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Monarchs in Love and Other Stories

Matthew Swetnam

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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MONARCHS IN LOVE AND OTHER STORIES

by

Matthew Swetnam

Bachelor of Arts
Brown University
2006

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
Department of English
College of Liberal Arts

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THE GRADUATE COLLEGE

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Douglas Unger, Committee Chair

Dave Hickey, Committee Member

Timothy Erwin, Committee Member

Joseph A. Fry, Graduate Faculty Representative

Ronald Smith, Ph. D., Vice President for Research and Graduate Studies
and Dean of the Graduate College

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ABSTRACT

Monarchs in Love and Other Stories

by

Matthew Swetnam

Douglas Unger, Examination Committee Chair
Professor of English
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Monarchs in Love and Other Stories is a collection of nine short stories. These stories are structurally and tonally heterogeneous, and it is this heterogeneity of form that emerges as the collection's central concern. Present are stories which borrow other forms' organizational conceits (the almanac entries of "Excerpts from the Dwarf-Monger's Handbook"), stories which arrange themselves around arbitrary organizational conceits (the order of the letters of the alphabet in "26 Characters"), and stories which employ radically traditional formal models ("Blind Boy and Mammoth.") Present are stories narrated in the first-person point-of-view ("For a Walk," "Harem Girls"), stories narrated in the second-person point-of-view ("Excerpts from the Dwarf-Monger's Handbook,"), stories narrated in the third-person point of view ("Air, Elegy"), and stories which develop forms that utilize more than one style of point-of-view narration (second-person-singular and third-person-plural perspectives in "Monarchs in Love.") Present are works of magical realism ("In the Walrus Colony"), historical fantasy ("Excerpts from the Dwarf-Monger's Handbook"), historical realism ("Air, Elegy"), and contemporary realism ("In the Palace of the Moon Sultan," "For a Walk"). In short, *Monarchs in Love and Other Stories* attempts to explore as fully as possible the short story's spectrum of form. As a collection, it hopes to

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To Leah Bailly, trusted friend, first and best reader for so many of the stories presented here.

And to my parents and sisters, as much for things that have not yet happened as for things that have already happened, for being the closest to always, to forever I'll ever know.

EXCERPTS FROM THE DWARF-MONGER'S HANDBOOK

Sales Pitches:

Put down the arquebus, the lance: I am merely a dwarf-monger, and though the goods I sell may peep and squeak now, imagine how finely they will sing after even a meager dinner. They do not require much. They know how to clean a carcass and drink a dreg, and these costs – food, wine, three feet of cot in a basement room – will better than justify themselves when guests arrive and see that these monstrous things are under your dominion. “Oh lord, oh savior!” they will say. “If he owns *this*, then what will he not stoop to?”

I thank you for the meat and for the dregs. I have already passed them through the cage-bars of my cart, and I assure you that they found a rapturous reception there. The cargo I bring with me now does tend to experience everyday rapture— little saints, every one, and do you know that learned men say that religion strikes this sort of creature doubly, because the heavens are even more immense above their heads? Still, enormity

of heaven makes for paucity of brain, and because these little birds do not know savior from dominion-master, a whispered word from any sort of man in a cassock – such things are not so difficult to borrow for a day, from a drunk minister, from a priest on his deathbed – will convince these tiny sets of ears to settle down on tiny knees and worship you with tiny hands.

Yes, these hands are tiny, and these ears are small. Though one of these precious things could not hold a gun, she could hold a doll, and though another could not understand a harsh word spoken by a first man to a second over a third's body, he could grasp the meanings of the fables that grace spring mornings in a schoolroom. Remember that you have seen your own children, once so innocent, grow up into drunkards, adulterers, sinners, and recognize that my creatures cannot grow up themselves, can never quite reach the bottle or the seducer's phrasebook or the devil's hands. You have watched your children change, and they have failed you. Do not forgo the chance to begin again. Do not forgo the chance to never again experience failure.

Another dwarf-monger has passed by not two months ago, and you have looked through his wares and purchased one of his offerings? This is no reason to refuse at least a turn around my bazaar. Like the offerings of artists, every dwarf is given by its creator a treasured and precious mark of distinction, and you never know what sort of innovation will stare back at you through the bars of *my* cart. Here is one whose body has the look of a corpse picked clean by buzzards, here is one with three fingers to a hand and twice-cloven feet, here is one whose skin is patterned green and gray up the backs of the calves,

here is one who never stops weeping... Collect dwarves, and make a show of the world's imperfections. As you do, you will put on display your own wondrous endowments, obvious in their absence from the things that surround you.

Will you tire of a dwarf? Will its singing grow too shrill, its prayer grow too meek, its laughter grow too knowing? Will the specialty you once valued in it vanish? These are not questions I can answer, but I can tell you this. There is worth even in a dwarf that no longer brings you joy. Magic will be yours, from the women of the woods who collect these erstwhile angels, these cast-off fragments of heaven, from the women who grind the little birds' fingernails into ointments that are lesser blessings, that heal wounds and stop the tongues of gossipers... Money will be yours, from the jugglers who shuttle back and forth between cities, who know the delight in little things tossed high by stretched blankets, who know, too, that sometimes the savior takes his chance to snatch these creatures' souls when they find themselves so high, that sometimes the savior leaves behind only bodies shattered by cobblestones... Comfort will be yours, from the tip of the rapier that encounters – after so much sparring with leather and straw – the soft sink of metal into flesh...

A First Itinerary for the Novice Dwarf-Monger:

Begin in the mountains, in the heights. Understand the meaning of pinnacle. On your journey, you will need such understanding. When your cargo peeps and squeaks, you will need to remember the power of towering above, the strength that comes from mastery, the glory of staring down at death, which inches its way up the faces of the

precipices of the world from the chasm where it lives. Revel in this, but realize that there is distance indeed between pinnacles and customers, and you must cover this distance quickly. Begin your descent by following the steepest paths, and whip your donkeys when their feet stutter – they are trying to pause so that they can chew on sweetgrass or lick up the errant honey that drips from the mouths of mountain bees. Do not pay attention when one of the members of your cargo gasps at the sight of lilies in a slopeside pasture. Remember that, for everyone, beauty is nothing more than novelty.

In mountain valleys, sell beauty. Choose the fairest of your offerings, the blondest, the ones with the bluest eyes, the softest skin, the saddest countenances. Coarse-faced countryfolk will shove each other aside with calloused hands to glimpse your wares. Among these people are the wealthy, but know that they operate in an economy different from yours. Short summers and long winters choke them with the common. Snow, firewood, potatoes, wool. They do not care for the money given to them by the merchants who travel upriver to purchase common goods for sale on hungry coasts. All they care for is rarity – these mountain men treasure stories that will spare them from the crush of summer boredom, from the flood of time and darkness that washes down from the sky every winter. So whisper to them, show them a mandolin, quote from plays written in foreign tongues, flirt with their wives, sleep with their sons, sell them a dwarf and let them name her. Imagine how long they will delight their neighbors with tales of Little Griseldina. Smile at them when you ride away.

In lowland hills, sell horror. If you have something to show that has no nose, show it, and if you have something to show that is short because it is legless, show it. The foothills are the places where folktales spring from the earth, where heroes with

singing swords and truffling pigs sniff out evil and make a carcass of it, where tongueless princesses learn to sing from the chirping bluebirds of the dells. The people here, rich after selling truffles and feathers, are sick of their legends, and they crave things that will disgust them, that would have disgusted their ancestors, that would not have burdened them with such weight of national purity. Bite your tongue and fuck a goat: the men of the hills will applaud. They will buy from you, a whole cart's-worth if you let them.

On the coast, sell freedom. Even the rich, here, are ashamed by the stench of subjugation that chokes the wharfs and clouds the workshops. Everywhere, there is dependence: the beggars need their donors' dirty coins, the donors need their bosses' grimy jobs, the bosses need their bankers' dirty coins, and the bankers need their beggars' awe. Put on display the most otherworldly of the creatures in your cart. If one of yours speaks only in a tongue never heard in any land, declare that he is a relic of the past, a straggler from some lost paradise. If another of yours has eyes that focus only on that spot between earth and sky where visions emerge, claim that her mind has already been carried up, and she stares away waiting for her heavenly dominion-master to take the rest of her. Proclaim that yours are the savior's children, who need nothing more than a drop of nectar and a crumb of bread to survive. Pretend that, in monstrosity of stature, there is escape from the hell of need.

A Second Itinerary for the Novice Dwarf-Monger:

Begin on a coast, in a city. La Rochelle, Bari, Rotterdam. Parade your cart up and down the avenues. Buy chickens, slaughter them, roast them, and distribute them until all that remain are trampled bones. Bark to the crowds and bring the members of

your cargo onto a platform one by one. Trumpet the peculiarities of each of the things you have acquired to sell. Do not expect to complete a sale. These city-dwellers, these merchants' sons— they are poor, they will never dream of owning your precious wares, but they talk. They talk to friends and colleagues and to the dullards and the innkeepers they meet when they venture into the countryside to make their fathers' trades. If you impress them, word will spread. They are not difficult to impress. They are desperate for dwarves. Some of them spend whole lifetimes waiting for dwarves to appear, waiting to look down on something monstrous, waiting to turn to a friend and squint and nod and be certain of superiority.

Set out into the poorest countryside you can find. Dress in your finest clothing. When you appear at the doors of country landowners, make a show of your marvel at the richness of their hospitality. Inquire after the parentage of the livestock they roast for you and speculate about the vintage of their dregs. Gasp when they bring you around the crude scratchings they call their portraits and icons. Make them feel richer than they are. Make them suppose that, if they pawn their daughters' brass anklets and their wives' undergarments, they might buy one of your offerings, and that, if they select from among your wares, they can finally count themselves among the ranks of the fortunate, those whom the savior has given a few more acres, a few better drops of rain, a few more industrious peasants. When these landowners agree to buy, show them only the nastiest, most normal of the little birds you have on hand. Looking on four-feet-three-inches of sound body and mind, they will see two feet of savior-blistered skin. Barter hard. These are customers who will pay what you demand.

Cross a river and scan the fields for strawberries and bees' nests. When you find them, beware. Men who know the taste of sweetness will not believe everything you tell them. They have felt the presence of the divine, and they felt it before they laid eyes on your cart. Know, too, that as soon as men have felt honey trace its way down their throats, they become insatiable. They cannot content themselves with mere bees' blood, mere strawberries. They will listen even to their wives' rumors, passed along from cousins: the finest wine, the finest cheese, the finest icon, the finest dwarf. For these men, forge your dwarves' pedigrees in hot fires until their tales cannot be shattered by reason. Say that your dwarves were gathered from Hyrcania, Kingdom of Dwarves, and that this one, this tiny lass, she was Queen of Them All until she split a lip on a tiger's foretooth in a bestial frenzy, that the sight of blood gave away the stench of sin to her master, her King. Say that your dwarves were gathered in the cellars of Cádiz by pirates, that there, surrounded by bottles of sherry that leak so slowly they take centuries to drain, the finest dwarves are tied together by their tongues and moved upriver, that the king's blind guardsmen never catch the smugglers because dwarves who have been fed iris-root cannot move their lips, let alone waggle their tongues to loosen the knots that bind them. The men who love sweetness will listen, once you have broken their skeptical whispering with the outlandishness of fantasy. Listening is all they do, for they themselves are enslaved, though it will not seem it, to you. To these men, sell the most mediocre of your wares, the short but ambulatory, the tall but fish-finned and gape-mouthed.

Your donkeys will thank you when you climb mountains and force your way through the snows of a pass and descend once more from winter into spring. Your cart is now almost empty, and those that remain in it are too wondrous, too pitiful to create

much burden. Though you will smile when you are greeted by the warm winds that always herald the end of a journey, do not think that you will find much pleasantness in those last days. In rich valleys where the sun is always warm, where the ground smells always of root and never of carcass, men grow strange in the darkness of their counting-houses. These are the men whom you will need to work the hardest to please, who will demand to see you lick the tips of their rapiers until you cut your tongue, who will fill your glass from the tops of their bottles and save for themselves the dregs. These are the men who can tell a fine abomination from a simple and tiresome dwarf. Tell these men the truth. Tell them which of your people you stole and which you bought. Tell them which can talk and which cannot, which can read, which had families, once. Pray that they do not buy you along with the goods you sell. Realize that, in the world, there are monsters more monstrous than your dwarves, than you.

Places that a Dwarf-Monger Would Do Well to Avoid:

The Ports of Smyrna and Alexandria, where men train in thieves' universities and have more talent than you do, where men will steal your stolen dwarves before you've had a chance to ask directions.

The River Oxus, where stands of pussywillow choke the banks, where dwarves carried on a barge can fling themselves ashore and find nothing but softness and shelter.

The Kingdom of Hyrcania, home to tigers if not to dwarves, where late winters and early autumns clog passes with snow, where thieves of every kind are blinded and left among pinnacles during the first snowstorms of the year.

The Duchy of Trebizond, where the duke's sister was a dwarf, before she drowned on dregs in some rich Walloon's basement.

The Kingdom of Parthia, where dwarf-stealers are not suffered gladly, where native dwarves are put to use more profitably than they can be in any of our European lands, knotting together carpets with tiny fingers, filigreeing silver.

The Kingdom of the Medes, where thieves are bought and sold like dwarves: the good thief's silvered tongue and hard bargain are considered as delightful as the features of any dwarf.

The City of Thessalonica, where carcass is less a thing and more a manner of living.

The Mountains of Macedonia, where dwarves hide in fissures and in lakes and make compacts with the devil to know the arts of murder: these flowers – so spindly and yellow – are in Macedonian dwarves' hands as poisonous as an arquebus is loud, and these glass coins – in the hands of the dwarf-monger – only shatter and cause lacerations that never heal.

The Duchy of Carniola, where dwarves are neither respected nor reviled, for, though the Carniolans grow to normal heights, they are at heart dwarves, timid and strange, and they will neither purchase your goods from you nor provide you with fresh ones for sale in other lands.

The hospitals for the sick, where you will find concerns more pressing than dwarves.

The houses of relatives, though soon your relatives will renounce their ties to you.

Whatever place it is that you call home, though soon there will be no such place.

Famous Dwarf-Mongers of the Past:

Charles Sanders, whose name should never be far from your lips because he is the dwarf-monger's hero and paragon: he smuggled sixteen dwarves from Parthia through Smyrna to the counting-houses of the Charente, and he ducked under lances and jumped over axes, and he could tell the wholesome hell of a dreg from the perversion of poisoned wine.

Hermann Braudel, the master of caves, who knew like his veins the subterranean connections of the world, who could find his way from Carniola to Bavaria without the aid of matches or lit lime, whose dwarves always surfaced in a valley a day before your cart arrived there, who always filled his purse a little heavier than you could ever hope your purse might be filled.

Wouter Vandenberg, the worst of the dwarf-mongers, who rarely occasioned a sale and who could not find it within himself to drown the less-than-salable members of his cargo; some of his dwarves traveled with him for years before he sold them, and one of them, a kneeless female of the first rate, rode in his cart until he died: she delivered his eulogy before she sold herself – it took a day for her to do what he couldn't accomplish in two decades – as tribute to him.

Elisabetta Lukashenko, daughter of two dwarves rendered miraculously whole by her savior: she hated her dwarf-family and her dwarf-rector and her dwarf-king for looking up at her so jealously, for making her feel shame for possessing power that she might never have chosen to exercise— and though she exercised her power, and though she could capture a dwarf and make a sale as well as any dwarf-monger, she was not dwarf and was not woman either, and because of this, all she could feel was hatred, and

she was impoverished, left with her huge cargoes and heavy purses but with nothing, only hatred, of dwarves, of mankind, of herself.

Cav Randall, no great salesman but a master of the capture: he could sense dwarves' secret hammocks from the ground beneath their trees, and he could spy the disguises that desert dwarves wear when they try to evade the eyes of wandering dwarf-mongers, and he could, without doubt, believe that even the most outlandish journeys would yield cargo; a snow-slicked trek into the wilds of the steppe managed to intercept a party of dwarves fleeing their Parthian captivity, and a Thessalonican dream inspired a sea voyage whose fabulous results are still unrevealed, only because Cav Randall has not yet returned to Europe with what is certain to be a miracle of a cart's-worth.

Ajaccio Muller, who amputated his own legs and sold himself as a dwarf, who, when discovered as less-than-dwarf, escaped on his calloused hands and sold himself into some new country; when scooped up into a wheelchair by a kind woman, he bawled and screamed like a child, and when accepted into dwarfly company under the roof of some particularly-rich dominion-master, he was incomparably happy.

On Capturing Dwarves:

The dullest of dwarf-mongers will tell you that the art of the capture is in fact two arts. First, they say, a dwarf-monger might seek those places where it is certain dwarves congregate; dwarves come to Macedonia by choice, they come to Parthia against their will, so on the borders of these countries a dwarf-monger might wait for an opportunity to stage his kidnap. Second, they say, a dwarf-monger might seek those places where no dwarf has ever been known to travel; in these great wildernesses, solitary dwarves take

shelter from the world, and, there, too, it is possible for a dwarf-monger to lay traps and fatten his cargo. The choice a dwarf-monger makes in his approach to the capture reveals everything about him, dullards claim, so choose wisely.

If you choose to wait in borderlands, know that other dwarf-mongers will have decided likewise, and it is in this that the capture is complicated. Lying between your snare's noose and a dwarf's fat stunted thighs is a host of dwarf-mongers, and these men, too, know how to patch the tears in their nets and grind soporific powders into the nicks in their arrowheads. When your donkeys come to the berm of a highway cluttered with the carts of other dwarf-mongers, you will need to know how to advance yourself through ranks, until you have your chance to paint your face fuchsia and lilac and hide with your lasso in roadside wildflowers. To succeed when you find yourself at the gates of Macedonia or Parthia, then, is to know first how to trick a man, or to send him running, or to kill him. You will think this task a simple one. After all, making oneself the better of men is hardly difficult, and you will have at your disposal – after making a sale or two – skills enough: seduction, bribery, yearlong-murder-by-incremental-poison, shame, heartbreak. But this task is not a simple one, because you will need to teach yourself to resist your fellows' menaces. So when a man offers to unknot your boots after a blister-worthy roadside day, shy away, and when a woman makes a show of grinning with her half-toothed mouth so that you are certain just how much she might do with her tongue, avert your eyes. Be mindful of everything you eat, and clutch your stores of food to yourself when you sleep, and if you sleep heavily sleep with them lashed to your stomach underneath your undershirt. If another dwarf-monger succumbs and dies after you've schemed on him one of your schemes, never show an ounce of glee. Make from yourself

the sort of thing that shuffles forward, that does nothing else, and soon you will be whipping your donkeys with more fervor than ever before, a new cart's-worth rattling behind: only then should you attempt to recover some sense of what it meant to be happy, or to be afraid, and though these sensations will speak to you in foreign tongues you will understand enough of them that you will prod yourself further towards new sales.

If you choose to roam through wilderness, you face a different set of challenges. You will wander across landscapes more awful than any you have known, and your boredom will dredge spare hours from long days as though you were pulling carcasses from a graveyard with a plow, and you will run out of whiskey and force yourself to face the local aquavit, the local sturmwasser, and your donkeys will break their legs and you will snap their necks and leave their bodies behind, forage for buzzards, now, and you will pull your cart behind you, and you will sweat, and you will cry after so much exertion and so much exhaustion. Do not mistake this labor for virtue. When you are lucky enough to chance across a colony of dwarves, the matter of the capture is not so simple as it might be in the confines of a highway. In wilderness, your quarry will flee if you attempt to capture it by force, so you must turn to stealth, and before you can steal in and snatch a dwarf from its own home, its own tent, you will have to spend long terrible weeks looking on. During these weeks you will catch the too-small scent of wilderness meals made for tiny mouths, sparrows halved and hares quartered, and you will overhear the low moaned squeak of dwarf prayer, a sound which almost belongs in such places as those, where churchbells are cracked and muezzins are mutes. After so many weeks, your body will urge you to quiet, to stillness. You must resist this. You must sand the rot from the wood of your cart and steal through bushes and lay your traps and lock your

cargo in your cart and begin your trek again. Life in the wilderness is a life of dregs. Remember the taste of wine.

If you choose to, face the society of the roadside or the solitude of the empty stretch. But recognize, at least, the idiocy of the dullard dwarf-mongers who would claim that these are your only options. Dwarves are not merely creatures of Macedonia, of Parthia, of wilderness. Every year, every day, dwarves are born in the towns and in the cities that you and I pass through, in Rotterdam, in Dubrovnik, in Oporto. Though dwarves' parents will not wish to admit their sin, and though most of these monstrous infants are drowned on shorelines and in springs and in the sewage-filled pipes that cut through the inhabited places of the world, sometimes you will hear rumors of limbless things and of things that could be stuffed into a sparrow otherwise ready for the spit. Recognize now that your weapons are no longer nooses, poisons, spare axels for broken carts. Your weapons now are pledges and lies. Pledge to take a youngster away to a monastic paradise in Lourdes, or lie about a barren wife desperate for anything that fits in armspan. You will be surprised, because some the parents of your dwarves will not merely look you in the eyes and suggest to you a price. Some of them will say no. They will pass their infants back – fathers to sisters, sisters to aunts, aunts to grandmothers, dwarflike themselves – and these grandmothers will shake their heads and they too will say the word, as if, by promising their savior that they might keep the child, their savior might make their child whole. When parents or grandparents do this, warn them. Warn them about dwarf-mongers, about women of the woods, about the horrors of lives lived in the depths. Repeat, and repeat, and repeat. They will hear your words, eventually.

When you leave, abandon your cart. Hold your cargo in your lap and ride away on a single donkey and act as though your life were starting anew.

On the Care and Upkeep of Dwarves:

Your profession makes few demands of you. Keep your dwarves alive. Keep them bizarre.

This is easy. If you understand your dwarves' deformities, you will know to feed the fattest of them too much and the skinniest too little, and this economy of food will let you balance your accounts, too. If one of your dwarves is red of complexion, feed him beetroot and blood pudding, and if another is weak of bone, feed her lemon-rind and vinegar and celery and everything else that thins the blood and shrinks the skeleton. If one of your dwarves talks too much, swell his tongue with iris-root until he only babbles, and if one of your dwarves talks too little, stud her porridge with burs and pebbles so she aches and peeps and squeaks.

This is difficult, too. Maybe, in winter, you will decide to spare the fairest-skinned of your dwarves from the flearidden blankets you buy from the men and women who pick through the refuse left outside by hospitals, but you will find that dwarves have different ways of sorting themselves into hierarchies than you do. Some of your dwarves will be content with what you give them – they will cough and scratch at itches and try to ignore the hint of death that accompanies their warmth – but some will not. The soft stretch of weaving you dig from your own luggage will wrap itself around the shoulders of the three-foot tyrant who barks and bares his teeth, while the threadbare piece of half-mange you find abandoned in a hedgerow will not have the strength even to cling to the

hair of your favorite little bird. Maybe, in summer, you will come to the braided edges of an oxbowed river and the desire to see your dwarves wash from themselves the collected dirt of a long journey over a dusty road will overwhelm you, but a glance backwards will remind you of the talents of your cargo: one is so short as to escape notice among reeds, another is fish-finned and gape-mouthed and could hold his breath until he paddled out into the cold, a third is just silver-tongued enough to convince you of the need for a bath, anyhow.

But in spring and fall, your donkeys and your dwarves will neither shiver nor pant, and the beetroot and the celery will be fresh enough that they will be welcomed without complaint by dwarves and donkeys both, and at night no one's sleep will be troubled by the light of fireflies or by light reflected from snow. You will spend whole weeks on the road during which you go unmolested by dwarfly complaint, and you will complete your sales more easily than you had during the other times of the year, and sometimes both you and your dwarves will catch sight of something – two sparrows making a phantom nest from the creeping threads of a bank of April fog, the first bright lamp of an autumn aspen speaking truth to a world desperate for the death that comes with winter – and you and your dwarves will feel in all of your throats the clutch of wonder, a simple and transitory sort of mastery that does no one any harm. Do not worry too much during these instants of communion. They are products of chance. The world is not made of them.

On Death at the Hands of Dwarves:

The moment comes when your dwarves finally gnaw through the bars of your

cart, or when you drink bad dregs and pass out in the mud of a riverbank while your dwarves are still free and bathing, or when some sanctimonious muleteer – praising the goodness of his Savior when his cart passes yours on a narrow mountain road – slips a dagger into the hands of one of your dwarves. Do not worry. You know that you invited your death at the moment you captured your first dwarf, in the instant when you took up the saw you used to cut the first bars of your cart. You have spent enough time with your dwarves, too, to know just how they will murder you. You have seen the glint in this one’s eyes – the one whose toes are as long as her fingers – that tells you she plans to put a nail through your tongue, and you have seen the scabs crusting the lengths of that one’s arms – the one who spends empty hours sharpening his fingernails against his fellow captives’ calluses – that foretell for you a bloody future. Surrender yourself to your dwarves’ inevitabilities.

Ignore the tedium of your murder. Do not be surprised when you see a swarm of dwarves moving across the ground toward you. Do not take fright when twelve or fourteen or twenty hands pull you groundwards, or when the one nimble-fingered dwarf in your cargo twines you up with a speed that would impress even a sailor. Do not spend time contemplating the method of your death: the difference between blade’s edge and bludgeon’s weight is hardly important now. Focus instead on something else. As the darkness begins to shatter everything you still recognize as you, look at your dwarves’ joy-struck faces, and listen to their laughter. Join them in their mirth. This is the only moment of pinnacle they will ever experience, and, as you succumb to carcass, unbuckle your mind from your body and cast yourself out. Even as you fall down, rise up, and let your dwarves carry you up, and hope for one last time that up is better than down.

IN THE WALRUS COLONY

I, Methuselah, incongruous emperor of walrus-kind, face exile at the hands of my own people. Hundreds of years have I ruled: king of kings, *caput mundi* of the Pribilof Islands. Hundreds of years have I guarded and shepherded my herds, spending every spring among calving cows and rutting bulls, spending every autumn among pups, waiting for first snowfall and the celebration of the holiday we know as Walrustide. I have migrated with my walruses on a floating palanquin of clamshell and kelp and built and unbuilt palaces of whalebone and sedge. In lean years I have picked seeds from the gullets of murrelets and auks, and in fat years I have swum among squid. And still I face exile.

My rival, whom I term Ear-Flaps, has made known his desire to usurp my palanquin and braid his whiskers with abalone and pearl. He is a walrus, I am a man, and though I have reigned these thousand years and been ever faithful to my herds, Ear-Flaps challenges me. He huffs and boasts at the edge of the surf and marches with his cohorts up and down the beach. Barking and strutting, he carves his mark in the sand with tusks and flippers. While other walruses dig for clams at low tide, Ear-Flaps squats like a boulder at the edge of the water, braying in the twilight, and I know what he means for me, and I know that one day he will drive me from my kingdom into sunrise and tundra.

The sting of mutiny could not be sharper. Ear-Flaps is my descendant.

At the dawn of my kingship, I was not the man I am now. My beard still came in thick and black. My back was unbent, my legs were unbowed; when playing with pups, I hoisted them up and tossed them into the surf, something that Ear-Flaps, strongest of walruses, will never do. My fingernails grew in clear and lustrous, and I sewed myself sealskin pants and beaverhide coats. Every summer morning, I swam to Sea Cow Rock, the one broken tooth of a seamount that cracks the line of the horizon looking west from our warm-weather grounds; every summer afternoon, I scaled the bluffs fronting my bay and stared down at my terrible kingdom, vastest in the north. From those heights, which no walrus had ever attained, I saw that the men I once knew would cower before me if they understood that I commanded all this. A thousand walruses lounging on sand, a thousand tons of muscle and blubber, a sweep of gravelly shore stretching a dozen leagues past halibut grounds and oyster beds whose bounty even I could hardly believe. I stared at this, and I marveled. My hands were strong and calloused and still hairy.

One spring during that far-distant era of my reign, a pup was calved under an aurora shaped like a scallop shell and her bright eyes took me in and her incipient whiskers were the softest I'd ever felt and I fell in love. Her name was Gray-Eyes and I raised her by my own hand, feeding her harp seal milk from a canteen made of sea cow leather. I let her sleep on a bed of kelp in my little palace, or we curled together among the walruses of my herd, my shoulders pressed against the strong-spined curve of a young calf's back, Gray-Eyes's tiny body wedged beneath the yellow tusks of an old bull. Gray-Eyes frolicked in the bay and brought me mussel shells and sandpiper feathers for my palanquin, and at night she folded her tiny, red, wrinkled body close to mine, and

Lord how her heat reminded me of my dead wife Ruth when I closed my eyes to sleep. Sometimes, nights when we slept away from the herd, Gray-Eyes wriggled out, tying the fronds of my kelp bed into knots. I would wake up in my little redoubt and measure the slow pulse of the morning, already anxious to begin my search for her.

Gray-Eyes spent her time dozing at the edge of the water among magisterial cows, pink bodies carved like monuments from the pale quarry of the sea, or she loafed among the lazy piles of sea-foam that caught between two great boulders that stood watch onshore near a south-facing curve of my bay. Sometimes I led her back into my fold: she hauled herself behind me, bellowing energetically when we happened onto her mother. Sometimes, though, we spent long afternoons together, there between those huge rocks. I lay on my back and stared up at the sky, held in granite embrace, looking at nothing but the clear light of the arctic sun, the view interrupted only by the occasional dive of a murrelet into the sea beyond. Gray-Eyes danced along the waterline, trying to catch blue crabs, barking whenever some other walrus came near. Sometimes, she rested her head on my chest. When the wind caught the tip of my beard, she jumped up and put her weight on her front flippers and regarded the twitching thing as if it were something living, and she pounced on it like it was a crab she could crush between her jaws. Then, after chewing a while, she settled back down into the tired bliss of summer haze.

Came a moment when Gray-Eyes flowered like an incandescent sea lily and I lit into her even though it had begun to snow and the pups all around us celebrated Walrustide and the death of the old year. The demure way she held her head close to her body when kin was present, the soft folds of pink skin that obscured her eyes, the way she traced seaweed patterns in the sand with her flippers, the way she piled clamshells

that washed up onshore on top of one another... I could not imagine life without her. I wanted to talk to her. I wanted to keep her longer than the forty summers that nature would grant us. So I lit into her and hoped against hope that she would bear me a child.

Later, when her cheeks became flushed and her teats grew heavier, my pulse raced, and I climbed upwards and spent a day alone, perched on the edge of the sharp-fronted bluffs, almost unable to breathe. There, the evening of that day, summer ended. The thunderhead cavalry of a storm raced towards me in the thin twilight, and I was lucky enough to be able to clamber down before I found myself stranded. I could not see the moon through the clouds but I knew that it was full; the tide rushed in and swallowed the boulders I shared with Gray-Eyes. The walruses were out, surfacing between crashing waves, fishing for oysters uprooted by wind and water. I crouched under my palace's sagging roof and listened to the barking of the thunder. Usually, I passed storms like that one dreaming happily of what I might find when the tides shrunk back into the sea and the shore reclaimed its indulgent expanse: canvas and weathered wood, whalebone and sea glass the color of milk. That night, I thought only of Gray-Eyes, somewhere in the water, smashed by wave after wave, yelping plaintively like an abandoned pup, clinging to the base of Sea Cow Rock, stones torn from their moorings and hurled downwards by the gale.

The storm ended, and Gray-Eyes hauled out onshore a day later as fat and full of oyster as any other walrus. I sat shirtless on the beach, untangling a fishing net that I had found wrapped around the broken willow-wood hull of an Inuit's *umiak*, and I saw her. All around me, ruins of humanity were strewn across the sand, but the sun shone warmly and walruses chased each other along the beach, oblivious to the things the storm had

brought us. Gray-Eyes appeared and plowed her way across the shore towards me, and when she reached me, I greeted her with fresh clams I'd dug that morning. She whistled and pawed at the gravelly sand with one of her flippers. I laid the net aside and turned and leaned against her, the night-weary muscles of my back pressing into her still-damp skin, and we lounged too long in the early autumn sunlight. We knew the weather couldn't last. My eyes settled on the shape of a barrel that had burst somewhere out at sea; bound together at one end by a rusted iron hoop, its struts were splayed upwards like the tentacles of a stiff jellyfish. A cloud stretched itself across the sky, following its stormy kin eastwards.

For six months I waited, and another six; I waited through migration southwards and migration northwards again, and all my thoughts came running back to Gray-Eyes's child and the possibility that I could claim another son to my name. I cut my beard and measured the seasons by its growth, but, beardless, Gray-Eyes looked at me as if I were some foreign creature, a harp seal with legs instead of flippers, a murrelet grown over-tall in the inky Arctic night. Whenever she saw me, she whistled low, accusatory whistles, spun around on her flippers, and slinked away. From a distance, I watched Gray-Eyes wallow in the frigid surf. Night slipped into night, the fragile moonlight struggling to illuminate our rocky winter turf, and Gray-Eyes grew larger and larger until hers seemed equal to two walruses' girth. My beard grew, too; before I roused myself to notice, it was the length of two fists, of five scallops stacked end-on-end. Daylight's rising tide lapped at winter's black shoreline, and I harnessed two bulls and mounted my palanquin. Our sojourn towards the Pribilofs caught the currents and we arrived in two weeks.

One night just past the equinox, Gray-Eyes bellowed mournfully and I knew. The

sun had set and wet snow was falling. The murrelets had not yet returned, and though a few gulls screeched hopelessly, perched somewhere in the cliffs behind us, I paid them no mind. Gray-Eyes's sound was dampened by the snowstorm, and I rolled over to face her. I thought of her lethargic girth, her stomach distended by our soon-coming kin, her whiskers toughened by a year's worth of emphatic fishing. I pressed myself into the red wrinkles of her back for warmth, but I could not hide my face, and the snow settled into my hair, piled along the length of my beard, caught itself against my eyebrows. I pursed my lips and tried to keep myself from shuddering. Spring had come, but everything outside Gray-Eyes and me howled *winter*: ice on the surface of tide pools and lacy hoarfrost woven through mussel shoals exposed by low tides. The cold shocked my body into sleep, and I awoke to find my son wedged between us, a perfect walrus.

In those early years of my dominion, I did not know the ways of walrus-kind; I did not know the secrets that they kept from me, the whispered whistles and hushed brays they exchanged deep under the surface of water so cold I could barely swim a stroke through it. I saw only the dutiful, unflinching strength of walruses, and when I saw my son, Slump-Shoulder, I convinced myself that my fevered expectations of familial joy had been realized. Summer was coming. The days lengthened like long braids of matted seaweed untangled by warmwater currents. There was work to be done: hunting the sea cows that lounged in the shallows, skinning them and tanning their hides, smoking their meat, harvesting kelp and sea lettuce for drying... I busied myself at these tasks, and I talked to my son. I had not forgotten how to talk, I told myself, so I talked to him while I sharpened hand-axes and while I wove nets from the stems of long grasses that sprouted from cracks in the cliffs and while I collected murrelet eggs from the low-slung nests I

could reach. Slump-Shoulder followed me everywhere, and as he grew his skin became paler and paler, and his eyes softened into a deep brown, like mine. He was mine, I told myself, even though Gray-Eyes consorted with long-tusked bulls and never again dallied with me between our two great boulders. Slump-Shoulder was the kin I had waited for and though he was a walrus and I was a man, he was everything I hoped a man of mine would be.

Slump-Shoulder grew large enough to venture out with bulls, and one winter he set out to sea and did not return. The loss was not one I felt immediately. Every day walruses surged up onto the beach, every day walruses departed, and I did not know that Slump-Shoulder was gone from me until a season had passed. The weight of my expectations for his return had sustained me when I missed him most, but when I understood he was not returning, I did not know how to respond. I had spent months away from him already, building snares and crab traps, sharpening old hooks and new needles. Though I knew I should feel, I did not. I went on, watching over calving cows, standing back when bulls charged and clashed during rutting season. Then, a hot day three seasons later Slump-Shoulder hauled his pale body out of the sea, and what was fatherly in me reawakened. When I spied him pushing himself forward with his rear flippers, not dragging with his forelimbs, favoring left shoulder over right when those front limbs found occasion to move, I knew instantly that he was mine: he still carried his head just below the hump of his back, his tusks were still a foot and a half too short for his body. I could not refrain from running to him at the edge of the surf, bellowing in language the only words that came to me, sure that he would remember some of them. When I thought of gazing into his eyes, brown and manly, I cried out louder and ran

faster, the soles of my feet torn by loose clamshells mixed with the gravel of the beach. I reached him and looked up, and he was exactly the walrus I remembered. But he lumbered past me as if he had never seen me. I have watched generations of walruses haul out year after year, and every season they loaf together onshore and go squid-hunting in the same hunting parties; they know each other; they remember each other's greetings. I could not understand why Slump-Shoulder would ignore me, as if I were nothing more than a boulder or a murrelet; I could not invent any reason for his seasons-long absence from my summer court in the Pribilofs, where clams and mussels jump from water to jaw, where fur seals and sea lions have never shown their angry snouts, where Gray-Eyes, loveliest of walruses, made her home.

Slump-Shoulder followed the herd during winter migration, and I hoped that he would recognize me in those southerly grounds. I gave up hunting beaver and river otters so that I could catch him tidepool abalone I should have saved for myself. He rejected everything I offered him. I watched him haul out on beaches farther and father distant, and, even though I sometimes forgot him for days, I stopped work on my palanquin, and my nets fell into tatters. Spring came faster than I knew it could; we ventured north again. Summer passed me, and Walrustide, and another winter, and another summer... Slump-Shoulder lingered, or he disappeared for months before returning, and though I worked at repairing my nets and sewing patches onto old coats and tattered pants, carelessness left me with nothing more than long strings of knotted twine and bent needles. I tried to forget about Slump-Shoulder and Gray-Eyes, but I could not. Even after Gray-Eyes died, even as Slump-Shoulder grew old, the sight of a boulder, the taste of blue crab or murrelet egg, the sound of my own voice – these things brought thoughts

of my walruses to my mind, and years spent in memory summoned thoughts of things even deeper buried, things I could not but help remember when I felt the coarseness of my beard gripped in my fists, when I tasted the burnt sweetness of old honeycomb from abandoned shorefront hives.

Once, on the shores of a different sea, where the sun beat brightly eight days of ten and where no wave splashed higher than my knees, where even the scrawniest child floated like a leaf and where the woodchat shrikes sang shrilly every month of the year, I knew a life with my wife, Ruth. Our little stone house was three rooms and a garden, and the shrikes in the date palms measured our years with their arrhythmic chatter. Ruth bore me two sons, and between them they bore us seven grandsons. We planted and replanted our orchards, in red plum trees then black pear. Ruth was a weaver. The sound of her loom was the rushed rasp of palm fronds blown in a sandstorm, and twice a year she took her cloth to market, but, after years, the prices she fetched fell, and before long, Ruth passed her days at the loom only because habit told her to. I watched Ruth's plum-red hair fade into granite gray and salt white, and her hands grew wrinkles like saplings grow rough bark. Her lips lost their color, her fingernails yellowed, and her skin grew thin and pink. The sinews of her fingers tightened and she stopped running her loom, though still she sat at it for long hours, working the treadles with her feet. Her knees began to ache, so stopped digging for clams on wet winter mornings. She stopped gardening, even in our little kitchen garden; she stopped making the little gauze tents she said protected the herbs from spiders and slugs. Soon after, she stopped sleeping, filling night's long silences with grunts of pain she tried her best to muffle. Or so I thought: one day I found her dozing on the shore, the wind moving towards the sea from the orchard behind us,

gathering just enough force to tug a few loose strands of her hair out of the bun she kept tied behind her. I bent down and touched her cheek to smooth the stray hairs away from her face, but when my fingers met her skin I knew that her warmth was nothing more than sun's warmth. Her eyes, colored as they always had been, smoky blue, were still open. I shaded myself with one hand, and with the other, I pressed her eyelids back downwards. I looked at her again and pretended that she was only sleeping: Ruth's death had written me a list of tasks that needed attention, and I could not pay heed to them if I descended into mourning too soon. I spent half the afternoon hollowing a little space for her among our trees.

I was still young. The years hadn't caught themselves on the surface of my skin like they had for Ruth, and my beard grew thicker with every passing season. My hands were still fresh enough to spend days on end making rope from the hemp we bought at market. I went through Ruth's belongings, and in her weaving room I found seven unsold reams of cotton fabric she had left underneath her loom. I thought to myself: this must be portent. These seven reams must go to clothe our seven grandsons. I borrowed a neighbor's cart and set out – south through grimy villages choked with pine-smoke, then east across dirt-smothered plains. The little city where my grandsons lived lay just beyond. Two of them worked wood and built stables, their fingernails caked with pitchy sawdust, and I left their cloth sitting among caulk-stained tools. Another two traded spices and perfume oils, and though they had peacocks and housekeepers, their homes were foul with the sour scent of bird droppings and old wine. Their cloth I left in wooden chests, edges unsanded, silver buckles tarnished. The last three of my progeny had no occupation. They lived with my second son in a lean-to at the bottom of a dry

riverbed that, upstream, ran its empty course past slaughterhouses and smelting sheds, and when I arrived the sun beat so hard that sweat poured into my eyes like water from some foul rainstorm would. My son's sons were barely men at all; a day after I gave them Ruth's cloth, it was already too filthy to see any profit; it could not be resold or sewed into garments. As soon as I could find reason to, I fled up the gulch towards city proper. Then, I turned my steps seaward and though I traveled with all impetus to speed, the journey was long and felt longer. I was alone.

I arrived home. Blowing sand had clogged the paths of our orchard and half the kitchen garden had succumbed to dune. The shrikes had gone; they were feasting on dates in some other orchard. A patch of desiccated lilies, still white and yellow but shot through with brown, rustled aimlessly next to our old oakwood door. I hesitated, hand at handle. I was not meant for confrontations like this. I stepped away and leaned back against the wall of Ruth's weaving room. My shoulders rested on the sill of a window long boarded-over, and I faced the sea. The long, salt-white expanse of beach between me and it shimmered dull and ugly in the mid-afternoon heat. The day was empty, blanked by sand and calm air. My eyes drifted shut and I stood that way a long time, unwilling to gaze at what surrounded me. There had to be the possibility that things could be begun again. There had to be the possibility that what was meant for me was not this but something different, something rare and beautiful, a lark caught in a just-whitewashed room. It was not here, it could not be built; I set out the next day, and I marched and scrambled and paddled until the islands that I would come to know as the Pribilofs appeared on the horizon. A black-red aurora the color of plum tree bark painted itself across the sky and far away I heard the bellows of walruses, plaintive and innocent,

I thought to myself, and beautiful as shrikesong.

I spied a shrike, once, here in the Pribilofs, even though the winds are cold and do not blow from west or south. It landed on a sharp little rock during the epoch of my despair. Slump-Shoulder had died that year, killed by some bull or other during mating season, but Walrustide had not yet come and we were still in summer grounds. My kingdom had been wrecked on Gray-Eyes's boulders and Slump-Shoulder's ill-fortuned return, and for a generation I had not done more than scramble to catch crabs and eat them, uncooked. My subjects must have pitied me; to them, I looked like a walrus corpse, rotten and deflated. The shrike landed and I knew it first by its song: the melodic chaos of rain on still water. It roused me enough to crane my neck, and there, on the beachhead, I saw six Inuits scrambling out of their *umiaks*. I struggled to stand, but I fell backwards and sprawled again on the beach like a great moon-colored jellyfish washed ashore at high tide and abandoned by low. I heard the men moving closer, searching out weak walruses to spear and roast, and even though the walruses around me had recognized danger and were squealing and dashing for seawater, all that was in my ears was the sound of birdsong and Inuit speech. I could not understand them and I never hope to: their language is coarse and unmusical, and they are a foul and dirty race, but their appearance that day forced me out of thought of sons and grandsons, men and walruses. I mustered the strength I had had when Ruth carded my beard with her carding brushes and braided it with her drop-spindle, when Gray-Eyes launched clam shells at me with her flippers, but those things too passed from my mind: again, I tried to stand, and I was on my feet and the wind was in my face. I stared the Inuits in the eyes and they peered at me, and what a terrible sight they saw, my beard filthy with crabshell and sand,

hair tangled like sedge-grass after autumn wind, and though I was hideous I remembered what awe was, and I started at the Inuits and raised my arms and howled wordlessly and they turned back to their *umiaks*, and ran, desperate, leaping over those walruses that had not yet reached water, foxskin caps swept off their heads by the breeze, left behind on the beach, among sea-foam and driftwood. One of the hats, tumbling cliffward, scared off my shrike. I looked up to find it and saw a sky mountainous with cloud, and I smiled a vicious smile I remember to this day. I could make myself lord again.

I shaved my tangled beard and cut my knotted locks and spun my hair into twine. I wove new nets to catch the halibut and fry that lazed in shoreside currents. I clothed myself again, first in birch bark harvested from stunted cliff-top trees, then in otter skin and sea cow leather. I rebuilt my palanquin from driftwood and seaweed and reassumed my position at the head of the migration, pointing it towards new grounds, not to the forested shores I had known before but to the smoking richness of volcanoes that rose from the southwestern ocean. In winter and summer, from whale ribs and walrus tusks, I carved spears and axes. I terrified walrus and murrelet alike, and for a time my world was mine and no one else's. Inuit would paddle their *umiaks* past my bays shouting prayers and incantations, and walruses cowered and pointed their whiskers sandwards for fear of me. I contented myself with this. When Slump-Shoulder's descendants took to the beach in mating season, I never noticed. I forgot the taste of dates.

I had reawakened. All that mattered to me was dominion. During every season, I pressed passage through the ranks of my crowded herd and challenged even the greatest bulls. I would shove a shoulder between a bull's tusks and bring it up under his chin, and I would grab the back of his head with my free hand and look him in his black, empty

eyes, his body thrashing against the walruses clustered behind him. I proved my mastery of sand and sea. When walruses conspired against me, when factions of three or four charged into the fold of bay I reserved for my harem, I took my spears and split those beasts through blubber and bone, and I hung their skins to bleach in summer sunlight or to fester in the steam of volcanic winter nights. I cosseted my harem, saving scallops and mussels for the most beautiful cows, sending the others to hunt when the moon was fullest and luminous schools of squid tied their tentacles together in the waters of the bay. I extracted such bounty from the sea that I did not need to catch crabs or claw in the dirt for murrelet eggs. Seasons passed. The cliffs crumbled behind me.

For years, walruses trembled when I walked among them, and before long I no longer had need to press myself against them, to grind their whiskers against my feet in sign of submission to me. But I awoke one day and found that my arms did not have the strength to force a spear through walrus-skin. I could no longer reach Sea Cow Rock when I set into the edge of the sea. The richest beds of oysters and clams seemed to creep further and further from shore, though I knew that they were not moving. My harem dissolved in a fit of hunger, cows too scrawny to wait for me to search through tide pools to find mussels and crabs. Huge walruses reared up and stole my cows from me. The most beautiful walruses born in generations slunk away with progeny of Slump-Shoulder's, and I could not stop them. Around me, walruses were whelped and raised, were driven off and killed; Ear-Flaps was born, and before I knew to pay him any mind, he had surged through the hierarchy of my kingdom like a great wave in a calm sea. He grew larger and larger, he used his tusks to carve pieces of my territory away from me, and, now, I no longer recognize the coves and inlets that he has made his. Strange

walruses, bulls and cows I have never seen, haul out there, barking in angry gutturals, sounds I have not before heard.

The only things I know are things that no longer exist. I look at Ear-Flaps, bellowing, and I do not understand, and I see that I am old. Though I have witnessed oldness elsewhere, I am not old like others are. I am old and alone, without children, grandchildren far gone. Any opportunities to perpetuate my name past death have vanished, and all I can do is climb to the headlands of my island and cry out and try to redeem my inheritance, lost to sea and sky. My numbered days ended long ago and there has been no one to number them since.

MONARCHS IN LOVE

But they were sullen, these monarchs in love, and they were sullen because they knew that they were not people in the way that others were people. Their works were not the products of their bodies, and their bodies were not the products of their intellects. They did not move through the world. Instead, the world moved through them, and its demands – profits needed taxing, and land needed conquering – forced them into existence. The world needed ink on decrees, and the ink on decrees needed pens to produce it, and pens needed hands to hold them. These hands were monarchs' hands, and monarchs' hands came attached to monarchs' intellects, though these intellects met no worldly demand and were merely incidental to other needs. When monarchs finished the daily work of signing, they fell into sullenness, and they stared through windows or into mirrors. They paced across their parquet floors and pulled splinters from wood with the soles of their shoes, and they sighed. Somewhere, they had beloveds. These beloveds found themselves in lands whose languages and tax structures were different from the ones they'd known in their parents' monarchies, and they were sullen themselves. Still, monarchs in love supposed that they might find their beloveds, might say hello.

A first errand: complete it during boyhood: meet your beloved, the second daughter of a monarch of some far-distant monarchy, when she disembarks in your country: as you travel to fetch her, ride pierwards and survey a landscape and imagine taxes, and rehearse a word of her language chosen at random from a book compiled by one of her monarchy's astronomers or saints or aphorism-mongers: fetch the daughter, and say the word: the word – would it mean *finished* in your language, or *town*, or *cauterize*? – will elicit something that you must recognize as a smile: fix this smile in your head, because it will take this monarch's daughter years enough to recognize your taxes when she sees them, and it will take her longer than that, even, to learn to smile in your language, in your monarchy, where tongues come in paler colors and eyeteeth come in sharper forms, where lips never tremble with sadness, only grimace in rage.

For whole days, for whole weeks, monarchs in love could not find their beloveds, could not say hello. Though they searched their palaces and their parks for their husbands, their wives, monarchs never chanced across the people whom they had supposed – in idler hours – were their intimates. Months passed, and monarchs finally recognized that their little hunts had taken them again and again along the same paths through their palaces, their parks: they left their offices and walked down hallways lined with the expensive mirrors that their fathers had installed, and they ducked through doorways painted their grandmothers' favorite colors, and they strolled through the greenhouses where their spinster aunts had crossed generations of daffodils for decade after decade, and they turned homewards just before crossing the lacquered oriental bridges bureaucrats had ordered built because they supposed them stylish, once.

Monarchs searched those places whose value they understood, but beloveds could not understand matters of worth, and monarchs realized too late that they might find their beloveds only by forcing themselves to search abandoned places, moneyless places. Now monarchs left their offices and walked down corridors whose ceilings crouched half-frescoed overhead, part sunset-with-clouds and part water-stained-plaster the spitfoam-white color of a beloved's native sky. They opened doors and looked through dusty rooms full of outdated furniture still inexplicably fashionable in a beloved's distant homeland. Only then did they see their beloveds at windowsills, staring out over trees imported from the south, trees that struggled in green-browns and green-grays against early October darkness. Just as monarchs opened their mouths, just as their vocal cords tensed in their throats, they felt their aides' hands clutching at their elbows. Monarchs listened when their aides whispered. There was more work to be done, aides said, so these monarchs who had brought themselves to the point of love could return to their offices and feel no need to be in love any longer. At this news, these men, these women always smiled.

A second errand: complete it during early womanhood, before rumor of fruitlessness can take seed in gossipers' heads and bear fruit on gossipers' lips: fetch a rose from your greenhouse and bring it to your beloved, the third son of a monarch of some far-distant monarchy, a son who was once a priest, who was defrocked on a father's orders when his monarchy needed a treaty signed with yours: mumble with your eyebrows, raising them and lowering them as though you knew what you meant, and mutter a word and point to one of your body parts and indicate the land you see around

you, your land: when your beloved reaches toward you to take the rose from you, take his hand and press the stem of the rose into his palm, and be quick, and do not worry about thorns, because time passes: lead him to the bedroom your father had decorated with metal furniture painted lead white: press your lips to his, and maybe in this you will insult him in his language even as you beseech him in yours, but press more firmly, and force him, because time passes, to provide for you an heir: give birth to an heir: monarchy must not pass.

When thunderheads carried summer heat into monarchies, when sweat and lightning forced a monarchy's bureaucrats and ambassadors to flee northwards or up the slopes of mountains, when these men took their work with them, monarchs in love could no longer avoid saying hello to their beloveds, and so they found their beloveds strolling through parched gardens as though the day's warmth were welcome. They said hello. Monarchs did not wait for their beloveds to respond, and instead they proposed outings: pleasure cruises, nights spent eating crab and drinking iced port, hunts. *Hunts*, beloveds repeated, and though monarchs could not know whether beloveds wished to participate in their old bloody rituals or whether they had merely murmured the word because it had been most accessible, most memorable for them, monarchs hurried off anyway and ordered their aides to make arrangements with the stable-boys and kennel-keepers and the silent men who staffed the bestiaries. A set of stormy days kept horses too frightened to risk riding, but a week later, two weeks later, monarchs and their beloveds dressed themselves and met in front of stables and inspected their reflections in the oil used to grease their guns. They mounted their horses and rode off into far parklands. Monarchs

looked at their beloveds and smiled, and beloveds looked at their monarchs and grimaced, and monarchs looked at their beloveds and grimaced, and beloveds looked at their monarchs and tried to speak, hazarded sentences whose nouns had grown ill-fitting suffixes, whose verbs were conjugated into past present and future at once, whose adjectives were hidden in crowds of articles affixed to nothing. Monarchs raised their guns and shot at underbrush pheasants and missed. Beloveds raised their guns and raised them higher and shot at hawks perched on the limbs of dead trees, and monarchs winced. By the time they opened their eyes again, beloveds had fetched their hawks from the ground, had snapped their necks if the birds still lived, had plucked long feathers and offered them to their husbands, their wives, had dropped the beasts and raised their guns again.

A third errand: complete it during that listless period of middle age when the prospect of completing anything seems illusory: an heir has turned six, and it is time to name her: though you will want to name her *Land and Taxes* because those are the most important things, pretend, for a moment, that an heir is important for reasons other than these two, that she deserves some name more than *Monarch*, more than *Land and Taxes*, and pretend that she is a person worthy on her own: send word to your beloved, and let her choose a name for the heir from among a group of names that are fancies on your mother's name: *Christine, Christiane, Christiana*: when your beloved returns word to you, retreat to your set of offices and sign a decree making this heir your heir, making this child your daughter, and do not worry what your beloved thinks about the fact that you have claimed this child for yourself: from her set of leisure-rooms she has already

dreamt that she has a *Land and Taxes* of her own, and she has already compromised, and she has already allowed you to choose a name from among some fancies on her mother's name: *Mari, Marie, Maria*: in shadows, at night, your daughter is your beloved's daughter, too, and though these daughters are different daughters, Christiane in offices, Mari in leisure-rooms, pretend that this dichotomy of soul is a gift: encourage your heir to treasure this gift by refusing to share it, by keeping the two parts of herself separate, just as you have kept the two parts of yourself separate: never mention that when you are not your father's heir-and-monarch you are your mother's Wilhelm, and trust that your beloved will never mention that when she is not her mother's second daughter she is her father's Anya: never tell your daughter that to be Henry and silent Wilhelm, Eleni and silent Anya, Christiane and silent Mari— never tell your daughter that to be these things is to know already what it means to be a monarch in love, in love with a sullen beloved, with a foreign beloved.

Months after beloveds picked the last bits of feather from beneath their fingernails and licked the last spots of blood from their knuckles, they found themselves staring through windows again, unable to understand the positions of the things they looked at in their monarchs' tax structures. Beloveds were desperate for this understanding. Without it, they could not transform any of the things that surrounded them into promise of money, and so they were left surrounded by the discolored lace of the local lacemakers, by the animal stink of tanneries miles away, by farms and orchards that produced grains and stonefruits that they could not recognize, even though they ought to be able to recognize them, now, decades distant from their fathers' amaranth, their mothers'

greengage trees. Whenever beloveds studied, whenever they finally understood that tanners who housed their operations in buildings made from stone were taxed at rates thirteen-sixteenths as high as tanners who housed their operations in buildings made from wood, monarchs signed decrees: now, because stone was scarce, because the wooded stretches of forestlands newly acquired in war needed clearing, tanners' taxes were matters of nineteen-sixteenths stone-over-wood, or of eight-sevenths stone-over-wood if tanners tanned sheep hide as well as steer and cow hide. So beloveds rarely left palaces, looked only at things whose value was incalculably low and never worth taxing, and though beloveds made for themselves lives populated by dwarves and entomologists' samples and old handkerchiefs, most of these things only served to bore them, and beloveds drifted in and out of sleep, and, and in their sleep, beloveds knew that dwarves and insects and handkerchiefs were not in fact things enough to make a life from, and during those moments early in days when the smell of downfeathers and distant coffee was comforting enough to allow beloveds to forget a world, beloveds wondered if they could feel beloved again, if they could ride pierwards and board boats and return to the monarchies they knew. When beloveds cried out for their monarchs, they never meant their husbands, their wives.

A fourth errand: complete it when your molars have been pulled, when you are left to labor at chewing with your eyeteeth only, when you can feel the pulse of migraine even before you open your eyes in the morning: your heir, your son has turned thirteen, and the time has come to find for him a beloved of his own, so call your secretaries and your ministers into your offices, and if your beloved comes at your call, too, do not worry

too much about him: unroll a map and point to a monarchy, here, and listen to a secretary explain a monarch's children's retardation, and point to a monarchy, there, and listen to a minister whisper about barrenness of issue, about rumor of pederasty, and point finally to a monarchy not too far distant from your own, and listen to your beloved cough and speak of an uncle married and in residence at a palace in that monarchy, an uncle who has written of that monarch's daughter with some esteem: decide, and call a secretary and instruct him to draft for you a letter in two languages, in your language and in a language another monarch might understand, even though that monarch's children are retards: pace across parquet while you wait for a reply: when it comes, do not bother to tell your heir that you have found for him a beloved because there is time enough to tell him during a ride pierwards, when you hand your heir a book composed in another language, when you explain to him that he is now – that he will be soon – an heir in love.

Monarchs in love suspected the worst of their beloveds. After months, after years, awareness settled over them. They saw that their beloveds kept around themselves the worst sorts of things, dwarves, insects, handkerchiefs. Monarchs wondered about these things while staring out through windows, while summing and totaling the taxes they earned from the things they saw, men harvesting hay, men breaking wild horses rounded up on northern plains, in southern deserts. When monarchs turned and paced across parquet, they pitied their beloveds, whose fathers' monarchies, mothers' monarchies must have been so poor that monarchs there taxed even dwarves whose fingernails grew in not as nails but as hair, even insects that gleamed dully, brass and tin, even handkerchiefs passed from nose to nose without washing. Monarchs in love envied

their beloveds, too, because their beloveds had found some little solace where they could now find none. Even though monarchs signed decrees and instated taxes and understood their lands, their mud, their parquets and windows, time passed. Now, when monarchs rode out into their lands, through their mud, they understood that they saw cottages and tanner's workshops and orchards *only* as taxes. Though they knew that a newly-thatched cottage and a tanner's workshop lately taken up production of camel leather and an orchard of pear trees grafted with crabapple branches all meant taxes, monarchs could not understand what meaning amaranth thatch and camel hide and crabapple blossom had, because these things were new to them, unlike the slate shingles and kid leather and cherries of their youth. Monarchs envied their heirs for their familiarity with such things, because, like time, worlds pass. The world that these monarchs had loved passed, and they were left with nothing, with pens and with blank paper and with ink but without words they could use to describe any of the things they saw. Monarchs retreated to old hallways, to the old familiar glass – windows and mirrors – and monarchs wondered what it was that still remained to them, and they lied to themselves. Love, they supposed, remained, because they were monarchs in love, and where were their beloveds, anyway?

A fifth errand: this errand is so simple that you can complete it from your bed, when you are very old: you know, you have always known, that this is the last of the things you must do for your monarchy: die: before you die, call for your heir, your daughter, and look into her eyes – and ignore the fact that you have never done this before, never, never – and promise her happiness, because soon she will be a monarch, and, more than that, she will be a monarch in love: next, call for your beloved, and if

your beloved has died, forget that fact for a second time or a sixth time or a tenth time:
look into the eyes of your beloved, now, and if your beloved has died, look into her eyes
anyway: in those eyes or not-eyes, see that your life and your beloved's life were the
same, made bitter by so much desire: look around again: you are dying, and you have
been taken by an understanding, and you must communicate it, now, because this
understanding has seized you, has seized all of you: pause: whisper to your heir, and tell
her to call for a pen and some paper, and see that she is leaning forward, failing to
comprehend, and whisper louder, now, strain your voice, and let her know, try to let her
know: you chose your foreign minister in a fit of ill-temper, and he must be fired, he must
be fired!

AIR, ELEGY

New England, 1922.

The old composer opened his eyes. On a table, he saw a bottle of Port wine, a spent match, a bit of staff paper, a dirty saucer, the pit of a plum now tied up in mold, a stack of newspapers. He knew what these things were, but he did not know what he was meant to do with them. He tried to focus. His hands wandered. In a pocket, the composer felt the shape of a fountain pen. When he took it from his coat, he saw that it was cased in purple soapstone or thistle bakelite or violet galalith. He couldn't have told the difference, but because he could touch the pen, because he was certain of its purpose, the composer reached for the staff paper and hoped that he could set himself to work.

An image of Valhalla took him by the collar. A heavenly chord briefly shook him. A hint of thrill caught him for the first time in months. With the pen he strained for treble clef, but his hand slipped, and he found only the bottom of the staff. He tried again. His elbow shuddered and his wrist trembled, and he wrote in a bass-clef A, a whole note, or what he could produce of one.

He imagined his dead wife's voice. *Oh, Oskar, Hilda said. Nothing will come of this.*

He drew something of an F anyway, a quarter note with a fermata that trailed six measures. He kept his hand moving. For an instant, he was convinced that when he looked again something *right* would greet him. A sequence of scales, reliable after so much rehearsal, or even a fragment of a scale— these would have satisfied him, but when he looked, all he saw were new stains on old paper.

His wife whispered in his ears, both of them at once. *Maybe you should sleep. Maybe you should speak a little into your phonograph recorder. Karl and Josepha will want to listen to your voice.*

He considered this. He couldn't quite fix the proposition in his mind. The pen felt heavy in his hand. When he looked down at the paper, he couldn't remember what he had intended to write there. Bracing himself against the edge of the table, he stood and shuffled. He found himself facing a window. Outside, a team of men was mixing asphalt in a slip of afternoon shade. Barrels of pitch drooled as the roadbuilders stirred them. The wind shifted and raised a noxious odor at the back of the composer's nose. He squinted and ran his tongue over his soft teeth. He saw that a crowd of schoolgirls who had snuck away from their classes also watched, too.

The men in the street were loading their asphalt into the cargo bed of a borrowed fire truck, and now one of them started the vehicle. A group ran alongside as the truck rumbled uphill. When it stopped, thirty yards along, half of the crew, grimacing, trying to stop their arms from shaking, lowered a barrel of pitch to the dust below. The other workmen unloaded tar-stained paddles from the truck. These men turned to the task of

dumping and spreading asphalt. Their work was something rhythmic, something sacred. The composer listened to the hot gasp of the tar as it hit the cold of the roadbed below. He listened to the laborers' yelling, stifled by distance. His mind was steadied by the safety of their ritual, and he began to suppose that he understood something about these gentlemen. They were Vermonters, they were fleeing the advent of winter in the mountains, scrapping for a few weeks' work somewhere warmer, and when they stood at the edge of their pool of heat, when the men reached into it, they were not merely paving a road, they were saving the asphalt's warmth. They were attempting to capture the aggregate sunlight and sweat of an entire summer, because they knew that, even though they were far from home, in some way they were already facing mountain snowdrifts, their sheep were already bleating in pain, and their wives were already shouting in anger.

This was the idea that the composer hoped to capture in the little air that he had tried to start, the desperation of the workmen and the novelty of their asphalt, twinned like the two voices of a boy on the edge of manhood. Leaning forward so that his breath registered on the surface of the windowpane, he tried to smell, to stare, to listen. Here was everything acrid in life, rough men, the changing of the seasons, the advent of the automobile so heralded by Karl and Josepha. He listened to the sharp stroke of paddle against tar, and sound swelled in his ears again. A 'cello at the deepest end of its register, its voice moving slowly upwards, the lightest flickering of a pianist's hands across the keys, darkness wrapped around a hope for light.

He moved back to his seat and lowered himself. *Oskar*. His wife's words came quickly. *There is no time for this. Stand up.*

He refused to stand. His pen was already in his hand. A workman's shout pushed through the curtains and echoed in the tangle of framed portraits he kept on his mantelpiece. The composer kept his chord in his head. He tensed his fingers.

Oskar, think of Karl and Josepha. This is not what they want to hear.

He tried to close his ears to the sound of his wife's voice. He shut his eyes tight and focused on ignoring her. The wind shifted direction. The scent of pitch and the noise of the workmen followed the breeze out of the room. When the composer looked down at the staff paper again, he realized that he had could no longer hear his wife speaking. Able to breathe, he saw that he had a little time. He could wait for his melody. He let his gaze drift.

His eyes climbed the patterns on the wallpaper, garlanded lilies and chains of roses. He followed these chains until he was staring at the pictures on the mantelpiece. There were Karl and Josepha and Hilda. In his portrait, Karl had twirled his moustache and tied his bow tie as if he were some movie-palace desperado transplanted from the Mexican chaparral into the gilt-fronted kingdom of the Boston courts. In hers, Josepha glanced away from the camera – her forehead smooth, the lace of her collar never stretched – as if there were some knight out of legend ready to bear her away, even there, in the photographer's studio. Hilda's photograph had been taken by a cousin of hers, and in it she smiled – was smiling forever – at an aunt's garden party. On the lapel of her party-coat, she wore a brooch, a branch of lilac made from amethyst and green glass that Hilda had colored by hand after she'd received her print of the picture. The composer wondered whether Hilda had hoped that, by wearing an emblem of the season, by touching it again with brush and watercolor weeks later, she could manifest some eternal

spring. All he could recall of those months were the party's string quintet, viola out of tune, the party's mayonnaise, spoiled by bees.

There were pictures of the composer on the mantelpiece, too, though when he looked into his own eyes, he did not recognize much. The early portraits – painted by New York amateurs eking out grim livings in the Berkshires – were so remote from him that they elicited no recollection at all, but when he saw the photographs in which his glasses had come out of his pocket, in which wrinkles had begun scoring his face, he remembered a little more. Oskar Nygren, yes, composer, mythmaker, idealist, yes. In Trøndheim, he had grimaced between birches and held up a copy of his score for *Fafnir*, *Transatlantic*. In Washington, he had smiled between pillars and watched the Secretary of War climb the steps of a concert hall to listen to one of his symphonies. In Newburyport, Karl and Josepha and Hilda had beamed at him – knickerbockers, lost teeth, fresh lipstick – because he had been lucky in catching the trains and had made it home for two whole days before he was due back in Boston to catch the Copenhagen steamer again.

The composer was staring into the fireplace, and he remembered, then, what he had meant to do that day. He was old, he did not have much of his life left, and his wife would have liked it if he recorded a message for his children. It could not be very hard, this act of speech. He would stand, and make his way down the long hallway to the bedroom where he kept the phonograph recorder, and he would install a new cylinder and connect the recorder to its electrical current, and he would lie down and begin talking. He could close his eyes if he wanted to. He could simply speak until he fell asleep. He

could let the recorder's engraving needle whisper into the wax of the cylinder, telling it of the quiet and comfort that comes with slipping away.

But a noise from the street called him to his feet. He began to turn towards the hallway, but a second shout, almost a scream, caught in his ears. He moved to the window. He stared out. There were the workmen, with their black-ankled overalls and their long paddles, and there were the barrels of asphalt, still belching. There was another figure now, one of the schoolgirls, abandoned by her friends, maybe fourteen years old. She had on a girl's frock, all pleats and daffodils, and in her face there was something of a young girl's absent contemplation, a concern with stones and larks that ignored men and their labor. The road crew must have seen something womanly in her, and the girl found herself pressed against the granite wall while the workmen taunted her, whistling and leering and rubbing their hands together.

The composer blinked and tried to focus. He needed to record his voice for his children. He knew this, but he could see enough to recognize that there was something important happening outside, too. Could he make his way to his front door? Could he raise his voice and shout? Could he pick up his bottle of Port wine and threaten the workers until they left the girl alone? He didn't know, he didn't know, he was old and he didn't know, and so he watched. Now the men gathered around the girl, still pressed up against the granite of the wall. Now they left tar-stained fingerprints on the hem of her dress, on the cuffs of her sleeves. Now she said, "Don't, don't," but they moved their hands upwards still, tugging at the ribbon that marked the line of the girl's waist, unbuttoning the mother-of-pearl buttons that started at the girl's collar and led downwards, and now the girl's shouts came louder. "Don't! Don't!"

Were there tears running down the composer's face? He couldn't tell. Was the mark of his breath on the windowpane obstructing his view? He didn't know. He couldn't tell whether he was imagining the things he thought he saw or whether he was in fact seeing them. Now the girl's voice was Hilda's. "Don't, don't close the door to your study. Come with me for the weekend to visit Karl at school." Next it was Josepha's. "Don't, don't you want to visit me in Maine, where I'm living happily, at work in a schoolhouse, cardinals whistling in the trees?" The composer couldn't remember whether he'd gone with Hilda, whether he'd visited Josepha. He couldn't tell whether he should rush to the aid of this girl, couldn't remember whether he'd already done so, didn't know whether he could do so. Lace crossed his field of vision and the composer couldn't focus his eyes. Everything he saw was blur punctuated by well-stitched white.

He turned and sank down and sat with his back against the wallpaper, his neck against the sill. Was the girl still shouting? Was the scent of asphalt still in the air? Was the pen still in his hands? Were there still lilies growing up the walls? Everything was blank.

He heard Hilda again. *Oskar*, she said. *Stand up. Get up. Don't look out the window. Stand up, and walk down the hallway, and fix yourself in your head and speak to your children. They will need your guidance. They will need to know about the man you were.* Yes, he remembered, the recorder, his voice, but he remembered the workmen and the girl, too. For an instant he held these two acts of memory in his head, and he could think of both of them and move between them, and he felt two pasts open up behind him and two futures stretch before him. He couldn't breathe. He needed to choose.

Only then did the composer think of the question he might have asked Hilda an hour before. *Why didn't you record yourself? Why didn't you let your children know about you?* Already the answer was apparent to him. Karl and Josepha knew her, she was with them like she was with him, she had spent her time with them while he was dreaming of Oslo and symphonettes and of Valhalla.

So he stood. If he snuck a glance through the window, it was an inadvertent one, and no one was there, anyway, no workmen, no girl. If he saw a mark the color of rust staining the granite of the wall, the composer didn't notice it. The composer turned and shuffled past the little table, past the ruins of a last little air, past the mantelpiece and all of its eyes, into the hall. Without looking up, he reached the door to his bedroom, and if the composer felt somehow crestfallen, he refused to acknowledge the sentiment. For whole minutes he had been steady on his feet, and this sureness allowed him to find a fresh wax cylinder to load into his phonograph recorder, to check the electrical current, to set the needle and flip the switch, to move across floorboards and lift himself onto the bed.

The composer realized that he did not know how to begin. "Karl, Josepha," he said. "I tried—" What had he tried? He backed up. "Today, I tried..." To write? To save? To start again? No. "This afternoon, I tried to polish off a bottle of Port, a good vintage, a '94, but I found I couldn't even drink a glass of the stuff. It's funny, old age, the way it starts making you act virtuous, even when you intend to sin. 'Don't drink so much,' Dr. Hoodley has told me more times than I care to admit, and now I simply *can't* drink so much. Or, 'Don't smoke so much,' and now I find the trip down the street to the tobacconist's more taxing than I care to perform. When Beethoven fell deaf, he

redoubled his investigations into the virtues of sound, and now that I have no body to speak of, I've begun treating what little I have left with more kindness than I had in many years. A lesson, I suppose, for you to consider." The composer was prattling. Nothing he said had mattered. He knew this. He closed his eyes and searched his mind. What was it that seemed so important? "I, I..." but now his words trailed off, leaving thick silence behind them. "This afternoon, I..." He needed to be able to do this, he told himself, he needed to be able to say something meaningful, to transform the afternoon's events into something worth listening to. "This afternoon, I was looking at your portraits on the mantelpiece, and I thought of how blessed I've been to know you." This wasn't it. "How angelic you all looked, like saints sent down from Valhalla, and I thought that I might like to write another opera, inspired by you, a fantasia of an opera, set in heaven or maybe among the planets, a *grande oeuvre* about human potential and aspiration." He was stuck now. "And though I know I don't have the strength or the time to sit down to compose any more, I hoped you would be aware of this last concept of mine, that you might know how important you've always been to my work." He wanted to tell his children to keep their eyes open, wanted to tell them to see the world for what it was, but he couldn't find the words to explain what he wanted to say. He knew only the language of fantasias, of airs.

Hilda's voice, though, sounded as sweet as an etude practiced absentmindedly in the humid air of a summer morning, next to quiet in its familiarity. *Oskar*, she said, *how beautiful. Karl and Josepha will remember you fondly for this.*

What had he been thinking about?

He felt tired, but he commanded himself to focus, to pay attention to what was going on, to what had gone on around him. Even as he fell asleep, he forced his senses open.

In the bedroom, dust rose from the quilt, and the wax cylinder spun, free from the touch of the needle. In the hallway, there was the slow motion of a breeze, the accumulated tension of so much taut picturewire holding up so many old landscapes. In the parlor, a strand of a girl's hair was caught in one of the window frame's hinges, and the odor of asphalt shadowed the white of the curtains, and ink leaked from the composer's pen, staining a scrap of paper, hushing whatever noise the composer had made there, earlier.

BLIND BOY AND MAMMOTH

Two rivers, a stretch of marsh, a struggle or two up clay bluffs: not so hard a journey. This is a camp we've used before, and the wind has forgotten its hurry for a day. Word from my mother's cousins put a mammoth somewhere behind us, cornered and waiting to lift us, for a while at least, out of the everyday hunger that separates the first sharp days of fall from the last contented days of summer, the desire for *more* even though there isn't yet any question about *enough*. I listen to the sounds of camp-setting and measure the time by them. Thrashing marks the clearing of brush, and the shuffling of feet means the leveling of dirt, and little gusts of air accompany the unrolling of the tent pelts. Last comes the scratch of coarse twine tied to tree trunks and tentpoles. Whenever one of the lengths of twine is found too tangled for a quick unraveling, it is pressed into my hands, and I set to work on it, pulling, testing, determining tightness and looseness, slipping fingers into the spots of absence that make straightening possible. I sit at the edge of camp, and my sisters and aunts brush past me, and I leave the twine I've unknotted in a pile next to me. Sometimes, when I reach down, the twine is gone, and if I've finished whatever length I'm working on and if it's been taken, too, I'm stranded, nothing close but the dry smell of switchgrass in autumn.

When camp is set, an uncle takes me by the hand and walks me around the camp's edges. "Here," he says, "willows and their hip-high switchgrass." I reach out and run a palm across the surface of the switchgrass buds, thick enough to be a second ground under my fingers. We move on. "Here," my uncle says, "birches in the shadow of a little knoll." This time, I know the boundary by scent: the hint of water that always accompanies the lick of shade, birchbark rotting below. My uncle's grip is tight enough that my knuckles begin to ache, and I tug at his arm, hoping that once we finish he'll let me go. "Here," his voice comes, "the gravel of the clearing, the clay of the bluff-edge, sky-blue asters." I don't bend, though my uncle probably expects me to, to trace the local stone with my fingers. I can hear the edge here, the wind whipping its way up from the river below before it loses itself in what I now know are flowers. My uncle's hand tightens further around mine and I grimace, try to pull myself away from him. Is he angry that I haven't knelt, haven't pressed my fingers into gravel, into clay? No. "I apologize," he says, "if I mentioned colors."

"Nothing, it's nothing," is what I come up with as a response. It doesn't bother me when people speak of these things. I'm desperate to know color, to know blood. Any testament to the idea of thrill is enough, sometimes.

Later, on the ground between two willows, switchgrass stalks brushing against my cheeks, my lips, I'm toying with twigs, trying to collect the smallest ones so that I can hand them over for tinder. The members of my family have scattered. Some are down by the river drawing water, others have set off to scout for blackberries that might still be fruiting this late in the season, others have made their ways to the corners of camp – they are clambering around in the branches of the birches that grow at the top of the knoll,

they are digging their way into the clay under the lip of the bluff – to whisper about the cousins and aunts who have ventured farther afield. Still others mutter in their tents, angry at the progress of their little carvings, annoyed by the mustiness of the tent pelts. These relatives are the people who make it their business to tend to me. They feel free to grumble to me about the faultiness of the water vessels, or they take pity on me by giving me first fruit, or they gossip with me or recount their stories for me. It's hardly consolation to spend an afternoon spent among twigs thinking about them.

Instead, a last group, my uncle Raywood, and other uncles, and cousins too, has ventured farther than my sisters, picking blackberries, than my aunts, drawing water. They've gone to hunt the mammoth that my mother's family spotted earlier in the day. I can imagine the first movements they made, because they must have unwound at least the last few steps of the path we all took this morning. They must have skidded down the break in the bluff, they must have thanked autumn for hardening the mud along the edges of the slough, and because they're smart enough they must have remembered to avoid the spots where the nettles grew up with the spearmint and burnt my ankles even though all I could smell was sweetness. At river's edge, though, they might have struck out in any direction. Maybe they spotted the mammoth lounging upstream and had to make a chest-deep ford to catch the beast in time. Pondering this, I feel the bite and shock of the water, and before my thoughts let me finish the crossing, my fingers' pace has quickened and I've shucked all of the dry bark I can from a section of log that I find. I set myself groping again. Maybe once the last of my uncles pulled himself onto the far shore, the group rushed to retighten the knots binding spearpoint to spear before creeping through the nettles that grew up in the shade of the far bluff. Maybe a cousin caught the

mammoth between two trees and tried to spear it through the throat, and maybe that cousin missed when he threw his spear, and maybe the mammoth panicked in its pain and pushed itself through forest understory with my cousin's weapon stuck in its shoulder, and maybe my uncles chased it and bled it to death slowly, and maybe it was living even after its tendons were cut, after its eyes were gouged out, after its trunk was severed, alive even with intestines caught in bushes and its lungs soft against open air. Maybe none of the members of my family breathed, either, until they'd licked blood from their fingers.

All of this is so hot and so immediate to me that it takes me half an instant before I realize I'm still stuck among willow-litter. Wedged under my fingernails are shreds of bark and between my feet is a pile of tinder big enough to start fires for two evenings' worth of camp, and I haven't even let my mind strike out and track down other possibilities that might match my uncles', my cousins' experience. Already the ground around me is clear of anything that might burn, and I stand, trying not to sneeze when the switchgrass buds shake and cover my face with pollen. I wade back to the tents and sway and mumble until an aunt comes up and takes the tinder from my hands.

"Our thanks," she says a little coldly, and I understand that this is my mother's sister, childless, always angry. And then, "Look at your face. Looks like you got caught in dust." I'm not sure whether I should laugh, so I whisper a chuckle and paw at my cheeks with dirty hands, trying to shake the pollen from my hair and from my lips, too. "Just wash it," the aunt says, and I can tell now that she's already turned and isn't looking at me any longer, that she's shuffling away, probably eager to return to her carving or to her whining.

I'm stuck, unable to orient myself. The pleasant thoughts that I'd come across among the willows have abandoned me. First I edge towards the birches and strain my sense of hearing, listening for a hint of invitation in the human voices I can hear, but everything suggests that my half-brothers and my cousins are content to speak to one another, that they would hardly appreciate my intrusion. So I spin and inch along again, and now I'm facing the bluff. I hope to catch the sound of jubilation, of a successful hunting party returning homewards, but all that come are things I should have expected: the ordinary whistling of the breeze, the occasional grumbling violence of a gust. I ease myself down and lean back and dangle my legs over the bluff-edge and try to imagine, again: maybe the hunters found the mammoth wallowing beneath them at the bottom of a muddy draw and maybe they needed to swing down through trees to reach it, or maybe they found the mammoth on its side heaving breath, sick or miraculously pregnant, so late in the year, and maybe they wet their spears with afterbirth and celebrated two deaths. But these possibilities are so outlandish that they don't catch anything in me, and I'm still aware of the air under the bottoms of my feet, of the clay crumbling and leaving itself on the backs of my thighs, of the gravel behind me, almost uncomfortable against my palms and my elbows. I bring my arms up and trace the patterns left on them as if there were some truth to detect there.

A hand presses itself against my back. I squirm and tense with surprise, and then I hear my aunt's voice again. "I told you to wash your face, so wash it." Her hand travels along the crest of my shoulder and rests on my neck. "You better," she says, "you better go now before the light fails." She lets out a fraction of a laugh. "You won't get lost, don't worry, or when you do one of us will track you down." Her fingers dig at the

skin under my ears until I admit that she's right, until I begin to lower myself, my feet swinging until the dirt of the break in the bluff stops them. I skid down, hoping whenever I hazard a step that my slide might be interrupted by some shrub, some stretch of firmer rock, and finally I reach the bottom, and I know that it can't be far to the river. I strike out. This half-squelch underfoot must be the mud of the slough, hardened by autumn, I know this, and now that I'm back on firm ground again I know that I need to be careful to avoid the patch of nettles that even my idiot ankles remember. I pause a moment and try to catch the sound of water from the din of the air, and finally I determine that if I strike out to my left and keep to the scree at the bottom of the bluff I might both be able to find the river and find my way back. The ground is clear of brush here, and mostly level, though sometimes I have to stumble up a hump of one of last winter's rockslides or down into the draw of one of last spring's floodchannels. Soon enough, the soles of my shoes are wet, and I venture across slick stone until riffles crest over my toes. Kneeling down, my hands already extended, I dip into shallow water and when I splash my face I breathe heavily so that I can ward off too much chill.

This must be satisfactory. I must be clean. I ease my way back across the riverside gravel, and stones turn and shift underfoot, and finally I'm on dry ground again, and I step forward, pushing as much attention as I can into my feet, trying to feel the tilt of the slope that will point me campwards again. A hesitant foray into knee-high switchgrass, and I retreat, and I strike out a second time, trying to set the sound of the river exactly behind me so that I can move away from it with confidence, and when I step now I stumble into a little divot, maybe a place where the roots of a tree had been, before a storm ripped the tree from the ground, before high water carried the tree downstream.

My hands are dirty now, but I don't care anymore what my family might say, and I move faster, listening to the wind in the trees, listening for the airy echo and bluster of the bluff-front. It's there, in my ears, that turbulence, so I open my palms and bring my arms forward and cross ground, feeling my way through the branches of sloughside willows, moving tentatively whenever I feel an empty space that might mean a stretch of mud or bog, and by the time I think I might have arrived at the break, by the time I think that I should be able to hear the members of my family, I take a step and find riverside gravel again, and the sound of the river is in my ears, and now this sound comes away from the noise of the breeze so easily that I'm stupid to have missed it.

I stop moving for a moment, so that I can think. When I dropped down from camp, I made my way leftwards, and if this piece of bottomland is bordered by a smooth curve of river – it seems natural to me that the river might curve like that, I think, because rivers ought to swing smoothly like water does – then I'd have been at one end of the arc, and if I angled myself just a little too far from the bluff-front and walked as far as I could, maybe I've reached the furthest point in the bottomland's jut outwards, or something, and maybe it's the case that camp is behind me now, directly behind me. I guess at a turn, and move my feet in increments, supposing that if I think hard and move slowly I might be able to feel my way into a straight reversal, and even though there's a chill hanging around my shoulders now, the first hint of evening, I strike out again, and try to put heel in front of toe as properly as I can, and even when my shoes begin sinking into mud or water I refuse to change my aim, and after I've crossed through shrubs and across bogs and inched my way around many-trunked birches, I think that I must be closer than I was, but I can't tell, I can't tell, and when the ground under my feet skitters away again,

gravelly, slick, the surprise is almost welcome, because I am lost, now, and at least I am something. I sink down and crouch over my knees, trying to imagine just how blind I look, touching tree trunks and mud as if there were reason behind my tries and jabs, as if I could ever know enough to suppose, to try.

If I sit next to the river, where the terrain is more open, less choked, I might —
—but someone is running across the stony riverside beach, footfalls accumulating in clatter, and now someone has taken me by the arm, and this hand — a man’s hand — is wet and warm at once, and now I hear a voice in my ear.

“Come on,” my uncle Raywood says. “We’ll go.”

Gripping my arm tighter, he pulls me so hard that I lose my footing, and though he doesn’t slow, I catch myself before I fall. I focus so intently on keeping pace with him that we’re knee-deep in water before I recognize the cold. The gravel of the river bottom forces its way into my shoes, between my toenails and their nail beds, but Raywood is pulling harder, maybe, than he had been before. The shock of the chill leaves me gasping for air, but I’m hip-deep now, and the bottom is still falling away, underfoot. When the water reaches my nipples, I feel nothing but Raywood’s hand on my arm, and I fix myself in the space between his palm and my shoulder. Warmth, strength, direction. Now Raywood is talking, though I can pay only scant attention to his voice, consumed as I am by the work of moving. Only when we begin to climb towards the far bank can I listen. “So we find the mammoth—” he says, but I drop into an eddy made by a boulder, and I stagger, and when I listen again, he’s come to “—cornered and angry, and I take my—” and before I can focus again my knees are up and the river water is running down my

calves and pooling between my feet and the soles of my shoes and my uncle says “— sweetest blood I’ve tasted in months.”

A pause, a gasp.

“Light’s failing,” he says, making no apology.

His hand has moved down my arm and he has me by the wrist now, and the last of the season’s mosquitoes is whining in my ear.

“We better come on,” he says, “if we want to beat the rest of them.” We are off again, across gravel and stone, into the grass that starts at last spring’s high water mark, and I pant and stumble, but I can keep pace, I can keep pace. Though Raywood continues to talk, now I can tell myself as much as he can about what happened: grass trampled and matted against the ground, and a fresh track in creekside mud, maybe, and a cautious slink across moss, and even though the midday sun is bright, the hunters cannot stop to drink when they cross the creek, and soon trees have closed around them and the silence of the afternoon threatens to reveal their position if they make any sound, and even though they can’t see through the darkness of the forest, sometimes they can feel scraps of mammoth hair caught in branches rubbing against their forearms or their calves, and they know the mammoth is close still, and beneath their feet shrubs neither crack or rustle because they have been broken already, and when the day grows so hot that they move slowly, they are lucky: a lethargic turn into a sunlit clearing shows the mammoth, there, across a stretch of sandy ground, and the hunters test the points on their spears a last time, and when they have drawn their own blood, point and fingertip, they spring forward.

Raywood and I stop. Even Raywood's breath is ragged, now, and the chill sticks to me wherever I've sweated too much. A first set of insects, the chirpers, the singers, has stopped making noise and settled down for the night, leaving the air to the growly muttering of the cicadas, to the high droning of the frogs.

"We're here," Raywood says. "Hey!" he shouts, not at me, though no one answers. And then "Seems like your cousin fell asleep with a piece of liver in his mouth." I shift my weight from one leg to the other. My muscles ache already.

"Come on," he says. "So." A step, two steps, and he takes me by the elbow and indicates that I should bend. I feel. Coarse hair, knotted together so tightly that even I couldn't hope to unravel it, and an edge, and then the scabby crust of sole of a foot, the rough splintery tangle of toenail. The clean smell of mud turned to dust is everywhere around the foot, and comes with me on my palms. "Come on," again, and we move a little and come to the swell of stomach, the hair finer here, almost soft, almost worth granting permission to fingertips to linger in, and there's nothing but a ghost of warmth, but this is enough to speak of the hint of swell and retreat that marks the rhythm of human stomachs. "Come on," and there is the huge weight of ear in my hands, and I marvel that, despite the heaviness of the ear, this is the only part of the mammoth that I could even hope to lift. "Come on": smooth striation of tusk. "Come on": flex and heft of trunk.

"Come on," and to follow him now I have to clamber over a second foot and the first of the tusks. I feel Raywood crouch and push himself away. He takes my hand again, and I stoop too, and I push, and he wraps his arm around my shoulders and pulls me further in, and I know now that my uncle has fit his head inside the mammoth's

mouth, his face under the mammoth's tongue. Hesitating, I sniff, and, outside, at least, the air smells fresh enough, like grass, like canes of alderwood broken and burned.

"Come on," he says, and I hold my breath and shuffle and squirm until I feel his shoulders next to mine. A tooth, soft and worn, starts a cramp somewhere between my shoulders and my neck. The mammoth's tongue, heavy and wet, presses against my hair, holds itself against my ear. The trunk is half-resting on my chest, and calm of the tusk is still at hand. There are mosquitoes here, even, and in the distance I think that I can hear the members of my family coming, walking, ready to eat— but I try to forget all this, try to leave myself in the mammoth's mouth, to make the mammoth's cheeks and lips into boundaries: silent, dark as always but properly dark, nothing, everything.

"Feel it?" Raywood murmurs, the hush of respect creeping into his voice. "It's still warm. Alive, almost." He squeezes my hand with his.

"But it's dead," Raywood whispers, drawing closer still, "and I killed it." Now, he's reaching, and I can't quite tell what he's doing, but I feel the elkhorn handle of a knife brush against my cheek, and before I can draw away he's cutting, and blood is running downwards, and his hands are at my lips and I'm chewing.

The mammoth is dead, and I haven't killed it, but I stretch, now, and take the knife from my uncle and reach up and cut another strip of tongue, and blood runs down again, and my face is dirty, and my hands are dirty, and I know that if I had been found by a cousin, by a sister, I wouldn't have been touched by even blackberry juice, but this is what blood tastes like. The next time I'm found, by one of the others, I will remember, and even though I can be certain only of living in camp, and of moving to the next camp, and of moving to the next, I promise myself that I will remember.

26 CHARACTERS

1.

During this period of her life, Alfa kept the habit of writing long notes addressed to no one. In these notes, she recorded her complaints about the people she knew. Whenever she sat down to write, she was careful to disguise the identities of the men and women she mentioned, hiding them behind nicknames and masks.

Sometimes – when she cleaned out a desk she had borrowed for six or nine months, or when she sorted through boxes before or after a move from one perch to another, a move from one friend’s half-furnished room to a old couch in a corner of another friend’s garage – Alfa came across one of her notes, and if enough time had elapsed, she took great pleasure in piecing together a history that had become strange even to her. “Ah,” she might remark to herself, remembering the pleasure she had found in writing with a calligraphic pen she had since lost, “here is Bravo, who was so weak-spirited then, when he made his own tempera paint from his mother’s chickens’ eggs and painted miserable thin-lipped portraits of all of his friends, when he loved late-spring

cherries and early-summer plums more than he loved himself, when little beauties took him so strongly that he believed that he didn't exist, that only a benevolent universe existed. Here is Bravo in whose garden shed my boxes are stored today, in whose spare guest bedroom I am staying now, whose old court filings and spare silver service take up most of the space in the linen cabinet where I'm allowed to keep my clothes. Here is Bravo, with whom I am as friendly as ever, though I hate him so differently, now."

Or, "Here is Charlie, who never failed to treat me with the reverence I adored, who laughed so broadly and so readily whenever we spoke that I never noticed anything about her other than the composite fillings in her teeth. Here is Charlie, whom I chanced across in a grocery store two weeks ago, leggings loose and bunched behind the knees, cart full of canned peas and carrots, suddenly skinny, suddenly poor."

Or, "Here— here is Delta, here is Delta, of whom— of whom I wrote, 'I will never forget you, Delta, because even though you showed me every kindness, I betrayed you when you needed my help, when even your fucker/lover, Echo, refused to help you.'"

Alfa could not remember Delta. She could not remember even whether Delta was a man or a woman. Was Echo the key to identifying Delta? Maybe Echo was, but though Alfa could remember Echo's real name, Alfa couldn't remember much more about Echo. What were Echo's fucking/loving predilections? From somewhere, Alfa came up with a scrap of memory— wasn't Echo a transsexual, or a transvestite, or a pansexual, or a bisexual...? Yes, Echo was one of these things, but if Echo was one of these things, then Delta could be any of them, too, or a man simple or a woman simple. Could Alfa simply hunt for Echo to inquire after Delta? No. Another scrap: Echo had

moved away, to Alabama, maybe, or to Antigua. If Echo had in fact moved to Antigua, it was beyond Alfa's power to suppose whether the Antigua that Echo had moved to was the Antigua in Guatemala, the Antigua of old Mayan ladies whose destitution was an act put on for tourists, whose wealth grew as the ladies became better able to look poorer and poorer, or the Antigua in the Leeward Islands, fronted by the Caribbean on one side and the Atlantic on the other, an island populated by men and women and plants surely lovelier and better-scented than Delta had ever been, could ever have been.

At a luau that Bravo hosted to celebrate the end of summer, Alfa poured herself a piña colada and began to explain all of this to Foxtrot, a junior associate at Bravo's law firm who stood and picked at the grime under his fingernails with the edge of a moneyless moneyclip that he had taken, improbably, incongruously, from a bulging wallet. Foxtrot blinked and stammered. "A little forgetting," Alfa pushed, "is what I want, or— But fuck this much forgetting, this fucking void."

When Alfa attempted, tentatively, to raise the dilemma of Delta to Bravo over tacos late the next morning, before Alfa could say the words *Delta* or *Echo*, just as Alfa said the word *nickname*, Bravo's wife Golf came in from the garden with a bag of trash in one hand and a pipe in the other. At some point – the night before, that morning – she had taken out the bellybutton ring she normally wore, two antique pewter charms on a hoop. She dropped the bag of trash next to the kitchen trashcan and began to play with the bit of stretched skin at the edge of her navel.

“Do you write about us, when you write like that?” Golf started. Had she been listening to Alfa talk, hanging just outside the door? “What do you call Bravo? What fucking *nickname* is he? Which one am I?”

Alfa shrugged. “I mean, I guess—”

“You mean. You guess.”

“Can I— Can I have some of that?” Alfa pointed to the pipe.

“It’s gone.”

“Well, oh, okay.”

Alfa stood and walked into the bathroom and shut the door behind her. “Weird fucking cheapskate,” she supposed she heard Golf spit at Bravo

Three times a week, four times a week, Golf found a moment to use the word *nickname*, and Alfa soon grew so sick of Golf and Bravo that she felt the need to move out. An initially-unwanted encounter with Foxtrot on a street near Alfa’s office led Alfa to Hotel, who needed a roommate. Though the room would cost Alfa more than the two-sixpacks-a-week-thanks-so-much-buddy that she usually liked to spend on shelter, her time with Golf and Bravo had allowed her to save enough money to afford a long-enough spell with Hotel, so she decided to inquire further. On the phone, Alfa and Hotel stammered and giggled nervously for ten minutes before deciding to meet one another. The meeting – in a café-bar, where Hotel drank unpasteurized whole-fat milk, where Alfa drank a glass of house-made blackberry wine – took them through the hours of the night. Hotel and her job in the tech sector had survived the recession in 01, and she had gone into work every day for stock options worth pennies, and still she remembered how to

smile, how to combat bitterness; and she wore gray cardigans, and it is certain that purity of heart grows in correlation with grayness of cardigan. Alfa and Hotel talked until both women could as much as feel the pain that their alarm clocks would bring them the next morning. Neither woman could ignore the need for sleep any longer. When she left the bar, Alfa recorded Hotel in her head as H####, supposing that she might be the sort of pure-hearted girl who could escape Alfa's deadening cynical masking, who could exist in Alfa's head as herself, who could avoid the transformation from person to symbol, from name to nickname.

Two weeks with Hotel, however, left Alfa unsure in her affections. In the mornings, Hotel went running, and whenever Alfa got up – early enough, but never as early as Hotel – she saw Hotel, drenched with sweat, panting over the sink, and Hotel hummed when she cooked. Sometimes Hotel whistled when she went into the bathroom to take a shit, and always, always, Hotel was making her presence known, making noises, producing bodily fluids and bodily solids, dancing, clapping, working off a long day of stress by leaving mostly-empty wine glasses lined up in little rows along the armrests of the apartment's loveseats, white, red, white, because Hotel could never hold herself to decisions about things of minor importance, because she always saved her focus for projects of significance, which she never failed to complete with success. As soon as Alfa began to resent Hotel for these things, Alfa recognized the potential for betrayal that must always have resided in her. This recognition fascinated Alfa, and it was for this reason that Alfa lingered with Hotel. Though Alfa did not expect that she would be able to remember Delta's name by betraying Hotel, at least she would be able to suppose that

she knew how she committed betrayal. This false knowledge could sustain her, for a while, maybe.

Alfa had thumbtacked the note where'd she'd mentioned Delta – there was only one note, and it was only one sentence long – to a wall of the cubicle in the office where she worked in a long-term-temporary capacity, and, one day, Alfa's boss, India, saw the note and frowned at its phrasing.

“F—er/l—er?” India asked.

Alfa took the note down and left it instead in the shallow drawer that sat between her keyboard and her knees. Whenever she slid the drawer open for a pen or a paperclip, though, she saw the note and pondered it:

“I will never forget you, Delta, because even though you showed me every kindness I betrayed you when you needed my help, when even your fucker/lover, Echo, refused to help you.”

A month and a half after Alfa moved in with Hotel, she unpacked the last of the boxes that she had brought with her from Bravo and Golf's house. It contained things that she did not particularly want. These were also things that she could not throw away, because they were irreplaceable things. One manila envelope was full of old identification cards – gym memberships, a college library card, expired driver's licenses that she had, years before, saved because she hoped to give them to nieces or friends' little sisters so that they could buy themselves menthol cigarettes and whiskey. Another manila envelope was full of old stationery – thick hand-laid papers, greeting cards that

were beautifully steckled, envelopes in colors that Alfa still found lovely, smoky gray the color of tarnished silver, hearth red the color of brick dust on pale skin. There were mugs and plates that Alfa had made in a college ceramics course, and there were a few letters from college friends, and at the bottom of the box, Alfa found another one of her notes. She recognized it for what it was as soon as she saw it lying there, creased, dusty. She recognized the angry tremor in her cursive line that meant that she had been at least half-drunk when she wrote the thing on the back of a receipt whose ink had since faded.

“Can’t believe that Echo is in *my* bathroom at *my* party fucking Juliet right now. Can’t believe that everyone has left, that Echo and Juliet are the only ones left. Fuck them. Fuck Echo. Fuck Juliet.”

Alfa remembered Juliet: he was a man, but she’d given him the nickname of a woman, because he was that sort of man, he was, he was.

Winter came, and the heat in Hotel’s girlfriend’s apartment didn’t work well, so the girlfriend, Kilo, had begun spending long stretches of time with Alfa and Hotel in their apartment.

Sometimes, nights, Alfa would shuffle down the hall from her bedroom to get something to drink from the kitchen – she needed a glass of water, she told herself, though she always came back from the refrigerator with a bottle of beer – and she would stop at the door to Hotel’s room and listen to Hotel and Kilo whispering. Sometimes, nights, Alfa heard her own name on Kilo’s lips:

“Alfa ~~??~~ ~~####~~ ~~≠~~ ~~#####~~ ~~####~~,” she would catch, able to discern only one word from the string of sound. “~~≠~~ ~~####~~ ~~#####~~ ~~#####~~ ~~####~~ Alfa ~~#####~~ ~~#####~~ ~~#####~~ ~~#####~~ ~~####~~. ~~####~~ Alfa.”

Whispering and closed doors reminded her of Juliet, whom she still remembered, whom she could still picture. His face was a child’s face, though on it, innocence was replaced by a simulacrum of innocence. Its tan was artificial, without the freckles that spoke of long hours in the sun. The long bangs that hung over the eyes were ostentatious, bleached, stiff with gel. A tattooed cartoon teddybear hidden just under and just behind an ear grimaced in pain, lips quavering— a tattooer’s slip of the needle.

“Alfa is such a fucking bitch,” Alfa imagined Juliet would have said, if he had been the one gossiping behind the door with Hotel “I can’t fucking believe that Alfa would steal your goddamned beer. Fuck Alfa.”

Only one plan presented itself to Alfa. Evidence showed that Echo had had a connection with Juliet, and perhaps Juliet would remember enough about Echo to remember something about Delta, too.

So who knew Juliet, now? Who might now know Juliet’s address or phone number? Bravo and Golf knew Juliet, but Alfa hadn’t spoken with Bravo and Golf since she’d moved out of their house. Charlie knew Juliet, too, but Alfa felt so embarrassed by Charlie’s of-late poverty that Alfa couldn’t bring herself to speak to Charlie, a sentiment that Alfa justified to herself by letting herself believe that she would never impose on Charlie, poor Charlie, a chore of any magnitude, however small. Alfa sat in her room and

thought, and devoted a week's worth of nights to thinking, and even at work she tried to think about Juliet

When she sat in her apartment, thinking, she thought only of Juliet and Delta and Echo, and she was surprised when Kilo knocked on the door to her bedroom one afternoon/evening when her walls were sunsetted red by some sort of miraculously-unexpectedly-thick winter light: Was Alfa OK?, Kilo asked, and if Alfa wanted there were bean-thread noodles leftover in the fridge that Alfa could have.

When she sat in her office, thinking, India glared, but a coworker whose name Alfa didn't really know – was it Lima?, she wondered, and she decided that Lima was good enough a name, for now – knocked on the glass of Alfa's nameplate and asked the same question. Was Alfa OK?

In both instances, Alfa smiled and laughed a little and said “No” and closed her eyes and went back to thinking. Twelve days of thinking left Alfa with these things, which Alfa counted as possessions: an unwillingness to contact Bravo or Golf or Charlie, an uncertainty about Echo's whereabouts, a more-desperate-than-ever need to know about Delta, a faith in Juliet's powers, and a phone call.

Receiver in hand, Alfa spoke with Mike, an operator employed by a local telephone company. “J##### ##”, Alfa stammered. Mike put her on hold. Ten or twelve minutes later, she still sat on hold. Reckoning herself lost in telephony, Alfa – fingers trembling – gave in to a hatred of Mike. She let herself put the receiver down.

2.

Six months had passed since Alfa began wondering about Delta, and she decided that she had followed her feelings until she could follow them no more. She had spent time enough chasing Delta, and if her hatreds – of Bravo and Golf first, and then of Charlie, and then of Mike – had stopped her from searching for Delta as thoroughly as she could, then she felt a sort of gratitude. She knew that, for her, hatred was instinct, the only thing she would always have, and if she were unwilling to track down Juliet to track down Echo to track down Delta because she hated the people who knew Juliet, then this hatred served to speak her desires when she was unable to speak them herself. If she hated so passionately, then she must not care much about Delta, anyway.

In February, though, Bravo called Alfa at work. “Alfa! What have you been—? Why haven’t I been able to reach you, at home or on your cellphone, or over— Anyway, I’ve been trying to reach you for a day and a half.”

Alfa grunted.

“You have to hear this news, OK?”

Alfa grunted.

Bravo stammered a little, now.

Finally his words rushed out: “Our friend Juliet? Do you remember him? Our friend Juliet has been injured in a car accident, and another friend, an older friend whom none of us has heard much from for years, was in the car with Juliet, and this was Echo. Do you remember Echo, too?”

Alfa did not grunt.

“And there’s something that’s happened, happened to Juliet, that you won’t—”

Even as Bravo was explaining all of this, Alfa's head began to spin. She felt the need to sit, but she was already sitting, so she stood, and when she stood she felt weaker still, so, helpless, she looked over the partition separating her cubicle from Lima's and tried to communicate her distress. Lima blinked and smiled. India walked past, and Alfa fixed her eyes on his eyes, and even though Alfa was certain that he hated her as much as she hated him, he nodded so apparently compassionately that Alfa did not even feel the need to explain to him what had happened to her before she hung up on Bravo and left her office and took a taxi to the hospital.

An orderly (her nametag said *November*, but the name that the tag claimed for its wearer was so beautiful that Alfa suspected that this orderly, this ugly orderly, had simply invented the name in some vain attempt to beautify herself) agreed to usher Alfa to Juliet's room. November took Alfa by the arm and explained what Alfa had already heard from Bravo, that the accident had left Juliet with trouble remembering, that other visitors of his had been shocked and dismayed to interact with this new, memoryless Juliet, that Alfa should take care to prepare herself for a shock. Alfa and November rounded the last corner before they came to the door to Juliet's room, and Alfa walked in.

The smile on Juliet's face was so wide when he caught sight of Alfa that she had trouble convincing herself that this was in fact Juliet whom she was visiting. The first words out of his mouth were filled with such kindness – feigned, surely, since how could he know who Alfa was if he was amnesiac? – that Alfa almost forgot the Juliet that *she* remembered, the Juliet who scowled and gossiped and hated almost as fervently as she did.

When he said, “I can’t hug you, I’m sorry— it’s just— bandages—”, Alfa was certain that this person, the person in the hospital bed, had stolen Juliet’s body and possessed it and allowed some new consciousness to inhabit it, and for this consciousness, she imagined a new name. Oscar.

Alfa felt a hand on her shoulder. When she turned, she saw a woman who was almost beautiful, hazel eyes and purple hair, eyebrows dyed in hot-white and pitch-black bands, a woven poncho cut into fringe at the sleeves and along the belt-line. The woman left her hand on Alfa’s shoulder so long that she began to suspect that she’d known this woman, sometime, before.

Alfa mumbled something, and the woman dropped her hand and gripped her by the elbow more strongly than she suspected a woman could grip, and finally the woman spoke up.

“Alfa?” she said. “Alfa? Do you recognize me?”

She didn’t recognize this woman, but she refused to admit this.

“You don’t?” The woman sounded happy at this. Confusion was pressing against Alfa’s temples now. Already half a headache had lodged itself in her head. She scanned the hospital shelves for aspirin or something stronger. “You don’t? Alfa, it’s Echo, I’m Echo. I’m back from Guatemala. I’ve been back two weeks now, and I was staying with Juliet, and the accident— But I’m a woman now, postoperative, yeah? I’m Echo, I’m Echo, and you can call me Echoetta if you want to, but—”

Without saying anything, Alfa closed her eyes and wondered whether she could keep her eyes closed and trace her steps back down hallways through reception areas to subway stops onto trains and back to work, back home, whether she could make it

anywhere, whether she could end up anywhere else, anywhere dark. Echo. This was hardly Echo, or Echoetta. This was someone new, someone new-old, old-new, and what the fuck was happening? Would Alfa look in a mirror the next morning and recognize Delta's face?

No. Alfa was Alfa, but Echo was hardly Echo.

“—but, anyway, legally—” Echo struck up again, “—I'm Papa now.”

Alfa should have mumbled something cheery, something encouraging, and she knew this, but she couldn't, and she kept her eyes closed.

“Alfa?” Echo/Papa asked with a strange concern in her voice. “Are you feeling OK?”

Bravo arrived next. He had come straight from work, and he suggested dinner, and though Alfa was hardly hungry and Echo/Papa felt that she should stay with Juliet/Oscar, Juliet/Oscar urged the three of them to leave together to find food, so long as they promised to return, please, so that they might eat it there, with him. This exhortation tugged at Bravo's pity and at Echo/Papa's pity, and before Alfa could excuse herself, she was sitting, uncomfortable, in a plastic chair in Juliet/Oscar's hospital room, a take-out burrito in her hands, four paper napkins spread across her lap.

“We're happy,” Bravo said, leaning over Juliet/Oscar in his bed, flicking stray grains of rice from Juliet/Oscar's chin onto his palm, “so happy that you're still with us, Juliet.”

Juliet/Oscar said: “Thank you, Bravo. My doctors have told me that I should try for that, for happiness, that I shouldn't worry too much about memory, right now.”

Whenever he spoke, Juliet/Oscar made a show of the courtesies, the thank-yous and pleases. Mindlessness – this is what Alfa figured affected him: not brainlessness, not lack of function, but mindlessness, lack of ornament – shortened his sentences, so his speech grew the appendages whose necessity was usually precluded by warmth of tone or excitedness of pace.

Echo/Papa smiled. “You’re a warrior, Juliet, and you’re brave, and I admire you so much.”

Who the fuck were these people?

Bravo prattled on and Echo/Papa prattled on, and Juliet/Oscar continued with his pleases and his I’ll-certainly-try-my-bests and his in-God’s-hands-nows, and though Alfa knew that it would be wiser of her to stand and leave without pronouncement, instead she, too, spoke.

“Here’s something,” Alfa said. “And I guess I’m sorry to look backwards because it sucks for Juliet or whoever that is, but I have a question for Papa, or for Echo really, because Echo’s the one who knows. Do you remember anybody who you fucked, and I guess this was before your fling with Juliet, whose name started with the letter D, who maybe we used to call Delta, or something like that?”

Bravo fell silent and stared. Juliet/Oscar smiled. Echo/Papa crossed her legs.

“No,” Echo/Papa said, and then she paused and tugged at her bottom lip with her fingers. “No.” She closed her eyes and when she opened them again she had turned to face Juliet/Oscar. It seemed to Alfa that Echo/Papa thought that Juliet/Oscar’s presence forced some compulsion to truth, that Juliet/Oscar’s mindlessness meant that she would need to be as honest as she could, to prove that memory existed, that remembering was as

possible as it was important. She started slowly. “I’m sorry Juliet, I guess— I guess you don’t remember, but you fucked me once— once, when you still thought of me as a man.” Faster, now. Maybe Echo/Papa, too, had realized that most speech, most communication, was a mistake. “And Alfa, no, no, there was no one, and why do you care? Why the fuck do you care? There was no one then, only Quebec.”

“And Juliet,” Alfa said.

Echo/Papa uncrossed her legs and put an expression on her face that said *forced silence*.

Alfa crumpled her napkins together and stood and threw the wad at a trashcan near Juliet/Oscar’s bedside. As she walked to the door, she glanced over her shoulder and saw Bravo doubled over, picking the napkins – which had flown apart during their flight, which had missed their target – from the floor. In the hallway already, Alfa mumbled that she was sorry, but she hardly heard herself, over the din of her footsteps, in the immensity of the silence that still lasted, behind her.

When Alfa left her office the next day, Bravo was waiting for her, leaning against a tree near the entrance to the subway station nearest Alfa’s office tower. Bravo waved, and Alfa said hi, or guessed she said hi, or couldn’t think of a reason not to have said hi and for that reason must have said it.

“Why’d you even ask it, Alfa?” said Bravo, a little shortness of temper creeping into his voice. “Why do you even care about Papa’s past, or Juliet’s past?”

Alfa shrugged.

“Delta? And the letter D? The letter the fuck D?”

Alfa pushed past Bravo and started down the stairs and into the subway system.

“I’m sorry.”

Bravo followed, jogging down the first couple of steps.

“Papa doesn’t need to worry about that stuff. Juliet doesn’t either. She just got the fuck back to the country, he’s fucking hurt, and you know that they—”

“What the fuck does this have to do with you? This is my deal. My deal. And I apologized already.”

Bravo stopped following and stood halfway down the stairs.

“I have to go, okay?” Alfa said. “I’ve got a fucking date.”

Bravo didn’t ask *who with?* but Alfa knew already who with: Romeo, whom she’d invented, but that didn’t matter, did it? So Romeo it was, and she would go out that night anyway, and if, from the loveseat in the living room in Alfa’s apartment, Hotel or Kilo asked *where to* or asked *who with*, it would still be out on a date, it would still be with Romeo.

Alfa and Romeo sat together in the same chair, in the same body, in the same brain, at the end of the bar in a little cocktails place three blocks from Alfa and Hotel’s apartment. Alfa ordered a drink made from barely-sweetened lemonade and some sort of vodka that had been infused with lavender. The girl behind the bar served the drink in a tall slender glass and garnished it with a long ribbon of kumquat peel that floated suspended in the yellow. “Sour, bitter, floral, sweet,” said Sierra, the bartender, who introduced herself when she pushed the glass across the bar.

Alfa tried to smile. But. Delta. The letter the fuck D.

Alfa was certain that Echo/Papa knew. Echo/Papa knew the name.

Alfa was also certain that she no longer cared about Delta, no longer felt any need to understand her own ability to betray. Faced with Bravo's cloying kindness, with Juliet/Oscar's idiotic kindness, with Echo/Papa's self-important kindness, she no longer hated herself for hating other people. It just seemed fucking unfair to her that Echo/Papa could escape her past with such impunity when Alfa had not been able to retrieve the past that had escaped her.

"The person who flees is the person who controls," Romeo whispered in Alfa's ears. Alfa nodded, made for herself a show of approval at her own insight. Papa had fled from Echo, so Papa had won the struggle for power that pits fractions of the self against one another. Delta's memory had fled from Alfa, and the fraction of Alfa that remained, there at the bar, had been rendered powerless as a result.

"The person who flees is the person who controls," Alfa muttered to Sierra.

"What's that? Or, who's that?" Sierra asked. "I like it. I like quotes."

"It's from Wilkie Collins's letters," Alfa said, managing to produce a real-enough smile now that she was lying.

"The person who flees... I like it."

Alfa pushed her chair back from the bar and stood to leave. Lucky Oscar, she thought. Juliet had fled from Oscar's body so thoroughly that nothing was left, and though Juliet ought to be able to control everything that happened to Oscar, nothing remained in Oscar, and nothing could not be controlled, even by everything.

When Alfa returned to her apartment, a sense of triumph had settled over her: finally she had identified the source of her hatred for Echo/Papa, and for Delta, and she knew that if she could force Echo/Papa to say Delta's name, then she could take control of herself again, and she could force Papa to surrender control of herself to Echo, too.

She took her phone from her purse and placed a call to the directory assistance service that served her city. When Alfa spoke with Tango, an operator employed by the local telephone company, she first asked for E### #### and then suggested that the listing might also be recorded under the name P#####.

When Alfa said Papa's name, Tango said, "Yes, I have that listing. Would you like the number, or would you like me to transfer your call directly?"

Alfa said, "Transfer, please."

3.

Echo/Papa's phone rang twice.

"Hello?" The voice was a male's, unambiguously a male's.

"Who's this?" Alfa said. "Is Papa there? Or Echoetta? Or whatever?"

"Okay, this is Uniform, and Papa's here, sure, but who the fuck is— Sorry, who the hell is Echoetta?"

When Uniform said the word *Echoetta*, his voice filled with hesitancy and confusion, and Alfa could hear Echo/Papa fighting Uniform for the receiver. The muffled sound of her voice hardly registered with Alfa, but Alfa could tell that Echo/Papa was desperate to answer the phone and stop any further talk about Echoetta or, worse, Echo.

“Hello?” Echo/Papa said, finally, breathing heavily.

“I wasn’t lying to you,” Echo/Papa said later, at the bar where Alfa had suggested they meet. “I don’t remember anyone like the person you asked me about.”

Alfa had finished her drink – another of those things made from lemons and vodka and kumquat peels – and when she looked up to get another, she saw that Sierra’s shift had ended. “Hi,” she said. “One more.” Had she slurred a little?

The new bartender on duty introduced himself as Victor and then apologized: “I’ll give it a try, but that drink is Sierra’s masterpiece. We all have them here, you know, sort of because the bar is called Piecemeal, but mostly because the owner of the place wants us to have them, so that customers develop—” (here there came a long pause) “—well, I, can I make you my drink, my masterpiece? It’s a shot of a really nice artisanal white rum from the Seychelles flavored with a little oil squeezed from the rind of a sour orange and served with a homemade orange soda. It goes great with a craft-brewed pilsener chaser, and I’ll throw the chaser on your tab for free, okay?”

“No,” Alfa said. “Try to make the other kind.” She turned back to Echo/Papa, bracing herself against the bar. “Sorry.” She was drunk, she guessed, but she was only drunk because Echo/Papa had taken too long to make her way to the bar, and because she hadn’t eaten, and because she’d stolen one of Hotel’s beers from the refrigerator, earlier, an action justified by spite.

“Why is this so important to you?” Echo/Papa asked. “Why do you even think there was someone whose name started with D, anyway?”

“There fucking was,” Alfa said. “And it fucking is important, I just— I’m not sure I—I don’t fucking want to explain.”

“Alfa, I’m sorry, I’m not fucking lying to you when I say that I don’t—”

“Daniel, David, Dackaree, Darvish,” Alfa started, without reason, unsure herself about the words coming out of her mouth. “Deronda, Derckel, Dredger, Dagmar, Donnerholt, Duke, Durgin—”

Echo/Papa grabbed Alfa’s wrist and caught her eyes. “Alfa,” she said, waiting a while before she spoke again. “Fuck. Shit. Fuckshitfuck. I fucking know who you’re talking about.”

Alfa blinked and stared. She was too drunk to experience any emotion: she was using all her strength to steady herself. “Well?” she said.

“It’s Bravo. It’s fucking Bravo. In the hospital, I remembered that I’d fucked Bravo back then, and I wouldn’t have said anything about it, even if I had remembered, because I know Bravo was fucking mortified about it afterwards. Really, you know, I didn’t say anything about it in the hospital because Bravo starts with B, you know, and not with D. But I remembered just now that you used to call him D#####, because he reminded you of that asshole from that movie that came out back when we were all hanging out more. It’s him. It was him.”

“Did I betray— fuck, did I betray—?”

“Somebody told Golf. We all drank a lot back then. Maybe it was you.”

Alfa remembered, now. Bravo had fucked Echo before Echo became Papa, when Bravo was a man and Echo was a man. Echo had left to become a woman, and Bravo

was left as a man. Bravo had felt ashamed, and Alfa had betrayed Bravo by telling Golf about the fucking, about everything. Alfa remembered.

Had Alfa betrayed Bravo *again*, by making his shame public again? This was the question that Alfa asked Whiskey, a midnight passerby, during her stumble homewards.

Had Alfa betrayed Bravo again, by making his shame public in front of two of the people, Papa and Juliet, whom he could have reasonably assumed had left that shame in the past, for good? This was the question that Alfa asked Xray, the lady cop with the scuffed shoes who took Alfa down for drunk-and-disorderly. This was the question that Alfa asked Xray again and again.

“Fuck this Bravo, whoever she is,” slurred Yankee. When asked her name, Yankee slurred *it*, too, and at the same time almost yelled it with the anger of being trapped in the fucking police station. She ended up pronouncing it ~~Y#####~~. Yankee said her name with such rage, as though a name were something imposed on her by others, imprisoning a person by chaining the self to the body with vowels and consonants, as though a name were the only thing in life that could not be escaped. How little Yankee knew.

“Don’t the fuck care about that shit with Bravo, maaaaaan,” said Yankee. “You don’t need Bravo and Bravo does not does not *does not need you*. Forget it.”

In the morning, her fine paid, Alfa found herself outside again. She faced the prospect of going home. Yankee had vomited on her sometime during the night – she had fallen asleep on Alfa’s shoulder, and the vomit must have managed to slip silently out of Yankee’s mouth, because Alfa had slept lightly, and she imagined that any real retching would have waked her – so Alfa walked strangely, leading with one shoulder, trying to tuck the other behind, trying to hide it between her body and whatever building or hedge was she was walking next to.

She had to apologize. She knew this. She couldn’t go forward without apologizing. When she reached her apartment, she smiled at Hotel, who stood sweating in the kitchen, and she tried to explain the vomit, her absence, her cruelty. Hotel seemed uninterested in the things Alfa said. “Take a shower, OK? You’ll feel better after.”

So Alfa walked down the hallway and into the bathroom, threw her shirt into the trashcan underneath the sink, and stepped into the shower. She didn’t use Hotel’s shampoo, even though it was more expensive than her own. By the time she finished drying her hair, Hotel had gone. Alfa sat naked on the couch and placed a call.

“Hi, it’s— Right, it’s me— I felt that I should apologize, for saying the wrong thing in the hospital and for asking about things that no one has any business remembering and— So. Right. I’ll call her later. And I’ll stop by and see him, and— And, sure, I would love to come over on Saturday and have dinner with you and Golf.”

Alfa stood. She realized that she had forgotten to wash the soap out her armpits, and now the little hairs that grew there bothered her, stiff and scummy and starting to itch.

Alfa hated herself, or hated this version of herself. She wanted to be able to steal her roommate's beer and shampoo, to be able to lie, to think of Juliet as Oscar, to think of Papa as Echo, to be able to date herself without recognizing the pity in it, the pity of Romeo.

Alfa hated.

So.

Fuck Alfa, Zulu decided. Zulu would still introduce herself as Alfa. As Alfa, she would go on apologizing, and she would smile at people when she met them. She would give presents to her coworkers and remember nurses' names and thank telephone operators for their time whenever she spoke with them. As Alfa, she would be sure to ask Bravo about Juliet's progress, would remind herself to invite Papa whenever she organized a night out at a Filipino restaurant or at the Elks Club bowling alley everyone liked. But Zulu knew. Zulu knew that Alfa was the mask. Beneath the mask, Zulu would hate and lie and steal and feel miserable, and Zulu would live with Oscar and Echo and Romeo, and, for all of this, Zulu would be the happiest woman in the world.

IN THE PALACE OF THE MOON SULTAN

When I was twenty-five years old, my brother and I spent a day on the beach near our house. Our parents had died two years before – our father killed himself during a course of chemotherapy he'd been undergoing to combat a case of pancreatic cancer, and our mother died in a skiing accident a month and a half later – and though neither my brother nor I had ever planned to live in the town where we'd grown up, after the deaths we chanced into a sort of life there. He did most of the work of executing our parents' estate and befriended one of the county clerks at the tax office, who'd recommended him for a job assessing property tax bills. I chose to stay for a week or two following my mother's funeral, tidying, remembering, but the tidying took longer than I expected it to, and I fell into some work with a friend of the county clerk's, a guy who bred tropical fish and sold them online.

My brother liked his job. He'd always loved maps, and his work let him build a more and more thorough map of our county in his mind, a map made of gradations of value and beauty. He remembered everything, conceits for naming streets in the fishing towns down the coast, the variations in different developers' approaches to amenity

horticulture in the subdivisions up in the hills, which companies planted verbena and red plums, which planted dusty miller and olive trees. I liked my job, too. Winter on the coast measured itself in lengths of gray, and my hours at work were made bright and warm by metal halide lamps and heaters, were given color by the fish themselves, the yellows of the tangs, the reds of the flame angels, the blues and greens and purples of the parrotfish. Time slipped along for both of us. Sometimes we hardly saw each other, and sometimes we spent days in the company of no one else. One day – the house stripped of the last of our parents' belongings, a pile of my brother's tax paperwork next to the little fish tank I kept in the dining room, where two clownfish circled a sea fan – we happened across each other in our kitchen. We decided to spend a day on the beach together.

It was April, and the air was cool enough to keep most people off the beach, but the season wasn't so cold that it made time outside uncomfortable. We walked from the beach access path near our house up the shore to the pier in town, where we bought a couple of cups of coffee. Our pantlegs rolled up, we sat in the sand, looking at the barnacles on the pier's foundations, talking, but not really talking about anything in particular. We stood again and walked past the pier to the headland beyond, jumped from rock to rock along the headland's base, maneuvered our way through low tide to the bit of coast beyond. There, we pulled sea urchins from tidepools and rolled them between our palms, watched crabs picking at the body of a flatfish that had been caught in the shallows, hoped to see the spouts of whales on the horizon. From some beachgrass and the wood of a shipping pallet, we made a little fire. We kneeled and stared. My brother smoked a cigarette. When the fire had burned out, when afternoon began chasing morning into the past, we stood and wandered homewards, climbing the scrub oak flanks

of the headland, because that was the way to make it back, at high tide. On the saddle behind the headland's crest, we paused a moment to catch our breath, and I motioned towards the sea with my chin. My brother nodded, and we struggled up to the lip of the cliff, where poor soil made it impossible for trees to grow. On either side of a runty agave, we sat. My brother finally spoke, or, I suppose, finally said something worth recording, something that didn't deal with local politics or television or the weather or the scenery.

"It's okay, here," my brother said.

"It's okay," I said.

It was. It was okay. A house, taxes, fish, the shore, a car we shared, drinking habits that had resolved themselves with time into a couple of beers a couple of nights a week, a hobby or two each. There was nothing worth minding.

"Do you wonder, though, about—?"

"I guess so."

"What would it be, then?"

"I mean, I guess I'd be in the city, and you'd—"

"No. I meant *could*. What *could* it be?"

"You mean, if none of this, if none of this was—"

"Right, right, if we weren't sitting on this cliff, if this town weren't this town, if our county weren't our county—"

"If there was no ocean, if fire didn't burn—"

"If we weren't down here. If we were up there."

“I guess that nothing we know now would be true. I’d guess we’d obey someone else’s laws.”

“Right, exactly. We’d be elsewhere, we’d be controlled by someone else.”

“We’d be on the moon. We’d be controlled by the Moon Sultan.”

“So—”

“So—”

“Maybe,” my brother said, “we’d be the only three people on the moon, you, me, the Moon Sultan, and you and I—”

“No,” I said. “Sorry. We shouldn’t talk about ourselves. Maybe there should be someone else.”

“There should be someone else,” my brother said.

“Right. The Moon Sultan would share the moon with a traveler, just one traveler, who would find himself traveling across the moon, traveling and traveling, and—”

“He would be lost in the monotony of the moon, jumping across crater after crater, unable to orient himself in the flatness and ceaselessness of the moon’s gray. He would be disoriented among so many craters, each formed in the same way that the craters surrounding it were formed—”

“But he’d see the palace of the Moon Sultan miles out, a mark on the lunar horizon so tall he’d imagine that it must be some natural feature of the landscape, because nothing artificial could be so impressive. Maybe, at first, he’d imagine that the palace of the Moon Sultan was just one of those natural curiosities, the haystack butte, the elephant’s-trunk sandstone arch, the palace-shaped moonmountain. As he approached, though, he’d notice that some of the mountain’s features could not have formed by

chance, and as soon as he saw the palace's buttresses and crenellations and turrets, he would push himself to move faster, because inside—”

“Before he went inside, though, he would stop. He would stare up the palace of the Moon Sultan, and he would see that its walls were built from basalt so porous that, in places, he could see starlight and faint sunlight shining through the walls. He would see that the things about the palace he had noticed earlier, the buttresses, the turrets, were used only a single architectural unit of form, that the whole palace was made from cylindrical vaults, some wide, some narrow, some climbing vertically, some flat with the ground. The palace was hardly some classically-ordered structure. It was just a jumble of cylinders, concentrated chaos, unplanned in everything but its monumentality.”

“The traveler would be thinking already about the Moon Sultan. He would be speculating already about the nature of the palace. Already he would be filling his mind with imagined histories, genealogies, stories passed down through generations about the maniacs and idiots who built the palace so haphazardly. Looking at the palace's furthest-flung passageways, he would imagine the nicknames that the centuries had given to corridors, to ballrooms—”

“But he'd hear a voice, yeah? The Moon Sultan's voice, telling him that he shouldn't stand so long outside, that he should come in, that he shouldn't be afraid about the solidity of palace's construction, because in the palace the force that made walls out of rock was not mortar, was not concrete, was instead the moon's relative lack of gravity. On the moon, the Moon Sultan would say, mortar would be nothing other than ornament. So the traveler would wander into the palace, climbing over the ledge of a window because he wouldn't be able to find an open door. There, stepping deeper into the vault,

he'd see the Moon Sultan, an old man with a stringy beard that spread itself in the thin gravity and hovered around the level of the Moon Sultan's eyes."

"Through the confusion of his beard, the Moon Sultan would speak again, inviting the traveler to tour his palace. They would begin walking, following crooked hallways, taking turns that didn't seem to have any meaning, and the traveler would see that the interior of the palace of the Moon Sultan was not, as he had hoped, decorated with furniture and tapestries and boars' heads, of the accretions of centuries in materials and space. The Moon Sultan would share no family anecdotes, relate no tales of great halls and bedrooms. He simply would simply walk along, a few paces ahead of the traveler, and the traveler would simply follow, through barren hallway after barren hallway, black stone, light filtering through the pores of the palace's basalt."

"And when the Moon Sultan and the traveler had reached the centermost point of the palace, they would come to a closed door, the only door that the traveler had seen. The Moon Sultan would open the door and invite the traveler into the room beyond, a square room, with a low ceiling. The traveler would follow the Moon Sultan in. As soon as the traveler stepped past the threshold, though, the Moon Sultan would step backwards, into the hall, swinging the door shut and locking it in place. The Moon Sultan would let the traveler know that the traveler was his prisoner, now, that there, in the palace of the Moon Sultan, he would live the rest of his life. The traveler would listen to the steps of the Moon Sultan receding down the long hallway, and he would sit and stare upwards and try to identify the stars he could see through the cracks in the ceiling."

"A day would pass, right? And the traveler would hear nothing, no noise made by the Moon Sultan, nothing. And then a week would pass, and the traveler would grow

bored with pacing around the perimeter of his little cell. After a month, the traveler would grow so tired of the darkness, of four walls, of basalt that, even though the walls and ceiling and floor of his cell would seem to admit no exit, he would begin to trace the mortarless joints of the basalt blocks with his fingers, hoping to find some way to escape. The painstaking methodicality of this work would remind him of his time outside, of the infinite path he'd traced across the moon's surface before his arrival at the palace. The traveler would finish testing the joints of the floor, he would finish testing the joints of a first wall, of a second wall, and finally his fingers would come to a block that seemed a little less tightly-wedged than the others. Excited, now, as excited as he'd been when he saw the palace appear on the horizon, he would push. The block would give way a little, and he would push harder, and finally the block would come free from the wall. It would float in the lunar demigravity, hovering at knee-level in a little room beyond—”

“Fuck! Yes! The traveler would climb through the space in the wall that he'd made, and he'd find himself crouching in a little interstice, a sliver of space between the corridors formed by the cylindrical vaults outside. When he looked up, he would see that the ceiling of the space was formed not by keystone and arch but was instead made of jumbled rubble. He would realize that, if he kept burrowing through walls, he might escape the Moon Sultan's palace, might return to the moon's open places. So he would kick blocks from walls and redistribute rubble overhead until he could stand, and then he would push through a next wall until he could squeeze himself into the palace's next little interstitial space—”

“But sometimes, maybe, he would fill hallways and close them off in his efforts, because he would not want the Moon Sultan to discover him during the act of flight from

the palace. He would realize that he needed to rearrange the palace as he escaped it. So he would make hallways of his own, and he would join vaults to one another at steep angles, and he would leave spare rubble floating in corridors. He would never see any sign of the Moon Sultan, though, and he would never hear the Moon Sultan's voice. By the time he abandoned his fear of encountering the Moon Sultan, he would realize that he had lost himself in the palace again, that he could no longer identify the direction he had supposed, earlier, might lead him outside most easily. Now he would change his behaviors, would surrender himself the chance that the Moon Sultan would appear to reimprison him. He would burrow through walls in one direction only, but here he would stumble into another monotony. The tedium of pushing from one little space to the next without concern for the arrangement of other walls, without the diversion of making little traps to catch the Moon Sultan— these things would raise in the traveler a more desperate need than ever to break through the palace's final wall and bound off into the endlessness of the moon again."

"After days, then, after weeks spent tugging stones from walls and pushing himself through gaps, the traveler would come to a wall he was certain was near the outermost limit of the palace of the Moon Sultan. He would force a stone from the wall and look through the opening he'd made, and he would see the Moon Sultan there, alone, in a cylindrical vault, which stood on one end, reaching upwards towards the Earth, which sat high in the sky. There was no doubt that this was the edge of the palace. The light slipping through the pores of this last vault's stones came brighter than it had in rooms deeper inside. The Moon Sultan would stand with his back to the traveler, and the traveler would decide to resist hesitation. He would try to surprise the Moon Sultan with

the speed of his actions, with the force of his determination. So the traveler would begin tugging at the other stones in the wall he faced, making as big a gap as he could, so that he could bolt around the Moon Sultan without obstacle, so that he could reach the terrain beyond. As the traveler created more and more space, the Moon Sultan would do nothing, would merely stand—”

“And then the traveler would pull a stone from near the top of the wall, and as he did this, he would watch as the walls of the vault in which the Moon Sultan stood crumbled, leaving the traveler inside the palace, staring out through a window of his creation, leaving the Moon Sultan outside, surrounded by the suspended rubble of the walls, beard caught in silhouette, a madness of tentacles and shadow caught against the light of the horizonline beyond.

“So—”

“So the Moon Sultan would look at the traveler. The Moon Sultan would turn. The Moon Sultan would begin leaping away across the lunar landscape, jumping across crater after crater. The traveler would understand that the palace was his. He could do the things he chose to, and so he would choose to linger, dreaming already of basaltic boars’ heads mounted on walls, of tapestries made from unusually-shaped blocks of basalt sliced thin and hung from ceilings, of a jumble of construction all his own. Though the traveler would be a little heartened by the prospect of turning the palace of the Moon Sultan into a proper palace, he would be more heartened by this fact: he would know that the Moon Sultan would make his way around and around the moon, that, eventually, the Moon Sultan would stumble across the palace again. The Moon Sultan would climb in through a window. The traveler would welcome him. Already, the

traveler could imagine the Moon Sultan's reactions to the changes he would make, and already, the traveler was excited to see the Moon Sultan made prisoner in the way that prisoners should be made, trapped in a lightless cell with no prospect for escape whatsoever. So the traveler would set himself to work, certain he could avoid lunar monotony, now."

My brother and I sat, staring at the ocean. A fragment of cloud in the sky held the last light of sunset like the filament of an incandescent light bulb just turned off. The awful cheesy gas lamps built along the pier had come on, and on the beach below, an old woman walked two dogs, which fought each other for control of a cloth Frisbee.

"And—"

"And—"

"That's it," my brother said.

"That's how it could be," I said.

We stood, and we felt our way through the dusk, picking our way past agaves and around patches of iceplant until we'd dropped to sea level again. As we followed the oceanfront promenade along the beach to our house, we saw that two harbor seals hauling out onshore. The town was quiet. An ice cream shop and a Thai restaurant stood open but empty, waiting for customers who wouldn't arrive for another month. When we reached our neighborhood, we washed our feet and hands with the garden hose in our front yard, and then we walked through the house, adjusting rheostats until the house glowed the way we wanted it to. I fed my clownfish their daily pinch of dried mysis shrimp. My brother looked through the fridge. We decided to order a pizza, and we ate

two thirds of it before we went upstairs and forgot to floss and climbed into our beds and fell asleep.

The next morning, my brother woke up before I did, was out of the house before I was out of the shower. When I finally made it to the fish operation, I left my bicycle on the ground outside the door to the Quonset hut where we kept most of our aquaria. I checked my boss's email account found that there was an order waiting for me that required in-person delivery. Two lionfish and eight leafy sea dragons, the most expensive animals in our inventory, needed to be transported to a city six hours inland. I called our customer and made arrangements, and I rode my bicycle home and took my father's old car, a station wagon I rarely drove, back to work. When I'd finished preparing the fish for transit and delivery, I drove out of my town, the fishes' Styrofoam cooler seatbelted into the seat next to mine. By the time I made it home, past eleven, I'd learned the lyrics to six or ten of Top 40 songs that were receiving the heaviest radio play, that month. The next weekend, I asked my brother whether he thought I'd ever forget those choruses, those hooks. He supposed I wouldn't.

A couple of months later, most of our stock sold, my boss at the fish operation decided he wanted to shut his business down for a year so that he could go diving in Indonesia. My brother started dating a girl he liked, and I started taking respiratory therapy classes at the community college. By the time I finished my associate's degree, my brother's girlfriend had moved into the house. I moved away to take a job at a hospital in another town, a town at the foot of the mountains, a town I liked a little better than the one where I had grown up, than the town on the coast, with its pier, with its beaches and headlands, with its gas lamps and seals and charcoal-studded sand.

HAREM GIRLS

I am here because I am broken, and the other girls in the harem are here because they are broken, but I am not like them. They are retarded, or they have lost their ability to move, or they never stop speaking in languages the rest of us cannot understand, or they never speak at all. The world broke them before they were born, or it broke them during childhood with war and misery. The world left them as they are, stranded in brokenness, unable to escape it because for them nothing other than brokenness exists. The world did not break me. I broke myself. I left myself blind in one eye and deaf in one ear. I knotted the skin of my stomach with scar. I colored my legs and arms with the red and glassy white of healed burn. I chose to do these things to myself because our sultan cares only for brokenness, for girls whose incapacity and disfiguration comment on his own abilities, on his own perfection of form.

The harem's servant women look at me and they see that I am not like the other girls here, and they whisper, "We will help you. We will help you escape."

When they say these things to me, I never respond.

The other girls came here because someone – a field marshal, a kidnapper, a sister, a child who wished for nothing more fervently than to escape a mother and be passed into the care of an aunt – sold them to one of our sultan’s agents. When they were sold, their sellers took their profits – money, land, two barrels of pitch for a boat in need of time spent in dry-dock – and squandered them on aniseed liquor and lazy years. I came here because I sold myself, to a man whose tongue was white with thrush. When I sold myself, I took my profits – our sultan’s agent agreed to give me his hunting dog, and an old goose he’d bought that day, and ten last minutes of freedom – and I squandered them, too. I released the dog, which killed the goose and dragged its body into dry brush. Then I spent my minutes sitting, listening to the dog enjoying its meal. I wondered whether I would recognize, by sound alone, the moment when the dog tore into the fat of the goose’s liver and discovered an even-more-intense species of delight. When I stood, I’d recognized nothing – no yelp of joy, no protective growl – and still I do not know whether the dog had made no sound or whether it had not yet found the liver, tangled as it must have been in so much feather and gristle. I chose not to strain my ears when the agent and I rode away on his donkey.

When we began our journey towards the capital, we rode through the territory I had been forced to accept as *home*. Late summer breathed dust onto undersized melons, and tangles of grapevines choked each other at the bottoms of streambeds. Boulders charred by old cropfires cluttered rectangular fields and left the rows of soupweed and barley crooked. Skinny roosters and blind cats slept in the branches of dead poplars, too

weak to fight one another for space or food. Families lived at the bottoms of wells, in abandoned granaries, in ravines carved by winter floods, in places where at least some moisture lingered, where at least the air was cool. From some hole in the ground came screams of childbirth.

The agent and I did not speak. Whenever he lifted his gaze from the stretch of road just in front of the donkey's hoofs, he stared at the sky. Everything around us – the stars that stained the air with light after sunset, the clean scent of so much dust, the yipping and barking of kit foxes – was coarse in the way that pure things are coarse, so the agent must have been dreaming instead of the finery of corrupt things: the bite of bad liquor in one of the capital's bars, the cloying sweetness of the almost-rotten peach served after the bottle has been drained, the scratch of an instrument played with a frayed bow or chipped fingernails, the huge disgusting belly and terrifying strength of an old prostitute. I stared at neither road nor sky. I kept my eyes fixed on the landmarks I recognized.

Once, in a village, there, a village with enough money to light two lamps at night, I touched the corner of a piece of shattered tile, traced its glazing with dirty thumbtips, heard a merchant's story. In the capital, the merchant said, whole rooms were paved with tiles like that one, iznik majolica azulejo, and in those rooms, the ugly things I knew – marsh flowers, frog-eating birds, ruined buildings, brushfires – were transformed by paint and kiln and architect into beautiful things. Later, near the base of that hillside, there, I followed a soldier and my father's still-unmarried cousin to the edge of the basement of a collapsed house. The soldier told my father's cousin about the harem that our sultan kept in the capital, about our sultan's love for hairy foreigners and for girls without eyelids.

The soldier told her about the sound of the harem fountains, audible through high windows, and about the daily deliveries of cornelian cherries and greengage plums, imported from countries better than ours. The soldier spoke of my father's cousin's unsuitability for the harem, told her that her body, the perfect body, two eyes, four limbs, would be imperfect there. The soldier said that, in his world, perfection came in only one form – soft black hair as lustrous as snakeskin, a shy smile, sweat that smelled like dew on pinebark – but in the harem, perfection came in any form that showed too much of something, or too little. In the soldier's world, perfection existed at only a single point, only at the center of things, but in the harem, perfection existed at the edges of everything, along the line that traced the furthestmost extremities of the world, the line that marked the end of the finite and the beginning of the infinite. The soldier said that he wanted my father's cousin more than he wanted the harem girls and the life-forever-death-forever they straddled.

A month later, later still, I watched from the branches of an apricot tree. My father's cousin had been discovered with the soldier by my father and his brothers, and during the fit of familial rage that followed, just at the moment my father took out his knife, my father's cousin, barred from escaping through our house's doors by the men of my family, squeezed herself through a window in the kitchen and ran away into the scrub. For two days, for three days, none of us saw her, but when she snuck from wherever she'd been hiding, I noticed, and I followed her up the slope of a hill to the old orchard. She stuffed pieces of broken glass into the flesh of tiny apricots. She swallowed the fruits whole. The next day, she came home, and when she coughed up blood our family took pity on her, lamented her sudden illness, so terrible, so strange. The next

week, when she died, stomach bloated, we forgave her. Joy at our forgiveness must have shattered her, wherever she was, shattered her like no other joy ever had, ever could.

I decided then. Violence and the pleasure that follows— those were the things I believed in, though I knew that between the violent act and the moment of pleasure came waiting, waiting, sometimes an eternity of waiting.

In the harem, our sultan prefers that we wait. This is what we are meant for, waiting. We wait to eat, days between meals. We waited a week, once. We wait for the servant women to come in to clean the harem. The weeks gather in dirt and odor around our ankles and in our noses. We wait for our sultan, too, and we wait for him longer than we wait for anything else. He is conducting business of state, he is hunting in a nearby forest, he is away at war, countries distant, and we wait for him, for months, for years. After we have waited for so long, for all of these things, our sultan supposes that we will find delight in everything that comes to us. In this, he is correct. The girls scream when food arrives, and they savor the first days of a recently-emptied latrine with a pleasure whose intensity can hardly be measured, and when our sultan enters the harem or dispatches a secretary to fetch one of the girls to be brought to him, they break themselves with their desire for him. If they are retarded, they try to recite verse composed by the poets of love, and end up confused and crying. If they cannot move, they shudder involuntarily, and they feel the hurt that shuddering brings them. If they speak continuously and unintelligibly, they yell themselves hoarse. If they never speak, they close their eyes and are taken up and away from themselves by their anticipation. Sometimes, if our sultan or his secretary chooses one of the retarded girls, or one of the

foreigners, or me, these quiet girls never find themselves again, and they stand for days, for weeks, and they grow thinner and weaker, and finally their bodies follows them into absence.

I was asleep when the agent and I arrived in the capital. He woke me and I found myself in a rented room. Our sultan had traveled to one of the frontiers of our country, the agent said, to encourage the people of another country to rebel against their sultan. We would have to wait until our sultan returned before I could be inspected, before the agent could complete his sale of me. We might wait weeks, the agent said. We might wait months. We begin waiting now, he said.

The agent counted his days in bottles of brandy, and when he was drunk, he would mutter things to me. He muttered about his donkey, hoofs eaten by fungus in the piss-soaked sawdust of the courtyard outside, or about his first wife, dead, whose hands had been as big as his, or about his second wife, alive, whose name he sometimes forgot, or about his third wife, alive, who'd been kicked in face by the donkey when its hoofs were still hard, whose nose had been broken, who brayed when she sneezed, as though she had become part donkey when the donkey made itself master of her. I listened, but I never spoke. I had nothing to say about myself. I had only questions about the harem, but I could not ask any of them because I knew that I could not seem too eager, knew that I could do nothing but act *discovered*, act *dragged*.

We had arrived in dry weather, but during our second month in the room it began to rain. The dampness in the air coaxed the scent of ash from the room's bedspread. The voices of children chasing each other through the mud and screaming happily slipped through the wall that abutted the courtyard. My hands never seemed dry. The walls of

the room, the room's floor, all of its furnishings had been painted with some thin brown dye, and everything I touched left my skin the weak color of bloodstained muslin washed and washed again. Though I tried to fix a picture of the capital in my head, I could not assemble the fragments I was able to collect with my senses into any whole that made sense. Everything was cacophony, old smoke, new moss, rumor of gunpowder fires in abandoned factories, rumor of flood, the fear of famine, and always always the expectation of wealth. The agent chose to spend the money he still had on liquor. By our third month in the room, he fed me only lentil stew thickened with sawdust. I grew so thin that the scar on my stomach shrank until it was no bigger than the size of my hand. I grew so pale that the echo of burn in the skin of my legs and arms lost its color, no longer looked red, looked pitiful, not violent. Dry days, I supposed I could hear the sound of rain in my deaf ear. I worried that our sultan would not find me appealing. I worried that he would recognize in me the depth of my desperation. My worrying left me unable to eat, unable to walk.

When our sultan returned to the capital, then, when the agent came in through the door with a bottle of wine half undrunk because our need to move was so urgent, the agent loaded me onto the back of a borrowed donkey for the journey to our sultan's palace. Though I was awake, I felt so ill that I had little chance to perceive much of the capital. I caught a little – the impossibly bitter scent of overcharred eggplant, the whining of spring mosquitoes, the grime coating the tiles ornamenting the portico arches of domed buildings – but my stomach hurt and my throat was dry and I spent most of my attention trying not to vomit with the donkey's swaying. Once we reached the palace, we were ushered to the harem's first room. I was tired, and my vision slipped in and out of

focus, and all I could sense was color: the poor blue of the light that came through the windows' old stained glass, the clean red of freshly-swept terra cotta tile on the floor, the green and orange of the iznik tile on the walls, which looked sick whenever a cloud passed across the sun and dimmed the room, the amber of a cut topaz, fallen from a ring or from a necklace, hiding in a crack in the floor's grout. Did I moan a little? Did my blind eye weep? I don't know, I can't remember, but I must have seemed broken enough, shriveled, marred in the ways that I am, because when I could see again, when I could focus again, the agent had been paid, and the servant women were feeding me scraps of the squab that our sultan had served the night before, at a feast celebrating his victorious campaign on the frontier. I was surrounded, now, by women more broken than I was. When I regained the ability to walk, I moved from one room of the harem to the next room concentrating on the sensation of the tile under my bare feet, and I recognized that I deserved the silk clothing I had been given, the copper rings that turned my fingers green. I recognized that I had waited long enough.

During my first months in the harem, for the whole span of my first year here, I could hardly understand the things I saw around me. I knew about tiles. I knew about paint. But I could not comprehend the immensity of the air kept captive by the domes of our sultan's palace, could not look up at frescoed ceilings without at least a little fear. When I ran my fingers across the flat surfaces of the pictures of the capital made from fragments of differently-colored marble pieced together on the floor of one of the harem's rooms, I could not believe that stone could be cut so precisely, arranged so marvelously. I wandered through the harem, and I ate until I was satisfied with the

stretch and fit of the scars around my body. I lay still for days, concentrating on the sensation of the silk bunched around my waist and at my shoulders, which hissed its softness so easily I felt almost menaced by the richness of the fabric. When I was too full to eat any more food, when my muscles ached from so much time lying still, I listened to our sultan's secretaries talking at the harem's threshold. They spoke of wives and mistresses, of sons dead in war, of virtueless daughters. They spoke of our sultan's horses, of the progress of the construction of a new pleasure pavilion near the capital's harbor. They spoke of money and lust. I came to learn the names of the things I had wondered about, the names of the palace's architectural features, its decorative techniques, its craftsmen's skills long since lost. Soon, I could utter those words. Pendentives, gesso, pietre dure. Even before I was able to say those things, though, I had realized this. Those domes, those pictures, that marble— they were mine even if I could not name them. Understanding did not matter at all.

During those years, I thought, sometimes, about all of the things I used to understand, things which I used to know how to do. I could husk barley and grind the berries into meal. I could plant soupweed from seed and I could graft the branches of apple trees onto the trunks of mulberries. I could dig frogs from the winter mud where they slept in colder months. I could speak about all of these things, could have told my sisters, my nephews, how to do them. After my first years in the harem, though, I realized that speech no longer served any purpose for me.

In the harem, I can speak but I can hardly talk. I can say things that would have been intelligible to my parents or to our sultan's agent, that our sultan or one of his secretaries would understand, but the harem girls are unable to understand me, and the

rooms and luxuries have never been anything other than mute. If the servant women bring in remnants of some particularly delicious meal, if one of the other girls steals one of my pieces of clothing, I might whisper a word or two to myself, of happiness, of anger, but usually I stay silent, wandering through the harem along a path that has become as familiar to me as my body is. I walk from the room of the low cabinets decorated with intarsia designs of tulips and hummingbirds to the room of the pillows beaded in patterns taken from our sultan's father's astronomers' records of the processions of the stars, and I look at these things. In the room with the seven-tiered marble fountain, where we are fed, I wash my hands and swallow grapes that have gone soft in the heat. I am thankful for the grapes and for the water and for the music of the guitar filtering through the harem's windows from some other part of our sultan's palace, but because there is no point in doing so, I do not express my thanks. I remain silent.

The first time our sultan arranged for me to visit him, one of his secretaries stood near the gilded gate at the harem's entrance and grabbed my sleeve when I walked past. He blindfolded me and led me past the harem's threshold, and he locked the gate behind us. I followed him, stumbling up and down sets of stairs, shuffling my feet through the dirt of gardens, until we reached the part of the palace where our sultan had established his quarters. In an antechamber so small that the two of us barely fit standing, the secretary slipped the blindfold from my face and pressed the palm of his hand against my mouth. Don't talk, he said. One of the secretary's ears was missing, and the hair that grew around the patch of scar on that side of his head looked thin and brittle. Don't talk.

The secretary pushed me through a narrow door on one side of the antechamber, and I stumbled a little before catching my footing. I looked up and saw our sultan, whose face was not the handsome face I'd heard described in song, whose body was not the strong body I'd heard the poets celebrate. Our sultan's skin sagged around his chin, and yellow had broken into the whites of his eyes. His thick fingers bulged around his rings, and he had chewed his bottom lip so badly that half of it was scab. But he had both of his eyes and all of his fingers, both of his arms and all of his toes, and the skin of his body was unstained by scar, unlike my body, unlike the secretary's. I stayed standing, and our sultan looked at me, and when he motioned to me, I sat next to him. His hands traveled across my body, unwrapping the length of silk I wore. When I was naked, he stared at the parts of me that I had marred with fire, with knives, with the tip of an awl. I did not know what was expected of me. I hardly cared. Our sultan reached out again and traced with his fingertips the hard smoothness of the burn up my legs, followed the path of blade through the labyrinth of scar on my stomach, pressed a little against the tiny fist of tissue in the socket of my blind eye.

How it must have hurt, he said. What pain you must have known.

I did not respond. Our sultan was wrong, but I would not have let him know that, even if I had been permitted to speak. The fire had hurt, and the knife and the awl had, too, but I couldn't feel that pain any longer, because pain is something that men and women are built to forget. Now I could feel nothing, only a little pressure where our sultan touched me.

Our sultan supposed that I had been transported by my pain, transported into a world of intense feeling he could know only in death, that he could only come close to

knowing, now, by coming close to his harem girls, but he was wrong. I had been transported, but I had not been transported far, away from the countryside, out of misery, into a state of satisfaction that was exceptional only in its plainness, in its tolerability.

Whenever our sultan returns to the capital from one of his expeditions abroad, he brings with him oddities and wonders common in foreign lands but uncommon in our country. These he gives to his secretaries, who leave them in the harem for the harem girls to claim. When I walk through the harem, I stare. A fingerless girl clutches a piece of turquoise the size of a cannonball between her palms. A blue-haired mumbler who comes from a country on the shores of a sea few of our sultan's navymen have ever reached feeds celery leaves to her crimson pheasant through the bars of its spherical cage. A four-foot-tall beast with a forked tongue keeps herself wrapped in the skin of a white bear. The animal must have been ferociously strong. I count the bullet holes ripped into the thing, six or eight through the flanks, one or two through the neck— in those spots, where the pelt is torn, it's impossible not to notice the color of the forked-tongued beast's skin, yellow like rotten butter. I keep the trophy I picked from the pile, seven seeds shaped like little moons, strung on a length of silk around my neck.

When I see these gifts, I wonder about the world. The luxuries of the harem are real luxuries – guinea hens boiled alive in wine, silks colored with powdered lapis lazuli – but I know now that the world outside is a world where canyons are filled with uncut turquoise, where birds the color of undiluted pigment roost in forests, where bears the size of water buffaloes snap men's necks with their jaws. The harem girls around me wander and mumble and roll back and forth across the floor, try to hide their jewels and

curiosities in the corners of cabinets, on high window ledges. They cannot understand the things they own. They cannot imagine that all of these things are fragments of a world that surely contains wonders even more wondrous, curiosities even more curious. I understand. So I pace through the halls of the harem, and I stare. I have been caught by desire again, caught for the first time since I touched a piece of cracked tile, since I held a blade and started a fire.

The servant women bring us our scraps and leave us in our filth, and when they come in, they whisper to me the same thing they always whisper. “We will help you. We will help you escape.”

Now I whisper back.

They pull me into a corner and name a price for me.

So I begin waiting again, but now when I wait, my time is so busy that hours pass like minutes and days pass like hours. When hot weather sets the harem girls drifting into sleep, I creep through the harem and pry loose precious gems from rings. When harem girls complain of toothache, when I notice them wincing when they chew, I tilt their mouths open and take the gold teeth from their mouths, promising them an end to their pain. I hide gold and stones in my pockets and under my tongue, and when my pockets are full, when I am transformed into a mumbler, I continue to turn the harem into payment. I collect swatches of spare silk large enough to be sold at market and hide them in the folds of my own clothing, I beg the sultan’s secretaries for spare coins and hide these in the thick braids of my hair. I make from the parts of the harem a little harem of my own, a harem kept on my body. When I have collected enough, I hiss at a servant

woman, my mouth full of chrysoprase and agate, and I sell myself again. The moment has come.

One of the servant women hides me, bundled in dirty linens. With a companion she drags me out of the harem on the sledge used to truck rotten scraps of food into the garden where our sultan's magpies wait to eat. I creep through doorways and come to a wall grown thick with vines. I clamber until I can stand, and I look out at capital, on my own, at last. Blind in one eye, deaf in one ear, skin knotted with scar, arms and legs burned and discolored, I know already that I am not like the residents of the capital, who are thin and vicious, lips stained brown by tobacco. I will not want to stay for long. I look at the capital's hills, and at its ravines, and my gaze settles on the harbor. I decide. I will walk down to the harbor, quiet at dawn, the sailors sleeping off the week's worth of wine they drank the night before. I will choose a ship. I will climb down into its hold. There, I will wait again, yet again, will wait longer still. When the ship arrives in some new country, I will slip out and make my way onto land again. I will discover whether the people in that country are like me or whether they, too, are unlike me. Whether they are or whether they aren't, I will find the best things there, monkeys, perfumes, and I will come to own those things. I will seduce for them, steal them, purchase them outright, murder for them. I will move again, on horseback, by sleigh, and I will find the best things in the next country I come to, fireworks, knives, and I will come to own those things, too. I will move again, and I will come to own more and more, and I will make from those things the best self a person could own, a self even a sultan would want to own.

Maybe our sultan will meet me, one day. Maybe he will feel content that he owned me, once, when I was one of his harem girls. If he felt content, if he did not want too terribly to own me again, I would know. I would be better than him. I would be sultan, and he would be nothing, a harem girl, happy with what he had, happy with just enough, broken and made oblivious by just a little luxury.

FOR A WALK

I.

Lease signed, furniture arranged, plates unpacked, dishwasher tested, half a dozen still-unopened boxes stacked in the bedroom closet, and at last there is the matter of the walk. I open the door – *my* door – and step out. The darkness holds enough warmth to raise a sweat. From somewhere, there comes the after-sunset smell that means spilled lighter fluid and settling ashes and the night’s last beer, even though none of these scents are quite discernable on their own. In all of this I feel welcome. I feel the promise of this new neighborhood. I jog a few steps across the gravelscape that separates the door to the apartment – the door to *my* apartment – from the street, and I look left, and I look right, and neither direction beckons more than the other. I remember the joy of this moment. For a week, for a month, whenever I go out for a walk, I am nothing more than a discoverer. If my thoughts are interrupted by an unexpected cul-de-sac or by the crawling underskin chill of nerves raised by streets where shattered bottlescaping

replaces gravelscaping or lawn, then I have learned something still. There is pleasure, anyway, in abandoning oneself to the simple tracing of the contours on the map.

II.

Boxes collapsed and stored, postcards tacked to walls, stove dirtied enough to warrant a cleaning, a friend invited for a glass of wine, bathtub finally used on the one night cool enough for it, and summer has loaded its heat into asphalt and sidewalks. When I step out, the warmth is thick enough to swallow. The map has divided itself, now. From my door stretch walks which seem as distinct from one another as countries on different continents.

To the left: two blocks, and a right turn, and through the tunnel that crosses under the freeway. There, the zoning laws become freer. The asphalt breaks and gives way to a network of private roads, some once-paved, some never-paved, some less roads than absences-of-trash. This walk requires its walker to guide himself, past overgrown tamarisk and saltbush, through sagging chain-link fences, over old flood channels cut into open stretches of ground. Some houses, here, have been abandoned, and some are fuller than they've ever been, home to young Latin American men desperate to be in this city, home to young Eastern European women desperate to be anywhere else. A walker can duck through holes in fences and peek through the windows of sheds and outbuildings, and there he can find crowds of refrigerators, jumbles of scrap metal tangled floor-to-ceiling, well-kept horses sleeping in clean hay. If he wants to, a walker can connect the most beautiful places to one another, can look in on horses and follow a flagstone path around the property of the house with the butterfly garden and the wind chimes and end

his walk on the far side of the vacant lot at the top of the hill, the lot with the view of the mountains beyond. If he wants to, he can connect the ugliest places, can pick at the rust of the abandoned RV, can carve his name into the burnt wall of a house that caught fire, can dodge nails and screws on the grounds of construction sites, model houses left half-built on spec that failed to fulfill its promises. This walk instructs its walker to choose a lesson from so much debris, but choosing is hardly difficult, there.

Or, to the left: ten blocks, past the cavernous glare of a strip-mall parking lot, and a second left turn, across a six-lane road. In the neighborhood there, sprinklers and lawn swallow the noise of the thoroughfare behind. All that is audible is the hum of money, cars purring, unmolested by the screeches and clicks that signal poor repair, hedgerows echoing hours afterwards with the buzz of electric trimmers. Old mulberries catch the wind, and the whisper of broad leaf rubbing against broad leaf makes the air feel cooler, somehow, makes the sound of shade, so that even at night a walker feels sheltered from everything above, everything outside. In that neighborhood, the streets meet each other at right angles, and the blocks, dozens of them, speak with the same vocabulary: the machined buzz of the lawns and hedges, the whisper of the mulberries, the driveways protected from the dripping-down of motor oil. Every block looks like every other block, and any turn could be any other turn. This order inspires the walk and frees it from itself, gives a walker a measure of space to think, to be safe in so much near-quiet, whatever the truth, whatever the noise, of the neighborhood's happiness or sadness, hidden behind garage doors, always closed, muffled by curtains, always drawn.

Or, to the right: four blocks, and a left turn, and at night a hop over a wall. In this stretch of space, the city council has developed an old watercourse into a public park

where the acid scent of puke always rises from the remains of one-shot-too-many. Concrete paths wind through stands of bulrush. The turns come so frequently that they lose meaning, and the walk loses its direction and dissolves into time that proceeds not in seconds or minutes but instead in surprises, groups of greasy mallards startled awake, already-cracked plastic broken further underfoot, the shuddering horror that accompanies the resolution of what had been an inorganic form – some sod, a rock – into the shivering or yawning of a homeless man or a destitute woman. The panic of disorientation stretches seconds into minutes, minutes into hours, but the calm of not being afraid of being lost can squeeze hours into minutes, too. A walker might emerge after fifteen minutes convinced of the lateness of the hour, taken by an awareness of the need to sleep, or he might emerge after two hours, cognizant only then of the lateness of the hour, startled by the sight of the moon so far from the spot where he'd thought it should be, worried by the proximity of morning but thrilled at the evaporation of so much time, the dissolution of so much self into such welcoming oblivion.

Or, to the right: two blocks, and a right turn, and between always-open gates once kept closed by a guard paid by a homeowner's association, since dissolved. Here, the roads curve with leisurely sweep, and the houses sprawl but keep low to the ground. This is suburb consumed by city, suburb of Oldsmobiles with deflated tires abandoned in driveways, suburb of old men who have forgotten what this neighborhood used to be, of young mothers who have never known. Every house, here, was once identical to every other house— an ornamental well out front, a semicircular driveway, a porte-cochere shading the kitchen door, a front door with an oval-shaped window fitted with the same stained-glass, two gila woodpeckers nesting in the trunk of a saguaro, a row of

ornamental sandstone boulders along the house's street frontage, an olive tree behind shading the backyard gate. But the houses are different, now. Porte-cocheres have been converted into garages, into spare bedrooms, have burned down, scorched beams unremoved from their concrete bases. Ornamental wells have been repaired, or they've been dismantled, bricks taken and reused to build mailbox-stands or ramps for skateboarders. Lawn has given way to gravelscaping, to AstroTurf, to bare dirt. This walk cannot know whether its walker should dream of that time, then, when a developer's vision could be replicated again and again and again, when purity of vision was possible, or whether he should celebrate this time, now, the pieces of that vision scattered, their trajectories traced into good repair and bad repair, into health and worry. This walk cannot be certain, given the lazy meandering of roads that intersect without reason, whether it is a walk that has somewhere to take its walker, or whether it is a walk that exists only in delirious aimlessness, whether this neighborhood means something, or whether this neighborhood is nothing but a beautiful trap.

My sweat is up enough to hold the polyester tag of my t-shirt to the back of my neck. I close my door and lock it, and I step across the gravelscape. I turn right, and before I'm able to settle on my opinion of this evening's weather, comforting heat, aggravating heat, I turn right again. I'm facing the rusted-open gates of this neighborhood I can always imagine making mine, this neighborhood I can never understand.

III.

Two coworkers invited over for dinner, the dishevelment and sweat-limpness of sheets gone too long unwashed, an overused air conditioner fixed by a landlord only after too many complaints, a four-a.m. stumble home from a night of celebration with a boss and three new clients, compact fluorescent light bulbs installed throughout, and summer tires of itself and wanders away southwards. I have lost the fear of scorched fingertips that made me approach my doorknob with hesitation, and the question of long pants is a question again. Jeans rolled twice at the ankles, shoelaces tightened and reknotted, I brush past the desert spoon blooming in the gravelscape and turn right, and turn right again.

This is the walk I always take, now, because the others I used to take – through the curtain of urine-stench hung across the entrance to the tunnel under the freeway, past the strip mall that still housed a Circuit City when I moved here, into the park where I once found a mouse whose desperation for sweetness had trapped it inside a mostly-empty two-liter bottle of Coke – were too easy to know. Freedom, order, madness. This neighborhood, though, ranch houses, *estates*, is sprawl and emptiness and authenticity and charm, and I can never predict precisely what I might come across, here. Two weeks ago, in weekend daylight, the streets lined with the trash left out for Monday dawn pickup, I found a metal garbage can filled with half-melted plastic toys, trikes, dollhouses, waterguns, shapes deformed and colors denatured. Three days ago, in weekday twilight, I tripped over a little plaque left at the edge of the street. I picked the thing up, not knowing whether it had been discarded or whether it had been lost or whether it had been placed on that spot with some sort of purpose. On the plaque were a

picture of a dog and a sentimental poem about a dog's certainty of admittance to heaven and three little locks of fur cut from a just-euthanized body, seal gray, silk white, dull black. My speculations about these things are fruitless. These toys, this fur could say anything – were the toys burned intentionally? was the dog old when it died? – but they say, it says nothing. The muteness of the things I see leaves me mute, too. I am lost in specificity. So I return home and come back again a day later, three days later, at night, before sunrise, sometimes.

Tonight, the gates offer me a string of half-deflated balloons struggling against gravity, a Xeroxed sign pointing the way to a party that must have happened a night ago, or earlier, and I follow the curves of the streets until I reach the house. Another sagging balloon, held by its remaining helium halfway up the length of its tether, is tied to a mailbox. The recycling is out, and in the bins I see eighty or a hundred empty beer cans, ten or twelve drained wine bottles. Was this an engagement party, a wake, a twentyfirst birthday party, a fourteenth birthday party, the celebration of a promotion, the celebration of a divorce? Who sorted and carried so many cans, so many bottles, from kitchen garbage can to curbside bins? What might that person have thought about so much aftermath? Was he taken by morning-after melancholy, convinced by the trash that the best world is the world that has vanished, that the cans' emptiness was a symbol of the emptiness of everything else in the world, drained and cast-off, life transformed into artifact? Or might he have turned his attention from the trash to the pleasantness of the morning? Did he look at the primrose near the garage, and did his hangover give way, for half a minute, to a little thought about the continuously-renewed wonder of the world, about joy, the infinite trellis of the world, up which we cannot stop growing?

I can guess the answers to these questions, and I can invent answers of my own, but I cannot be certain of those answers, cannot even be just-certain-enough to believe them. Other places, I am able to know, verb intransitive, even if I cannot know everything, verb transitive. Here, I am capable of neither.

IV.

A string of sixteen-hour days spent at the office, a stack of empty frozen-pizza boxes piled under the sink, vegetables gone bad in the refrigerator, houseplants dead for lack of water, carpets left unvacuumed for too long, and the scent of rot and dust is everywhere, but at least I can leave windows open to let in new air, now. Autumn has filed down the edges of the days, and I try to wander out-of-doors whenever I have the chance to. Keys in hand, door locked, I turn right, and I turn right. The sky – crowded elsewhere by the rooflines of apartment complexes, of two-story houses – opens and flattens, and again I find myself suspended in familiar confusion, of time, of detail. The sense is one of despair.

I pass an arsonist's dream of a palm tree, an intensely brushy thing, and I wonder whether the it's meant to look like that, a shaggy beast kneeling, or whether it's been abandoned, whether, somewhere a pair of hedge clippers sits forgotten, blades rusted together. I pass the spot in the road where I nearly stepped on a scorpion, once, where I stopped to stare, where I stood for minutes, waiting for the scorpion to move, wondering whether it would have stung me if I had stepped on it or whether it would have stayed still even as it died underfoot. I pass the house whose ornamental front-yard fountain is still dry, and I wonder whether the house's owners could still turn the thing on, if they

wanted to. Lining every street are landmarks of my inability to do as much as suppose I know anything, and when I walk past them I am stuck asking myself the same set of questions. I follow the sweep of this road and turn into the next street I come to, and I see a man standing in his lawn.

“Hey,” he says, pleasantly enough, as though he’s been waiting for me. He’s wearing scuffed black basketball sneakers and cutoff sweatpants that stop just above the knee, and his Super Bowl XXVI t-shirt is faded and stretched. He’s thirty-five, maybe. “Why’d you come from that way?”

“Sorry?” I slow down, a little.

“Bus stop would’ve been closer if you came from that way.” He points in the direction I’m walking.

“I don’t think you— I’m not sure I—”

The guy starts laughing, and I start laughing. I’m relieved that he’s relieved, that he’s recognized that I’m not whomever he had supposed I was. I’ve passed his house, walked past the edge of his lawn, and now my shoes are raising dust from his neighbor’s gravelscaping.

“Alright, then. Take care,” I say.

“Fuck, man, come on, buddy. Come inside,” he says, still laughing, a little.

I crane my neck so I can face him, but I keep moving. “I’m really not,” I say.

“I’m really not whoever. But sorry.” I turn again and already my eyes are fixed on the sky, cirrus clouds racing in ahead of the next front.

I know that I could stop, could try to chat, I know that I could try to figure what was what, determine who I had been meant to be, but that isn't what I want to do. I want to be enough, on my own.

“Whatever,” the guy shouts at me. “Faggot.”

V.

An offer of promotion extended, the possibility of reassignment to a new city hinted at, a stuttered request for a little time to think, a day spent at home, and I wonder whether I need to begin cataloguing a set of objects and memories from my time here that will be able to generate nostalgic feeling three years from now, five years from now, that will be able to sustain the weight of deathbed reminiscence. But nostalgia is easy. A failed attempt at bonsai gardening, a season of overdrinking, a couple of nights out with an acquaintance who later died— from those things any person can build a world. I wrap an unneeded scarf around my neck – the trees have shed their leaves, though the air is hardly chilly – and I step out. I lock my door, and I turn right, and I turn right.

There are houses for sale, in this neighborhood, that I might be able to buy, foreclosures with moldy insulation I might squeeze meaning from for years. But there are houses in other cities, too, cities where my firm has offices, and I could live in one of those places, in a snowy city with brick sidewalks, in a city whose town council members are mad for flowers, where spring whispers in freesias and summer shouts in millionbells, where autumn and winter hide in greenhouses and orangeries. I keep walking. Someone's car has been broken into. A spray of green-tinted auto glass catches

afternoon light in a crack in the road. The street I'm walking on is Wagon Wheel Trail. The sky is empty. The houses are shingled. I can see a couple of pick-up trucks, a few coupes, a station wagon, a dirty RV parked in a driveway. Two dogs bark at me when I walk past their stretch of cinderblock wall, though I can't see them and am not certain how they know I am passing. I can continue seeing, continue noting. There is a bullet casing in the mouth of a culvert. Two mourning doves sit on a branch, a hand's width separating them from each other. I can see, but I cannot name anything here, cannot fix description to purpose, cannot remember. I don't understand why. Is this the world, this ununderstanding, or is it something alien, or is it just confusion? Should I give myself to this? Can I hope to understand, some day, or should I never hope to understand? Or should I run for magical elsewhere?

Two days later, I step out of my house and lock my door. I walk from my front step to my car, and I drive to work, and I knock on the window of my boss's office. I am honored to accept my promotion, I say. And might I take my new position in some other city, some other country, somewhere better than this?

VITA

Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Matthew Swetnam

Degrees:

Bachelor of Arts, History, 2006
Brown University

Thesis Title: Monarchs in Love and Other Stories

Thesis Examination Committee:

Chairman, Douglas Unger, M.F.A.
Committee Member, Dave Hickey
Committee Member, Timothy Erwin, Ph.D.
Graduate Faculty Representative, Joseph A. Fry, Ph.D.