand gripped hers. She did her best to get him off the periphery. She did her best to look more proper so that she could take him into the city in the daytime, so that he would be used to it and then she could let go of his hand. Before going to the city she always washed out her skirt and blouse, ran her fingers through her hair. It surprised her that Fabian didn't laugh at her for this. It wouldn't have hurt her feelings. She expected it, but he didn't laugh as she and Bartolomé passed his mound of dirt and headed for the interior of the city. They went to the parks and he played with the other children. Ivy supposed she should talk to the other women, but she was embarrassed by her missing teeth. She felt like a too exotic flower with her layers of skirts compared to the other women who stood and laughed in their tight blue jeans.

She took Bartolomé to other public places: markets, ice cream shops, libraries and museums on first Tuesdays. They stayed for hours instead of partial hours because she wanted to get him used to it all. They rode the buses and went to seasonal carnivals and he clung to her hand. It was always a relief to return to the mound of desert that she called home. He always slept soundly, peacefully and quickly. Maybe one day she'd be ready leave the periphery and go all the way into the center of the city with him and stay there. Maybe. In the meantime, she stood in the park with Bartolomé and made sure he was wearing his name plate even though it fit as a bracelet now instead of as a necklace. As he ran off towards the swings, she slid away into a side alley. After an hour, maybe four, there was an unusual burst of fat raindrops and this was when Ivy decided to go back to the playground. Bartolomé was gone and Ivy nodded her head and agreed with herself that she had been right to leave him there.

She returned to the mound and reported to Fabian, *The city come and took the baby away*. She squatted beside the bookshelf, felt it leaning over her. If she was younger she would've shoved it over, ripped the books open, shoved them into the ground with her sweaty feet. She would have tossed the books out to the peripheries of the peripheries. She would have left them overturned and scattered with their pages bent, and she would have made a nice little bonfire out of the shelf. Instead, she sat beside her mound and looked at the shadow that the shelf cut across the ground. Baby Bartolomé would be a grown man someday with no remembrance of her. One day he might come back to the periphery. He might one day trip out to the northern edge of the desert, find the bookshelf, pull a book off of it, then stand there reading it beside a mound of desert where her bones would be buried.

Her lip split from being chapped. The rain hit her hard because her face was a flat, upturned target. Cease and desist. Do not go in the direction of lost wombs. She gazed on the spine and glitter of the city that had seen fit to lift him out of her life again. The city was hardened and beautiful. Ivy couldn't hate her much.

Mile 2 “The 3rd Dumpster Child”

Aereola. What stupid parents I must have had to have named me that. That was the name written on the tag tied to my baby big toe when I was left in the dumpster.

I don't know why the fates arranged my life the way they did but they sure did seem intent on eff'ing it up in a big fat way. The man who found me was a Buddy Holly look alike except for his fat gut, worn out t-shirt, and sagging stained jeans. He had shuffled outside to dump out a month's accumulation of trash, and there I was perfectly happy and sound asleep in the dumpster with my thumb in my mouth. Buddy was always

going on about how perfect I looked. His word: “perfect.” Perfect in what way? Perfect in like he wanted to eat me. He wanted to prune me into being his love slave. I knew that from age three when he tried to make me touch what he called his cucumber because he knew I liked cucumbers, but I liked them cold, green and cut open and his cucumber sure as heck wasn’t green like the cucumbers I’d eaten and never I’d seen one stuck between a person’s leg like that. I didn’t have the vocabulary then, but what I felt was, *What a foul place to have a pink, wrinkly imitation of a cucumber*. I busted out of the room like a mini-stallion.

In that first escape, Buddy’s fatness worked to my advantage. He couldn’t catch me. I wasn’t even scared, just a little out of breath. Then he left me alone for awhile. From ages three to five his tactic was to try and make up new games to get me to touch him. The closest he got was asking me to walk on his back. I’d seen Bentley on “The Jeffersons” do this plenty of times to Mr. Jefferson. But something didn’t seem quite right. I pointed to the swath of body that was Buddy on the rug and I said, *What gives?* I’m sure he thought I was talking about his fat pushed up against the floor, shoved out from the bottom of his shirt but I wasn’t targeting any part of him. I was targeting all of him, targeting the general point of his existence. *What gives* was my general comment on his size in proportion to mine, because Bentley was so big and Mr. Jefferson so small, and I was so small but I was the one expected to take my shoes off, so in the end I didn’t walk on Buddy’s back. If he had suggested that he walk on my back I might have done it. I might have been willing to play Mr. Jefferson lying on the floor then getting up and doing a little tight-pants dance. Of course, later when I understood better I was glad I never walked on Buddy Holly’s back, because if I had he would have turned over so that

he was face up. He would have grabbed my ankles so that my legs straddled him. He would have gripped me around the wrists, or he would have pressed down hard on my shoulders.

After age five, his tactics became more threatening, like tying me to my bed and putting drugs in my food, and trying to get me to drink alcohol. It was his stupidity more than anything that helped me out of these situations. Food and drink I didn't eat unless I had made it, and I was more than capable of making my own bologna sandwiches and buying juice from the 7-eleven. The ropes gave me burns, but I had teeth like a woodchuck. I bit right through them while he was away at the store buying lube. I didn't know what the heck lube was at the time but I knew those ropes burned like a mother and I figured that if I didn't get them off of me I'd soon be under his crushing body. There was no way I was ready to be flattened just yet.

When Buddy got back and saw the bit up rope on the floor, he was pissed as a bull in heat with no cows to shove into. I was hiding on top of the china cabinet where he never thought to look as he went stomping and hollering around the house. Finally, he fell asleep clutching those ropes like a teddy bear in his left hand, and I fell asleep curled up on top of the china cabinet. From then on I wouldn't let him get five feet near me. It was my own personal restraining order. Really, I should have run away when he started pulling stuff like tying me up. Buddy wasn't a complete idiot. He would tie me up again, first chance he got, using something that my teeth couldn't get through like steel cables.

But I have to be honest. There's no getting around it. Part of me didn't want to leave. There was, and still is an old granny with a broken heart and bad knees inside of me. I've extinguished that part of me as much as possible, but at that time I was still a

kid. I wasn't trying to extinguish any part of me. Sure Buddy was trying to make me his sex slave, but he also bought me teddy bears and read me stories (not as I lay in bed, but as I perched on top of the refrigerator and looked down.) Once, when I came home crying from having a tooth knocked out, he even gave me a hug that was sweaty but sincere, so I stayed on because of those moments of niceness, which the granny inside of me cupped like golden goblets falling over in her lap.

If Buddy had lived in any other city, maybe I wouldn't have survived the way I did because I wouldn't have had anywhere else to go. Eventually he would've got me, but to my good fortune I lived in a city with a plethora of gutters and gutter children. Technically I wasn't a gutter child because I had a house to go to, but truthfully I was a gutter child because it wasn't a house that I was safe in. Why did I keep going back to Buddy Holly's house? Why didn't I just stay in the gutters with the other kids? Two reasons. One is what I mentioned before, that granny part of me that craved a "real home" with a "real television" and a "real father." In the gutter there were no televisions and there were no fathers, or mothers. There were the older kids, who were sometimes bigger, but barely smarter. If anything they were stupider, their senses dulled from living so long underground in the sewers. Most of them spent their time sniffing glue and paint thinner or poking their heads out of the sewers and into clouds spewing from car exhaust pipes. This brings me to the second reason I kept honing back to Buddy's. Being in the gutters too long left me seeing only orange lights. Everything became an underground orange, and all the kids had Gollum heads and limbs.

I'd seen Buddy Holly try and get kids to come play in the front yard by offering them Transformers and Play Stations. At first he tried using dollar bills and chocolate

candies, but he must have figured that the more expensive the toys, the greater his chances for snagging someone. I would watch him while I perched in a tree or on the roof. The thing about this city is the kids are smart. They don't eff around with sweaty palmed men who they don't know. Still, I kept a look out. I always watched in which direction the kids' feet were pointing, because whatever direction they pointed in was the direction that they would move towards. Every kid kept one foot pointed to the street.

There was the one and only time I saw a boy almost get pulled in by Buddy. Just as Buddy reached for those dark locks, I hit him a good one on the back of the head. I dropped a rock on him, just like a bird pooing from the sky. Buddy was mad. Oh I'd never seen him get so red. But I was already gone before he could shout, "mother-effer" Which was the word that he used in place of cursing, because everybody else in the world cursed, and in his mind not doing so distinguished him from other people. I guess this was the same sort of philosophy of distinction that led him to go after children, even though if he really wanted to be different, I say he should've gone for plants or animals. To be a lover of melons or a lover of poodles would have really made him unforgettable if that's what he wanted.

The boy was running down the street. Buddy was mother-effen in pain. If he wasn't so sweaty-palmed and fat, he would've come up on the roof and grabbed me, wrapped his arms around my knees and knocked me face down. Of course, I was way past way already, running after the boy who was so scared he probably peed his pants. I found him in the bushes by the Albertsons crying.

"It's o.k." I told him. "Are you new to this city or something?"

Then the damn kid started crying harder. I couldn't believe it. I stepped out from the bushes and looked around for somebody else who could take care of him, but there was nobody else. It appeared the city wanted me to watch him for a little while. I played it cool, but truth be told I was shaking. I knew Buddy had a gun. He hadn't even used it, but he had a gun like he had a million other things to get a kid, like poison to pour into milk that was poured onto cheerios. It was just one rock that I'd dropped on him, but I knew it was one rock in a string of humiliations. Buddy Holly wouldn't be patient anymore, or worry about covering up his deeds, or try to convince me that he was my forever playmate, my forever daddy. I was there in the bushes with this kid and there was no going back. Thank goodness. I wasn't able to save myself, but I could save this kid.

“Are you lost?” I asked him after he was done with his crying. “Are you running away?”

All I could get out of him was that he'd been left behind in some botanical garden far outside the city. He'd gone on a bus with a bunch of other kids from an orphanage. There were a million tiny gardens, each with its own unique lump of plants. There was the Japanese, Mediterranean, rose, George Washington Carver, Chinese, Greek, melon, rocks & sand. He just took off running through each and every garden until he realized it the air had gotten cooler. The bus was gone and all the other kids with it. He wrapped himself up in a plastic poncho and lay in a bean patch. It was an old grizzled man who found him in the morning and grabbed him by the neck shouting,

“You're the little mcfuck fucker who's been eating my melons.” I think he must have smacked Bartolomé a few times across the face. Bartolomé didn't say so but when he told this part of the story he moved his head back and forth in just the way his face

would have gone, if a meaty, calloused caretaker's hand had knocked him in the face. The caretaker took him inside his house, told him to sit his butt on a wooden chair, then he gave him a cup of water. The caretaker questioned him about where he was from, but Bartolomé didn't have anything to tell him.

Well shoot, the caretaker didn't know what to do with him, but he knew he wanted to be done with him; he didn't want to be troubled by him, so the next day since he had to drive up to get supplies from the city he took Bartolomé with him. He dropped him off on a street that looked crowded enough, chased him away from the truck and drove away. From there, Bartolomé wandered around. A lady on the bus gave him half a sandwich. He found a cookie in a trash can and a little bit of sour milk. He kept on wandering getting hungrier and dirtier until he came across Buddy Holly with his offering of toys and me with what I liked to think of as my guardian angel gaze.

With this kid Bartolomé under my wing I wanted to find us a safe place, so we went to the gutters. I acted like the strong one taking care of him, but the truth is that with Bartolomé there I could finally bear the orange lights and the wide eyes in the dark. I was ten and he was nine and for us, at the time, the sewers meant safety.

Mile 3 "The Sewers"

We congregated under the boulevard: the spine of the city, where the metal piping was the warmest. We congregated in little coves during the day and climbed to the surface at night to scavenge our food from dumpsters. There were plenty of other things in the dumpster too, if you wanted them. Ofelia, who was part of our trio, found a shoebox with four baby rabbits inside. The rabbits motivated her to go back to the surface for a little while. Underground they wouldn't have survived, although who knows?

Mother Nature has a way of mutating and adapting. They probably would have become like us: bigger eyes, bigger ears, smaller faces, leaner bodies. But somewhere she had picked up an image of rabbits running in fields. Poor girl. I wondered how long it took her to discover there weren't any fields of chamomile or daisies. The rabbits could hop around in dirt or hop around on cement, but that was it. After a few days, Ofelia came back to the sewers, after the rabbits died I suppose. She was half an inch taller. Her lower lip hung dejected.

Another find was a pair of roller skates. A complete set, a real miracle, because while there were lots of pieces of things—one roller skate, one shoe, or a tennis racket with no mesh—finding a complete of something was rare. It was Bartolomé who got a hold of the skates. He would've preferred a skateboard, but this was what he got. He rolled up and down the tunnels in his roller skates until the water corroded the wheels.

We loved each other. We each had our person or two whom we clung to rabidly. Sleeping curled up together was common. So was humping. There wasn't a day when we wouldn't hear a couple of kids or a group of kids humping together. Even I participated in them and it was all limbs, all breath, heat, and bones knocking together, and then those sighs, the pantings, and the barks. Somebody would get off and then we'd all get off, racing to the climax like a pack of pups. After that we'd lay piled up like that and go to sleep. The years passed and Bartolomé slipped in deeper but I stopped participating after awhile, too routine I guess.

There was a life expectancy of 15 if you were a female, 18 if you were a male. Kids died from asphyxiation and from brawls over spray paint cans that resulted in cracked skulls against the wall. I was near the end of the predicted life span. I was just

about to turn 15 and I was ready to go. A lot of the other kids, even if they weren't really content being down there, smoked in enough fumes to kill the desire and energy to leave. But my butt got restless. We'd been down there five years. I got itchy and would scratch away and scratch away till I bled and until I scabbed. This knowledge that I was expected to die soon was the main reason I wanted to get out. No Buddy Holly had gotten me. No sewer was going to get me. It tried, though, and I tempted it.

There were deeper tunnels that extended off the central one where we stayed. We called them the bowls of the sewer system. As the pipelines extended further and further there were less people, but there were one or two individuals who had been wandering those tunnels for years. None of us wandered back there because we knew that if we did, one of them would soon sense us. They had evolved to have the same capacities of rats and roaches. When they sensed another person's flesh and heat, how quickly they would grab on, how deeply they would bite. It had been passed on from gutter child to gutter child the way they groaned as they jammed their hands inside of anyone they caught. Whole fists, jamming, jamming. The stories of those loose individuals kept us from straying too far from the main tunnel beneath the Boulevard. But I was restless. I did it anyway.

Being so far in was like staring into someone's asshole, somebody who was bent over and holding onto their ankles. It breathed. I stared down into that dark hole expelling and sucking in air.

Already I was thinking I would go to the bowls again, and the next time I would stay longer until I melted into the dark and became both formless and thoughtless. The cylindrical flow of air and the equal amount of pressure exerting on me from all sides

would transform me into one of the truly underground who hid in the dark and grabbed all wanderers, who slurped all liquids in the dark, and who gnawed on her own arm when there was no food to be found. I would become master of the bowel system of the city and feed on its bile and piss because few could survive such an environment, few could understand the darkness, but I could understand it and be it. It would keep on calling me and I would go back to the bowls because there it was all equal mass. Loss of faith or hope never occurred because such concepts had no place there. Few could survive, but I would and it would take years before I would degenerate. Anybody else would die, stick a shard of glass in their own neck, but I was stronger. I'd always been stronger and the real underground was vile but I would thrive. It would kill anyone else but never I.

We can go back. Bartolomé tugged on my hand. I'd forgotten he was there. A bit of cement crumbled and tumbled down the curve of the tunnel breaking the spell of the bottomless asshole through which the single current of air ceaselessly flowed.

Mile 4 “The Blow Up”

I came up with a plan. Since the day in the bowels I started spending more time on the surface, scoping it out. I ran along the walls that sliced up the apartment complexes. I sprang from one complex to the next. In each of them I saw a fat man smoking. Babies cried through open windows; couples sat in the darkness of their dusty balconies; a man drunk shouted at a woman drunk. Everywhere there were people posted up in corners, standing in the shadows smoking. Everywhere I saw this, as I leapt up to the rooftops, nimble, limbs stretching, dominating height and distance. I scurried from rooftop to rooftop the way I scurried in the pipelines and sewage tunnels.

On the northern edge of the city, immediately where the desert began, I found an abandoned house covered in vines that crawled up the outside walls. Few people lived out that way. The handful of houses were scattered about, not lined up but dropped higgly, piggly on the road. They were small and flimsy, but stubborn as if they'd been clinging to the hardened ground for some time and would keep doing so even in death. All the houses looked vacated with their windows opened but curtain-less. The doors were set loosely in their frames. Desert plants filled small pockets of the ground but most of the ground was just dirt. I didn't know why that white house, but I pushed on the front door and it opened right up.

It was small but open inside, with one main room, and a kitchen and a bathroom.

"Imagine that!" I thought. "The other end of the sewers, the parts we never see." After seeing the porcelain bowls with the clear water floating inside, the silver handle, and the seat that lifted up on hinges like a drawbridge, I knew I was done with the underground sewers. This would be my home. I would move up to it and bring Bartolomé with me. There were plenty of corners to nestle up in. I would start collecting things: tin pots, a candlestick, a framed picture, whatever it took to make it a sincere house. Once it was all outfitted, then I would bring Bartolomé there. When I was through examining every corner of the small house, I opened up the front door to leave. It was nearly dark. From where I stood in the open doorway of the house, the entire twinkling body of the city spread out before my eyes. I'd never seen the city like that before, from a distance, far enough so that it spread out like a shimmering net.

They blew us up in the middle of the evening when most of us were dozing or playing games. It was too early to go up to the surface. Too many people were out and

about, but I was eager to get out and scope out my new living space on the surface. I was making plans to move up and out. The night was hot. The heat filled the tunnels.

Everything was warm to the touch. It was early still, around 8 pm, but I was restless because my final departure was eminent and I wanted to make sure everything was in place, that my new home was ready, that I knew how to get there, that I knew how to get from there to my job at the House of Cards where I was going to be working soon as a hostess. I was hired to swing on a swing outside and wave to the cars while inside the customers ate \$1.00 hotdogs, drank \$2.50 beers, and the other girls danced in their booty shorts and zebra patterned tops.

I started climbing up one of the man holes that was located by the Palace. Because of where it was located, people were too busy laughing loudly and sucking out the last bit of alcohol from the bottom of their three foot long tubes of glass to notice me climbing out. Nobody bothered with a girl like me, coming out of a manhole, looking up eagerly into the new life I was about to start. I peeked my head out and saw a girl in a cocktail dress, squatting to pee in the bushes.

The first explosion went off and debris struck my body from the shoulders down. I dropped the sewer cover. The tunnel filled with smoke. The kids were screaming. I could pick out Bartolomé's cry as I slid back down the ladder back into the hole. Another boom shook the tunnel and I fell, hitting my head. This was the first time I learned that if you hit the back of your head hard enough it gives you a black eye. The debris came thicker and I was suffocating, lying on my back on the rocks that stuck a million points into my body. Everything hurt, but more than the pain from the fall, there was the weight of the iron manhole cover above me solid and closed, the weight of all the casinos on the

surface above me, the weight of layers of asphalt up there, the people up there laughing their layers of laughter. All of it pressed down and all of it was heavy so that even though there were small rocks and large rocks pushing into my body, and even though the back of my head ached from their sharpness and from the impact of falling on them, and even though already the area around my eye was blackening, I felt that in the end it would be the weight that would kill me the way it was pressing down heavier, a thumb holding down a fly. My ears rang. I suffocated. The debris fell, then silence fell, and there was no more screaming, only the heavy silence just like in the bowls. I had to get out of there. I thought, *I'll just try one step. A singular step. I can always let go, fall back, another chip off the city sewer wall.* I sat up and reached my hand forward to grasp the metal bar of the ladder. This was all I did for one day. Or maybe it was for 3,000 years that I sat in the rubble, with my hand on the iron bar. The bar was the only sensation that made any sense if sense could be made. I fell asleep, then woke, but all the time held onto the bar. It was hot from the blast, but its core was still cold. The roughness of metal flaked off into my palm. It was a skinny metal bar. It would hurt to climb it with bare feet. The metal bar was held between two metal bars, and all of them were pinned into the wall by metal screws. My hand discovered that above that bar there was another, so I reached up until my second hand was on the second bar.

It was easier to reach up to the next, though my mind still moved with a film of plastic across it. I moved up to the next rung. The higher I went, the colder the bars felt against my hands and the firmer and harder the rungs on my feet. At last I was pushing away the cover to the surface. This time I climbed all the way out with no thought to who

might see. I kicked the cover back over, not to seal it shut but so that none of those drunken partiers would fall in.

I ran up a back street that ran parallel to the spine of the city and led eventually to an empty field of dirt behind The Circus, where the lights from the Boulevard couldn't reach. I collapsed to the ground.

My ear pressed against the ground so that I imagined that I heard the booms echoing underneath, and the screams, and Bartolomé. I heard the rip of duct tape by silent hands strapping explosives to the backs of rats that scampered through the tunnels headed for our cove. Rats are smart. They knew that what was strapped to their backs would kill them, so they ran scampered faster than ever they had before except for that time when word got out that there was an entire dead body lying in an off-shoot of a tunnel, and the body's name was Ofelia raped and left there at a healthy 2.5 months past fifteen.

The feast and festival of an entire dead human body was the only time they had run so fast. They were running for their lives, straight into our cove, thinking maybe if they ran fast enough they could out run their physical existence and then the explosives would slide right off them. They believed in their rat brains, hoped in their rat hearts that they could out run the physical reality of their bodies. The rats came shooting out of the blackness of the tunnel and leaped out of the air into our cove. They exploded because they were venomous vermin. They were smart but they still couldn't out run the man-made explosives strapped to their bodies by one of the great inventions, duct tape.

I imagined that bits of exploded bodies could twitch like chunks of starfish, like the tails of earthworms, like raisins on a windowsill.

Mile 5 “Train Tracks”

A pigeon flew and hit a window in the distance. The spine of the city glittered in the morning light which was beautiful but burnt my eyes. I squinted and used my hand as a visor. For a brief moment I allowed myself to enjoy the sight of the quiet city, which I knew was only quiet because I was far away from it. I would be hungry soon.

The sun rose higher. From having spent the past few weeks scoping out places to live, paths to take while on the surface, I knew that if I kept on that back road, I would soon reach an overpass and that I could rest under there until night fell again. The walk was through a flat, increasingly glaring world. I walked stooped over, following my shadow that fell in front of me, knocking my feet against the sides of the railroad track to make sure I was staying on the right path. My body was still not accustomed to the severity of the light. There were few trees where I walked. There were no stores where I walked. The buildings were empty warehouses or packaging plants. Somebody far away shouted at me, *Hey girl, where you goin'?* *Hey girl, can I go with you?* I started walking faster, the voice that called ringing in my ears. The light was too bright for me. I hadn't had enough time to adjust my vision to it yet, and then suddenly I heard footsteps catch up to me, felt someone touch my arm, and heard him whisper *Sofia*. I froze. Somebody had seen me and seen a Miss.

A Miss: a woman who is alone and probably lost.

Women and girls become lost all the time. Check the missing children board at Wal-Mart or the want ads in any city newspaper. Ask around. Everyone has a lost miss. All of us sewer kids had at some point been mistaken for a miss, which was another reason why we went out at night and tended to hide in the shadows, and why we tried to

go out in pairs. But all of us at some point had paused to look at a dead bird in the road, or to wonder about a box of cornbread or a dozen roses that we'd passed in the last dumpster. In pausing we'd forget to be on the look out. Suddenly, somebody would be coming towards us with their arms extended, and they would be murmuring, *Is that you?*

If you are alone and people see a miss, you look up and you will find a pair of bulging blue eyes or a pair of flat black eyes looking at you. Without the close protection of family or lover or friends, you are alone and the city will see you differently. It will feel no guilt, no qualms at grabbing you and taking you for its own. The intent isn't evil. The city and the outside gaze believe they are loving you in wanting to suck you, but in the end they are sucking you of all your marrow. Their bulging eyes won't stop bulging. Their flat eyes won't become curved or concaved. Out of perceived kindness, they suggest: *Let neither of us be lonely. Would you like to share a soda pop with two straws on this fine summer day?* They will offer you a bite of food. They will ask what it is that you are doing and whether or not you live with your mommy. Most of them don't mean any harm, but when they see a miss they believe the relationship to the miss to be stronger, to be realer than it is. They will grab hold of an arm or breast. They will grab hold and grip tightly believing that they are both drowning and saving.

I always thought of Buddy Holly during those encounters, although I'm sure he never came looking for me. It wasn't as if he were partial to me. He liked all children, but I had been the most conveniently located, right in his house, right above his head. The searching people with their extended arms reminded me of Buddy in the way that they panted, in the hungry way their hands hung down in front of them, grazing the surface of

their thighs. They made a grazing, whispering sound: *Come here. Whisper in my hair. Press a tiny pink tongue against my cheek.*

These encounters weren't without their benefits. Often they led to food, a real meal: meat, fresh vegetables, and warm dessert, so lots of time us sewer kids would play along. We'd let them make it better. Seven times out of ten we'd get a warm meal, a loving conversation, and some show of concern like, *Honey, don't you have any place to go?* Once the conversation reached this point, it was time to go. Always we had to keep in mind an escape route. The feeling of sorrow and desire to save could dissolve quickly and turn into a back hand across the face. *Look at you!* Then came accusations. How many times had I been grabbed by the roots of my hair?

The man who was holding me took me to be his wife. He called me Sofia, pressed his hand against my hip. He buried his nose in my hair but pulled it out abruptly, probably because it was no head of roses that he smelled. His other hand was in my hair, palm against the base of my skull, and he tugged not quite hard enough to make me yell but hard enough to make my eyes water. He said, *I'm so glad I found you.* We stood on train tracks, the hard metal pressed into the soles of our feet as we rocked gently back and forth. I kept my eyes opened, my body stiff. My strategy had always been to never get caught in the embrace, because I knew once that happened I would be fucked.

We stood there on the track, his body pressed tightly against mine. I kept looking to see if a train was coming because I frequented this strip of land and knew that one had to be passing soon. The space, the moment I shared with Sofia's husband was a vacuum. If there had been other people around us, they would have had their backs to us, thinking we were lovers with no shame. If there had been birds in flight above us, they would have

maintained perfect formation without bothering to look down on us, thinking we were just a pair of silly trees tangled up together. The wind blew without pause and it was I in a dress and worn out slippers standing on the tracks feeling the vibrations beneath my feet and it was he, emerald eyes in a brown face, hooked hand grasping my hair and cupping the base of my skull, pulling tightly on my hair, pulling my head back so that he could stare at me hard and melt my face into Sofia's. His other hand was around my waist and he gripped me tightly there, so that I understood the knob of bone that was my hip. I stood there as a rag doll. From past experiences I knew that I could take on my role as the lost Sofia and maneuver myself into a safer position. But I only wanted to get away. I didn't want to play along.

I hung there in his hands. My left foot twitched and wanted to run. My eyeballs rolled to the side when at last I heard the train coming. Its whistle screamed as we stood there on the tracks in our embrace. *Sofia*, he whispered.

The wall of heat from the train rushed up on us and I pushed against Sofia's husband. It was luck that his feet didn't catch on the tracks. It was luck that we stumbled and rolled off to the side and didn't fall face down on the tracks. We fell onto the rocks. His body landed on mine, then rolled off to the side. I dragged myself up and moved away quickly before he regained consciousness. I dragged myself away quickly, wanting nothing more than to go back to the orange glow of the underground nest.

When I finally felt the cool shade and hard stone of the overpass I stopped. I ripped up a handful of shrub and stuffed it into my mouth. It was some sort of food and its green flavor calmed my stomach. The house wasn't far, but with the sun beating as it was I knew that I would be permanently blinded if I didn't stop. I climbed up the sloped

sides and looked for a corner to tuck myself into. Few people passed on foot that way, and even if they did they wouldn't notice me. If they did, most wouldn't dare approach me if I was lying down, curled up, face hidden. In this position I would be a stinking pile of rags, possibly dead. This would be safer than walking down the street, or standing, or sitting because in any of those other positions I would look once again like a miss. There was the possibility that Sofia's husband would come looking for me, though I doubted it. He would wake up thinking he'd had a drunken dream, then wander away, his body honing back to his home. Just in case, I tucked a shard of glass in my sock and curled up with a broken bottle in my arms.

There was no gutter to go back to now. There were no embracing arms, no familiar orange glow. I kept my hands tightly clasped. It was better to lie down than to stand. The sun would set and then I could keep on moving towards the white house.

I was feeling slightly delirious or I don't know what, but I closed my eyes and there was Bartolomé in a new position, face down like he had his face pressed into a pillow because he was laughing so hard, a staccato laugh. I wished that he would turn over but I couldn't make him, even in my head.

I clasped my hands tightly together and intertwined the fingers like he'd made me do once when I'd had an especially bad day. This was after the incident in the bowls, but before Ofelia disappeared. Shit happened to us every day, but that had been an especially bad one for me. I didn't want to tell Bartolomé what had happened. I didn't want to tell him about the way I'd tried to play the lost miss game and ended up hanging from my wrists, the old tongues on my body, the wet, and the making. I didn't even want to tell him the way I freed myself once again by gnawing through the ropes with my beaver

teeth. If I'd told him, how would he have ever been able to look at me again? I told him I couldn't tell him about my day, and he understood. He knew only that I wanted to cut out two tongues lying in a bed in the second story room of an old house with a basement.

Bartolomé lay behind me, his body pressed into mine, our legs tangled, his arms wrapped around me and hands pressing my hands together.

It's okay this way, he said, and almost I wept.

Mile 6 “The House of Cards”

Ring the doorbell if the door is locked. Parking is at the rear of the building.

There were always a few cars in the parking lot. It was a work week place. Folks came in after work in the late afternoons or the early mornings. Red hot chili was the lunch special. Was it still lunch time? Was it still daylight outside? A helicopter flew low just as I walked beneath the shadow of the sign post and entered the dimly lit bar.

Everyone at The House of Cards was nice enough. Everyone always greeted me with hugs and said goodbye with kisses on the cheek. There were promises of seeing each other soon. Frequently used phrases were “I miss you.” and “I love you.” I didn't say them, but at night on the floor of the empty white house, just before I fell asleep, I whispered...*I miss you...I love you...* letting the sounds take shape in my mouth. My lips liked the feel of them when I whispered them while lying there in the dark on my back with my fingers clasped together on my stomach. I didn't say them to anybody in particular, because that's how it was. Everybody said those phrases to everybody. I wouldn't have predicted that I would've fallen in love with pretty words so easily. In the sewers we barely used words at all, so what did I know about them? They were so ornamental. I wanted to fling them, hang them on ears and other places where they could twist first one way then the other.

\$1,014.39; \$2; \$139.78; \$5,407.27. The jukebox flashed orange, yellow, red, green. The fans spun. There were a million empty bar chairs, rows of poker machines with the slot to slide in \$1, \$100, red lightbulbs on the ceiling, floral wall paper, framed pictures of show girls, The Sands. Purple Nights. Brent Woods, The Jailhouse rock, a Budweiser labeled canopy over the billiard table. A man with a cap on backwards came in to the House of Cards carrying rolls of paper towels and windex. He opened up the juke box and removed rows of coins and stacks of bills. His shades hung under his chin. Carefully, he wiped down every knob, every corner, the entire surface with windex. What had been fingerprinted and greasy became silver. That was enough for me. Watching him, I decided to use the *I love yous* that I'd been practicing every night for months.

Where were the church bells? Was the day's wind too strong for them? There went the church bells! The blue of the sky deepened. I was on the surface now, no longer in the sewers, and from having spent so many nights running on the rooftops of the chapels, I absolutely wanted to sit in a white carriage and be pulled along by a single black horse with black eyes. Now that I had the phrases, I absolutely wanted to use them. Who was it I planned to sit beside in the carriage since Bartolomé had been blown up? Anybody would do.

Lionel, the security guard, was adept at getting I.D.'s, and so every week, starting with the windex man, I found someone to marry. I went to the same chapel every time, Harmony Way, which was the one with a white carriage and a black horse. The people who worked there never let on that they knew it was me coming again and again. They didn't care because my new husband always paid up. Every week, I brought a Francisco or a Chet or a Philip or an Anthony or a Beltran. After the quick vows, we'd

ride in the carriage, the horse's hooves clapping up and down the street. It was the horse that almost gave me away because he knew me, so he'd nuzzle my hair, stomp one leg, snort out of his big nostrils, and toss his head. Luckily, none of my husbands knew anything about horses. They were all city boys, except for one rancher type who looked at me and the horse and said, *What, you work at the chapel too?* But as life goes, he was a little drunk and forgetful, so he, like all the rest, put on his hat, cupped his hand over mine as the photographer snapped a picture. Then it was on to the carriage and down the Boulevard, the horse stopping to shit in the street every now and then. The chapel owners tried to train him out of this, but something about that corner on Sahara and the Boulevard near the Bonanza! Souvenir Shop and the 10 foot tall clown made the horse's bowels turn. On the corner we'd hang a right and head west towards the overpass and mountains. We chased after the sinking sun; our diamond studded shades shielded our irises; my veil fluttered in the dry, hot wind; the leather reigns slapped meaninglessly against the horse's back; the horse's neck stretched out and bobbed as he worked his way up the incline. There was the smell of exhaust from the cars and roses wilting in my hand. The carriage headed west for Rocky Shore Casino where the false river shores were studded with plastic rubies and diamonds. Once we arrived at the side entrance my new husband would help me down from the carriage. I'd go straight to my favorite slot machine and pulled on it until the lights flashed and the machine sang *ching ching* and my new husband would kiss me. Then we would go up to the top of the hotel, the highest room possible. From there, every time, I'd press my hands against the window and look down at the city.

It is all a beautiful, essential gutter. There is a park down there with four swings. Four little girls are swinging and one mama is pushing them on their elliptical trajectories.

My life trajectory began as a sliding back and forth like a button threaded through by a straight metal wire. When I left the gutter, I began a slow rise from the bottom. Straight up is the only way to go. My life trajectory is vertical. To keep moving straight up I have to be a scorpion scurrying up a wall.

Life's incidents repeat themselves. It is becoming harder and harder to distinguish myself from the walls, the floor, and the double entrances through which the wind pushes itself. It is getting harder to distinguish my thoughts from the thoughts of this place which are rampant, but fleeting. They are thoughts of small acts: of sitting on the edge of a sagging bed and pulling up a gossamer stocking that smells of toes; of smearing oily lipstick over oily lips while sweat beads form on the forehead; of filing fingernails, the dust falling down to mix with the floor; of fingers raking fragrance into hair; of wiping the body with a soiled cloth; of lying in the dark and hearing the tinkle of music against the backdrop of silence; of stacking coins; of unfolding bills and pressing them between blocks of wood so that they might be smooth.

My face moves toward the angled sunlight. I am used to the brightness now. I am the perpetrator of this place. A city is its surroundings, its elements, its creatures. I am one of its creatures, just as the man / men who cross/es corners is/are one of its creatures, just as the woman scorpion, her head hanging awkwardly off her neck, is one of its creatures. I am one of its creatures too. I am the shape, the scent, the revelation. I am the singular body in the desert. Someone notices. Someone wonders. Someone seeks and

comes and the end is the same. The end is the body I always have been forever never always have been one Never I moving in the city.

Mile 7 “12:55 The First Point of Contact”

The *Bonanza Souvenir Shop* is a monster filled with thousands of tourist trinkets.

There’s me and Danny posted up on the morning shift. Reginald and Victor come in at 3:30 to take over for the night shift. The morning shifts start at 6:30 am. The store isn’t open yet so me and Danny keep an eye out while Nadia and Nanette, the owners, get the paperwork and drawers in order, turn on the cash registers, make sure their guns are in place. Me and Danny got it easy. We just watch. Easiest job in the world—if you know how to do it. Some don’t know how to pace themselves on the watch. They let their guard down without even realizing it. It just takes one incident and if you’re not ready, well that’s it. You’re done in this business.

Take Lalo who used to talk a lot of trash to us about how he was a former Wet Seal and Iron Man competitor. He’d stand by the door for maybe ten minutes and then he was off doing what he called “patrolling the aisles,” but really it was just him going around flirting with the girls. He was hungry for the girls. It was more than loving women, he was starved for girls.

Anyways, this was back when I was working the afternoon shift and it was me and him instead of me and Danny. So one day I’m standing at my post, hands clasped, resting on my belt buckle. In those days I’d taken to wearing my shades to hide the tick in my eye because I knew that Lalo was no good, but Nadia and Nanette liked him and they were the proprietors, so I was trying to be respectful of them and do my job even if that son of a gun wasn’t doing his. He was over there in the tiny t-shirt section, which is the

area he most liked to patrol and coincidentally the area where women in tight clothes and hooker shoes liked to spend most of their time. I steadily scanned the tiny-T section, then moved on to the red aisle, the black aisle, the silver and gold aisle and—wait a minute. I retraced the path of my gaze because I'd seen something, a little blip on the screen of my awareness, so I reversed my gaze back to the red aisle and there she was.

A 20 year old female, 5'8, 210 pounds had just stuffed her pants full of key chains. They bulged out of her crotch like a bed of turtles was in there scratching to get out, and she walked around like that as if it wasn't nothing, as if she just had extra thick pubic hairs. I whispered into my walkie talkie to Lalo, *Aisle red, blond hair, black tights, let's take her down.* Lalo, at the far end of the store nodded. *Yeah.* I gave a slight nod of my head then headed towards Turtle Crotch. I'll give Turtle Crotch this much, she was perceptive. As soon as she saw me coming in her direction, she took off running. If Lalo had been where he was supposed to have been, he could've easily tackled her and at most been jabbed a little in the stomach if he fell on her, but instead he stood and watched like he was at home on the couch in front of the T.V, so I had to chase after her with no back up. Most of the customers in the store were busy studying the rows of souvenirs and debating whether a shot glass or t-shirt was better for their old granny. A few of them looked up only when the girl knocked against a shelf of ash trays. The girl was spry, weaving between the aisles. It was her age that helped her, but it was her stupidity that got her in the end. She was already at the counter and I knew there was no way I could catch her. I was still chasing and she wasn't out the door yet, but I could already see her busting out, hitting the parking lot, and sprinting around the corner. Then she'd be lost in the maze of wedding chapels. As it was, she ran right into the glass door and knocked

herself back onto the ground. By then a couple of the customers had caught on and grabbed her by the arms. Then, finally, here came Lalo. He might as well have had a toothpick in his mouth and flip flops on his feet as he sauntered over and snapped a handcuff around her wrist.

This is what I mean about being a security guard. You're either all the way there or you're not. You can't just come in at the end like how Lalo did. He was fired the next day and I was glad Nadia and Nanette finally seen the light, because if they hadn't I might have walked out on that job, and I'm not one to walk out on anything.

Can't say I missed the s.o.b. Working as security you have to make your presence felt, but at the same time let yourself be forgotten. You do this by standing in one place, nodding, and saying at most, *Have a nice day*, as a patron leaves the store. What you don't do is crack jokes and ask them how long they'll be in town. Everybody who comes through is temporary, otherwise they wouldn't come to this shop. It's the nature of the souvenir business. Any customer is a temporary person in the city, which is why people like myself, Nadia and Nanette, and Danny, we stand out in sharp contrast. We live in different units of time. The tourists are on a whirlwind of a pace, while we live on a slow and steady time frame. We've seen all these people before. There's the old white couple wearing Birkenstocks and perusing the Native American section; the girls with matching hair, carrying bags of rubber penises and silver tiaras; muscled-out boys buying up hats shaped like hotdogs; thick girls buying stuffed gorillas that say *It's a jungle out there*; short, stocky couples with their hands stuffed in each other's back pockets; different versions of the same people, day after day.

I suppose it was from working so many years that I began to turn my body slightly. For ten years my body was always turned inwards towards the shop. Then one morning I turned it slightly to the left, just slightly so the only one who could possibly notice my change in position was Danny, who was standing on the other side of the doorway. He noticed too, make no mistake about that. He was no Lalo. Still staring straight ahead he says to me, "Better watch it." He let his gaze drop swiftly and directly to the toe of my left shoe which was pointing at ten instead of eleven. Of course he was right. I had moved. But I wasn't about to move my foot back just cause he'd told me so, so I it kept right there on ten and I glanced over my shoulder out the windows. Danny rocked once on his heels. 12:55 o'clock position. This was where I was supposed to be. This was where I always was, and instead I'd moved my toe and was at 12:50. Might as well have told him I'd decided to have a sex change and become a woman, so drastic was this change. Already the blood was moving up his neck to his face. It wasn't because of Danny that I moved my foot though.

I'd seen a girl come out of the gutter. I had no doubt she was real and so I looked away. It's the same principle as when you catch a ghost out of the corner of your eye. If you look directly at the space that the ghost occupies, you won't see it. The sort of space the ghost exists in is different than the way living people occupy space. The average person is blind to their presence, and those who aren't blind to them know it doesn't work to stare straight at them.

It had been a long time since I'd seen anything in the pocket of my eye like that. That's what jarred my foot off the ten and back on the eleven. I knew for sure I'd seen her. Due to my profession, I don't second guess myself. My eyes are my primary tool. It

was a girl I'd seen climbing up out of that gutter, just at that moment when the streetlights changed and the cars started moving forward and picking up speed, heading down or up the Boulevard, heading towards the mountains, or up the hill for the freeway exit. The pedestrians were all crowded on the corner. Everybody's gaze was up looking at the buildings or watching the light. Not that it would've mattered if they'd been looking directly at the spot in the street where the girl popped out of. First of all, the whirl of the cars passing by confused her image. Second of all, as soon as she popped out she was gone around the corner. Hard to tell her age. Anywhere between fourteen and twenty-four. Skinny. long hair and pale skin glowing beneath the desert sun as if it was the sun itself that had bleached out all her color. She knew the city and was sure in her step. The city knew her too. I could almost hear it calling to her, *This way. There's a break in the vista this way.* Out of the gutter she came and around the corner she went. If anyone else had seen her, they would've thought they were hallucinating because the girl was so quick. One blink and she was gone, I was back at 12:55 o'clock, and the blood receded from Danny's face.

Mile 8 "Second Point of Contact"

When I got home that night, I did my usually routine of eating dinner, showering, trimming the beard and the nose hairs. I put on my house clothes and flipped on the television, and looked for a good western or sci-fi flick.

I kept thinking about that skinny girl climbing out of the gutter. I kept reliving the sight of her so that I could relive the sensation of heightened awareness. Oh, sure, I felt that every day at work but this went even further. This pushed even beyond my usual watchful gaze because at the store I had my buddies: Danny, Nadia, and Nanette. We all

surveyed together. There wasn't any other way to do it, because alone, none of us could be looking in every direction at once. I preferred the team approach to life anyway.

As a team you conduct meetings and review the layout of the store even if you know it better than you know your own house. As thick as football coaches, you and your coworkers sit and plot plan a, b, c, d, and even e if necessary. Together, the team organizes the right combination of strategies for handling various criminal scenarios and disturbances to the well being of the general public. After designing your plans you role play. Who's going to play the petty thief? Who's going to play the stalker? The masturbator, the unhygienic, the female giving birth? Through role play you get a sense of your true reactions, although admittedly it's only a sense because your rational, conscious mind knows that it's just Danny down there on the floor clutching his panza with his legs spread. It's possible that Danny has done some community theater playing the pig in Animal Farm or the mover fellow from Waiting to Exhale.

Community theater or not, eventually the acting will creep over reality like ivy consummating over and over again against a stone wall. Suddenly, you are convinced of the truth of this woman and of the liquid pouring from between her legs, and of the child searching for his first breath in the world. Suddenly, you are convinced that both of their lives are in your hands. What are you going to do then? This thought could freeze you just as the woman screams from a stab of pain that bursts from her spine, just as the child flips around and faces the world butt out instead of face first. Role playing helps you get a sense of at what point you might freeze, so that when—not if—the actual event occurs, you will only freeze for a millisecond because you've already lived through this moment, even though at the time you told yourself it was not the real moment but a

pretend moment, but even so, even in it being pretend you know clearly that you've already been through this moment and so you freeze for only a millisecond, not long enough for the pain to gather up in the woman's spine or for the child to turn himself over. With role play, that moment of being frozen is so fleeting that it will be imperceptible to everyone but you.

Camaraderie is important. I've always believed that. I still believe that. But there was something to being the only one who'd seen the gutter girl. Not the only who happened to see her, but the only one who could see her. Seeing her was different than being a security guard on watch. Being able to see her in the pocket of my eye was a gift. I knew this. I believed I had a special talent ever since I was a kid and helped Lizette find that gold chain of her daddy's that she'd hidden in the grass, thinking she'd play treasure hunt until he got home. I never heard a kid holler like that before. But I helped her out using that pocket in my eye that helped to see what nobody else could see in the dark or the shadows. I know it sounds like a cheap soap opera but yes, I found the necklace and after that we were bound for life, me and Lizette. We wandered in and out of each others lives until I found that the pocket of my eye was filled up with visions of Lizette, and that's when I found myself... but, that's another story. Right now what I'm talking about is post Lizette and post family rearing. What I'm talking about now is the rediscovery of the pocket of my eye and the second point of contact with a girl who probably if she was asked, wouldn't even know I existed.

That night I watched old episodes of X Files and fell asleep within the half hour like I usually did and this was when I had my second point of contact with the girl. I

dreamed it. It was an effortless dream, not a product of my subconscious but a dream from the corner pocket of my eye, the gutter section of my vision.

I walked due south towards *Bonanza*, swinging my left arm while the right arm held a six-pack of Negro Modelos for Danny because it was his birthday. The weather was mild, and even better was that I wasn't wearing my polyester uniform.

The streets were deserted except for a carriage pulled along by a horse. In the carriage rode a bride and groom. I knew, even though I was seeing everything from behind, that it was her in that carriage. The yellow lights on the *Bonanza* sign blinked, wicked children in the sunshine. The horse was heading south like me. He was about to round the west corner towards the overpass. The streets were entirely empty except for the carriage and me carrying the six pack. The bottles gently clanged together in their cardboard box, as eager as clowns putting their white-gloved fingers to their painted lips and giggling, "Sssshhh, ssshhh...It's almost time!"

The horse pulled around the corner, heading west for the overpass and mountains. Its perfect, convex eye reflected the street, just as all the orbs on that street reflected the scenes before them, from the streetlamps to the rounded letters protruding from building signs, to the tinted windows on the thirteen-story buildings, to the car bumpers of abandoned cars left to rest in empty car lots. Her veil fluttered to the left, the tops of the wheels tilted to the left. The weight of the bride and groom's bodies were shifting to the left so that they leaned towards the right. The friction of the wheels moved to the right. The right arm of the driver was raised in the air and cracked a useless whip on the steed's back.

There was Bill. In a flash, I spotted him inside Bonanza, on the other side of the glass, facing outwards with his hands in his pockets like a small boy.

The street was silent but for the chinkle of the bottles bumping shoulders, the heaves of my hefty breathing, the turning of the well-oiled but heavily used carriage wheels, and the clip clop of the horse's hooves. Then from the east rolled a sleek limo. Inside of it I knew there was a well-cologned driver from Venezuela with lotioned skin and neatly razored facial hair. He kept looking in his freshly windexed rearview mirror at the three girls who were his compatriots.

¿Accidentado? ¿Lastimado?

It was early afternoon and bright out, but for them in the dark interior of the limo with the inebriating scent of perfumes and bath salts, the short dresses and the waxed, oiled legs stretched out as the compatriots giggled and clinked glasses of champagne (or were they on to tequila shots now?) The driver couldn't keep his stunner shades off them as he cruised straight down the deserted streets. The girls laughed in unison, leaned forward and slapped him on the arm as if their hands were fine, leather reins slapping against his back urging him to go faster *¡Dále! ¡Dále!* Only with him, unlike with the horse, the slapping worked, and so he accelerated the sleek and waxed pod of which he was in charge of, so that in this 2nd point of contact the limo struck the horse and the carriage at 90 miles an hour.

In this 2nd point of contact I saw and I ran. All the bottles in the six pack jumped and shouted furiously, *Here we go boys!* That sleek white limo rammed into the horse and carriage just as smoothly as if it had been a missile launched on its programmed out trajectory.

On this 2nd point of contact I ran and there she lay on her back, twisted. Her legs, knees, and hips pointed in one direction, while her torso went in the opposite direction. Her right arm was flung out, palm up. Her head faced the direction that the right hand pointed in. The left arm was flung behind her, wrapped around her back. Her gaze was set on a distant point on the pavement. The groom lay grimy and face down beside her as if he had his face in a pillow and was laughing. She was a wax figure with her lips parted. The horse lay on its side, heaving and nearly dead. Danny was outside then, standing in his sheriff's stance. He put the gun between the horse's two black eyes and shot a bullet into the brain. Since he was there beside me, I thought about giving him his six pack of beer but all the bottles were shattered and the liquid bled through the cardboard.

I knelt beside her. She looked like she was made out of porcelain. She was too young to be the age of my youngest daughter, Ana, but she could've been Ana if Ana were dead and porcelain with eyes too large to filter out the world, with fingers that looked too skinny to hold on to anything but the hem of her veil. I reached out to touch her cheek, not knowing if it would feel warm or cold, but expecting both. She was the temperature of the pavement which had begun to absorb the 85 degrees from the sun, but still held within it, the cool temperature of the evening before.

I followed the line of her gaze. I set the six pack beside Bill's booted foot. He was now standing at 12:55 o'clock with his arms crossed, staring down the silent street, standing over the body of the dead horse that also still had its eyes open.

I followed the line of her gaze as easily as if there were a string marking it, a hypotenuse beginning in the core of her eyes, moving down the length of her arm, across the open palm, and over the pavement until it came to rest on a small point upon the road.

I squatted and pressed my finger on that point, and then the street was no longer deserted. It was filled with vehicles including the sleek limo that turned south and went on about its way down the Boulevard. The fragments of the carriage and the horse were gone. The dead bride and groom were gone too. Bill was back on the other side of the Bonanza glass.

I really did have a six pack of beer to take to Danny. The bottles really did clatter against each other. I got dressed, stepped outside, and, yep, and it was a perfect desert day when fragile lives could bloom. Yep. No horse crap on the corner and no carriage. The traffic was regular as always and so were the tourists who were eager for some silver memories. Danny was like a boy cheesing because it was his birthday. Nadia and Nanette fired up a grill. We had us a nice, easygoing time what with the beer and the grill and the girls and a little radio. Nanette and Nadia bent the rules for Danny. It was a rule-less day.

The 2nd point of contact.

She was too old to be my granddaughter, even if my eldest had been a teen mother, so the girl was a strange in-between generation in relation to me, neither daughter, neither granddaughter. If I'd wanted her young flesh I suppose that could've been the relationship too, but that wasn't what I wanted. There was no appeal in that for me. Young flesh traipsed through Bonanza every day. Besides, having known Lizette, grown with Lizette...there was no other. And if I did want some one else..I couldn't help but notice Nadia had been a little flirtatious lately.

I was sure that despite the dream, whoever the girl was, she was still alive I felt this in the pocket of my eye. She was probably trekking, or maybe she was in a cold room. It was likely that she was dirty and hadn't bathed in awhile. She wasn't like my

daughters, but I wondered about my daughters...it was too late anyway for me to fix anything that might have happened to them before they got settled and found themselves some husbands and had them some babies. Ana is the only one not married, but she's no gutter child. She's my child. I remembered my girls growing up. I couldn't believe it, three girls and no sons but I remembered when they stopped being girls. I was glad in some ways to be working two jobs at the time so Lizette had to handle all of that.

I wondered if that body of that girl was clothed and if it was, if she were clothed in a wedding dress, or if she were naked, or if she were swaddled in a dirty blanket. I wondered and I thought of the two points of contacts between us that I was sure she had no knowledge of. But that's the way it goes sometimes, lots of times. I knew this from personal and professional experience that one person sees but the other doesn't. One looks one way and one looks the other way.

It wasn't coincidence that I'd seen her two times in less than twenty-four hours. It wasn't a coincidence that she'd triggered a re-opening of the pocket of my eye that allowed me to see just a hair more than other folks did. Still, I didn't know what to do with this circumstance. I wasn't her daddy. I didn't know her. The most I could do was keep those two points close as I stepped. One. two. As I ate two grapes that hadn't yet gone rotten.

Mile 9 "Scuttling Scorpion"

When the explosion happened I fell backwards and felt the weight of the entire surface on me. I made it out, but even on the surface there was the weight of the dead. The surface was dry. It was saturated with light, the weight of the still, the weight of the scuttling scorpion.

All my husbands were not my husbands. And Bartolomé was dead. Nothing connected me to the city except experiences that were already passed. The city would never notice me missing, so I decided to go. The most obvious destination was the ocean.

I got to the bus depot. I had left some money between bricks in the back of the house.

I approached the man behind the counter, who was a skinny man in a dirty uniform, and who had large veiny hands that hung out of the sleeves. He wore his hat crookedly. He had brown jewels for eyes and was older than I. He looked at me in the pink dress as I walked up to the ticket counter. I said, "Can you tell me which bus will drop me off near to the ocean?" He stared at me like I was a big dummy. How was I supposed to know which city was known for its beaches and which for its mountains? Which for its imported shoes, which for its leather goods, which for its jerky and nuts, which for its wine, which for its hot air balloons, which for its green-hat parades, which for its air that made birds drop dead in flight, which for its fog rolling in, which for its murder rate, and which for its lost population and extinct industry. I didn't know what city was what, so I stared back at him until he answered, "San Diego." I bought me a ticket to San Diego and sat down in a plastic chair.

There was a plump woman there with her children. We all wore flip flops. She was going out to visit her sister and her sister's kids, and she hadn't slept in two days and hadn't allowed her children to sleep either because the bus ride was at least ten hours long, but really even longer than that because ten hours was the official time they told you, but it was a low estimate She asked me if I'd been staying up nights and I told her

No, and she shook her head and said *Pity for you*, then pulled out a plastic pillbox, which she shook saying that I could have a sleeping pill if I wanted, but I told her it was okay. If I didn't sleep it was fine by me. She leaned in and studied my face close and, of course, in doing so I also studied her face and saw beneath the wrinkles, the veins, and the discoloration, the young woman she might have been before she was a mother and an aunty. I could see the woman she might have been standing on the median, waiting to cross the street. She would've worn white high heels and a polka dotted dress. Was it her cheeks that were pink? Or just the dress?

She squinted at me. *Your first time out of the city?* I nodded. Her child, the boy wanted to teach me to play cards. She sat back and seemed to doze. *It will be dark so you aren't going to see much out the window. There ain't much out there to see anyway but maybe you'll catch sight of a jackrabbit or something.*

We could choose our own seats, so I sat by a window. The woman went all the way to the back seat which was long, so her children could lay out like little beasts pressed up against each other. Then she took one seat for the baby and one seat for herself. I sat not right by them but towards the back too, beside the window. It was cold on that bus. I leaned my head against the window and looked at the ticket agent who was standing outside now smoking with the driver. Ten hours seemed plenty of good time to look out the moving window. Looking at the men smoking and listening to the woman behind me with her children chattering, I didn't notice the goosebumps on my skin until the boy I'd been tossing cards with came over. He handed me a bulky grey sweater that smelled like cigarette smoke. She wasn't looking when I peered over the edge of the seat

so I turned back around, tucked my legs under, wrapped the sweater around me. Then the driver finally got on, put the bus in reverse and rolled out slowly.

My last view of the city was, of course, the lights. They stretched on. In some spaces the city slept. In other spaces the city was barely awake, and in still other spaces, the city had never slept and it was spotted with simultaneous spots of fatigue and alertness.

The flat land rolled out from the edges of the city and turned into red and black volcanic pebbles. The pebbles, scattered far and wide, become rocks that took on the hunched over shapes of boulders. The boulders mounted up forces, pushed further into the distance until miles and hours away, they were mountains. These weren't snow capped mountains or mountains with trees growing on their sides. These mountains were the grandiose enlargements of the dust on my feet.

Here was the plan. When I got to the ocean, I was going to move horizontally until I got to the water. Once there, I would move vertically up a cliff. From there, I would leap into the sky, spin down into the ocean where I would keep moving breaking all linear trajectories. I would tumble under water, blowing out bubbles that would race eagerly like a pack of dogs to the top where they would explode in ecstasy right as they broke through the surface of the ocean.

The lady was right. There wasn't much to see but rocks as we rolled on out of the city.

Mile 10 "The City"

These creatures which run over her body, why sometimes she thinks they are nothing but parasites. Sometimes she believes that parasites are all that they are, running

over her body, breeding in her spine, spinning out of control, laying their eggs, sweating on her. Her spine is lined with jewels.

Vicious tit bitch though she is, she is also too short sighted to be vindictive. For awhile she watched the gutter girl, both in jealousy and in eagerness. Jealous because she couldn't know the insides of herself the way this girl did. She couldn't stick her hands into her own bowel system and play around in there. Half the time she forgot she even had an interior that ran so deep. For awhile she watched that girl eagerly because in the girl she saw a speck of herself, but after awhile she forgot to keep track of her.

The weather is getting hotter and this is the weather she loves, so she stretches herself out. Ah limber limbs. Window washers cleaning the jewels. She smiles ruby lips to herself with her eyes closed and just happens to flutter one eye lazily. There is that girl again! Looking different now. She isn't bleached white. The city doesn't care. The parasites come and they go. One person boards a bus, another one gets off. These mites that scutter across her body are not worth any worry. She could crush dozens with her thumb and it would be nothing. So a girl got on a bus? She should matter? It should matter any of it? When every day planes flew in, rolled up her thighs, rolled down her thighs and lifted into the sky, and she should care about one individual? Fifty buses a day coming in and coming out. Why that speck of a girl is nothing. This is a regular day, nothing special, nothing new.

Mile 11 "Coming In"

Your head nods. You forget that you are on the bus.

The bus turns into the greyhound station. How eager you are! You are in a new place far from cornfields and suburbs. You are in the gritty now with a tattoo shop across the way

and a tatted up man like you hoped there would be, outside smoking a cigarette. You are feeling brave so you step off, go bum a square off of him and it does not take any imagination to know that his gaze is swallowing up your body. He knows you are new here. He saw you get off the bus. And you know you are new here. The entire city knows you are new here; it feels your excited vibration but you do not care if they all know it because it has all been waiting for you here, just like you had been crisscrossing your fingers for. It is all magnanimous, lit up, bejeweled and that tattooed boy has lifted up his shades. Now he is really looking at you as you squint and breath out smoke like a pro because you are a pro at life, at living. Here you are and there he is. His eyes are black pearls and here you are. You made it, you did it, and now you are hungry.

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