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Talking to strangers: Stories

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TALKING TO STRANGERS: STORIES

by

Heather Ann Jacobs

Bachelor of Arts
University of Washington
1996

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

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

**Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
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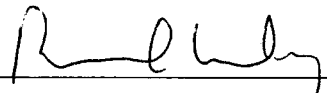
Heather Ann Jacobs

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Talking to Strangers: Stories

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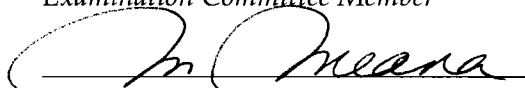
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ABSTRACT

Talking to Strangers: Stories

by

Heather Ann Jacobs

Richard Wiley, Examination Committee Chair
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The stories in this manuscript are united by the mystery of human relationships and our often fragile connection to others. “A Father’s Story” reveals what happens when a father and daughter are at odds politically. “The Box” explores a woman’s search for self in an outgrown relationship. Through glimpses into a scientist’s life at different ages, “Drift” tells of his attempt to comprehend the bizarre life of the deep sea and of his dark family history. “*Tropiezo*” is told from the perspective of a young Mexican woman who comes to question her position in life through a seemingly insignificant incident in the town square. “Da Gamba” focuses on thwarted homosexual longing and fragmentation of the self. Finally, a teacher seeks confirmation of herself and her abilities in “Semipalatinsk.” Pushing herself to overcome an old fear of diving, she only encounters new fears more difficult to name.

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A FATHER'S STORY

Santiago, Chile 1973

César Navarro paced the Persian carpet, waiting for his daughter. He brushed back the curtain of his second-story window and looked out. Lace caught on his dry skin. Below, taxis sped by in the rain, spraying puddles of water in white arcs onto the sidewalk. Buses blew off plumes of exhaust. Behind him, the housekeeper, Lourdes, polished the mirror above the liquor service, then moved to dust the baby grand piano that had belonged to Navarro's late wife. A blue and white bus stopped across the street and Ana got off, walking away with her head bowed as if she were plowing through a hurricane. Navarro watched his daughter disappear in the crowd of people with umbrellas, red cardigan fading through layers of gray coats.

"Why doesn't she come in for tea?" Navarro stuffed his hands in the pockets of his sweater. "She changes buses right here!"

Lourdes stopped dusting. "Did you argue again, César?"

"It's none of your business."

Navarro closed the curtains and moved from the window. He poured a glass of scotch from the decanter, his reflection stark in the mirror Lourdes had just cleaned. He thought of desperate men in hotel bars,

mirrors magnifying slumped shoulders and long, sagging jowls. Navarro stood up straight. A clean-shaven man in a stylish sweater. Still, drink brought the picture down to depths he did not wish to contemplate.

Lourdes worked without a sound, straightening books, pulling them out to dust the shelves and replacing them again with the spines even. He watched her work with his back to her, observing his surroundings as one observes a barber shop, in glassy reflection. She had gained weight over the years, but a shadow of her youthful figure remained, and now Navarro glimpsed movements—the way she reached up, still limber, to dust a high shelf—that uncannily belonged to a younger woman. She kept her hair dyed rusty red. Last year he and Lourdes had celebrated their seventieth birthdays together. She had worked for him since Ana was a toddler. She knew the colors of all his sweaters and when to take them for dry cleaning. She prepared his meals. Yet there existed a civilized distance between them.

Now Lourdes leaned over the piano and swiped its black lacquered top. Dust swirled in a rectangle of winter light filtering through the curtains. Navarro looked out again. “Clearing up, I see. I might go for a walk.”

“Don’t go out if you don’t need.”

“There’s nothing to worry about.”

“It’s Ana, isn’t it?” Lourdes peered at him over her half-moon spectacles.

Navarro rapped three times on the window with his index finger. “She refused the position at the Catholic school.”

“Go and see her,” Lourdes said, slowly folding her rag in quarters and setting it on the piano. “I’ll put some sweet rolls in a tin for you to take over.”

Navarro drained the last swirl of liquor in his glass. A moment later he followed her downstairs for his coat and hat, slipping on the tile in the entryway.

“Lourdes! You must warn me when you’ve waxed the floor!” She opened and closed cupboards, rattled the silverware drawer, but did not respond.

“Lourdes?”

He thought about ducking into the kitchen to tell her he had come close to breaking his neck, but imagining the mess of pots, pans, drawers, and cupboards overwhelmed him. He stayed clear of kitchens. In another life, as a bachelor supervising the Braden copper mine at Sewell, the workers’ wives would bring him lunch along with their husbands’ meals. The mining town hung onto the snowy Andes like a scab, yet he ate as if he were in the city—broiled chicken tender as pudding, steak with onions and garlic, homemade rolls. He had reveled in the attention women lavished on him and laughed at their husbands’ jealousy. He never allowed himself to fall in love. When he married Estrella Godoy and brought her from the mining town to Santiago—to

this very house—she informed him that the stove’s exhaust pipe was stuck shut and looked as if it had been that way for many years.

Lourdes emerged from the kitchen with sweet rolls in an old candy tin covered with cellophane wrap. “This should do the trick.”

Navarro took the tin and tucked his umbrella under his arm, in case it began to rain again. Lourdes pushed her thumb between his shoulder blades to send him out the door. “Tell her hello for me,” she said.

Maintaining his gentleman’s posture, erect but casual, he strolled along the avenue near Gral Bustamante Park, using his umbrella as a cane, flicking it out in front of him and setting it down with a solid tap against the sidewalk. Fine drizzle wet his face but he would not give up the effect of the umbrella. The soft sting of rain reminded him of peppery tear gas that had wafted up to his windows just weeks before.

“My poor Chile,” he whispered. The constant riots were ripping her apart. Now the avenue was empty, bruised-looking, like a used woman. Marxist leaflets littered the sidewalks. A placard flapped loose from the cement wall of an apartment building across the street, the paste underneath melted in the rain. In red and yellow letters it proclaimed, CHILE WANTS CHANGE WITHOUT BLOOD! It was the cry of the middle classes, the managers, business owners, people like him who feared the government would take everything down to the shirts on their backs. Navarro reached into his breast pocket for his cigarettes, but found none; he must have forgotten them at home.

The tension with Ana had begun during the truckers' strike last spring. Everyone took to the streets. Lourdes kept the windows closed even in the warm season. Rioters filled avenues and alleys, only to be scattered by the police with tear gas and water cannon. Meat and vegetables vanished from the supermarket shelves and housewives stood in line at 6 A.M. to buy food for dinner. People hoarded things—they had to! During one of Ana's visits, he showed her some cigars he had bought from his mechanic, who stacked them like firewood in his glove compartment. "One currency," he said, "that will hold its value."

Instead of being impressed, Ana glowered at him. "You don't need them," she said.

"You won't allow an old man a few indulgences?" he asked.

She snapped to her feet, spilling her cup of tea. Then she sat again, finished what was left in the cup, and would not meet his eyes. "I suppose there's no harm in a few cigars," she said, as if there were a great harm in it—a crime against her.

Navarro rounded the corner of the park, which was several blocks long. On a day like this, one could forget the Andes were only fifty kilometers away. Low clouds and smog obscured the mountain peaks and crept down into alleyways, weaving through narrow spaces between buildings. He could barely make out Cerro San Cristóbal, the hill where

young lovers went to hold each other away from watching eyes. He had forbidden Ana to go there as a teenager.

Across the street, a shopkeeper closed up his café, rolling down the metal door with a harsh rattle. Navarro touched his cap. The shopkeeper smiled with one side of his mouth.

Navarro crossed Rio Mapocho into Ana's neighborhood. As he neared her apartment building, he scowled at the fading spray-painted message on a warehouse door: KENNECOTT GO HOME! Navarro snorted and shook his head. Kennecott Mining Company had left two years ago when Allende took office and nationalized the mines. Now wind shrilled through open windows of the abandoned mining camp houses.

Ana would have loved the town, when it was alive. A rugged, beautiful no-man's land. Many times, Navarro had tried to coax Estrella back to the mountains, but she had refused. "How can I survive there with this infant? She needs to go to school, grow up in a proper place. Not like me." Navarro pulled out all his arguments—there were schools at the mines, the children were healthy and friendly, they could live together as a family, instead of separating for weeks when he traveled the eighty kilometers back and forth to Sewell, working on the rotation schedule. She had bounced Ana in her arms, shaking her head "no" until her hair fell out of its chignon, sticking out every direction, like a witch's.

Ana had always listened to her mother, not him. She appeared strong, but Navarro knew that she was more like a sapling—strong but also easily bent one way or the other.

When he reached Ana's building, he took several deep breaths to dispel the dizziness that came over him. He shouldn't have drunk the scotch on an empty stomach. He opened the wrought-iron gate and climbed the stairs to her apartment. Yellowed walls, faded carpet, and absence of windows in the stairwell increased his vertigo. By the time he rang her bell on the fifth floor, his shirt stuck to his chest.

"Papá? What are you doing here?"

He wheezed, "May I come in for some coffee?"

She hugged herself, pulling her red sweater tight around her shoulders as if he had brought the chill up five flights of stairs to her door. "Of course," she said, her voice flat and lifeless. "I just put some milk on to boil."

"Thank you." Navarro followed his daughter inside, expecting at any moment she would take his coat and, graciously, the tin of rolls. But she went straight back to stirring her pot of milk. He sat at the small round table off the kitchen, removed his cap and rested it on his knee. As clumsy and hard as Ana was outside—stomping by under his window every day—in her own territory she softened. Her wrist moved in lazy loops as she stirred the milk and added coffee crystals. She had let down her hair. It was very black and shiny like her mother's. She looked too

thin to him. Her dress hung loose around her waist—a blue house dress with brown flowers. She wore slippers and that red sweater. He imagined her as a teenager, standing in the kitchen, bothering Lourdes for a taste of whatever she was cooking. Then, and now, she had a look of affected poverty to him. He had offered before to buy her a wool skirt, some new shoes. But she always turned him down.

Navarro plucked a dry rose petal off the table cloth. Then a book lying open with wine and coffee stains on the pages. Poems by Gabriela Mistral. A selection was marked with a worn photograph—or was it a postcard? He glanced over at Ana adjusting the flame on the gas stove. Parting the pages gently, he read, “Wheat, my son, is of air, / of sunlight and hoe; / but this bread, called ‘the face of God,’ / is not set on every table.” So she got her ideas from poetry! He scanned down the page, looking for a line or two he thought he remembered from his school days, but found no familiar words. Clipping the book shut, he turned over the postcard in his hand. The stoic face of Che Guevara, the revolutionary-saint, glared back at him. Young people went wild for him, waving posters of the long-haired revolutionary in his olive drab uniform. Navarro thought Ana wiser, more mature. He slipped the postcard into his pocket, planning to toss it into the river on his way home.

“What a mess,” Ana said. He thought for an instant that she meant to blame him for it. But she calmly took the book of poems and gathered it

with her students' compositions which were strewn across the table where she marked them every night.

“Do you ever think about having a family of your own?”

“I have my students, my work.” Ana wagged the book of poems. “She never married. A teacher, too, like me. In the rural areas.”

Ana stung him at every opportunity. She refused his help in securing a position in town, then rubbed his nose in it.

He cleared his throat. “Coffee’s boiling.”

She poured two cups and sat down opposite him at the table, drumming her fingers and picking at the stained linen. “Is this what you came to talk to me about? Grandchildren?”

“No.” Navarro could think of nothing more to say. He wanted to say that he had come to bring her back from a world that excluded him, but when he rehearsed the words in his mind, they sounded ridiculous.

“Why don’t you call?” he asked. “Stop by?”

She looked out the window, following shouts of boys playing soccer in the street. “What would I say?” she asked. “I don’t want to talk to anyone these days.” Her voice trailed off. “I know you don’t want me to teach poor children. You haven’t said as much, but you do think I’m wasting my time.”

“Ana—”

“Don’t start, Papá.”

“I thought you might have noticed I brought you some rolls. We can have them with our coffee. Sweet rolls. The kind you like.”

She pouted at the offering between them on the table. “I’m not hungry.”

“There’s no getting through to you, is there?”

“Because I won’t take a job as an assistant at that horrible girls’ school?”

“How can you say that? The principal was your mother’s cousin!”

Ana sighed. “I like my job now. I don’t want to change,” she said finally.

She had decided. Veins in his neck pumped hard. “Why, Ana, why?” He let a fist land on the table. Spoons rang in their cups. Coffee sloshed onto the tablecloth. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I don’t understand why you want to play poor, when I can help you.”

“I don’t need helping.” Her lips formed a thin line. The soft cocoa color left her face; only a fierce flush remained. “You’re being selfish. You’re the one who’s afraid. You’re afraid to have a daughter who associates with radicals!”

“Don’t you realize you’re turning your back on me?”

She pulled a cigarette from a crinkled pack on the table. She didn’t offer him one. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m sorry you can’t see the good in what I do.”

“Well, so am I.”

He stayed longer than he should have. If he had gone home then, at a half-truce, everything might have been different. But he stayed and ate a roll with jam and finally wheedled a cigarette from Ana. While she washed their cups and the milk pan, he picked up an envelope that had fallen off the kitchen table when Ana cleared it. On the front was scrawled "Lourdes." "Is this a message for Lourdes? Shall I take it to her?" He squeezed the envelope, thick with small denominations of bills.

"Oh, God. Put that away."

"Did you borrow money from Lourdes?"

"No."

"Then what is this?"

Ana tore the envelope from his hands and stuffed it inside her sweater. "Some money—not much—just to help out."

"But I pay her a fair salary! What are you talking about?"

"You pay her half of what she deserves!"

"Ah, so now you've raised her salary behind my back? You're no better than that fool President of yours."

"What did you think? She's too proud to complain. You forget she has her own family to feed! A loaf of bread costs five times what it used to. Or are you so senile you've forgotten?"

"How could I forget? I've worked hard all my life only to see my money float away like a raft to the sea!" Navarro stood up and slammed his hat down so firmly on his head it nearly covered his eyes. A hard ball rose

up from his stomach to his chest and into his throat, a pain like indigestion, but live, agile, able to go where he hurt most. “How do you think Lourdes sees me now? You’ve made a fool of me for your ideals!”

“I was only trying to be fair.”

“Life is not fair, Ana. This government won’t last. Then you’ll come asking me for help.”

She crossed her arms and shifted her weight to one hip. “You don’t understand anything, do you?”

He left, slamming the door behind him.

Weeks passed and Navarro didn’t see her. Every morning he read the paper with his coffee. The house was quiet as dawn, except for the rustle of newspaper and soft, porcelain chime of cup and saucer. Afternoons he fixed the loose molding on door frames in his bedroom, hall, and linen closet. Wood glue smelled like something getting done. He still took his daily walks, but the river was now an end point, the bridge only a place to turn back home.

He forced himself to stop watching for her out the window.

Then a September noon, he heard high screams of jets flying close and tank tracks crunching on asphalt like rusty cogs. Military trucks passed by every few minutes—old, belching mufflers cruelly imitating the sound of Ana’s bus. Explosions deafened him and shook his house like

an earthquake. At first he stuffed a bewildered Lourdes under the dining table and told her to hold on to the legs in case the furniture began to slide.

Finally he heard what she shouted at him: “It’s the soldiers, the soldiers!”

He let her go, crawling on her hands and knees, patting the floor for her spectacles.

He drank two glasses of scotch standing up. He and Lourdes waited for the explosions to pass, but they kept coming, randomly, so that it was impossible to think or do anything.

Navarro sat down in his overstuffed chair. He and Lourdes looked at each other. Should she polish the furniture, continue work she was doing before the bombs? Navarro shook his head. Lourdes perched on the piano bench with her hands in her lap. The phone rang.

It was Ana. “The President is giving a speech over Radio Magallanes!” Her voice was small and far away. “I’ve got my radio turned up. The military closed down all the stations—Magallanes is the last one. Papá? Can you hear me? Can you hear the radio?”

The ball of fury—the fuel of their arguments—softened to sadness.

“Please,” he said, “Don’t hang up.”

*

In the days that followed, Navarro tried to live a normal life. Phone lines were up and then down again. He and Ana talked when they could. But he skipped his usual walks, even though days lengthened and trees started to bud. Lourdes came to work for him as usual, but he sent her home early every night, well before curfew. She whispered second-hand stories about people caught outside when the sirens wailed—an entire city on a time-clock. Navarro nodded but did not believe her. Bodies? In the middle of the street? Talk of a nervous woman. Still, Navarro stayed in the drawing room, falling asleep on occasion in his chair. The telephone sat on a stand beside him, half the time useless, but always waiting for Ana’s call. If he did not hear from her for more than a day or two, she said, he was to expect the worst.

He told her, “Don’t talk nonsense. You’re as bad as Lourdes. Everything will go back to normal soon.”

Her tone was icy. “Nothing will be normal, ever again.”

When he suggested it was female paranoia, she hung up on him. Needing a voice of reason, Navarro phoned an old friend, Ed Houston, one of the *norteamericanos* from Kennecott forced to abandon Sewell two years ago. Navarro was surprised to hear that Ed, an ex-U.S. naval officer, had been back in the country recently to do some consulting work.

“Tight schedule. Sorry I didn’t call. How is everything?” Ed said in Yankee-accented Spanish.

Navarro's throat constricted. "Not too bad."

"It's a shame," Ed said. "But there was no way to continue on the same path as the last two or three years. I don't envy you. How's your kid? Is she still a real beauty?"

"Yes, she's still beautiful. She's a teacher now."

"Married?"

"No, not yet."

Ed laughed. "Then I won't ask about grandkids."

Navarro could not laugh. While Ed talked about his grandchildren and coming out of retirement, Navarro drank a tall glass of scotch, his lips dry, sucking at the rim of the glass. White stubble on his chin scraped against the phone mouthpiece, sounding like static or distant thunder. Soon conversation faded like water drying in a gutter and there was nothing left to say.

Click. Dial tone. Silence. Then gunshots a block away. The room had grown dark. Lights out in the neighbors' houses, everyone asleep. Navarro tried to pour another glass of scotch but his hands shook too hard.

He took up his post again at the window, behind the curtain. Now all women looked like her—they imitated her walk, heads bent, hurrying. A flash of red sweater, black hair pulled back in a bun, thin fingers waved

casually at someone—it all made his breath come quickly with a burning sensation in his chest. This was not right. Curfews, unreliable phones, patriotic music on every radio station, nothing in the newspapers—it had all gone on too long.

He must see her. If they could have lunch together outdoors with clean linens and silverware warm from the dishwasher, that would be right, everything would be right.

When she did appear, he did not believe it at first. She stopped in the street after her bus let her off. A young man talked with her—a disreputable-looking sort, with hair that flopped in his eyes. Friend? Lover? Ana glanced up at the window. Navarro straightened his tie and went downstairs to meet them at the door—surely, she would introduce her friend. But when he opened the door, blinking in the sun, she and the young man were gone. A tin can rolled down the street. There were a few clouds, a breeze. From where he stood, Cerro San Cristóbal rose darkly behind houses and apartments.

When Ana called that evening, he asked her about the young man.

“Would you quit spying on me? He was just a stranger, asking for directions.”

Navarro was buttering bread and scraping a spoonful of sugar out of the bowl for his coffee when Ana called late one afternoon. “Papá,” she

whispered into the phone. Her voice was hoarse, sobbing. “*Dios santo.* Help me.”

Someone had broken into her apartment. Navarro took his car—which he rarely drove but always kept full of gas for emergencies—though he thought she might be overreacting. Probably nothing but thieves looking for a radio, television, anything of value. He had told her to move to a better neighborhood, but she wouldn’t listen.

He knocked lightly at her door. “It’s me.”

“Come in,” she answered. She sat cross-legged in the center of the room. Everything was overturned—couch, table, records, students’ papers, even houseplants. The contents of her refrigerator oozed onto the kitchen floor.

Navarro stepped over a broken flower vase and wilted bouquet lying in a puddle of water. “What in God’s name has happened here?” It seemed he could not help himself: His voice took on a tone of disappointment, as if Ana had smashed her own records and torn her books from their bindings. He said softly, “Are you all right?” and reached for her, but she pulled away.

“They’re coming for me,” she said, her face motionless as stone.

“Who is coming? Thieves?”

“The *militares*. They’re taking people. My friend, Marco, is gone. No one knows where he is. They take you to the stadium, and then ... you disappear”

Navarro held out his hand to her, and this time she took it. She stood and wiped her cheeks, though her tears had dried already and left salt flakes. Navarro wanted to fold her into his arms.

“Slow down, Ana. Who is Marco? Is he some kind of criminal?”

“No! Haven’t you been listening?” Her voice cracked and wavered, like she might break into sobs again. But she took a sharp, deep breath and collected herself—cool toward him even now. “It’s just a matter of time before they come back,” she said. “Maybe hours. The milk on the floor was still cold when I came home. I never should have called you here. Please go.”

“If it’s that serious, you can’t stay!”

“I don’t know what I should do.” She dug her fingers into her hair. “They’re executing people at the stadium! And worse. So much worse! I don’t like to imagine. I can’t think about it! But there, I’ve said it.”

He hugged her. “Ana, calm down. You’re safe.” Stroking the crown of her hair, he felt the heat of her scalp, her crying, on his palm. He breathed in the sweet smell of her shampoo. “You’re safe with me.”

“But whoever did this ... took my bookmark, my postcard of Che. That’s enough. Just one old postcard.”

Navarro smiled and kissed her hair. “No, Ana. I took it. They can’t hurt you.”

She pushed away from him. “Don’t you get it? It doesn’t matter if they found the postcard or not! They’re going to kill me! Because of Marco!”

Navarro gripped her shoulders and shook her once. “Stop it! That’s not true! Now come with me. Get out of this mess.”

Ana looked around her, stunned, as if surveying her apartment for the first time. “You’re right—I shouldn’t stay.”

While Ana gathered a small bag of clothes and her toothbrush, Navarro cleaned the kitchen floor. He sopped up milk with a sponge, the sticky, sour smell reminiscent of baby vomit. “I admit,” he called to her, “that this has not gone completely right.”

She appeared dressed in a clean skirt and blouse with her hair brushed and swept back off her face. “Yes,” she said. “I know.”

They left the apartment with milk spatters on the cabinets and clumps of potting soil on the carpet.

At home, Ana retreated to her old bedroom. After a quick drink, Navarro climbed the stairs to check on her. Lamplight fanned out into the dark hall. Navarro stood in the triangle it made and peered at her through the half-open door. Posters of actors and rock bands still papered her walls.

She sat on the twin bed, back to him, stroking the careworn quilt from her childhood. She took off her earrings and set them on the nightstand. Birdlike shoulders poked her thin blouse. Her hair was still pinned up, but a few black strands came loose and curved at her nape.

Navarro rapped one knuckle on the door. She turned around. Her face was ashen.

“Who is Marco, this friend of yours who’s in trouble?”

Ana faced away again, unhooked her necklace and placed it slowly next to the earrings.

“I saw you with a man last week, in the street. Was that him?”

Navarro asked.

Ana sighed. “Yes, that’s him.”

“Did I not warn you?” Navarro stepped inside. “Is he your boyfriend?”

“No—he’s a journalist. He interviewed some teachers at the school. We became friends.” She looked at him now, lip quivering. “He didn’t do anything wrong. None of us have. He doesn’t deserve to be killed!” She cried quietly for a minute.

“No one’s going to kill him,” Navarro said. “He’s probably hiding out.” Ana slumped forward and rested her head on her knees. “So you admit there is something to hide from.”

“For Marco, perhaps. But not you,” he said. He let his hand hover over her back. “I’m sorry. I know you’re afraid. You need a distraction. Will you play for me?”

She lifted her head and stared at him, her face furrowed darkness. But she agreed to play the piano—to distract them both. Father and daughter strolled down the hall, oak floorboards creaking underfoot. In the drawing room, Ana slouched in front of the piano and lifted the lid over the keyboard. She plunked out a few notes—just a bare outline of Beethoven’s “Moonlight” Sonata. Navarro poured two glasses of scotch, hoping she would drink with him. He walked over to her and touched her shoulder.

“I haven’t played in a long time. Not since Mamá used to teach me.”

“It’s all right.”

She took the drink.

“I wish it were different between us,” Navarro said. He shuffled across the rug—he was so tired—and sat down in his chair with the phone on one side of him and liquor on the other. He was breathing heavily. “I wish I could stop thinking about the past, but I can’t.”

She plucked a few more lonely notes from the piano. Last streaks of sunlight through the window made a halo around her profile. Birds lighted on telephone wires outside, calling their warnings and love songs.

“Do you remember when I took you to the mine?” Navarro asked.

“Only a little.”

“You were five or six. You were so beautiful with your pigtails, and freckles across your nose. The mountain was so good for you. Nothing there but tall black peaks and blue sky. Nothing between you and the

sun. That sun used to turn the men's skin leathery." He laughed. "You wanted to play a game with the mine children. They kicked a soccer ball in the school yard and sent it sailing over the fence, down a mish-mash of staircases, into the river. You wanted to go after it, but you were too little. I held you. You squirmed and cried in my arms until I thought I'd drop you."

She listened, her head cocked like the birds' outside.

Navarro continued, "After your mother died, I wanted to live like that again—the two of us, together. I thought after a while we could be happy. But you were at a difficult stage of life, becoming a young woman. I don't blame you for rejecting me."

"I didn't reject you," she whispered, so gently, Navarro felt as if she were stroking his face. But she stayed on the other side of the room, at the piano bench with her legs crossed at the ankles, leaning toward him awkwardly. "I missed Mamá. Didn't you?"

"Of course I did."

"Did you love her?"

"Ana, sometimes people grow into each other. They grow to love each other. So I loved your mother. But you ..." He paused, twisting the wood buttons on his cardigan. He took several labored breaths.

Conversations with Ana felt more and more like climbing stairs to him.

"I loved you without thinking."

She closed the lid on the keyboard. She walked toward him, carrying her glass with one hand on the bottom, the other wrapped around the rim, like a priest with a chalice. She set it down, almost full, on the liquor cabinet.

“I love you, Papá. I’m sorry we fight.” She kissed the top of his head.

He held her wrist. “Why did you lie to me about Marco?”

“I didn’t want you to worry.”

Navarro loosened his grip and moved his hand so that he and Ana laced fingers. “Have another drink with me.”

“I’m sorry. I can’t. I’m going to lie down.”

Navarro closed his eyes and leaned back against the chair cushion. “You must be tired. We’ll talk more in the morning.”

“Good night, Papá.”

That was the last time he saw her. Next morning, he overslept and found the breakfast table set for one. Ana had gone to work. She never returned. He might have seen her from his window—a woman in a red sweater hustled into an unmarked truck and taken to the soccer stadium. He watched many people get into trucks. Could it be possible? Or did they take her in the night while he slept? He filled himself with scotch and let his weak heart pump it through him.

Over the next few days, he visited Ana's apartment several times, called her every hour for twenty-four hours, never finding her home. Lourdes mopped the floors over and over again. Navarro couldn't stand it. Lourdes had been so fretful, and now she mournfully accepted the situation, without a fight.

Navarro phoned Ed Houston again.

"She'll turn up soon, I'm sure," Navarro said. "Can you help me fly her out of the country? When she comes back?"

There was a long pause on the other end. "I can't help you with that. In fact, we shouldn't discuss this any further."

Navarro tried again to explain the urgency of the situation, but Ed sounded like a broken record. He wasn't the same man who taught him American folk songs, or who rattled on about grandchildren and kebabs in the back yard. "I'm sorry," he said. "I can't help you. I'm going to hang up now."

Navarro dressed, shaved, and put on a clean shirt and sweater. How had Ed become so frightened? Everyone was paranoid. Not him. He would investigate, reason it out.

He drove to the national stadium where soldiers stood guard, young men with baby faces and submachine guns strapped across their bodies. On the way, the sunlight aggravated his raw eyes. He rubbed them with the heels of his hands. Looking at the road again, he swerved to avoid a little black dog darting under his tires. In his rear-view mirror he saw

the thing tumbling, blowing, as if it weighed nothing. What was it? He looked ahead again, and there they were—the street full of dark lumps of human hair. Lourdes had told him once that the soldiers cut off men’s hair if it was too long. Could the most bizarre things be true? He pulled over and walked a few more blocks to the stadium. He pressed his handkerchief over his mouth to keep from being sick, right there in the street.

Soldiers surrounded him. Here’s another one, they said. Get him out of the way. What does he want? “Keep moving, please,” they said to him. Hands, gun metal pushed at him until he stood facing a boy with a doughy, expressionless face. Blood clotted on the boy’s neck in unsightly dots—shaving cuts.

“I’m looking for my daughter,” Navarro said.

The soldier smiled like a matron. “Her full name, please.”

“Ana María Navarro y Godoy.”

“Your name? Address?”

“César Navarro. 43 Santa Isabel.”

The soldier wrote his information on a card. “Move along, please.”

“Tell me where she is!”

The soldiers surrounding him all took one step forward, closing a tighter circle.

The boy with the shaving cuts smiled again. Navarro thought of the shopkeeper on the way to Ana's so many weeks ago, half smiling, half judging. "You must come back another time."

When Navarro didn't leave, he shouted, "Get out of here, old man! Or do you want me to shoot you?"

Laughter from the boy, from behind him, from all around. Navarro stumbled back, hands caught him. Easy there, old man. For a long time, no one moved. Time, the sky, opened; warmth spread through him, over his shoulders, sunlight and a gentle breeze. Taxis rumbled by. He could hear the tap of women's heels. He turned his head. It was only an old grandmother hurrying into an alley. Blackbirds gathered in a squabbling cluster around a crust of bread on the sidewalk, then flew away. He watched all this, heard it. And yet it was impossible. Vision narrowed to a point focused on the soldier's face, surrounded by a dark circle. "Where is she?"

The boy soldier was silent. The others laughed, holding their stomachs.

"That's enough, Enrique," one of them said. "We're wasting time."

But the boy gripped Navarro's jaw in his fingers and pushed a billy club into his gut. Navarro doubled over, but the boy held his face firm, close to Navarro's. He felt the boy's sweaty fingers, their calloused tips and uncut nails.

"Oh, just let him go."

“The cat is playing with the mouse.” The men laughed again, and then the fingers softened, released.

Navarro stood up as straight as he could, the pain of the club still burning in his stomach. “Excuse me,” he said, and the soldiers parted for him. One, he swore, even patted him on the shoulder. Only their game kept him alive, he knew that. Cats playing with mice. As he walked away, the skin of his back twitched, crawled—itching, shivering for the bullet. But it never came. He walked toward home, unable to find where he had parked his car.

What could he do at this moment? Continue walking? Go home and sleep? Reaching into his pocket for his handkerchief to mop cold sweat from his face, he found the postcard. He had forgotten all about it! He grinned at the photo of the revolutionary in uniform, a cigarette hanging from his lips. That he still had this photograph, that he had not thrown it into the river, meant she was still alive. Out of necessity, stubbornness, he believed it. Why had he not believed *her*?

Navarro reached his front door. He went inside, removed his coat and hat and hung them neatly on the stand. He sent Lourdes home and told her to stay away. She must not get wrapped up in this. She begged him to tell her what had happened, but he had no time. If Ana could not come to him, he would go to her. Lourdes shouted at him and hung onto his arm, but he shook her loose and sent her trotting away from him, down the street. Then he stuck a piece of tape to the postcard and

fastened it to the front door, over the brass knocker. Sitting at the bottom of the stairs, he removed his shoes and began to polish them.

THE BOX

As Ellie came up the cement steps to her apartment building, she thought she saw against the white siding, a large, lozenge-shaped rat. She sighed and moved her key towards the lobby door. The key always stuck a little, and when it rained, as now, the glossy green door, thickened with layers of paint, swelled and stuck, too. As she struggled with the door, the rat hunched there in her periphery, under an umbrella created by the hydrangea that overlapped the porch. Rain dripped from the edge of the portico onto the broad leaves, but not onto the rat. Ingenious. The door opened with a little pop. The rat shifted, meowed—it was only the gray cat that belonged to the house next door. “Don’t just sit around,” Ellie said to it, and it darted into the greenery.

Inside the lobby, Ellie set her courier’s bag on the long lacquered entry table, which the building manager decorated with a lace runner, a vase of silk flowers, and a small crystal bowl of peppermints that were never eaten, and never replenished. This décor, she imagined, was meant to contrast the row of metal mailboxes on the opposite wall, but was doing a poor job of it. Institutional, depressing, each of the twenty or so apartments with its own tiny slot, labeled in the manager, Joe’s, compressed handwriting. Ellie bent down to open hers. She reached in,

scraping her knuckles on the tiny opening. She folded the mail into a taco shape, with the bright newspaper circulars on the outside, and stuffed it all in her bag. Ellie grabbed her things from the table, leaving a pucker in the lace cover, and started upstairs. If the old mansion were still a private residence, the long table might have made sense, but now the building, converted to apartments occupied by an eclectic group of young people living on the cheap on a side street off of Boylston Avenue, was no longer a home with shoes and coats by the door, or anyone to lay the mail out on the table, sorted by addressee.

Ellie reached her apartment at the top of the stairs and brought her mail inside, recycling the advertisements and placing the letters in two piles on her desk: bills and personal correspondence. There was a late birthday card from her mother, a graduation announcement from a step-cousin in Texas (with no note, Ellie grumbled, just the ivory card with gold embossed writing), and an unusually thin letter from Harper. Ellie tipped the letter back and forth, the paper inside insubstantial enough to slide within the envelope. She set Harper's letter down and paid the phone bill. The rent was also due. On a clean sheet of computer paper she wrote a note to the manager to fold around her check: *Dear Joe, I am still hearing them. Tonight I saw one making itself at home on our entry porch. It showed no fear. I hear them in the roof and the wall that abuts the blackberries. Perhaps you should have someone out to cut them. I'm getting nervous. Ellie.*

She felt a tiny bit guilty for lying about the rat she didn't actually see tonight; but she reasoned that the little gray creature outside could just as easily have been a rat as a cat; it may have been an untruthful illustration, but the larger truth was still served by her letter. Rats roamed the building and its surrounds, and Ellie wanted them gone. She listened. There was the soft rain, a breeze, the scratch of Himalayan blackberry thorns outside her window. (In August, she would be able to open it and collect handfuls of sweet, dark berries from the slope that rose steeply past the second story, as if the mountain of vines had had to be cut into to build there.) She heard the ocean rush of the freeway to the west, but no rats.

Ellie picked up Harper's letter again and tore into it, hooking her finger under the flap and making a jagged rip along the top. Harper opened her letters differently, she knew. She had seen them once when she visited him, a pile still in their envelopes under the bed. At first she had been angry, thinking he had never opened them. But she looked closer, while he was in another room, and saw that they had been torn delicately at one end, slid out, read (she had to believe he read them), and replaced in their envelopes, stacked in order by date.

By opening his letter in her rough way, she hoped she might remotely offend him. The thin letter had put her on edge. Normally Harper wrote morbidly detailed, confessional letters—a diary in installments. These letters were in addition to his e-mails, texts, and phone calls, and were of

a different nature than all three. The letters stood in, in some ways, for their physical relationship, being so very monolithic. Bulky. Harper often peeled so many pages from his notebook that the blue gum at the top still held them together. He told Ellie everything he did, what he ate, who he observed on BART, and, if she read closely, his intimate thoughts. Sometimes Ellie consumed the letters quickly, compulsively; other times she savored them for days, bringing their thick-folded pages to the breakfast table, digesting certain lines over and over again while she took soggy bites of cereal and sipped the milk. Or she took the letters to work with her to read on her breaks. She would get off her bike downtown, between deliveries, and sit at a fountain or on a park bench and chip her way through his long narratives. She laughed out loud and muttered half-formed replies to Harper in these public places and did not care if people heard. She would carry the letters with her throughout the day, as she would a novel, or a knitting project, and work at them in every spare moment. When she returned home, she would bury herself to the neck in her down comforter and read until a warm relaxation overtook her. Then she might touch herself, imagine him, and fall asleep.

That night, the thin letter frightened her. She thought it must be bad news. She would have to absorb it in a sitting; there was no sense in carting this one into the busy, comforting world. She had made a gouge in the envelope right through the postmark, and the return address as

well. She smoothed the envelope and noted: May, San Francisco. She pictured the old neighborhood, the pastel town houses built into the hill at a razor angle, the view of the fogged-in city in the distance. Things that seemed solid but that could be turned upside down, could be left, and forgotten, or at least misremembered.

But there was no bad news. Harper was coming to visit. That was all. Why hadn't he phoned her instead? Maybe he couldn't bear to hear her say no. Ellie swallowed hard and considered the words: "I need to see you." It was the need that struck her wrong somehow. How could Harper say he needed her? What did a person need, truly? Ellie had considered this question at length, desiring, in moving away from home, to become a stripped-down person, a person who had, and needed, little. She rode her bike or the bus, she had few possessions to clutter her small studio apartment, and she ate simply, standing in the alcove kitchen. Her mother, with a twinge of sadness, Ellie thought, had written in her card: *I hope you are enjoying the monk's life!!* As if Ellie were tucked away up here in the Northwest, rising early to pray, and making blackberry jam as a kind of meditation.

After dinner, a little television, and a cup of tea, Ellie thought she should call Harper, at least to say she had received his letter. First, though, she would get a shower and read. She had been looking forward to it all day. She flexed her sore legs, her squared-off cyclist's calves, and thrust her arms into the air in a giant stretch. If someone had been

there, he would have seen her shirt rise and expose her midriff, tight and freckled and pierced at the navel. But no one was there. She showered quickly to wash off the sweat and car exhaust, and vigorously rubbed dry her long brown hair. In her robe, she allowed herself the luxury of lazing in a bean bag next to her small shelf of books by the little pop-out window (it had sold her on the otherwise dingy apartment), which during the day provided the perfect reading light, and now, at night, a cozy view of rain ticking the glass. She picked up the novel she was reading—a classic she felt she ought to have read, and had begun to like for the rhythms of its prose. But soon, still bothered by something Harper had said, she put it down to reread the letter.

She let herself sink lower and lower into the beanbag. *I need to see you.* Yes, that was it—he was protesting too much. Ellie remembered another letter from several months ago, a fat one. It had been exactly five months ago, dated New Year’s Eve. Harper had described a woman from work. “Your opposite,” he wrote. Short hair (he didn’t like short hair), angular chin. He had talked about this woman for a paragraph or so. She worked at the same company, but in marketing, not Harper’s thing, so Ellie thought her an inconsequential figure in his life. He described a lot of people to her, some of whom she knew from their old life together, and other new people he’d met, whom she only knew through the letters, through the nicknames he gave them, and her imagining what they must be like. He never seemed close to anyone but

to her, Ellie. And now that she was far away, what did she expect? Toward the end of the letter, after reporting on a film he'd seen (a detailed regurgitation of the plot that Ellie skimmed through), Harper had confessed to being attracted to the woman. Ellie cried in her apartment when she read it, and then read it again. But just as she felt cold relief after adjusting to the news, Harper dismissed the attraction, wrote that he had put the girl out of his mind. He thanked Ellie for letting him get the whole thing off his chest. He closed by saying he felt much better.

Everything had to be tidy with him: felt, confessed, expunged. Ellie lay in her robe on the bean bag, the present letter resting lightly on her chest. She had fallen asleep. It was almost eleven, and Harper went to bed early. She would call him in the morning.

Ellie sat up slowly. Norway rats, that's what they were called. She had been trying to think of it. Gray or brown, as large as guinea pigs, alert little faces and thick tails. She couldn't tell Harper she had rats. She hadn't seen one inside, not yet, but what was stopping them? They were big, but could squeeze themselves into an opening the size of a quarter, like contortionists. She had heard they could live on only an ounce of food a day, too. Ellie got up and washed all her dinner dishes—just a knife and a plate she had used for her sandwich. She dried them and put them away, then wiped the counter of crumbs.

She would call him in the morning, and she needn't say anything about the rats. She would welcome him, absolutely. She didn't like demands, but was it a demand to say "I need to see you"? She needed to see him, too, though she wouldn't say it. She missed his solidity, his barrel chest and trunk-like thighs. Harper was large, not fat. He had to lean down to kiss her, his mouth covering hers. He could pick her up and carry her around the room. He could move her limbs like a puppet. He could blanket her completely with his weight, a good weight, a comfortable sinking and heat. She felt she knew him even better now than in the two years they had been dating; she had read him in the letters, and it occurred to her that this distance had prompted him, for the first time ever, to write about his life, to write anything at all.

Ellie finally phoned the next day. She pleaded a sore knee, an old injury that flared up from time to time, she said, and got off of work for the afternoon. She rode from downtown to Denny Park and lay in the grass under the firs, her bike wheel spinning on its side next to her, flopped down like a tired dog. Ellie pulled off her helmet and set it in the grass, too. The air flowed around her sweaty hair and cooled her immediately. She caught her breath and dialed Harper. The park, triangled between three major arterials, was quiet and peaceful at its center. Under a big old cedar not far from her, a homeless man napped with his head on his backpack. He was heavily bearded and wrapped in an overcoat, though it was warm enough for Ellie to lie comfortably in

her biking shorts and T-shirt. He breathed evenly, and she imagined, for an instant, that he was Harper in disguise, and that he was waiting for her to tap his shoulder.

“Hello? Hello?” Ellie heard over her cell.

“Sorry, hi,” she said. “Me. Is everything okay?”

“Yes,” he said, “Everything’s fine. Where are you?”

“Work.” With one finger she spun a wheel of her bike. She was near work, perhaps. She had been at work earlier. “I got your letter,” she said, since Harper had gone quiet.

“Oh, that,” he chuckled.

“What? You can’t threaten to come and not come.”

“No, yeah, for sure,” he said.

“When?”

“I got a cheap ticket. Next weekend. I hope you don’t have any plans. Do you have plans?”

Ellie pondered this move. Was he being manipulative? What if she *did* have plans?

“Do you?”

“No, but what if I *did*.”

“The tickets were on special. You know how it is when they go on special. I couldn’t wait.”

“Yes,” she said, “I know.”

“I thought it would be all right with you.”

“Of course, it’s fine. I’ll keep myself on the hook, for you.”

“Ell, don’t be like that.”

“I’m kidding. It’ll be good to see you—great—to see you.”

There was a silence.

“Harper? You still there?”

“Hello? I’m still here. Are you?”

“You said you *needed to see me*. What does that mean?”

“Nothing, it just means I wanted to see you.”

“Wanted or needed?”

“Does it matter?”

“I guess not. I’m sorry. It’s just that things are—”. She thought of warning him about the rats, but changed her mind.

“Busy?” Harper finished her thought.

“Yes, but it’s fine. Not too busy to see you. But now I have to run. Call you later,” Ellie said, not waiting for the final awkward back-and-forth goodbyes.

She hung up, closed her eyes and pretended that the grass was her bed. She looked over towards the cedar and the homeless man, but he had gotten up and wandered off. Well, that hadn’t gone too badly. She didn’t know what to do with the rest of the afternoon. For a time Ellie didn’t move. She wished she had another of the long letters to wade through. She hadn’t realized how much they comforted her, how much she read them just as she would some distant historic diary, lacking any

form or dramatic shape and so focused on minutiae it seemed that Harper faded into the background of his own life. Clearer than Harper's face (a sketch of deep-set blue eyes and the russet beard he used to grow) were his office routines (come in at nine, head straight for water cooler, read e-mail, sneak a glance, at nine-thirty, at the lunch menu in the cafeteria), the objects surrounding him, things that passed through his hands (a lucky dollar coin, tickets for movies he wished they could see together, a comb, her letters). Yes, her own were briefer than his. She synthesized, distilled her life for him into a story he could understand. She left parts out, expanded others. The arc mattered to her. Perhaps it was a stab at Harper. *See what your life can be?* she seemed to be asking, *when you trim here and there, put events in their place?*

Ellie rode most of the way home, a nearly unbroken uphill climb to Broadway, then all the way south to Madison. When she reached the corner, she dismounted, languidly hoisting her leg over the bike seat, in slow motion. Her legs trembled under her. She still wasn't used to this. Even strong muscles tired. On the last block towards home, she strolled with her bike past the grocery store, the florist's (nothing bridal here, but single blooms of orchid or gerbera daisy in test tubes suspended from the walls with metal brackets), the used book seller.

She paused. Around the next corner was her apartment building with its rats waiting. The book stores, the coffee shops, the boutiques selling

expensive clothes that wouldn't keep you warm in a stiff breeze ...

Everything was the same no matter where you went. She had simply traded one city for another. Seattle seemed to her San Francisco's quieter, homelier sister. It was that way with men, too. She recalled her mother's frank, sighing expression: "You've seen one, you've seen them all." This wasn't quite true, though. Of course there were types—both men *and* women. Walking alone downtown she sometimes played a game with herself, noting which people—total strangers—looked like other people she knew. In the Washington Mutual building where she made frequent deliveries, the woman at the concierge desk always startled her; every time Ellie came in the door with a package, she had to stop herself from calling out the name of her friend, Amanda. The genetic pool contained features (only ideas, really, waiting to manifest)—noses dished or bulbous or Roman, longer or shorter philtrum, earlobes of various robustness or delicacy, wide or narrow-set eyes in a limited palette of colors—that could be combined in a near infinite number of ways. *Near* infinite; still *finite*. Take Harper, his peculiarity, the specific, jagged outline he pressed into the air—even so, one was bound to find, among all of humanity, someone very much like him. But not *exactly* alike. The tiniest details, then, were the most significant. Perhaps she had not been fair to Harper, about his dull letters. Maybe they were not dull after all. Maybe even in the realm of the brain we had to assert each

tiny difference, it was our greatest project, lest we get sucked back into the pool.

At home, Ellie brought her laundry to the basement. She had to take a flight of stairs to the lobby and walk down the hall past Joe's apartment to another set of stairs that led to the laundry room. The stairwell was narrow and damp—the perfect place, she thought, for rats. On the way down she nearly hit her head, as she always did, on the single light bulb illuminating the passage. She leaned to the side to avoid it and rammed her hip against the handrail. She cursed; she wanted to rip it out of the wall (the rail was already so loose, it wouldn't be that hard); but she continued on until she reached the bottom of the stairs and peeked around the corner to make sure she was alone. She hated making small talk with anyone, her neighbors most of all. This time she had the place to herself and the machines were empty. She was ashamed, really, at what an intense pleasure these simple facts gave her. Was this all her life amounted to?

Over the washing machine, a little above eye level, there was a tiny window, flocked with spider webs, flecked with spider shit and the dead bodies of flies and pill bugs. Ellie tried not to look up there, but she sensed movement, a bright shifting green. The overgrown grass outside the window swayed with animal intensity and suddenness. Ellie

slammed the lid to the washer and ran out the basement door to see if she could flush the rat. This time she was sure. She would expose it—and then what?—knock on Joe’s door? The rat would be gone by then. She had to see it, at least, for herself. She reached the spot in the grass outside the window and stood carefully a few feet away. The tips of the knee-high blades still twitched, though most of the movement had stopped. Whatever had disturbed the vegetation there was large, clumsy.

She crouched down and tossed a pine cone into the grass. The rat took off in the opposite direction from her and the pine cone. She followed it until it reached the border of the blackberries and disappeared inside, shaking the broad dark green leaves in a zigzag path. Carefully, Ellie grasped a blackberry stem and lifted the vine, long and heavy as a flexible tent pole, arcing from ground to ground. She couldn’t see much, but thought she made out a little face, a backward glance, a fat hump of back, the thick base of a tail. It seemed to dive (dive *where?* did they burrow?) and vanished.

That night between freshly washed sheets, Ellie listened. She tried to banish her inner dialogue and surrender to whatever came into her ears. A siren, car tires passing at intervals, Bob Marley upstairs, occasional bursts of laughter and a woman’s voice saying, “I don’t care if it’s late. Call him right now!”, a dog barking, the wind, crickets. She stroked the wall next to her bed with her fingertips. She wanted to hear them; she

wanted to be assailed by rats, to hear their scabbling little feet in the roof, undeniable.

Then there he was. It wasn't so hard; you were in one city in the morning, you got on a plane, and an hour later you were in another, a little less vibrant, a little more wild with plants and animals than with people. Ellie took a bus to the airport—several, actually, trundling slowly through the gray morning, fog lifting while she waited in some forgotten industrial neighborhood for her transfer—such a long ride that she was desperate for a bathroom when she finally got to the terminal. She must have been in the restroom, releasing a voluminous stream of urine, when Harper arrived at the baggage claim. She exited the ladies' room, looking around for him, but he found her first, gripping her from behind, covering her eyes with a big, warm, sweaty hand, slightly metallic-smelling, like blood, or the airport shuttle handrail. She pulled into herself, shrinking down to wriggle free from his hold. “You,” she said, turning around to embrace him, her face in his chest so she wouldn't have to say anything more just yet. He kissed the crown of her head.

“Do you have luggage?”

“There it is.” He let go and jogged over to the carousel for his bag, nearly knocking down a woman with an infant in a tie-dyed cotton baby sling.

Ellie winced. “Careful,” she said.

Harper tossed back an apology, but mostly it seemed he hadn’t noticed the woman at all.

“They’re out in force,” Ellie said.

“Who?”

“Nesters. Seattle seems particularly full of them lately. It’s like a feminist backlash.” She gave a fake shudder. “There’s something kind of horrible about it.”

“It’s just a lady with a baby,” Harper said, shifting his duffel from one hand to the other. He had unzipped it while Ellie talked and was refilling his pockets with his compass and lucky coins and pocket knives. When he had finished, he put his arm around Ellie’s shoulders and inadvertently squished her nose into his armpit. He smelled like basil tea—a vegetal, spicy smell. This scent was not what she remembered—more Harper, perhaps, and less soap. She wasn’t sure she liked it.

“You look good,” he said.

They took a cab back to Ellie’s apartment; Harper paid. They climbed the stairs, taking two at a time. Ellie had Harper by the wrist, pulling him upwards. They passed Joe coming down the stairs, carrying a small metal cage—a humane rat trap. They heard a voice above, from the Marley fans, “I *told* him that thing wouldn’t fucking *work*.”

“Ellie,” Joe said. Ellie smiled. She paused only a moment, then continued up, squeezing by. Harper and Joe passed face-to-face,

sideways in the stairwell, saying “oop,” “’scuse me,” “pardon.” At last they were alone at Ellie’s door. Neither of them said anything about Joe, the trap, or the angry tenant.

They made love right away, kicking off their shoes and pants, so hurried that they could hardly undress themselves properly. Ellie laughed and then screamed in frustration trying to pull a bunched-up pant leg over her heel, her sock still on. Harper came to her rescue, sitting back and tugging. By then it all seemed a joke, too much Keystone Kops. Harper kissed her hard. He had grown his beard again, full but neatly trimmed. She had forgotten the plush terrain of facial hair, the way it could shock like grass on a bare back. And there was the fact of his body, so familiar, his hands and tongue on her, the cool, rumpled sheets under her shoulders, the half-melody of a neighbor’s wind chime fading in and out of her consciousness. Afterwards they washed off in the refrigerator-box-sized shower, bumping their elbows against the soap tray. Harper seemed to fill the entire space. “We’re like baboons or something,” Ellie said, “rubbing our soapy chests together.”

Harper laughed. “Baboons don’t use soap!”

“It’s wasn’t really that funny,” Ellie said.

That night they walked down the street for Thai takeout and watched a rented movie, then lay in her bed, engulfed in the warm, heavy smell of peanut sauce and fried tofu, listening. It felt like stalking. They lay very quiet and still. Passively, her body sank toward Harper’s in the futon.

His weight compressed the cotton mattress and she listed into this slump. It was a perfect illustration of gravity; she pictured the mattress as one of those schematics of space-time—a black plane with yellow grid lines extending out in all directions. Harper bent them. Did that make him a planet, or a black hole? Ellie couldn't remember what concept of physics her mental diagram was supposed to teach. She let the entire left side of her body meld into Harper's as they rested on their backs, staring up into the dark ceiling as if it might reveal the paths of the rats. She had told him about them, after they had sex. She couldn't stand to think of him discovering them on his own. He would freak out. Yet he had seemed unimpressed when she told him. "Remember Mark?" he asked, "My old roomie? He found an infestation of cockroaches in his new place, a nest of 'em behind the dishwasher. The whole wall was just alive—*teeming*, you would say—with these slick waxy brown bodies. Yum."

Now he put his arm under her shoulders. Their skins were sweaty and sticky together, moist, the same temperature, so that she had trouble distinguishing where she left off and Harper began. But all she had to do was move, and she would be defined again by her choice, by the illusion of will over her own limbs.

"Shh," Harper said, though she had been lying perfectly still, barely breathing. He stood up on the bed, naked, his ear and cheek, his heavy chest and stomach, a little more paunch than muscle these days,

pressed to the wall. "Right here. You hear that?" A faint scratching. Harper's face turned excitedly towards her in the semi-dark. "Come listen! There it is! Listen!" Ellie watched him leap from the bed to the floor, scuttling along the wall, his ear still held there, as if against a pregnant belly. "Do you hear it?" He had found more enthusiasm for her rat problem than she herself could muster. He was solving a mystery, doing what he did best; it mattered little to him what was at stake. The task itself, the listening for and locating the rats, was both the means and the end of his pleasure. He slapped the wall and the noises stopped. "All you have to do is tear it down!"

"That's my bedroom wall, Harper."

He was jubilant.

The next day they went out for Chinese lunch at a hole-in-the-wall restaurant Ellie had discovered. Only locals knew it. To get there, they had to walk around the back of a camera repair shop, to a small beige door. Inside the restaurant was dark, low-ceilinged, and smelled of garlic. They sat down and the waitress served them tea in a battered metal pot. Ellie said, "The Kung-Pao tofu is supposed to be the best in the city." She nodded at the chef in the fluorescent-lit kitchen—the brightest spot in the place. "At least he says so." Harper reached for her then, pulled her by the elbows until their faces met over the steaming

teapot. “I could see this,” he said, “I could so easily see this being, you know, *it*.”

“No, I don’t know.”

“I have something for you,” Harper said as they pulled apart to allow the waitress to take their order. “Back at your place.”

After they returned, he gave her the box. They sat on the edge of Ellie’s futon. Harper took the gift out of his duffel. Blue paper tied with a mass of flattened raffia, like straw that’s been slept on. As she unwrapped it, she imagined a shop girl—petite, of course, pretty, if a bit stupid—packaging up whatever it was he had bought her in white tissue, then the paper, and securing it awkwardly with the raffia (did she ask Harper, standing there on the other side of the register, to hold his finger on the knot while she tied it?). She picked at it with no success. Harper finally had to cut it for her with his pocket knife. Ellie tore the last bit of paper away, revealing a wooden box the color of strong tea.

“It’s Polish,” Harper said. Ellie ran her fingers over the delicate pattern burned into the lid. It reminded her of latticework in confessional booths through which one could see the obscured face of a priest. Ellie opened it. Inside there was nothing but a tag that told her the box had been made by hand, in the traditional manner, by old men in the Carpathian Mountains. She sniffed it.

“What are you doing?” Harper asked.

Ellie smelled not the musty Eastern-bloc aroma of the Tatras region of Poland, where the box was supposedly from, but the store where Harper had bought it, the same dizzying fruity sweetness all those home stores shared. Expensive triple-wicked candles. Blown glass butter dishes. Indian throw pillows with little mirrors sewn into them. Gaudy statues of “African” cats. This box. “It’s lovely,” she said.

“I thought it was you,” Harper said.

It was her—or it might have been. Ellie touched the inside of the box. There, the wood was not stained; it was blond and rough and there was something shabby and careless about it. That such care had been taken with the outside, only for the inside to turn out so splintery and dusty and with beads of transparent glue showing in the seams, was incomprehensible to Ellie. Why would someone do such a thing? It could only be desperation. She imagined the old Polish bachelor, holed up in a chilled cabin in the mountains, his hands shaking as he fashioned the box, muttering something in his native tongue that amounted to “God, what has my life become?”. Holding the box, she felt his despair, his cold fingers, his stooped walk and resigned manner. Of course it was ridiculous. All this from the shabby inside of a box. “It’s very nice,” she said, and began to cry.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, again and again. But she couldn’t tell him because she didn’t know herself; he wouldn’t understand her imagined ancient artisan. Harper whispered into her hair, “It’s okay, it’s okay,”

and rocked her, half in, half out of the bed, in a confusion of socks and blankets and yesterday's shirts.

Harper returned to San Francisco, where they had once spent so much time together—at the de Young Museum, seeing concerts in the cheap seats at Davies Hall, walking down Haight Street posing as a pair of bohemians, which they were not. There, they were always pretending. Here, with the constant patter of rain and the comparatively low profile of the city, Ellie felt as if she were leading, finally, a real life—or rather the life that she deserved, a life whose various demands she could meet, and still have time and energy left over for reading or pursuing other comforts.

Ellie kept the box, never filling it with jewelry, as was intended. Only a few days after Harper's visit, she took his gift and some clothes to stay with a co-worker while her apartment was bombed for rats. When she came back, her mail was overflowing, but there was nothing from Harper. She called him and told him about the fumigation, and that she had slept with another man. It happened a long time ago and had meant nothing to her. Why had she done it? She did not know. It didn't matter; this man (Harper called him a "fuck") wasn't why she was leaving him now. No, it wasn't Joe, not even the night he came to her apartment door, sweating dark circles under the arms, holding a too-stiff bouquet of

irises and baby's breath. This man she slept with—he was utterly ordinary, no one he knew. No one *she* knew.

That was the point. Feeling empty, unmoored, it had only been the physical sensation she craved. The weight of this other man, the smell of cigarette smoke on his jacket, from the dance club. To transfix her. Nothing more. Physical love was, she thought (she could never say this to Harper), a pleasure like reading, a pleasure one could open or close, depending on one's mood. Each encounter was discreet; each lover belonged to his own time, his own context, and could never overlap with another. She was wrong to have told him. They argued. He was *glad* she had told him. To know the truth. As they talked—finally, Ellie thought, coming to some kind of understanding—she opened and closed the box, feeling the satisfying way the lid snapped over the body.

DRIFT

California Coast, 1971

Lionel is alone when he sees it.

He's crouched over a tide pool, scooping a hermit crab into his palm, feeling it drag along his skin, when a flash of silver-blue appears a few yards away—a long, thin strip of color. At first, Lionel thinks it's a rope lying on the beach. But it's awfully shiny for a rope. Maybe a chrome car part has washed up.

Lionel grabs his pail of seawater and drops the hermit crab inside. The creature pulls back into its borrowed snail's shell. The sun is on Lionel's shoulders as he gets up and climbs down the rocky tide pool flat, moving in the direction of the strange piece of flotsam. He likes the way the sand feels near the water—hard, yet shifting. He can watch his footprints accumulate behind him, surf liquefying the sand inside the place where he has stepped. Maybe the silver thing is some type of giant kelp. If so, it will be the largest he's ever found, larger than bull kelp. He can scare his mother with it, make her scream like she does when she sees a snake. After she realizes it isn't a snake but a piece of seaweed, she'll tackle him and try to steal the kelp, but he won't let her have it. It will be his, a specimen like the hermit crabs and starfish in his bucket.

As he gets closer, hope of seeing the gargantuan seaweed disappears and is replaced with a terrifying vision. Shimmering in the sun is a creature as long as five boys his size lying head to toe, but with a thin, ribbon-like body. Shaking, he draws closer. Red feelers stick out from the animal's throat, with little scoops like ice-cream spoons on the ends. Its flat, round eye stares up at Lionel. More red spines, like poison arrows, protrude from the top of its head, moving of their own will. Its gills move unevenly, desperately—drowning in the air. The strangely patterned skin—now silver, now blue—is mottled with darker blue dots and crooked red lines. Lionel bends down to touch it, and the creature's eye follows his movements. He grazes a finger along the side of its body, holding his breath, waiting for the touch to kill him, but his heart keeps beating, he senses no cold paralysis, no burning fever, just scales so soft and tight they feel like snakeskin. Somewhere in his memory, Lionel has beheld this scene before—the spiny red mane, the serpent's body—not with his eyes, but with his mind, as if he dreamed it.

He starts breathing again when he sees the creature is in trouble. The lower portion of its body is still in the waves, tossed by the motion of the water. Lionel tries to push the creature back into the sea, but its body breaks, horribly, as easily as soggy bread (he is terrified that something so large could be so fragile) and half is swept back into the ocean. As the fish dies, it spills what Lionel decides are thousands of eggs.

His upper lip feels hot, tingly. He tastes tears. His mother is so far down the beach, she appears as a billowy white shirt and yellow disc of sunhat. A man is with her. Lionel can see his mother's thick white calves, her hands fluttering as she talks. Who is this man she's talking to? Lionel begins to run. The pail of seawater he carries sloshes and spills on his legs. His feet slap the wet sand and he feels perspiration on his body for the first time, on his upper lip, his chest, cooling sun-fevered skin. So much water has spilled from the pail that it's nearly dry. Now he can hear his mother laughing: He hears it on the wind, faint and mixed with the sound of the surf. The man she talks to is tall and tan. Lionel doesn't like the way he stands so close to her, above her, rocking on his bare feet, hands in his pockets. His shirt is open, showing hairy swirls. Panting, Lionel drops down beside his mother like a crashed seabird.

"Whoa there, pumpkin pie!" She strokes his head. The wind blows her red hair across her face. "What's the rush?"

Lionel can't tell her yet. He's breathing too hard, and he won't speak in front of this stranger. The man's eyes are hidden behind sunglasses, just like the ones his father wears; they have gold rims and dark lenses the shape of insects' eyes. Lionel's father lets him try them on at home. "All the pilots wear these," he says, though he is not a pilot. His mother always says she's glad he's not a pilot. "Your father is very lucky," she has told him. "The Air Force sent him to school instead of to war. We

are very lucky.” Lionel, even at six, doesn’t believe in luck. Luck is too slippery, too random. He wants to believe in something much more tangible, like the serpent, whose soft wet body he can still feel. He sees the eggs again, the slow stopping of the gills. He starts to cry.

His mother says nothing, but hugs him to her side and rocks him, like she does when he’s tired. “You’re a little sun-sick,” she says. She presses her fingers to his pink skin, then throws a beach towel over his shoulders.

“I should get this one home,” she says.

Her voice sounds sad.

“Yes, well,” the man says.

Apart from the sunglasses, there’s something familiar about this man—his stature, the dent in his chin, his mustache. Then he lifts his sunglasses and says, “What’s wrong, Lionel?” Lionel startles, and his mother and this man laugh at him.

The man crouches down. “You don’t recognize me, do you?”

Lionel shakes his head. Then he sees the way the man’s hands fold, the familiar gold ring on his finger. “Pastor Mark?”

“Yes. Even preachers go to the beach on Saturdays.”

He’s not the same in his blue shorts and his shirt open at the front. He looks many years younger—like the grown son of the man at the pulpit.

Lionel's mother seems to forget about going home. She shakes sand from her canvas shoes and nods while Pastor Mark talks about the church newsletter, the canned food drive, an upcoming field trip for the Sunday school. He takes a cigarette from the pack in his breast pocket, lights it, and begins to smoke while he watches the waves.

The three of them sit, unmoving. They are wasting time. The creature is waiting for him—dying or dead—far down the beach, and the waves are getting higher. Lionel trembles. Once, his mother did not speak to him for a whole day for drowning ants in a pit he dug and filled with water in the yard. “Every bit of life counts,” she had finally scolded him when she tucked him in that night. He tugs at her sleeve now.

“I saw something on the beach,” he says.

“Oh? What was it, darling?” his mother asks. There is an edge of worry to her voice. She is always worried; he feels it like a thick, coating guilt.

“If I tell you, you have to promise to believe me,” he says.

“All right, just tell me then.”

“It was a sea monster!”

Pastor Mark interjects, “A sea monster!” He sits down close to Lionel's mother. “Are you sure?”

“I saw it, there!” Lionel points down the beach. He strains to see if the shiny body is still there, but it's too far away to tell.

“Well, I don’t see anything,” Pastor Mark replies. He stubs out his cigarette in the sand and buries it. “Swimming in the water, you say?”

“No, on the beach.”

He hasn’t been listening. He’s only pretending to be part of the conversation.

“Let’s have a look. Let’s all go for a walk—the three of us.”

Lionel doesn’t like the idea of three. He stands at his mother’s side, away from Pastor Mark, and holds her hand. Her fingers grip his loosely, distractedly.

“I’ve been reading to him,” she says, as if he can’t hear. “Their foreparts and their blood-red crests towered above the waves; the rest drove through the ocean behind, wreathing monstrous coils.”

“Is that appropriate for children? What’s it from?”

“Virgil.” She stops to pick up a sand dollar and rubs it clean with her thumb. “It’s about a priest of Neptune who gets attacked by sea serpents while he’s sacrificing a bull to the same god. A cruel kind of religion, I suppose.”

“What happened to the priest?”

“The serpents ate his sons.”

“Not much of a reward for his devotion. Not very ‘New Testament,’ I’d have to say.”

Lionel's mother laughs and squeezes his hand. "Precisely the point." Lionel squeezes back, but her hand has gone soft again. "You think of your Bible as the beginning of history," she says, "but it's not."

Lionel waits nervously for Pastor Mark's reaction. The pastor walks down to the water to wet his feet. He shouts through the wind, "You were always lecturing me like that."

"No, I wasn't."

"Yes, you were."

Lionel listens, remembers every word, just like he remembers the arrows in the creature's throat, the eggs, the smell of brine. Pastor Mark is still talking to her, gathering up handfuls of wet sand. "Do you ever miss your school days? Our school days?" He pretends to throw the sand on her, and she flinches. Lionel walks ahead, hoping they will hurry.

They make a triangle on the beach—the pastor and Lionel's mother walking some feet apart and behind Lionel who has now stopped at the tide pools, where he first saw it. The beach has changed, though, with the rising tide, and he fears the worst, that the creature has been taken back by the waves. They will think him a liar. Pastor Mark will say lying is a sin; his mother will say lying is naughty. Why didn't he say something sooner? Why did he leave the creature at all? Why didn't he just shout to get their attention? Maybe it wasn't dead after all—maybe,

like a worm, it could regenerate itself and survive the injury he inflicted on it.

“It was here!” he says. “I saw it. A long blue thing with red here,” he points to his head, “and this long—from here—to there!”

His mother is frowning, thinking very hard, and so is Pastor Mark. He wonders what they might have talked about after he walked away.

Finally his mother says, “Is that true, Lionel?”

“I saw it, mama. It was here before. Do you believe me?”

“I don’t know,” she says. “I think Mark’s right about Virgil. It’s not really kids’ stuff.”

“You should be discussing these things with other scholars, Karen, not your son,” Pastor Mark says. “It’s a shame you had to quit your studies.” He winks at Lionel, but it is not a friendly wink.

Lionel’s mother says nothing. She kneels down and touches the sand. “Right here, you saw it?”

Lionel nods.

“You’ve had too much sun. I’m a bad mother to let you stay out so long without watching you. We have to go home now.”

“I saw it! You have to believe me! It broke apart and these eggs ...”

“That’s enough,” Pastor Mark says, and suddenly Lionel feels the heat in his face again, the trembling lip, and something unfamiliar in his gut, like fear but stronger, more focused, something with energy of its own. His mother strokes his face and shoulders. It hurts when she touches

him there, but her touch cools him, too. She was right—he is sunburned. She reaches into the bucket he still holds tightly in two hands. Thin gold bangles slide down her wrist as she strokes each of the sea animals that are keeping moist in the little water that is left. “They’re beautiful,” she says. “Look at this starfish!” She picks it up and turns it over. “Eew.” She holds it up to his face and he reaches out for it. “Don’t let it sucker you!” she teases. He tries to forget about the blue and silver creature, the horrible eggs. He lets her play with his specimens as if they were toys. She’s not really playing, but drifting—back to him, his again, delicate as a shell caught in the tidal pull of his need.

Lionel is in junior high when they take their first family vacation. He hides his acne-scarred cheeks behind a dark hooded sweatshirt, though it is warm outside. He and his mother and father are driving south to Mexico. Lionel’s mother complains that it is dangerous to drive. What if they get hijacked, robbed? Lionel’s father tells her not to be so prejudiced. Mexico is safer than the United States, he says. Lionel is watching out the window, how the wide streets of San Diego turn to the curving narrow highway that continues down into Ensenada. He looks up at the hills on one side, dotted with tin-roof shacks and laundry lines. Out the other window is the Pacific, moody and endless, hazy at the horizon. Later, he will remember nothing about crossing the border

other than the change in landscape, the long fence extending out into the sea. His mother stares out the window, no doubt thinking, as Lionel is, about a million things, feeling the blur of emotions common to people who stare out of car windows at the rushing scenery. Lionel's father taps on the steering wheel and whistles "King of the Road"—the radio is broken.

Lionel loves his father, despite the fact that they don't know each other well. The single ritual they share is watching television at night. After Lionel's mother has gone to bed, they watch a couple of hours of sit-coms. Lionel does his homework and goes to bed himself. What his father does after that is a mystery. Lionel says goodnight as the blue light from the TV screen shines on his father's face like bioluminescence. He might squeeze Lionel's shoulder. Or say, "I'm proud of you." But he is preoccupied. Something is happening inside his mind that Lionel can't penetrate.

The same is true of his mother. In the front passenger's seat of the van, she appears to be asleep with her head against the window, but her eyes are open, looking at Lionel through the dusty side mirror. They live out their separate existences as if behind thick aquarium glass. He wants to rescue his father from his computers—his switches, dials, and screens. For her. To bring her back, he would use his own father as bait. He watches her pretend to sleep, the sun blanching her features, making them shadowless.

They arrive at the seaside hotel where they will stay for a week. “To do nothing,” Lionel’s father says, but his idea of nothing is not the same as hers. She will want to walk on the beach and think while he will want to visit bars and monuments and shops, and—it is implied—not think at all. Early the next morning, he manages to drag them out to the *Mercado Negro* on a day when the fishermen are pulling into the harbor with their catches. Lionel’s father sucks in a breath of the foggy, sulfurous air and proclaims that though it stinks to high heaven, the place is fascinating to a connoisseur of daily Mexican life. Never mind, Lionel thinks, that this is a tourist town, that the market is mostly for show—surrounded by bars and restaurants with outdoor seating, big stucco terraces with a view of the marina.

Lionel shuffles behind his parents as they walk from the tour bus to the docks, followed by a slow-moving group of mariachis. The men wear black uniforms with silver stitching and large hats. The violinist places a red cloth under his chin with his instrument, which, for an instant, reminds Lionel of the exotic plume of a tube worm, but it is only a rag, a scrap of fabric taken from some other costume. They are playing something in a minor key, slightly out of tune. The trumpeters and *guitarrón* players squint into the white sky, the sun burning quickly through the fog. Lionel will leave his hood up until it gets too hot.

The *Mercado Negro* is a cluster of tents between rows of restaurants, and beyond it is the harbor where fishing boats land. Lionel wanders

into the middle of the stalls under the canvas which darkens and dampens everything. People are too close, crushing around him, speaking a language he only partially understands. He curses for no reason when a man in rubber waders accidentally sprays him with a hose while washing a milk crate full of crabs. A woman holds out a handful of squid. Their gray-white bodies seem to form a single gelatinous mass. He walks deeper into the tent and nearly collides with a man pushing a wheelbarrow full of ice and the midsection of a blue fin tuna—a huge hunk of black flesh cut in half, backbone embedded in surrounding pink meat. Shark, swordfish, marlin, eels, squid, prawns—all dead, all meat. Lionel feels dizzy.

He wonders, as he has many times before, whether he imagined the serpent on the beach, or whether it was real and he murdered it. He had only tried to help it. It was nothing like these specimens, as recognizable as domesticated animals, part of the arrangement of parsley and lemons and rice on a plate.

“Honey,” his mother says, suddenly standing behind him. “I’m going to sit down at that bar over there.” She points through a gap in the tent wall to a taco stand with long wooden benches. “I’ll be nearby.” She can’t remember that he isn’t a boy anymore. She has told him—in one of her weepy moods he hates so much—that she has dreams of him running away from her, slipping into a crowd.

“I’ll come find you. Where’s Dad?”

“Admiring some poor fellow’s boat, practicing his rusty Spanish.” She reaches under his hood and smooths the hair away from his forehead.

“You should cut these bangs. How can you see?”

He shrugs. “I’ll come with you,” he says.

“All right. I’d like that.” She sighs and turns around to exit the tent. He can tell that as much as she wants him near, she is also tired of his long hair and the sweatshirt he has worn for two months straight without ever putting it in the wash. She wants to have a drink alone. She complains, often, that she is never alone, and that she is lonely. He catches up to her. “You hungry?” she asks.

“Yeah. But no fish,” he says.

“No fish,” she laughs. “Not for me, either.”

They sit at the long wooden bench. The restaurant is open to the air, just a large covered patio. There is an outdoor kitchen where women grill prawns. Lionel’s mother orders a Corona. He watches the bottle sweat in the sun, mesmerized by the golden color of the beer. “Are you okay?” Lionel asks. It takes him a long time to ask this question.

“Of course,” his mother says quickly.

“Right,” Lionel says, drawing out the word. He turns around awkwardly to see the ocean. It’s spring. Somewhere out there, gray whales are calving. He wants to tell her this; it seems like something she would want to know.

“Contrary to popular belief, no one is ever entirely okay. But don’t worry about me, Li. I have you, right?”

“I guess.”

“Not you guess. I still have you, right?”

“Yeah. Okay. You still have me.”

His mother smiles, “Behind you.”

Lionel’s father comes up and chases him off the bench and tells him to go talk to a boy his age who works on one of the boats. “A real entrepreneur,” he says.

“Grant,” his mother says. “He’s fourteen.”

“Go on. Those boys are diving for shellfish. Go see how it’s done.”

“You don’t have to,” his mother says. She shades her eyes, still penetrating him, swallowing him.

“I’ll be right back.” Lionel wanders to the dock. The sun is hot and overhead now, the fog is gone, and the place is starting to smell like rotten fish. Lionel has to peel off his sweatshirt. He feels like a freak. He’s not going to hang out with some boys whose language he doesn’t even know. They would sooner call him names than let him interfere in their concentrated labors. He watches the boys enter and emerge from the water, coming up just long enough to give their abalones to the men on the boat, then going under again. Their bodies are sleek and brown. They dive with no equipment but a pair of goggles and a long knife. They belong in the water. Lionel has swum in the ocean but he has not

thought of it before as its own economy, like a world upside down to this one. There is something desperate, a human neediness, in the sight of the fish market, of these boys diving and resurfacing like shearwaters with their prizes from beneath the waves. He wants to pierce the glass world, expose his skinny white arms and go diving with the boys, feel the exuberant spirit of their endeavor. He wishes the boys could go on harvesting, but that the abalone wouldn't have to die.

On the dock, a tall boy about Lionel's age watches the boat and folds his arms over his chest. His skin is white with salt in places. His black hair stands on end. Sensing Lionel behind him, he jerks his head, beckoning, "come here." Lionel steps along the creaky dock.

"*Oye, güero.*" The boy points to a small motor boat. "Thirty minutes," he says, "to *La Bufadora.*"

Lionel shakes his head.

The boy motions with his hands—water coming up out of a blow hole. Whales? No, a hole in the rocks. Only ten dollars.

As his mother fears, he could just slip away from her. At the boy's feet are a fishing pole and a plastic bucket. The boy turns the bucket upside-down and sits on it. "Ten dollars, thirty minutes," he repeats. Lionel asks the boy if he has ever seen a sea serpent. At first the boy doesn't understand. It takes them a while. A snake? Yes, but underwater, and bigger. No, no snake. Never. The boy makes his offer

again, but Lionel pulls his pockets inside out. No money. The boy laughs at him, showing a row of white, overlapping teeth.

Lionel is in the girls' dormitory at the University of California, Santa Cruz with his roommate, Ted Marzotti, drinking cheap red wine and becoming mean-drunk. Ironically, he thinks, his capacity to recognize what's happening to him as he passes through the various stages of drunkenness makes him feel more bemused than mean. He is entertained, however briefly and blackly, by his own idiocy and inability to hold liquor. Ted says it's all the seawater they absorb while diving: It gets into your skin, into your bloodstream, cleanses your body so that you become more sensitive to drugs and alcohol. Ted lies. He is happily drinking and becoming rosy-cheeked, in good humor, on his way to scoring with a girl for about the third time in his life. The girls with them are Anna Lee (Ted's latest, a freshman), and Judy Sitnik, Anna Lee's friend and Lionel's "date."

Lionel tries to stand to go to the john, but he stumbles and Judy catches him, which makes her go into a horse-laugh. He snaps at her and pulls away.

"She didn't mean anything, Lionel. Jesus," Ted says. He knows: Lionel is trying to forget that his mother is having an affair with Mark Sterling (no longer Reverend, no longer "Mark," either, as he goes by

Sterling now, some middle-aged male bullshit.) She may even be pregnant, which is the only reason she has told Lionel's father, who immediately phoned Lionel. Ted was there when Lionel turned stony and distant on the phone, then cursed his father, then apologized, his voice lowering to a pathetic, unintelligible mumble. "He's had a rough night," Ted says in a tone of conspiracy between the two men, meaning that the girls may ask all they want but they won't get a single detail out of him.

This, Lionel thinks, is probably one of Ted's last redeeming moments for the evening, and he is grateful for the break, grateful just to go to the john. As Lionel excuses himself, Ted goes back to talking about their latest dive at Catalina Island. "It's hard to achieve neutral buoyancy, you know, cold water means you go a little heavy on the neoprene." Why doesn't he just say "wet suit"? The girls' eyes widen and Ted grins at Lionel as he goes out the door—*I'm getting laid and you're not*. Lionel wonders if he'll room with Ted next year, knows that yes, he will, he has no choice in the matter. It is easier, he thinks, for his mother to leave his father and fuck the ex-preacher than for him to end his friendship with Ted Marzotti.

Lionel has trouble finding the men's bathroom in the women's dorm, though at the end of the hall is a one-hole deal for visitors the girls aren't supposed to have. He does his business without too much difficulty, and when he emerges, he slumps against the hallway wall and sits on the floor, waiting for the courage to go back to Judy's and Anna's room. He

feels like someone is watching him—not now, exactly, but all the time, generally. What will happen if he doesn't have sex with a girl with big front teeth and a horse laugh? What if he would rather be floating in a giant kelp forest, the light streaming through the frond canopy above, like standing in the midst of redwoods at Big Sur?

Lionel sits in the hall, listening to radios behind doors playing and re-playing the same songs but in a different order. If he hears "Like a Virgin" or "Love Shack" again, he's going to do something crazy. He gets up and tries to remember which way he came. He rounds the corner of the hall and runs into her—the deaf girl he saw one day in front of the library, the strawberry blond who stood up to the Jesus freaks with placards that said "Fornicators Go to Hell!", exposing herself to them, saying in her voice like an unformed lump of clay, "Does anyone deny that God made this body? That it is a temple, not a locus of sin?" All the students who had gathered around to taunt the religious group applauded in a thundering wave; some whistled and shouted at her. She had turned and disappeared into the woods around the library, unable to hear their approval. Now Lionel's memory of the kelp forest meets the image of this girl, and briefly Lionel hallucinates that she is floating naked in the sea weed, her deep orange hair twisted among dark green kelp fronds.

"Excuse me," she says, frowning. Lionel has to speed up her words in his mind, like a record played too slow, they sound so distorted.

“I’m sorry,” says Lionel. “I’m sorry,” he repeats, slowly. She watches his lips while he talks. “I didn’t see you.”

“That’s okay,” she says.

Last week, when he witnessed her performance, he told Ted about it, omitting certain details. For instance, he left out that he had gone from a brief feeling of being cradled when he saw her breasts—so white, conical, with soft pink aureoles that faded into the rest of her skin—to a feeling of violent desire, something so acute and painful he felt sick afterwards. He wanted not only to make love to this actress bodily, but to be swallowed whole—his mental self along with his physical being. Later he admonished himself that a man who loves that way is no better than a male angler fish, searching his whole life for the one female he’ll attach himself to, ten times his own size, suckering himself to her, her blood circulating through his body, like a baby in the womb. No, that would not be him, he thought, even as he followed her and hid behind an oak tree. He left her alone when he realized her vulnerability—she couldn’t hear him stalking her. Staying back a ways in case she turned around, he waited until he saw her get back on the main path to the dorms, where she would be safe from creeps like himself. He said to Ted, “She showed her tits and then it was over.” Gripping Lionel’s shoulder, Ted said in a religious tone, “You have to tell me next time the Bible thumpers come to town.”

Normally, girls just push past him, eyes to the floor, but the deaf girl hesitates.

“I saw you,” he says, moving his lips exaggeratedly.

She rolls her eyes. Putting his arm out, he stops her from going by. He is mean drunk. He floats outside himself, watches the tragedy unfold.

“What’s your name?”

“Dahlia,” she answers.

“I’m Lionel. Why did you—?”

She shrugs. “They deserved it.” Her voice swallows itself, sounds like a sentence recorded backwards, then played forwards.

“It was pretty brave,” he says.

She takes a piece of paper from her pocket and holds out her hand. It takes Lionel a while to realize she’s asking for a pen. “Slow,” she says.

She writes: *Want to sleep with me? Check the box.*

He checks the box.

In her narrow bed, he tells her about the kelp forests that grow right off the coast here, and down by Monterey. He loves the way she hovers over him, her hair forming a tent around him, not unlike the kelp. He uses it as a prop while he explains the slow, gentle movements of the current. “It’s silent down there. I mean, you hear things, but not like you do above water. You hear the ocean, you hear your lungs and your heart. It’s hard to explain.”

They draw and write on a pad of paper she takes from her desk drawer. Lionel sketches a kelp forest, explaining how the columns of kelp are analogous to terrestrial trees. He draws the holdfast, the stipes that carry nutrients, the long amber blades that soak up sunlight and create shade below. He draws a school of rockfish, he draws rays of light coming down.

Is this your church? she writes.

I stopped going to church when I was six.

She kisses him on the eyes.

“They’ll think I’ve passed out in the john,” he says. “That Ted’s a bastard. He should have come looking for me. Judy, at least.”

“Who’s Judy?”

“Just a girl. She’s just a friend.”

Dahlia shrugs. “Whatever. She’s your girlfriend?”

“Honestly, no. I just met her.”

“Good,” she says, and rests her head on his chest.

Lionel listens to her breathing for several minutes. He convinces himself that she has many lovers—he is not the only one. How could he be? She was obviously experienced, leading him, telling him where to touch her, how. Moments ago, he thought it was grand, but now he’s embarrassed. He extricates his limbs from their tangled positions with hers. “I should get back,” he says. He dresses slowly, regarding each sock before he wrestles it onto his foot. The mean drunk is gone. Dahlia

made it go away, and now it is just the sad post-drunk, the dehydrated lethargy.

“Why?” she asks.

“They’ll look for me eventually,” he says.

“Come see me again.”

“I will. I’ll pick you up tomorrow and we’ll go watch the sea lions.”

The wine has abandoned him; everything and everyone seems to be falling away in a kind of optical illusion as he pulls on his jeans and leaves the girl’s room.

In the Gulf of Mexico, scientists in a submersible have just discovered a brine lake under the sea, an ecosystem within an ecosystem. Half asleep, lying next to Trisha, Lionel answers the phone, thinking it’s Ted again, with more news of the exciting discovery their team stumbled upon. The radio-alarm goes off at the same time—news of the war, dispatches from Tel Aviv, the “Desert Storm Happy Hour,” as Trisha calls it. She is a blunt woman, an avid surfer, a decision-maker. She reaches over and shuts the radio off.

“What time is it?” Lionel asks the voice on the other end. “Ted, is that you?”

“It’s Sterling,” says the voice.

Sterling tells him how he found her, what she took, how he never should have left her alone in one of her moods. He cries like an infant over the phone. Lionel has to hold it away from his ear.

Lionel's father calls next, says the line was busy. Now Lionel cries—because he can, because he doesn't want her to be dead, because he doesn't want to tell his father he's not the first to give him the news. Trisha strokes his back for half an hour, but he hardly feels it.

During a dive, after he has explored the seafloor and it is time to return to the surface, Lionel keeps all his equipment to the proper weight, so has to have neutral buoyancy. That is, he can begin his ascent by simply filling his lungs with air, lifting him off the bottom. Lionel thinks that if he just fills his lungs with air, he can come up off the bottom of this feeling, see the light overhead again, relieve the terrible pressure crushing him from above.

Lionel hardly remembers the day at the beach—everything he has been and done, and everything that has happened to him stems from that day, and yet he cannot clearly remember it. He has feelings, he knows what he saw. Since then, he has read about the oar fish, *Regalecus glesne*, in textbooks. He has studied pictures. He tries to reconcile these with his memory of the serpent, but the details aren't quite right. Who but an ichthyologist would recognize such a fish in the

ocean, or washed up on the beach? The pictures aren't very good—drawings, no photographs. He suspects this is what he saw, but he cannot be sure.

The oar fish is the rarest of deep-sea fishes. Usually, Lionel works with the more common ratfish, deep sea crabs, anemones, polychaete worms. He extracts small cores of flesh from their bodies and measures the carbon dioxide levels in the creatures' cells. The burning question for him every day is, How much carbon dioxide from the atmosphere is absorbed by the oceans? He suspects that his research will be used to exploit the ocean somehow, to increase the rate of absorption—by way of human intervention, the effects of which will only be apparent when it is too late to reverse them—and allow us to keep driving our big cars. Lionel has remained at Santa Cruz, earning his B.S. in zoology, a Master's in marine biology, working for this and that professor until he received his Ph.D. in ichthyology. Now he lectures twice a week and takes samples of fish meat. As a hobby, when he does find the occasional angler or fangtooth, Lionel also photographs them for his web site on bizarre marine life. These specimens are not the best. They are the odd wanderers, the slow ones that migrate with their brethren every night to feed in the shallower, plankton-rich waters, but for whatever reasons do not return at dawn and are caught in fishermen's nets. When bizarre fishes turn up on this part of the coast, they often find their way to Lionel. Some thoughtful fisherman throws them on ice and notifies

the marine biology department at the university. Their spines and gills are often cruelly torn, their colors faded. Lionel lays them out on a white table and photographs them against a yardstick.

Lionel wonders now how he will photograph the gulper eel. It is too big to lay out on his table. With Ted's help, he wraps it in a tarp and hauls it from the basement lab outside to the parking lot behind the marine sciences building. Every time they recover something from the deep, Ted asks, Is this what you saw? On occasion, Lionel has been close to saying yes, but he has never found anything to match his memory of that day.

"Be careful," Lionel says. "It's delicate."

They set their cargo down and unfold the tarp. The eel's wet body glows with tiny ice particles.

"This guy's practically intergalactic," Ted says. Sweat beads on his forehead. "Is this it?"

"Not even close."

"Have you ever thought that maybe somebody told you about it, and you only think you saw it?"

"I know what I saw. The worst thing is that I hurt it. At least, I remember hurting it. Not on purpose. I was trying to help it back in the water, and it just disintegrated." Lionel flicks a piece of ice off the eel's soft skin. "It doesn't matter now," he says. "I just wanted to show it to

my mother. She never believed that I saw—whatever it was. It must have been an oar fish. That’s all I can think.”

The men—one swarthy and round, the other fair and lanky—sit down on the curb and enjoy the breeze rustling the tops of the oak trees surrounding the parking lot. It is spring, deliciously warm, peaceful. The earth smells of drying pine needles. Women on campus wear practically nothing these days, and Ted jokes about “bird-watching” and screws a new sophomore or junior each term. “The seniors are too savvy and the freshmen too pimply,” he says of his choice of prey. A sophomore named Cheryl is waiting for him now, in his office. “I knew from her unshaved armpits that she’d be mine. Rich neo-hippies tend to go for scientists—they want to free our rational minds, open us to love. Plus, they don’t mind the smell of my office.” He bounces his leg up and down nervously. “So now what?” he asks. “We take its picture?”

“I suppose we should.” Lionel takes his camera from around his neck and adjusts the speed and the f-stop.

“We should turn him,” says Ted, “so he’s parked lengthwise in the space, for perspective.”

“Good idea,” says Lionel.

They carefully pick up the tarp at both ends again, turn the eel. Lionel notices its head is torn up. Its giant lower jaw hangs askew, unhinged, flopping. Its marble-like eye gives him the shakes. He photographs the eel in sections—head, middle, tail. Next he takes a

wide-angle shot which encompasses the gulper, the tarp, the outer edge of the tarp, and the blue and white handicapped parking sign. If only he had a camera *then!* A Polaroid, his family had one of those. He could have proved it to her—the serpent from her stories come to life.

“Hey, buddy,” Ted says. “You all finished?”

“If you wouldn’t mind,” says Lionel, “I’d like to be alone.”

“You coming to the dean’s retirement thing? There’ll be cake.”

“I’ll be there. Two o’clock, right?”

Ted salutes and goes back to the basement where Cheryl waits for him. Why does he have to screw his students? Lionel tried it only once and found it was too stressful. But Ted is just the type of man who would be oblivious to such stresses. Lionel envies people who don’t care what other people think.

Lionel measures the eel, writes in his notebook: *May 28, 1999.*

Gulper eel, 1.4 mets., damage to lower jaw (prob. by fishing net), posterior bioluminescent organ intact.

“What am I going to do with you now?” he asks. The eel’s expression is utterly vacant, like Lionel’s insides. Why did he banish Ted? Who is going to help him now? He wonders, for an instant, about the deaf girl, Dahlia. Back in his office, he keeps the notebook they used to write in, along with some of her letters. Right after she went to graduate school at Stanford, they split up. He’s heard that she’s the director of a children’s relief organization based in New York now—the mutual friend who told

him this emphasized how well-adapted Dahlia is to city life. This one small detail hurts him more than anything else. She's not the romantic person he thought he knew—she's a city girl.

Bereft, Lionel refolds the tarp. He forgives the boy on the beach, looking for hermit crabs. He didn't understand how fragile the life lying at his feet was. He thought he was being heroic.

There is little that can stir a sense of wonder in Lionel these days. He is far distant from the boy on the beach, has almost forgotten him. Lionel's father is having fun spending his retirement money, nudging him to invest in the stock market every time he visits. Now he's taken Lionel, Ted, and Ted's new girlfriend, Holly, to the Bahamas. The four of them charter a boat with a Bahamian fisherman and his yellow Labrador retriever as crew. Ted has suggested they try to find a live oar fish. Lionel thinks this is nuts, but he goes anyway. On the boat, Lionel thinks he hears music, but it is just the engine and the gentle slap of the boat's hull on the water as they skim towards the Tongue of the Ocean. Everything is turquoise and white. Lionel squints in the sun. After all these years, he is still nervous before a dive. There is something about crossing that boundary of elements that sets his stomach fluttering.

Ted is joking with Lionel's father and the captain of the boat. On this excursion, he has brought his new filming equipment and now he makes

a lewd reference about Holly and the video camera. Holly isn't fazed by Ted's jokes—she even joins in. Lionel thinks Ted will end up marrying her; he's actually quite optimistic about the match. "You ready?" Ted calls. Lionel gives him the thumbs up. Holly is going with them. Lionel's father claims he is too old, though the truth is that he's always been afraid of the water. Lionel feels a pang of love, knowing that his father would rather be safely tucked into a hammock on the beach than out here on the open sea—but it is for him, for Lionel, that he tries so hard—too hard sometimes. The captain shows Lionel's father where to sit so he can watch them go in. The Labrador leans against his legs, the two of them content.

Lionel helps Holly check her equipment. She asks, "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, fine. I always get a little nervous."

Holly laughs. "I meant the equipment. But I'm glad to hear you say it. I thought it was just me," she says. She shakes her sun-bleached hair before pulling it into a loose pony tail. Holly is beautiful, and close to Ted's and Lionel's age. She could be a real friend to him. Lionel studies the crow's feet around her eyes, her tight, freckled skin. She pats him gently on the cheek. "Let's go," she says. Before they somersault over the edge of the boat into the water, Lionel waves to his father, who lifts his hand briefly from where it rests so comfortably on the dog's head, then lets it fall again.

Blue. White bubbles. They begin their descent. A weather buoy near Andros Island, used by the Navy and several environmental and oceanographic research teams, attracts a wide variety of marine life. Small fish use it for shelter, which in turn attract tuna, sting rays, and sharks. Recently, a pair of Navy divers spotted what they later identified as an oar fish at this very place, which is exactly why Lionel thinks they will not see one now. Most oar fish sighted near the surface or shore are in moribund states—for some reason, no one knows why, they have left the deep sea to die. Lionel is not optimistic. But Ted has his camera ready. He's convinced, as he approaches forty, of the existence of miracles. As they near the buoy, they encounter sting rays feeding on a small swarm of thimble jellies, and a few young razorfish hiding in the submerged apparatus of the buoy.

Holly is graceful in the water. She is distinctly seal-like in her black suit, except for her dayglow green fins. Lionel follows her train of bubbles. Sun penetrates the warm water unevenly, as if punching through holes above, searching them out with its dancing rays. It is not quite the cathedral feeling of the kelp forests, of colder, rougher waters, but it is beautiful. This is something he could never tire of, this feeling of weightlessness, of the ability to extend almost infinitely in all directions. He had a dream once that he was floating in space. He had never comprehended the vastness of even our solar system, much less the universe, but in this dream he felt it. He could “fall” up or down or

sideways, infinitely, forever. He could “swim” among the stars; there was no direction. Diving was similar to his dream of floating in space—true three-dimensional movement.

Holly and Ted are ahead of him now, descending further into the water column. Without a submersible, they must stay above the dusky midwater. Peering down into the depths is like wading through time itself—from day to night, from outer to inner space, this vertical movement reminds Lionel, painfully, that everything, every dead thing ends up at the bottom of the sea, on that desert plain of darkness.

The amazing thing is not only that they do see an oar fish, but that it appears to be perfectly healthy. Holly stops first and points madly at nothing. Ted has his camera rolling, trying to follow Holly’s gesture. Then Lionel sees it: Swimming upright, propelled by its long red dorsal fin, the oar fish bobs along towards them, apparently curious. As it swims closer, Ted tries to hand the camera to Lionel—“you film it, it’s your fish”—he seems to say, but Lionel places a hand on the camera’s lens and gently pushes it back to Ted. The fish is brilliant, alive. Lionel is as still as he can be. The fish nears, then turns and brushes by them slowly, keeping its flat disc of an eye pinned on them. Its whiskers float gently around its head; its dorsal fin, which runs the length of its body (a full twenty-five feet, Lionel guesses, although it is hard to tell since the posterior end extends into the darkness of the water below them), moves in rhythmic, red undulations, like a wheat field bowing in the wind. He

feels his heart becoming larger. It is exactly as he remembers. The fish allows him to touch its body, its scales as smooth and tiny as a sardine's. Lionel draws a finger across his throat and points to the camera. Ted shakes his head. Lionel gives the sign again. Holly nods at Ted, and he shuts off the camera. Lionel smiles. His mother will be able to see it better this way, burned into his memory, which she still visits on occasion, than if the creature is captured on film. Confused, perhaps, in the midst of their triangle, the oar fish stays near them for a few more moments before it jets off, escaping in the space between Ted and Holly, quickly vanishing into the deep.

TROPIEZO

Lupe's mother never took off her apron, not even to go out in public. She wore the grass green thing with scalloped edges wherever she went. When Lupe asked her about it, she simply said, "Oh! I forgot to take it off." Yet she kept the apron washed and ironed, and never wiped her fingers on it. At only thirty-six, Lupe noticed, her mother verged on old. Her black hair was streaked with white *canas*, and her hands, brown and creased, examined everything—Lupe's braid, her school uniform, the dishes after she had washed them—with the brusque dismissal of someone who can no longer be surprised by life.

When Lupe was a baby, her mother would place her hands on Lupe's cheeks. "What a long face! Like a horse. Your sister's head came out round as an onion." Lupe's sister, Rosario, lived and went to university in Mexico City. She came home to marry her boyfriend in the spring—a three-day-long *fiesta* at her family's new house in the hills outside their town. Lupe thought it odd that suddenly her father's business was doing so well, right after Rosario had announced her wedding; her parents had bought the house to hold her sister's *boda* there in style, her father said. He couldn't resist the chance to show off to the aunts and uncles and cousins. While he boasted about the house, how it had been reinforced

above and beyond any architect's requirements for safety against earthquakes, Rosario had leaned into Lupe's shoulder and whispered, "I don't think I'm going to finish university. Emilio got a good job in the city and we're having a baby." Her sister's breath was damp-smelling, her body hot and sweaty from dancing. The white clouds of her sleeves brushed against Lupe's skin. She pressed the side of her head with the wilted freesia bloom against Lupe's. "Don't tell mama," Rosario said.

Lupe had shrugged her sister off. "You're sticky." Rosario held onto Lupe's wrist, waiting for her promise of secrecy. "Once the baby comes, mama will forget about your degree," Lupe said. Rosario had turned away then and shouted at the DJ to play another *raggaton*. It was the last time Lupe had seen her, and of course she was big now, and it was all anyone talked about.

One fall afternoon after heavy rains (unusual because they came so hard and so late in the season, driving pedestrians to hide out in doorways and courtyards), Lupe accompanied her mother on an errand to buy underclothes. "I need some new things," her mother offered in pretense, but Lupe understood that she would get shuffled into a dressing room, too, and the shop owner would touch her and measure her and produce, from a wrinkled cardboard box, the item she needed—all hooks and clasps and lace. It shouldn't be a big deal, Lupe thought. But being with her mother like this made her feel heavy, dragging her feet like a child. She didn't *try* to be a tomboy, as her mother accused,

just to frustrate her. Compared to her friends, like Maricela with the kinky permed hair and nice round hips, Lupe felt ugly (though she knew, somewhere very far inside her, that she wasn't), ashamed of her slow development and the scar on her forehead, a white arrow pointing into her hairline (she fell out of a tree when she was seven). Until now, she had gotten away with doubling up her T-shirts and wearing baggy sweaters; but ever since her father had made friends with a young employee at the *ferreteria*, Lupe's mother had decided that her boyish practices would have to end.

"Lupita," her mother hissed on the bus, before they reached their stop downtown. "Put on your sweater. We're almost there."

They got off at the *zócalo*, where bands played at night under the gazebo in the city's center. Men were hanging lights on the federal building, getting ready for Independence Day. Young couples drove around and around the square with their radios on. In a stone archway, a woman peeled back the banana leaf wrapping her *tamal*. A girl not much younger than Lupe swaggered by with a basket of cigarettes and gum. In front of the cathedral just across from the *zócalo*, a group of schoolboys lined up in their red sweaters, each with a hand on the shoulder of the boy in front of him. Lupe and her mother crossed behind a taxi blaring *rancheras*, avoiding the dips in the cobblestone filled with oily water. The street looked beaten by rain, but the air smelled clean, just washed. Thunderheads still loomed over the mountains in the west,

but above, through the branches of giant oak trees, Lupe saw crisp patches of blue and white. Squirrels chased each other, leaping from branch to branch, even where the trees were sparse enough that the squirrels had to fly, briefly, on nothing but their instincts. Lupe held her breath.

“Pay attention!” Lupe’s mother jerked her elbow. “You almost stepped in a puddle.”

A tiny woman with a bundle of *rebozos* strapped to her back approached them, and Lupe’s mother shooed her away with a scowl and quickened her step. Lupe watched the old woman turn to a pair of tourists and offer her shawls to them. She held out several draped over one arm, their purple and black tassels sweeping the ground.

Soon Lupe had to trot to keep up with her mother, who had moved ahead, past the *zócalo*, and was turning down a side street. The sun disappeared as Lupe left behind the square, the gazebo with its concession stand underneath, the children sitting by the fountain, the pair of men playing chess on a bench in the shade. Following her mother, Lupe looked up at the gray and yellow apartments with wrought iron decorations around the windows. Her father probably had made them. His replicas of colonial ironwork sold all over town. Her father was a rough man—only a rough man could shape metal, she thought—but she had always felt his love, his affection, even when Rosario didn’t. She touched the curve of the iron as they walked by.

If Lupe and her mother continued along this road, they would come to Lupe's favorite church. The walls inside were covered with gold figures of saints and angels. Her mother had often told her in a bitter voice: "Don't enjoy it too much, Lupita. It is built with Indian blood." Lupe understood. Still, her mother never hesitated to brush off the *indigenas* like the woman selling scarves.

"Hurry, *m'ija*," Lupe's mother said. Once Lupe caught up, her mother seemed to ponder each step. She sighed twice in a row, which meant she was getting ready to speak. Lupe tried to think of something to say first, but her mother beat her to it. "Juan de la Cruz came by last night. Your father talked to him for quite some time."

"When Papi came to kiss me goodnight, he smelled like beer."

Lupe's mother made a sour face. "He was only acting hospitable. It would be rude not to drink with Juan de la Cruz, when he had come by expressly to talk about you."

They reached the boutique then. In the window, Lupe saw the undergarments pinned to a satin background. Pairs of panties and bras, stockings, pajamas. They went inside. On the back wall were shelves full of raincoats—red, green, black, blue. They gave off a strong rubber smell that filled the whole shop. There were racks of neon-colored bikinis on sale, the season finished. Near the front of the store where the expensive items were kept, the saleswoman worked to put a wedding dress on a wire torso. She managed to button the dress in back,

cinching it tight at the waist. The lace sleeves hung down, empty. Then the woman got down on her hands and knees and arranged the beaded train. Lupe's mother coughed loudly, and the woman heaved herself up from the floor and dusted off her pant legs with her palms. "Is it still raining?" she asked, looking past them to the street.

"No," Lupe's mother answered. "It just quit this morning. But it's windy! You should poke your head outside and take a look."

"I have to stay in here all day!" the woman said. "My husband was supposed to help me, but his back is out again."

"That's terrible," said Lupe. She was thinking not of the woman's husband, but of the trees in the *zócalo*, shaking the rain from their leaves, like dogs after a bath, not moved by the wind, but by an internal energy. Everything in the square had danced with an enchanting rhythm—the slow steps of the balloon men, circling like old and hopeful suitors, carrying their bouquets of pink, purple, blue, and silver; punctuating shouts of children, car horns, sudden bursts of light through wind-swept branches; the oaks with their white-painted trunks, their high thin arms quivering as squirrels and birds played in them.

"Excuse us," Lupe's mother said. "We'll just look around." She pulled Lupe again by the elbow, and began moving her hands over the racks of underwear with her quick, disapproving gestures. She snatched several white and pink items and called, "*Señora!* We are ready."

Lupe and her mother tried on bras. She made Lupe lean over and shake herself into the small lace cups. "That's better," she said, as if something had been wrong before. Lupe's skin began to itch.

"Can I go buy a Coke?" Lupe asked through the dressing-room door while her mother tried on more things.

"Can't you wait for me, Lupita?"

"It's only around the corner. I'll be back before you're done."

"Do you have any money?"

"Some. Enough. Please, may I go?"

"All right, but hurry."

Lupe ran out of the shop. The wind was shuttling the clouds along, the light constantly changing, brightening and muting. As she entered the square, Lupe saw a marimba band setting up under the gazebo. The men would take their time, not begin playing until dusk, when strings of lights would come on at the federal building across the way. Lupe nodded at one of the marimba players who stood at the railing of the gazebo and waved at her. Behind him she could see the reddish-brown wood of the instruments, polished and rustic at the same time. She wondered if the old man had transported the marimbas himself, if he would play them all at once, running from one to the other, or if there were other members of the band. For now he seemed to be the only one there. As a uniform he wore a maroon sport coat that was too small, showing his white shirt sleeves, and a black bowtie. Even from a

distance, he reminded Lupe of her grandfather: that gnome-like face, huge eyes behind glasses. “Good afternoon, *señorita!*” he shouted at her. She waved back at him and called, “Good afternoon!” He took a slight bow, and she returned it. She descended some stairs into the concession area underneath the cement foundation of the gazebo.

Among the concessioners, the air became close and humid. Wet footprints covered the bare floor, linking puddle to puddle. Kids, teenagers, pressed around her, shouting their orders: “Coke!” “Snickers!” “Ham-and-cheese!” She was taller than most of them, but still felt she belonged here, more than she belonged in the stuffy shop with her mother. A radio behind the counter played, the sound of horns weaving in and out, fading, full of static, between the echoing voices of the children. Lupe stood in line to buy her drink. At the next register, she saw a boy her age. He smiled at her, then turned to the counter to pay for two bottles of orange Fanta he held above the head of his younger brother, who jumped up, trying to grab one of the bottles. Benito! And the little boy must be Ira—a toddler when she saw him last. Lupe continued to watch the brothers, jostled on all sides by the crowd of children. Benito was taller but still boyishly thin, with a smooth face, and his black hair stood up in an unruly wave. She had not seen him since they moved. He seemed older—perhaps it was the glasses he wore, and something about his mouth, his dark, full lips slightly more set and serious. What made Lupe smile, what she had first recognized in

him, was his lack of confidence; he still hunched his shoulders inside an oversized shirt, stuffed his free hand deep into his jeans pocket, and directed his gaze at the floor. “*Señorita!*” Lupe heard, and turned to the woman selling sandwiches and Cokes. “Are you going to order?” she asked. Lupe held up her hand, *One moment, please*, and tried to catch Benito’s eye again. But he had already started up the stairs, holding the sodas high. Ira’s hand shot up and clutched Benito’s belt, almost toppling him. Lupe felt a surge of sympathy for him; she opened her mouth to shout his name, but didn’t. She let out her breath—her voice without sound.

She put three pesos on the counter. “A Coke, please.” She took the drink she no longer wanted, and pushed through the children who pushed back; everyone seemed to be moving in the opposite direction she wanted to go. In the sunlight and shade of the park again, Lupe looked for Benito.

She found herself at the edge of a small crowd—a woman in a business suit, a couple and their baby, the old man and younger one (apparently his son, for their hooked noses were identical) who had been playing chess when Lupe first passed the square.

“Get back!” someone shouted. It was the marimba player. “Don’t crowd around! Give him some air!” Lupe looked up at the gazebo railing. The old man scowled at her and pointed to a spot on the ground in the

center of the circle of gatherers. He curled his lip at her, as if to say, "You too?"

"What happened?" Lupe asked.

"Let it alone!" The marimba player took off his glasses and shook them. "It's a goner!"

Lupe pressed through the circle. There on the ground lay a brown squirrel, flat on its side, panting.

"It fell—just like that!" said the old chess player.

"I thought it was a gunshot! The smack it made when it hit!" his son said.

The squirrel lay still except for its black eye that jerked here and there, and its palpitating sides. Lupe heard Benito's voice then, "There's no blood." But he was not speaking to her. He rested his hand on Ira's head, who was staring intently at the squirrel. There was nothing anyone could do. For several minutes, the circle of people watched the squirrel pant, waiting to see whether it would live or die. The cobblestone under its body was dark gray, still wet from the rain. Its white chest heaved in and out, as if in panic. But the squirrel's paws never once twitched.

"It's disgusting!" the marimba player yelled. "Quit your gawking and let him go to his squirrel-god!" But no one listened, no one moved.

So strange, the way certain events could stop you on an errand, Lupe thought, reshape your day, redirect you like a snag of mud and branches

in a stream, a *tropiezo*. For a moment, Lupe believed that as long as the squirrel did not die, she could remain suspended; she did not have to clear her throat and speak. She could stay here until the squirrel's fate was determined, no matter how long that might be. She glanced at Benito, who saw her now, his mouth open, lips stained orange from the soda. "Benito," she said only, though she wanted to say more, to make a smart comment about the power of small events to change the very air they breathed. Or that life could end, *así*, on the cement, without dignity, or a chance to think.

Around Lupe the small crowd began to move. "With your permission," came a low woman's voice. "Excuse me," she said, and then the marimba player shouted, "Let her through! *Policia!*"

A woman in uniform stepped forward and crouched by the squirrel. "Poor thing," she said. She scooped it up without any hesitation or squeamishness, and hid it under one flap of her jacket. Lupe could still see its little body moving underneath the fabric of the officer's coat.

"Benito?" Lupe blurted, and at the same time, Benito himself asked, "Is it going to live?"

The officer stroked the creature through her coat. "I don't know," she said. From under her stiff-billed cap, a lock of hair strayed.

The marimba player gestured as if tossing a ball. "Tsss! It's a goner!"

But the officer continued to hold the squirrel close to her body. Lupe imagined the warmth and darkness inside her coat might calm the

animal. People started to leave. The old man and his son returned to their chess game; the couple and their baby continued strolling around the square; the woman in the suit clicked off in her high heels.

Only Lupe and Benito and Ira looked on now.

“Do you remember me?” Lupe asked.

“Lupita? Of course.” He put his hands on her shoulders and kissed the air near her cheek.

“Down there, at the snack bar, I didn’t think you knew me.”

“This is Ira,” Benito said, pushing his little brother forward. The boy was only three or four, a shy round face framed by stick-straight black hair that hung into his eyes.

“I thought it must be you, Ira. You’ve grown a lot since I last saw you. I bet you don’t remember me, though.”

“Did you change schools? How come I didn’t see you?” Benito asked.

“We moved to the suburbs,” Lupe said. She put her hands in the pockets of her sweater, mirroring Benito. Like strangers, they looked not at each other when they spoke but at the small lump inside the officer’s jacket. Lupe wondered how the woman knew that cradling this wild animal would comfort it; but she seemed utterly calm, and Lupe thought that maybe she had some special talent with animals.

“I’m studying at Bellas Artes,” Benito said. “You know how I used to sneak in there? Now I’m official. The *profes* know me by name.”

“You must be really good now,” she said. One Christmas vacation, they had gone out to a jazz café with friends. It was a slow night, and no one was playing the piano that stood pressed against one wall of the tiny place. While they were all talking, Benito sat down and played a syncopated melody in the high octaves, and then joined it with something rumbling and full of energy down low. He kept it up for a long time before Lupe realized that it was Benito playing, that he had left their circle. The piano was a little jangly and out of tune, but the music was lively, and Benito’s fingers skipped over the keys with such confidence that she wondered why he had never mentioned before that he could play. When he finished, their friends clapped and whistled and Benito seemed genuinely embarrassed, as if he had forgotten that he was playing for anyone but himself. “Congratulations,” Lupe said again.

“There’s a recital next week. All of the first-year students.” Was he inviting her? Ira stomped in circles around their feet, swinging his arms wildly, still holding the empty soda bottle. On one pass, he accidentally clipped Lupe in the knee.

“Ow.”

“Ira, be careful!” Benito grabbed his baby brother under the arms and picked him up, though he was almost too big for that. “We should go,” he said.

“Me too. My mother’s waiting for me. You should come see our new house.” Immediately, she regretted mentioning the house. Benito might think she was bragging.

“Maybe.” He smiled and patted his brother’s cheek. The boy had started to pout and cry softly. “Let’s go,” he said to Ira.

“What about him?” Ira asked, pointing to the officer. The squirrel was still inside her jacket.

“I don’t know,” Benito said. “I guess we won’t find out.”

He surprised Lupe by taking hold of her arm and kissing her cheek again, goodbye.

“See you later,” he said. He pulled away, bounced Ira up on his hip and walked on without looking back.

At that moment, a balloon seller passed between them, a man so slight that Lupe thought his cargo would lift him off the earth, and when she looked again, Benito and Ira were all the way across the square.

“Hey!” she called after them, but they couldn’t hear.

It was getting dark. A few notes from the marimba reached her, then faded. “What do you make of that?” someone said, and then Lupe heard the officer’s voice again. “There,” she said. “Its heart is slowing. It’s going to live.” She looked at Lupe, who was the only one from the original group who had stopped to see the squirrel. “Everything’s fine, *señorita.*”

*

“Lupita, I’ve been waiting. Where were you?” Her mother looked angry, but when Lupe entered the store, she had found her chatting with the clerk, as if she only remembered Lupe, only remembered to be mad at her, when she walked through the door. She held the shopping bags against her body, still wearing the ugly green apron. “We have to hurry to make the bus now.”

“I’m sorry. Something happened in the square.” Lupe turned around straightaway and headed out the door, before her mother could tug her by the arm again.

“What happened? It wasn’t anything to do with a man, I hope.”

“No, nothing.”

“Don’t be secretive.”

“I’m not.”

They had to chase the bus and flag down the driver. When they found their seats, Lupe’s mother mentioned Juan de la Cruz again. “Fix your hair, Lupita. He might be there when we return. It’s already five o’clock.”

Lupe stared out the window. The city streets rolled by; first, the restaurants and hotels downtown, then the market stalls, the highway, and green and yellow hills.

“I don’t want to hear any more about him,” Lupe said.

“Watch what you say, *m’ija*. He’s a family friend now.”

“I know what I’m saying. I’ll be polite, nothing more.”

“You met a boy in the square, didn’t you?”

“No, nothing like that.”

“Well, what? You can’t look this way and tell me nothing is wrong with you!”

Lupe delayed answering. There was, after all, nothing to say. Both knew she did not care for Juan de la Cruz, and never would. Though still a young man—only twenty—he was too old for Lupe. If they had been friends, classmates, it might have been different. Lupe breathed against the window glass, drew a face in the condensation with her finger.

“Eh!” Lupe felt her mother grip her shoulder. “Is this my daughter, gazing out the window, not answering me?”

“A squirrel fell out of a tree. It almost died. It would have if the police woman hadn’t put it in her coat.”

“What are you talking about?” Lupe’s mother stared at her. “Do the police have so little to do these days?”

“Do you remember the Brambilas? Benito and his baby brother?” Lupe asked.

“Not really.”

Lupe held up her finger, smudged with dirt from the window. “Me neither.”

“You’re not making sense, Lupita.”

“Sorry.” Lupe reached over to take her mother’s hand, but both of them were clenched in fists, nested in the apron.

DA GAMBA

MWF, will pay \$10 an hour for a sitter for my legs. They don't stay up late. I need a break from them, though, if only an afternoon's severance. You be: Musically literate, into old sappy movies, popcorn, and ice cream—the homeopathic remedy for my pain. Did I mention that? You have to be able to handle pain. The ache in my legs spreads like a glacier, grinding up everything in its way in a boulder-cracking throb. You'd feel it, too. Still interested? Ask for “Viola.”

You turn out to be the quiet neighbor with the nasturtiums. You invite me into your kitchen, unfazed by the absence of anything above the waist. You offer coffee and ham salad sandwiches with the crusts cut off. Plenty of mayonnaise. I like you already, despite the inordinate cleanliness, the daisy yellow walls and white cabinets. You stroke the countertop lovingly, pretending to wipe up a few crumbs. “We've never spoken,” you say, expressing our mutual nervousness. You look down then. My legs are dripping rainwater on your floor. “I'll get a towel,” you say. A smooth contralto. You go away down the hall. There is the creak of the linen closet, but you don't return for several minutes. I wonder if I

should go home. My legs are still dripping oily water. My feet leave dark shoe prints on your burnished parquet. Pants are soaked. I've been out in the rain all morning, steady and drenching. My legs twist out of their wet encasings and kick the clothes into a corner by the recycling, then they try to soak up the mess with a dishrag clutched between toes.

You return without the towel. Rather, part of you returns, the part that has forgotten your errand, forgotten about the rainwater on your lovely floor. Somewhere in the house, the upper half of you is blithely going about her business—perhaps she has noticed that the linens need rearranging, or that the cat hasn't been fed. Now we are here, making ourselves comfortable. We somehow know that our other halves won't bother us. As if part of a ritual not yet established, you shed your clothing and lay it next to mine.

"Come in, come in out of the weather," your legs say, though I am already in. "What on earth have you been doing in the rain?"

"I was with someone," my legs reply. My toes trace neat squares of floor-pattern. "Working, sort of. Actually, not-working. Purposefully not-working. A musicians' strike, out in front of the theater downtown."

"Oh," your legs say, "I've heard of that. Is it still going on? So you're a musician, then? I thought I heard notes sometimes, here and there, practicing, an echo, an interrupted signal. I couldn't be sure of what I heard. Was that you?"

“Yes, that’s me. I’m a gamba player.” My legs give a little laugh. “Don’t you think,” they ask, “that to effectively *strike*, one has to be in *demand*?”

Yours pause a moment to let this sink in.

“I should be there,” my legs lament, “to give a show of support. But how can someone who plays an ancient instrument that no one cares about, for which little repertoire exists, threaten not to play it? My friend—the one I left there—she feels differently. She’s probably still standing in the rain, holding her sign, preaching to me as if all of me were still there with her. But part of me couldn’t take it any more. Besides, everyone wants her, everyone needs an *oboist*. I’d just be keeping her company.” My legs shift from foot to foot, creeping nearer to the ham sandwiches. “I’ve never been good at the whole solidarity thing,” they say.

“You look tired,” your legs say. “Please sit down. You’ve been working too hard. Of course you should unionize. I believe in that, don’t you?”

“Yes,” mine say, “I do. I’m just tired, and it all seems like too much. I—these legs—just walked away from there, aching so deep from standing on the line in the cold weather. Is that wrong?”

“No, it isn’t wrong.”

“My problem,” mine say, “is that I don’t want to work that hard. I’ve been a babysitter, a waitress, a secretary, a maid, a carpenter, a teacher, and now I don’t want to be or do anything. So I left. Look at these,” my

legs say, turning themselves around to show the delicate backs of the knees. “Varicose veins! At my age!”

Your legs try to cheer mine up. “Everyone gets those. It’s no big deal.”

“I know,” mine say, “it’s not a big deal now, but I’ve heard they cause you problems later. Blockages and so forth.”

“But lasers?” yours venture. “Can’t they be removed painlessly with lasers?”

That, yours and mine know, is not the point. You have mentioned pain, and the common desire to be free from pain. We will do anything to avoid it, to get away from it once it begins. Yours turn on the television to distract us. The numbing, flashing voices. Our legs sit down on the couch and share a blanket for our laps. The blanket droops in the space between my knees and reminds me of the absent instrument, my absent self. We go through the ham sandwiches and coffee and start on fresh hot popcorn. Mostly, we just push the food around. We switch to some old movies, with a tub of mint chip between us.

“It’s been ages since I’ve done this,” my legs say.

“Me too,” yours whisper, as if protecting a dirty secret.

I don’t remember the name of the film we’re watching, but it’s one about a dark, wrong-side-of-the-tracks boy and a blond beauty whose mother oppresses her. It’s couched in all this fifties crap, it’s all

metaphor. The boy and girl are in a play together, the play is *Our Town*, and the boy and girl have to kiss in the play. They have to hold the kiss, frozen, for several minutes, while the rest of the scene continues around them. They're trying to practice kissing, they're trying—at least the boy is trying—to go further. The girl likes the dramas-within-dramas, the lack of seriousness, the boy's playful attentions. Now the strings' dark tremolo tells us that, soon, her visions of love and sex will no longer be pleasant fantasies, but will take on the heaviness of the real. Poor girl loses innocence, la dee da. Her mother can smell it on her when she gets home. She goes apeshit. The mother doesn't want the girl to have any sexual feelings; she doesn't want the girl to have a body, even. Something dirty happened in the mother's past.

However outdated, the film has stirred something in us. Anger at the mother, fear and pity for the girl—and for the boy, too, facing as he is the corrosive prejudice of the small town in which he is forced to make his way. The decorative lap blanket we shared has slumped off the couch. Our legs regard themselves, each other, and see each other's nakedness.

“What is that?” your legs ask.

“What is what?”

“*That*—it's like a nest.”

“You have one, too,” mine clarify.

“Well,” say your legs, “I didn't realize that came with.”

My foot shoots out and gives your thigh a playful, if awkward, slap.
“There are buttocks, too—look at yours!”

“What about my backside?” yours ask, anxious. “Is it too big?”

“Every woman thinks her ass is too big. It’s trite, you know that?
There’s nothing wrong with it,” mine say. “I just thought we were legs,
you know? But now we’ve got asses and pussies too.”

Your knees press together, as if wishing to contradict what I’m saying,
wishing only to be legs, without mess, without trouble, without any
identifying feature. “Is that what you call it?” yours ask. “Your pussy?”

“Whatever you want,” mine say. “It’s a pussy now, I think, like those
tabletop ones they sell in porno shops—divorced from a body, a face. It’s
a cunt when someone wants to hurt me. It’s my crotch when I scratch it.
Vagina if you want to be clinical. Now it’s something else much more
defining. Just it and the legs. It: *Cooch, furburger, hair pie, jellybox,*
mink, mutton, pole-hole, twat!” my legs crescendo.

Your legs tense. “Are you okay?” they ask.

“I don’t know,” mine reply. “Don’t ask me how this happened, this
urge to name, to separate. I think it started with the pain, and the need
to walk away. Unbearable, do you know what that word means?
Sometimes I have anxiety dreams about biological weapons. The latest
was some kind of virus that caused such an unbearably painful sore
throat that many elderly people and children, and even some healthy
adults, died of thirst before they could overcome the pain of swallowing

even one sip of water. Only this pain I feel isn't a dream. My acupuncturist says my *qi* is trapped. He grunts like he's unscrewing a stuck lid when he's needling me, his face red with concentration. I asked the medics if it could be my sciatic nerve, but their tests were inconclusive. The gynecologist, the soft, gray-haired woman who reads Tarot on the side, says it's an injury to my womb sustained in a former life. None of them knows. There is no name for what I feel."

Trying to be sunny, perhaps, your legs pipe up: "But it's amazing, really, how quickly we forget pain, assuming we survive it. I mean, it's just a sensation." Your toes clench and unclench, the tendons in your feet quivering like plucked strings—it's getting to you, it has spread.

"Very easy to forget," mine agree. "In those moments of relief between waves of aching, I remember the pain only distantly, second-hand, like a story told about me in childhood. It's the sound of the word that strikes me, that's all. Pain. It doesn't really mean anything, does it, if we don't remember the experience? Am I making sense?"

"Oh, you're making sense," yours say, breathing deep into the sudden muscle spasm in your calf. It passes after a few minutes during which your toes curl into little pink cashews. "Now what were we talking about? Oh, yes, I prefer the literary: the husked sesame, my basil of the bridges. I had a pain there once—was it sex or childbirth?—I don't remember that, either. It doesn't seem to matter much now. Everyone has a pain there at one time or another, don't you think?"

“Of course,” mine concur, “it’s only natural.” My foot reaches for your thigh, this time to rest itself there in a comforting gesture.

Yours ask thoughtfully, “The girl in the film—do you think she ever forgave her mother?”

My toes explore the plush inside of your leg. “Or is it the other way around? The mother who needs to forgive her daughter?”

“My question,” yours say, “was whether they were ever reconciled.”

You have turned toward me slightly and now my foot is pressing up your thigh, my toes brushing your bikini line (there is, in fact, a tasteful line, a leftover tan, well into autumn). Mine chuckle, “What did you call it? The husked sesame? Anyway, you’d better check your granary—there appears to be a moisture problem.”

Now it is your turn to give me a shove with your foot (surprising, beautiful, size-10 foot) and leave it jauntily braced against my hip. Yours laugh, “It’s not a sesame, it’s my basil of the bridges!”

“Well, two can play at that,” mine say, wiggling toes. “They’re well-groomed, clean, plump little things—my Gnomes of the Promenade!”

“Your gnomes? Plump little gnomes? How plump?” ask yours.

“Want to feel?” One foot braces your leg open against the back of the couch, and the other begins to touch you.

“Um,” your legs protest halfheartedly.

“Just when things start to get serious,” mine say. “Such a tease. So bourgeois!”

My toes tickle you there. Your legs begin to open, part. The television is still on low, the popcorn still sitting in the bowl, the bottom of the batch, the Old Maids.

“Why did we ever try to eat popcorn?” yours ask.

“I don’t know, but be quiet,” mine say. My legs stroke you with dexterous toes, gentle pressure, little circles. “I’m fucking you, mine say. Don’t make a sound. There’s nothing you can do about it.”

How do we come undone? Piece by piece, little by little, foot by foot, inch by inch, drop by drop. It happens more quickly and easily that one would think.

It is late afternoon. My legs should be getting back, but really, there’s no rush. By now, my few after-school students will have come and gone, perplexed, ringing the doorbell repeatedly, peering the wrong way through the peep-hole. There will be messages on my machine from the Early Music Society, and probably from *her*, too, wondering where I am. All the more reason to stay. Our legs are stretched out foot to hip, hip to foot, on your couch. The television is off (only infomercials anyway) and the sun is low, coming in through the cracked blind. It’s a lazy time, and the couch is deep and hard to get out of. This is what is meant by

intermezzo, intermission, between. There's popcorn all over the floor. Your legs have let their feet fall open, like an indecorous bather at the beach. My legs are crossed at the ankles, to give yours more room. Popcorn hulls poke them.

My legs remember sleeping with a girl for the first time, how she quietly took over, how it was like now, like your legs taking all the room, your big feet digging into my hips. My ass is halfway off the couch. The nubby fabric piping around the cushions is going to leave a scar-like indent, a red, irritated line running down my left buttock and thigh, a brief bruise like the insides of my knees get from gripping the viol. She always said I was too tense, as if she knew a thing about it. This girl, the one I slept with, hogged all the covers. I was all together then—legs and the rest—shivering in the pre-dawn cold. She had a forceful personality. Yes, that was it, she had a more forceful personality than me, even asleep, and so she took all the covers. That was a long time ago. Since then, I have married a man, and now, when I am in bed with him, I am the one to take the covers. I am not more forceful than he is, but I am meaner, bitterer. This girl I slept with, she was elemental, driven, acquisitive. I could feel it, even before she stole covers.

We were at a beach house that belonged to this musicologist friend of my mother's. We slept on the screened porch, with the sound of the water. It was never hot there on Quartermaster Harbor, even in July. The house's large deck butted up to the cement bulkhead against which

the water would rise and break gently in jewel-green waves, our little harbor an inlet of Puget Sound, the Sound an inlet of the Pacific, layers of calm, layers of remove from the big ocean, but just as salty-smelling and full of life.

These women will always be linked with that house, that harbor. The musicologist showed me her library the first time I visited with my mother when I was about nine years old. She and her husband, an historian, had so many books that they had to convert the swimming pool to hold them all. I remember being fascinated by the place, still very much resembling a pool house, with the green corrugated plastic roof that gave it all an eerie underwater light. Rows of bookshelves hid the pool itself, until we turned a corner and she led us down the deep-end ladder into the dry basin where more stacks of books and sheet music were located. The shelves slanted up to the shallow end. As we walked through, she plucked a few titles off for me to read, and then we continued to a short set of stairs and a metal hand rail that led us back out of the pool again. I wondered how I would ever find the right shelves to put the books back after I'd read them.

Years later, several years after the July when I was there with my lover, the musicologist drowned. We suppose, because no one can be sure. She took the cedar canoe from the side of the house—the one I had caressed many times for its soft, aromatic wood, but in which I had never ventured out—and paddled into the harbor. Though the boat was found

a week later, having drifted into the Sound, her body was never recovered. She was an old woman, and her husband, whom she had known since childhood, had also died. They had grown into each other in a way that left her unbearably exposed once he was gone, that much I understood. When I was younger, she was like another mother to me, more so than my own, even. But when she died, she was very old, and I hadn't seen her in a while. She didn't want anyone else to take care of her—not even my mother—so she took to the ocean. My mother was devastated. The extremity of her grief surprised me at the time, but it no longer does.

Your legs stir slightly, taking up more room now. A quiet force.

“I'm sorry,” my legs say, “have I been talking to myself?”

“After what happened,” yours say, “I just sort of drifted off.”

“After *what* happened?” mine ask.

“Have you forgotten already? You really are a cad,” yours accuse.

A stupor lingers, but the glow is gone. Now I find your legs awkward—not unattractive, but clearly not polished, either. You are lax in shaving; they're covered with fine brown stubble. The ankles are neither too thick nor too thin, the calves lack definition, and the knees are ashy but show no scars. Your legs have the gift of being average. They can quietly go about their business without notice from others. Anonymity means living unimpeded. Their eyes were always on me—my mother's, the girl's. Watching and judging. I couldn't get away. I still

can't. No matter how many times I divide myself, that stamp of essence—a soul I don't even believe in—abides, like DNA, in parts of cells, in molecules, in atoms, in the physical properties of my self, properties which create an irreducible timbre, the timbre of my life. The pain resides *in* me, there is no running.

"I don't want to live like this," my legs cry aloud.

"You must," yours say sternly. "You aren't the first or the last; it's okay."

"It's not, though," mine say. "Not with me."

"Pretend it is okay," yours say. "It's all attitude."

In the end, you are only the neighbor. There is no real *simpatico* between us. You are as much of a scold as everyone else in my life. Because of our geographical proximity, we are afraid to know each other better. Your legs pretend to fall asleep, one toe straining for the remote. My legs may have the weaker personality, but my toes are more prehensile than yours, and I snatch the remote away, deftly as a monkey.

After the death of the musicologist, the house went to a son I had never met, and he sold it immediately. I was never able to return. That distant morning in July, the time I have spoken of, I woke up with my lover, completely bare, a fog rising off the water. The girl lying next to me, the one I loved just then, was still asleep, wrapped in the quilt. I couldn't tear her from her warm fortress. I stumbled to the bathroom, feeling strangely ill. I felt as though I had swallowed rocks, and they

were trying to come back up my throat. In my memory, this horrible sensation, which has never completely gone away, and which was most likely the first symptom of my current condition, is inextricably linked with a sign on the bathroom door, a sign from the historian-husband's travels, a sign from some hotel which said, *Avete dimenticato qualcosa?* Have you forgotten anything? Have you forgotten anything?

My legs turn the television back on and wander out to the kitchen, leaving yours there, asleep. Your kitchen floor is hard and cold to my feet. Everything is tender, bruised-feeling. My legs are tuning forks. They hum, they reverberate against the hard surface, they're shocked into sound, it's like a perpetual *hitting*. Heels strike the floor, then there's a sound—an A. My toes write "440" in pencil on a pad of paper by the phone (prehensile). It is a number, a mathematical representation of a sound, a tone against which all other tones are measured. The girl I slept with and the oboist on the picket line—yes, they are the same. Her precision has always deeply bothered me. She'd spend six hours a day shaving down a piece of bamboo a millimeter at a time in the quest for the perfect reed, the purest sound. Maybe she is still causing me pain with her precise A, and its narrow harmonic focus.

She wanted to keep me in that narrow place. I grew tired of her militancy. I want to have kids, I said. You want to *what?* (She doesn't

like children, claims she never was one.) She never changed her mind, not just about children, but about anything. She was rigid. She is still that way. It strikes me as not a very smart way to be. *Who are you?* she continually demanded of me, as if I could know. She was never uncertain. That isn't smart, either.

I walk to the refrigerator, my feet relaxed, the toes splayed wide to grip the slick wood floor. I don't know what I want. My legs open the fridge door and let the cool air escape, luxuriating in the brief waste of energy. It's all part of the lethargy of the afternoon. No work can be accomplished now, and it's okay to leave the refrigerator door open, not wanting anything, not able to eat anything. The light is on inside, in the dimness of the kitchen, and cold air is rolling out. One, two, three, four, five. My legs close the door. They open it again and count to five. I want to see those ten seconds on your electricity bill. I want to see the electricity pouring out of the television, all that energy draining. I want to drain the whole place, turn on the hair dryer, the clothes dryer, the dishwasher, the microwave, the electric stove, leave all the lights on, blow a fuse. Or maybe I'd prefer a slow drain. When they emptied the pool for the library, where did all the water go? A diminuendo, a final pulse, and then nothing. Darkness and everything gone, escaped, wasted.

There is a logic to this. My legs bend until my knees touch the floor. I tuck my toes under so that my shins are pressed flat. I lower myself

down, my quads and the tendons in my knees stretching until my legs are doubled over themselves. They hurt, but less now. I control the pain. There I am on your floor, crying, with eyes, with a raw face. Yes, it's there. Hands reach out and take my damp clothes. Like me, the clothes surrender.

SEMIPALATINSK

I am at the deep end treading water. Nika taunts me from a crouched position at the pool's edge, her hands tucked between her knees, her black suit dripping chlorinated water from the crotch. "It is easy," she says. "Like a children's play."

I shake my head. "*Child's* play. You go again," I say.

Nika laughs at me, as if I, not she, had confused the idiom. She is shivering, though the pool is indoors and heated. Since she began teaching me to dive, we have had many moments like this. The coaxing will go on for several more minutes without hurry or discomfort—the point is to get me out of the pool and to the edge of the board—so I have time to study her in a different way than I do in my classroom, bent over an exercise book, head-to-head with her conversation partner, forcing their shy voices to fill in the blanks. *Do you prefer coffee or tea? I prefer tea. How many children do you have? I have one child.* Their responses are always too complete and rehearsed.

Behind Nika are the large glass windows of the community pool. As I regard her from the water below, the view outside is of a typical Seattle sky—white, with little definition between clouds. Rainy, diffuse light envelops Nika, makes her softer around the edges. Her body tenses as if

she is about to demonstrate another dive, but she does not move. I can see the outline of her breasts, small and athletic, pressing against the fabric of her suit. It's a horrible suit: high-necked and crossed in the back, competition-style, but made of something that looks like it would give a lot of drag, a thick loopy cotton. Whenever I see her in it, I am reminded of a documentary I saw in college on AIDS in the global context. A Russian boy stands on a balcony in a high-rise apartment building with similar buildings in the background. He talks to the camera. "Have you ever had sex with a Communist condom?" he says. "It's like smelling a rose with a gas mask on."

I suspect the same mind that invented such a condom also invented this swim suit. Still, she looks beautiful in it. In the characteristic way of all the women I've met who have lived through revolution and exile, Nika's skin is perfect—smooth, freckleless, poreless. One fight with David, which seems to happen a lot these days, and my own face looks as if I've spent the night in the morgue. Really, it has only been a sleepless passage of time, lying next to my husband in bed, with the sound of raccoons foraging in our semi-wild neighborhood north of the city, half hemlock forest, half used-car lot. I am too tired to get up and chase the animals off, so I doze in and out all night and pay for it with red-limned and puffy eyes each morning. Life gets written on us in different ways. It is inevitable.

Perhaps what marks Nika is more insidious. She reveals little to me about her journey here from Kazakhstan, so I can only guess. I know that she was an electrical engineer in Semipalatinsk, and her husband, Yano, a professor of Russian literature. She has hinted to me that they came to escape the memory of mushroom clouds issuing from the Polygon—over four hundred blasts while it was in operation. Their two-year-old son was born here. Nika started coming to classes when he was still an infant. Now she spends long days frying corn dogs and battered onions at Kid Palace. Who knows what she carries around inside her? She seems to push on with a kind of blameless hard work that I have never been able to master. She looks healthy, even happy.

Nika turns and squints out the windows, pretending I'm looking through her, not at her. "What do you see?" she asks.

"I don't know," I tell her. I can't say exactly what this gazing at Nika is; only what it isn't. It is not sexual desire, or even something as simple as jealousy. I want to know everything; I want to travel to the other country that exists only inside her head. I want, in a way, to become her. That somehow it would ennoble me. To be bathed in the same fire. Nika squeezes water from her braid. Her ears are delicate and pink, and stick out from her wetted-down hair. Tiny gold studs make them even more vulnerable.

"Kate, you must try!" she urges. "Last week is good. What's going wrong now?"

“I’m chicken!” I am running out of breath. I dogpaddle to the side of the pool, where I pull myself up and rest my arms on the cement lip. Nika sits and dangles her feet in the water next to me. I feel the currents she makes as she swings them slowly back and forth.

“What does it mean, ‘chicken?’”

“Afraid. An irrational fear. It’s just a feeling—nothing you can say with words. I guess chickens are considered cowardly animals. I don’t really know where it comes from, to be honest.”

She nods gravely and seems to understand this, though I have a bad habit of explaining a concept with another, more complex one. “I think no cake on Friday if you are not diving,” she says.

“That’s not fair.”

“Not fair!” She rolls her eyes—I can’t tell if she’s angry or joking with me. “No cake, and I send the wedding video of I and Yano back to mother in Almaty.”

“Nika, please.” The semi-professional video that Nika’s brother made of her hour-and-a-half Russian Orthodox wedding is to be the centerpiece of our last class and potluck for the quarter, on our theme “Rituals and Traditions.”

“How do you say it? Blackmail? No cake, no video if you are not diving. You must do this!”

“You would ruin class for everyone just because I won’t dive?” I’m needling her now, but she is only becoming more set and serious. “The

big boss is coming by. If you aren't there, Faina and Marta won't come either. We need a big group—I have to prove somehow that our classes are worthwhile. That I'm helping you.”

Nika shrugs and pretends to pick at a thread in her bathing suit.

I have no right to make demands. A couple of weeks ago, Nika invited me to her house after our swim. I forgot about it and made an appointment that afternoon with David and the therapist, who, for some reason, is pitiful to me, in his polo shirt, sport coat, and tennis shoes, trying to look casual, as if he had been out for a walk and just dropped in to help out a few ailing but entirely fixable marriages. Nika was almost crying when I tried to explain why I couldn't miss this appointment, that it would be further proof to David of my essential “laziness.” She looked at me like I was crazy. *Therapist?* I imagined her thinking. *Yano and I might have our problems, but we're just happy to be alive together, with our son, normal and whole.* She begged again, told me she had gotten the day off and made fresh piroghi that morning. I felt exhausted, embarrassed at having to explain to her what the appointment was about, why it was so crucial that I go. I could have lied. I could have simply told her that it was an emergency, that my husband needed me. I always feel some stupid compulsion to be honest when it doesn't serve me.

And yet, I still wasn't telling her the truth—that I didn't want to muddle my relationship with her, though it was already blurring when I

felt her hands positioning my arms, like so, over my head in class one day. This is the reason I am here now: Nika gave the class diving lessons for our “How To” project, using a flattened cardboard box as our “platform,” showing us the proper way to approach, to position our bodies, make them into perfect coils of potential energy. A slight bend in the knees, the smoothly arced back, and then all of us letting go, for Nika’s sake, the old women thrilling at the idea of leaping into air, into the imagined water.

I was hooked, convinced she could help me over this age-old phobia, and we began meeting at the pool. She entered my consciousness, the way I entered the water, coloring my days with an unfamiliar emotion, as if her fears were contagion, the world she had escaped threatening to press against mine, erase it. For she would never really be clear of what she might have smuggled here in her chromosomes. Being with Nika, I had the sense that she was always waiting for illness, or death, to blossom without warning. After that, I couldn’t bring myself to visit her home, afraid of what I might see, or smell, there—an unfamiliar spice, and the sticky sweetness that permeates every house where there are children. I imagined something too intimate, something impersonal yet so precisely descriptive of her essence—perhaps some household object, as mundane as an empty bowl, the way it caught the light, dust motes settled in its basin, a cracked yellow varnish. I couldn’t bear it. I couldn’t bear to know her any more than I did.

Ever since that day, she has been surly. Now, along with her threats about the cake and the video, the botched invitation hangs between us. We don't speak of it. Shy Nika talks even less now than she did when our classes began. I have to remind myself that she has a personality, passion, intelligence, boredom. That she is capable of sarcasm, cultural and literary allusion, all in another language. If she was quiet in class before, she is now exerting her silent gravitational force on other students, like Faina. I try to get them to share experiences, practice role-plays in English—buying meat by the pound, returning a scarf. Everything is a transaction; I get sick of it, too. They want to know how to get jobs like they had in their home countries. Marta has “golden hands,” they say. She sews so well. But how to get a business license? Make dresses for profit? My Salvadorans, a brother and sister, sell bag lunches to construction workers in their neighborhood—*pupusas* and sandwiches in sweet white buns with sprigs of cilantro piled on top of the saucy meat. What will they do when the new apartment building is finished, and the workers move on? A Taiwanese man insists that the only way to get ahead is to find a job—any job—and work your way up. “Learn English!” he exhorts, and I bring the class back around, remind them that that's what we're doing, that even their tangential arguments are practice. Nika says nothing during these exchanges, but rests her hand on Faina's shoulder, as the much older woman argues back that she doesn't give a damn about working her way up, she's retired, she has

worked since she was thirteen years old. In factories. In Russia. With no heat in the buildings. She knows all about that and she is done.

My class is often a long lament. Once, when I invited a Medic II to teach CPR, a Brazilian student, who I'd only seen once or twice before, took me aside during break and spoke to me while she nursed her child.

"These things remind me of when my husband died. He took many pills and went to bed. We were always fighting then, so I did not go to sleep with him. In the morning, he was dead. His mother died the month before, so I suppose it was a kind of suicide."

I watched the smooth black swirl of hair on her baby's head. "I'm so sorry," I said. When I met the woman's gaze, she held a strange expression, as if she had smelled something sour. I realized she was involuntarily mimicking my appearance, that my face had done its thing again. When they talk to me this way, so freely, I am crushed and mangled by compassion inside, but all I can manage is an ugly, frozen countenance, an apology, sometimes just silence. I want to touch, squeeze a hand, a shoulder. I don't want to use words. I'm tired of saying things that no one understands. I think, *Come on, Kate, you should be able to do this by now*. But it never gets any easier.

Nika was there that day, too. She came over to us, sat down next to the mother and nursing baby, and unabashedly stroked the child's head. "Beautiful," she said. "Mine is one year and one half." The Brazilian woman smiled, her face flooded with color. Shyness? Pride? Or was it

happiness, just like that? The women, who hardly knew each other, talked until the end of the break, their bodies close in that other-cultural, personal-space way. But when they returned to their seats, they were separate again, taciturn. They think they are being good students, obedient, polite. I try to tell them that our class should be a lively microcosm, a place of total freedom to experiment, to make mistakes. But more often than not the class is just a laboratory—sterile, unconnected to everyday life.

Still, they keep coming. They bring friends. At the end of every session, we have a party. It's the end of the winter quarter now, and Nika has promised me her clan will be there: Faina, Marta and her daughter, Kristina, Yano and Nika and their son, Alexi, bearing the impressive honey-cake and piroghi. The cake is a work of art, Faina has told me: honey-drenched, deep-fried balls of dough stacked into a cone, drizzled with some kind of maple and chocolate glaze that binds the whole thing together. Everything is planned. As much as it can be, at least, in a world of people who, for many good reasons, may get called away at the last minute.

Nika went missing once. Neither Faina nor Marta knew why she had not come to class for a whole week. When she returned, everyone rejoiced. Where were you? they all wanted to know. "My son," she said. "They think he was very ill, some cancer of the bone, but it is only ... something harmless." Nika was flushed, as if she had just run from the

hospital where they gave her the dreadful—and then the happy—diagnosis. We spent the rest of the class dissecting the language of the lump on her son’s leg, and finally came to the consensus—through a lot of awkward description, drawings on the white board, and a sudden delving into very specialized vocabulary—that what Alexi had were calcium deposits. I hugged her. Everyone hugged her. It was the only time I felt at ease.

Nika places her hands on the floor behind her hips and leans back, staring up into the beams of the pool house ceiling. Her elbows bend too far the wrong way, making me shudder in fascination. “I think about join the circus when I am sixteen,” she tells me. Everything about her, physically, is foreign. It isn’t her double-joints, or her immunization scar, as much as it is her wrists, perhaps, or the way she walks. There is an instant recognition of difference, as if from across a room, one would know somehow that she will never be molded into a physical Americanness. I want to applaud her. *Resist! Resist!* She rolls her neck (also too free in its movements), and scowls at me.

“I don’t know why I try to help you,” she says. “One day you will dive. The next day you will not. Am I not good teacher? I was champion diver in my country. Not Olympics, never Olympics, but a little lower. You understand?”

“Yes, I understand,” I say. “It’s not that you’re not a good teacher. Everyone has tried to teach me to dive—my brothers, my husband, my cousins, friends, everyone. It’s just not possible.”

“Do not say it is impossible. This is what you tell to us every day: ‘You can do it.’ Okay, I can do it. But what if I don’t want to do it? This is your problem.”

I hear David’s voice. *You should know by now*, he said, in front of the therapist. *We should know*, he corrected himself, *if this thing is going to work*. All I could think was that I should have been somewhere else right then, having tea from delicate blue and white porcelain cups, eating hot borscht and piroghi. They are, after all, one of my favorite foods in the whole universe.

“Nika,” I say, “I’m sorry. But I can’t go back and do it all over.”

“Start here,” she says, patting the cement beside her. I swim over to the ladder and put my feet on the rungs. Something small and hard sticks on my toe. I dunk my head under and pull out a coin. “Hey!” I call, “a quarter!” But Nika isn’t there anymore. She’s on the bench, digging through her bag.

“Don’t give up on me,” I say.

“One minute, please,” she says.

She finds what she is searching for. She goes to the window where a girl listens to the radio and lends out flotation devices and goggles. Nika speaks to the girl, who wears her hair in a high ponytail and snaps her

gum, and I wonder if Nika is able to communicate with her as naturally as she did that day with the Brazilian woman. Nika hands the girl a tape. She looks incredulous at first, but she puts it in the boom box she's listening to. She turns it up all the way and I hear—filtered through the wet atmosphere, the glassiness of the pool and the long windows—windows just like the ones in our classroom I must open with a broomstick when the radiator overacts—a sublime piano.

“What is it? Chopin?”

“Chopin? No. Glinka. Mikhail Ivanovich. I used to practice to this as a girl.”

She climbs to the top of the high dive. She stands on the edge of the board and tests its springiness, jumping on it like a trampoline. She backs up and takes a run at the edge, then stops. This is more than a hesitation; it is an arm-wheeling freeze. She begins again, and this time throws herself into the water in a rapid somersault, with stark assurance.

She surfaces with a cry. “Ah! It feels so good. Glinka has made me happy today.”

The music is a nocturne, the pianist as patient as a student working through an exercise, yet the sound is full and melodic. It is music that belongs in a large room—like this pool, or an airy dance studio. The pianist plays with the same mixture of pride and melancholy I see in Nika. She is proud of herself now, grinning from the water, ready to dive

again and again in a series of perfect executions that fool me into thinking her skill is natural and untaught.

“I have another one that is my favorite,” she says, and she pads back to the ladder and ascends again. The piano is filling me, filling the room with arpeggios that make my chest tight.

Nika is poised high above with her back to the water. Her face is so focused, so predatory, that I think she is going to leap in and drown me. Only her toes grip the edge of the diving board; her heels hover off it, in midair. She holds her arms out from her sides as delicately as a dancer. She stands like this for a very long time, concentrating on something wholly in her mind, since she could not possibly see the pool, where she is going. Suddenly, her knees bend, she leaps up, and her body folds forward like an origami bird. Then she comes down, unfolding her body again, legs straightened out behind her, diving head first now, arms pressed together in a point—a missile. There is almost no splash. This perfection is what she was thinking of all that time when her mouth looked so determined. Underwater, her body is a dark wriggling figure, mixing with the lane markers on the bottom of the pool. For a long time she doesn't come up. This is the other Nika, when she is closer to home, freer, unfettered by the demands of silly things like telemarketers, buying milk. She is somewhere between home and here, and with Glinka—the father of Russian music, she tells me—she has placed this bubble

around us, where I am the foreigner. I vow to stop teaching my students how to buy things.

“Nika, just teach me how not to belly flop,” I say, but she can’t hear me.

She swims up beside me, breathing hard. “Have courage from the music,” she says. “Come on, Kate.”

Come on. If I do this, what will happen to me? I feel I will vanish. I dig in—against the pull of the water, against the large, rolled chords of the piano. Nika, the music, the very room is insisting. I sweep my arms and legs furiously, just to stay afloat. Nika’s face is close to mine. She blows bubbles into the water. Her face is heart-shaped, pointed at the chin, pink and moist, her eyelashes dark and beaded with water. She smiles, and for the first time I notice that she has an extra pair of canine teeth where her lateral incisors should be. Her sharp teeth are like a dare.

“I can do a cannonball,” I say.

“You will do it like this.” She hoists herself out of the pool, stands dripping at the edge, points her arms above her head, and tucks in her chin. She makes sure I see her position, then slips into the water before I know what is happening.

I pull my wet frame up the ladder. The water has been holding me for so long; the full gravity of being on solid ground surprises me. The music coming from the little stereo strikes the walls, the pool’s surface.

The two hands of the pianist speak and answer each other in a comic melody. The tape warbles a bit as if it has been played too often, making the music sound even more humid, swampy.

I tuck my head and plow in. It's not bad. Not good, either, but she praises me.

“Do it again,” she says.

Each time I'm a little better. The repetition is good for dulling my fear. I keep going until I can hardly feel my body. Eventually, I know, I will have to climb the ladder of the high dive, run to the end of the board, not knowing who I am until the moment my feet leave its edge.

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