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Prelude to Artifact

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ARTIFACT

by

Jaclyn Costello

Bachelor of Arts
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
2005

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the

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

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THE GRADUATE COLLEGE

We recommend the thesis prepared under our supervision by

Jaclyn Costello

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May 2011

ABSTRACT

Prelude to Artifact

by

Jaclyn Costello

Dr. Donald Revell, Examination Committee Chair
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The book is a place, a moral and intellectual site. With any luck, a well-written book calls the real condition of a reader's perception into question. Amid books written for leisure, instruction, or the sake of sheer indulgence, there are those books which can be classified as fated providers of Truth. The function of such books is not mere representation, but rather transformation and transfiguration of the reader's soul—and consequently, the world. As writer/scholar Henry Corbin illustrates:

All the elements [in a work of Symbolic Art] are represented in their real dimension “in the present”, in each case perpendicularly to the axis of the viewer's vision. The viewer is not meant to immobilize himself at a particular point, enjoying the privilege of “presentness” and to raise his eyes from this fixed point; he must *raise himself* toward each of the elements represented. Contemplation of the image becomes a mental itinerary, an inner accomplishment; the image fulfills the function of a *mandala*. Because each of the elements is presented not *in* its proper dimension, but *being* that same dimension, to contemplate them is to enter into a multidimensional world...¹

Let this passage act as retrospective inspiration for my MFA thesis project.

Though in my wildest dreams am I not delusional enough to consider what I have created Symbolic Art, I do wish to teeter alongside such a capacity in hopes that (in my wildest dreams) I may someday create a work that falls close to such achievement.

¹ *The World Turned Inside Out, Henry Corbin and Islamic Mysticism*, by Tom Cheetham

In the pages of my thesis, I attempted to strike a balance between form and formlessness, although I often placed more importance on the energy from which each piece was created, rather than the form each part eventually acquired. This follows my beliefs that 1) form is the debris of energy, 2) the poem is the debris of poetry; and 3) only through the loss of form are we led to the true spirit of things. Or perhaps there are just excuses for my inability to commit to one particular shape for this thesis project. My view of the novel as a social contract, as story-telling around the tribal fire, kept me wanting to contribute to the cultural story-telling canon—yet I was born with a poet’s soul—and poetry is far from a contract; a poem is created away from the social order, in solitary happiness. Thank you Don for writing, “Humanness is, after all, a little portion shared. But the gospel of happiness...delights in itself all alone.”²

In these pages, you may also find the curiosity of a child integrated with the intellectual and emotional life of an adult. While I crave the clarity rendered from an examined life, I refuse to be corralled by the rational mind. I’m sure this is reflected in my work. As is my love affair with ‘the new’. To avoid being named and consequently killed, I continue to (very sanely) change my affiliations with the world—always seeking the original and unusual discovery. I experiment. That is who I am. I hope the mirror I’ve created in which to contemplate my own world is, at the very least, clear enough so that you might catch glimpse of your own reflection. Thanks for reading.

² From the Translator’s afterward found in Arthur Rimbaud’s *The Illumination*, translated by Donald Revell

for scottie

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Part One

The human spirit is fastened to a dying animal.

-W.B. Yeats

The Convalescents

Tara says it will happen suddenly, like fireflies in a cornfield—before the boys catch them and smear them on the driveways, watching them glow even after they're dead.

1

“Cameron?” Anna shook the kitchen faucet. “Cameron? There’s no water. Do you think it’s us? Is it just us?”

I walked over to the sink and shook the faucet with her. I shrugged. I tried the bathroom. Nope. No water.

“Hello,” she said into the phone. “The water seems to be turned off in our apartment. I’m wondering if you have any information—” she stopped. “Are you sure?” She tilted her head to the side, as a small child does when asking unanswerable questions about fog. “Thank you.” She hung up the phone.

“Is it just us?” I asked.

Anna shook her head. “It’s everyone. The entire complex. The whole city maybe.”

“The city?”

“What do we do?”

“The *whole* city, Anna?”

“That’s what she said. There’s a pipe—” she lifted her hands in the air, to form an imaginary pipe so I’d better understand. Then she changed her mind and brought her palms to her chest where her Matroyoshka charm hung around her neck. “They don’t when we’ll have water again.”

I took a walk down Tropicana Avenue, immediately struck by a change in the movement of things. Feathers stuck to doormats. Sirens eloped with bird calls. The Antique Sampler Shops were now selling pet supplies. A box of perfume bottles and a broken mermaid lamp sat discarded on a couch in the sun. Even the man who chased shopping carts into the quarry sat calmly at the edge of a curb today, blowing on a feather between two thumbs. “They’re all I can trust,” he said as I passed. “The feathers and the pre-cut squares of tin foil. I can trust those because they’ve been pre-cut.”

“Anna,” I called. “I’m coming back home. We need to stock up on some things.”

“Does this mean you get the day off work?” she asked.

“No,” I said. “It doesn’t. The people will always need pizza.”

We lugged lemons in a crate. Bottled water in a box.

“There’s no natural source here,” David said. He leaned back in his swimming pool chair. “We have something resembling a manmade lake, but you can’t drink from it. I wouldn’t drink from it. Don’t care how many times they say it’s been filtered. I went swimming in that lake once last summer, and when my wife found out she cried *real* tears. She said out of all the things I’d done since we’d been married, she’d finally lost respect for me.”

“Where does our water come from?” Anna asked.

“Out of state. Those pipes you were talking about—”

“What about wells? Can’t we build a well?”

“Not here anymore. It’s too dry.”

“This is a national emergency!”

David laughed. “I’m not sure everyone sees it that way.” He leaned further back in his chair, indifferent maybe, or avoiding the sun.

“But we have no water,” Anna said. “It’s ninety degrees outside. We can’t all afford bottled water, and the stores will sell out soon. What do we do? How do we bathe? How do we brush our teeth? Do we dip our toothbrushes in the pool?”

“I’d sit this one out if I were you,” David said. “You’ve got to pick your battles, and there’s sure to be another one even crunchier for a fight soon enough.”

“What are you going to do?” I asked him.

David frowned at me then, as if he’d been thinking about it for a long time, but didn’t want to divulge the secret yet.

“Sleep,” he said. “Until it’s time to contemplate the weak side of my shadow.”

I wasn’t sure what he meant, but I believed him.

There was a message on the phone from Vonelle. The pizzeria was open, for now, but no one had called to order anything yet. She said to come down and sit with her in the kitchen until she figured out what to do.

I went down to Vonelle’s Tropicana Pizza. Vonelle sat in a black plastic chair, combing one of the many hair weaves she kept tacked to the wall behind the stove.

“This is what it’s come to,” she mumbled. An unkneaded lump of dough sat floured on the counter. “Would you do something with that?” She motioned to the lump. “I don’t care what. I don’t want to look at it.”

I moved the unmade pizza to the utility fridge.

Vonelle pressed her lips together and squinted at me. “Did you shower this morning?”

“No.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure.”

She nodded. “I haven’t had a thing to drink. Liquor I mean. I’m afraid of it.”

“That’s all right. Something good will come this then.”

Vonelle nodded again, then returned to the weave. She combed it with a passion. Over and over again she combed, using a small grey pick with pink-tipped prongs. The weave-hair was shinier than her real hair.

When I returned home, I found Anna locked in the bathroom.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“I don’t know.”

“What did you do today?”

“Nothing. I’ve been in here building towers out of q-tips and things.”

“Will you come out?”

“No.”

“Are you hungry?”

“I’ve eaten.” Anna opened the door. Her entire face trembled. “There’s no shaving lotion, Cameron. I was going to shave my legs for you.”

I rubbed the stubble on my face. “I haven’t shaved either.”

Anna looked at her legs. “I guess it takes a small tragedy like this to bind us.”

“It does,” I said. “We’ll go down together.”

“We will?”

“Of course.”

“Cameron,” she said. Dark hair pulled away from her face. Soft, full skin.

Apologetic eyes.

*

In high school, Tara Cavanaugh saved enough money to buy a second-hand hearse that her mother did not allow parked within fifty yards of the Cavanaugh’s mailbox. The mailbox had been carved and painted to represent an exact, miniature replica of the Cavanaugh’s full-sized suburban home—down to the green trim around the Ethan Allen shutters that hung outside each bedroom window. Tara parked the hearse down the street and around the corner, between a Greek diner called *Eros* and an Ace Hardware store. She hadn’t bought the hearse to provoke tension at home or to upset the neighbors. Tara purchased the hearse to attract the attention of the Catholic school boys at St. James Junior High. Tara Cavanaugh had always been curious about the peculiar scenes that manifested themselves on Catholic school playgrounds. She enjoyed watching the boys—boys with small ideas—as they tossed rubber balls against the brick church wall until the Sisters rushed out to shoe them away.

After rainfalls, the boys dared each other to stand at the side of the school house gutter with their chins pointing up to the sky. This was the dare: who could stand still the longest while Tom Flanagan climbed the blue dumpster, then the fire escape, then onto the roof where he shook the rain gutter and emptied the trench of stagnant rainwater down on his classmates’ foreheads and tongues. The boys laughed, winced, and elbowed each other until the moment came for each to stand shock-still and suffer the anticipation of Tom’s climb, the shake and clang of the metal gutter and finally, the arrival of the wet unknown from two stories above. Tara wanted one of those, a boy with a small idea, who looked up the side of a school house gutter and waited for the water to rush down on his face.

When she couldn’t sleep at night, Tara sat at the desk in her bedroom staring at the pieces of an unfinished puzzle. She wondered if all the pieces had come together in one box, or if this was some sort of marketing ploy and she still needed to spend another 19.95 on a second box containing the key. Who did puzzles anyway? she wondered. Children? Veterans? Retired farmers? Babysitters? Tara was especially intrigued by the people who framed their completed works of art. “Look what I did!” she imagined they cried around the dining room table. “I put all the pieces together and something actually came of it!” Tara wanted to invent a puzzle with no picture, no corners, no recognizable shape, and no reason. A puzzle that did not work. She would leave one or two pieces unchiseled in the mix, and if anyone took the time to write her company to complain, she would personally telephone them and say, “Yes, I am the maker of the puzzle. Yes I realize all the pieces don’t fit. What did you expect? This is the 21st century. We feel no need to lie to you anymore. If you’d really like the pieces to fit, find a razor blade and go at it. That’s what we like to see.”

Other restless nights, Tara snuck from the house to wander under the fluorescent lights in a 24-hour convenience store. She kept track of the addictions of the people in the aisles. Tara Cavanaugh believed she was the only one there who needed nothing to eat, nothing to drink, nothing to smoke, and no one to bed. It was all these things she wished she needed.

When she finally moved out of her parents' house, Tara moved West and rented an apartment with the biggest closet she could find. She stood in front of the mirror and cut her bangs so that they covered her eyes. She wanted to look Japanese. Tara tried to imagine herself in Tokyo. Did the girls have bangs in Tokyo? They did, she thought. Straight, flat bangs. Those girls are cute as stickers, she sighed. She'd heard that anime filmmakers were obsessed with creating the perfect pair of breasts. Tara looked at her own breasts in the mirror. Not perfect, but she could fake it if she tried—if she pushed her shoulders back a little and made sure her nipples were always in the delicate state just between semi-soft and semi-erect. There, she thought. Stay like that.

*

"You don't look like a Tony," Tara told the boy inside her closet.

"What do I look like?"

"I don't know. A Mike. Did you ever have a name you wanted to call yourself?"

"Mike."

"My friend has a philosophy about Mikes."

"What kind of philosophy is it?"

"A bad one. You look different every time I see you."

Tony shrugged. "I was wearing a different shirt before."

The only thing Tony had to remind him of his father was a beaten-up skateboard he kept with him in the closet. A faded sticker of Bruce Lee was stuck to the underside between two mismatched wheels. "He gave this to me," Tony fingered the edge of the board. "That's it."

Tara nodded from the bed and rolled onto her side. Her brain felt heavier than usual, as if someone was trying to keep it warm by wrapping it with many quilts. She let her eyelids fall, and she wasn't sure why, but lately when she closed her eyes it was as if they were still open. Her eyelids had become completely transparent.

"It makes me nauseated," she moaned.

Tony emerged from the closet. "Maybe it's all in your head."

"We live in a third-world world country now. That's not just in my head."

"We're in a third-world country?"

"That's what the new businessmen say."

"If you stand up and move around a little you might feel better."

"I'll feel guilty for getting thirsty."

Tony puckered his lips. "Tara? Can I try swimming again tomorrow?"

"The water will be even more disgusting than it was today."

"That's okay. I'm itchy already."

"It's your choice," Tara said. She attempted to stand, but her knees buckled from underneath her. "I feel like a noodle." She lay back down. "Pasta has no legs."

“Are you hungry?” Tony asked. “I’ve got to eat something.” He left the room and returned from the kitchen with a box of peanut butter truffles. “These are the best food in the world.”

Throughout the night, anytime Tara stirred, Tony poked his head out of the closet—wanting to know if he’d done something wrong. He’d been snoring again, but Tara didn’t say anything in fear he’d try holding his breath in order to stop. She climbed out of bed and sat with him in the closet until he fell back asleep. Then Tara sat at her desk re-arranging the pieces of her unfinished puzzle.

Tony was desperate to learn to float. No one had ever taught him to swim, and the idea of resting on water consumed him. Tara tried everything she could to help Tony with this skill, including enlisting her father—who had since taken leave from his wife’s painted mailbox and ceramic rooster collection to follow his daughter’s whim West for a breath of fresh air and new business ventures.

He stood in the shallow end of the swimming pool wearing the red nylon shorts Tara insisted he wear while providing Tony with a floating lesson.

“Should I put my face down?” Tony asked.

“Start face up,” David said. “On your back. Chest up. Breathe. Breathe.”

Tony exhaled and writhed on the water. He gasped for air as if his back was his true source of oxygen intake, and his mouth and nose were merely instruments there to express his struggle in gasps and moans as the water suffocated his spine.

“Tony,” David said. “Breathe at your regular rate.”

“My regular rate?” Tony spit out a mouthful of water.

“In and out slowly. Floating is relaxing. Feel the sun on your face,” David used his hands to express the serenity in this suggestion. “Feel all the little ripples of water massaging the muscles in your body. It’s like you’re at the ocean. But you’re not at the ocean. You’re in this mess with me.” Tony resumed the floating position. David placed his palm at the base of Tony’s back so he did not arch too far upwards or collapse in on himself like a folding chair. “Good,” David said.

Tony exhaled. The sun beat down on his face. David noticed his reflection in a bead of sweat on Tony’s forehead.

“Good,” David said. He removed his palm.

Tony exhaled and sunk.

*

“You’re scaring me Tara,” Anna paced the living room. “What sort of feelings do you have for this boy?”

“It’s an addiction,” Tara said. “You can’t get mad at me. I’m an addict.”

“What is it you’re addicted to?”

“Leave him,” I said.

“I can’t just put him on the street!”

“Yes, you can,” I told her. “That’s where you found him.”

“But now *he*’s addicted to the truffles.”

“Give us the truffles. Look at Anna. She’s a bone.”

“How old is he?” Anna asked. “He’s fourteen, isn’t he?”

"I don't know. Probably."

"And he's a Mormon?"

"Yes."

"What are you doing with a Mormon?"

Tony entered the living room on his skateboard. "Bosh," he said. He smiled. His tongue-ring made a small clicking sound against the back of his teeth.

"He's not a real Mormon," Tara shook her head.

"I'm a real Mormon," Tony said.

Tara found him crying in the closet again. It was the second time this week he'd wedged one of her dress shoes underneath the door, in a haphazard attempt to keep her away.

"Tony?" she asked.

He held his breath. Tara's pink pump peeked out through a splinter of golden light shining from under the door.

"Is this about the floating? Can I come inside?"

Tony removed the shoe.

"Please don't cry," Tara sat next to Tony on the floor. He smelled like acne medication and Doritos. "My father didn't learn how to swim until a year ago. He barely ever goes in the water. He's been very brave teaching you."

Tony wiped his face with the side of his hand. "That old guy teaching me how to swim just learned a year ago?"

"Strange, I know. I used to think everyone could swim. My father never could. He fought in the Vietnam War and he couldn't swim. Do you know that war?"

Tony shook his head.

"It was fought in a very wet place. There was a time my father was leading his platoon across a bamboo bridge towards a field of rice paddies, and there was a sniper—a woman actually—but they didn't know that yet. She was up in a tree shooting down at them, and all the men in my father's platoon had to jump off the bridge into the water to avoid getting shot. But my dad didn't jump. He had to drop to his stomach and roll around on the bridge, dodging the bullets until the sniper grew tired and went home."

"Yeah?" Tony said.

Tara nodded. "He could feel the bullets ricocheting off the bridge all around him."

"How do they know the sniper went home?" Tony asked. "She could have gone out and killed a bunch more guys."

"They know because they followed her home," Tara said. *And raped her in a chicken coop*, she didn't tell Tony.

"Your dad was never shot?"

"Not the entire war. They called him 'Comet' he was so fast."

Tony looked down at the carpet—at the mess of shoes, the tufts of hair, the faded leather belts, the stuff of closet floors. "I can't see the stars from any windows in your house."

"Of course you can." Tara took his hands, and together, they pulled each other to their feet. They emerged from the closet and walked to the big bay window in the center of the living room. This window provided an unobstructed view of the ravine behind the apartment complex. And beyond the ravine, the Red Rock Chaoun Mountains reached for

the night sky. There were always at least three thousand stars to be wished upon from this window. The smoke, smog, and inclement weather rarely interrupted the view, and on sleepless nights Tara counted the constellations descending behind the mountains.

As Tara stood with Tony at the living room window, a familiar feeling overtook her. It wasn't something she'd felt in this lifetime, or the lifetime just before, or any of her previous lifetimes since the very beginning when the coming of night had brought with it an aching uncertainty.

Tara felt this standing next to Tony, as they gazed out the window at the sky.

"See?" Tony said. He was right. Tara couldn't see any stars.

*

On the night of the double black moon, Vonelle wore a one piece banana-colored swimsuit with the sides cut out so that her sides hung out and kept her feeling 'liberated'. She eased into the hot tub saying, "Ohhhheee," as if the water was much too hot. When she was up to her neck, she stretched her arms to her sides, displaying the breadth of her wingspan. Impressive, I thought. Her skin was as dark as the starless sky reflected on the surface of the water.

I tested the temperature with my big toe. "It's barely tepid."

Vonelle shrugged.

I slid in. Anna followed at my side. The three of us sat and thought about nothing for what seemed like a very long time.

"I like nothing," Anna finally said. "Let's build a well and draw from it."

"I don't think they've cleaned this water in a hot minute." Vonelle grunted. She poked at something alive on the surface, struggling, floating by.

"It's better than the pool," I told her. Its surface was covered in wilted leaves and a thick layer of sloughed human skin. Two men bathed in the deep end, rubbing suds into each other's backs. A recently deflated raft hung from the diving board.

"I'm surprised they keep that thing running." Vonelle nodded towards the mechanical waterfall that spilled into the pool. "You know, my period's come twice this month already," she said.

"Cam?" Anna asked. "Is this supposed to happen?"

I looked up at the sky. The moon had become tangled in the cloudy lattice left behind by criss-crossing paths of midnight airplanes. Heaven curved like a dome above us, enclosing our globe and giving it the safety of a habitation, while at the same time keeping it, as if it were an insurgent sphere in a cage.

"Is it supposed to be like this?" Anna asked again. She lifted herself from the tub and stretched out onto the grass, running her fingers over a large plastic rock nestled in the sod. They were scattered everywhere—the same plastic rocks that had been used to form the base of the mechanical waterfall. Each was lit with an individual spotlight and wired to act as a speaker for the tranquilizing music our apartment complex played over the sound system at night.

"I don't know," Vonelle said. "The power in my house is *out* and I've been paying my bills."

A young girl knelt at the edge of the pool, coating her arms in water. "I like the way it feels on my shoulders," she said.

Anna hugged a rock. "If this is the way it's supposed to be, I'll make myself accept it. But I can't accept it without knowing it's not all a big mistake." She looked up at the tops of the trees and followed the course of the wind down through their palms to our wet human bodies. The breeze against her cheek reminded her she was just a small, warm creature made to follow the rules of hot and cold, unanswered questions, and gravity too.

Vonelle climbed out of the tub and hurried towards the metal gate. "I'm done."

"We're lucky, I guess," Anna said. "If we know nothing, we can't be held responsible."

I left the tub and burrowed next to her in the grass.

"Are you two sleeping here?" Vonelle asked in disbelief. She shook her head and carefully closed the latch on the metal gate, but before she left, she lowered her eyes and blessed our world behind it. The men in the pool had finished their bath and swaddled themselves in cotton. The young girl curled to a ball on a chair and yawned the shape of the moon. The water from the waterfall rushed down into the pool, momentarily creating a cool, clear pond where overturned beetles twirled in their shells amid the cascading flurry.

All the artificial rocks were lit with artificial light, and soft music lulled the world to sleep from somewhere underneath them.

The first of our rations arrived in a mail truck. James unloaded the boxes, apologizing to the crowd that there were not more. We stood around feeling as if we should help, but too afraid we'd be penalized if we touched the things that did not belong to us.

"It'll be a while," James said. "The list guy isn't here yet."

"I'm starving," Anna rested her head on my shoulder. Her accent thickened as she grew fatigued.

"You want to go to the zoo?" I asked. "We can heckle the tigers again."

"Okay," she said. "We'll be back, James."

"There might be a line," he warned. "I'll try to leave your box to the side, since I know you were here early, but I can't promise anything."

"Thank you," was all we could say.

We watched a flock of beach egrets sifting through Nantucket grass—tall, thin strands of wispy grass—imported for the comfort of the birds, so that they felt at home. *To recreate their natural environment* the sign read. No bars on their cage, just a slight shift in light. "A psychological barrier," the zookeeper had said. We'd laughed in disbelief.

I led Anna from the bird house to the ape house through the arboretum.

"They're closing kindergarten tomorrow," she said.

"For good?"

"Yes. Today was the last day."

"What did you do?"

"Taught my class the difference between 'on purpose' and 'on accident'. I wasn't even sure I knew the difference. We drank apple juice. Lars learned to tell time. That sort of thing. They napped. We weren't supposed to change the routine in any way, you know? I don't want to see the apes. Can we go back to the birds?"

"I don't know these birds," Anna said. There was no sign at their enclosure. Crêpe-like feathers. Light, green wings. Heads like ducks. "How high do you think they fly?" she asked.

"High," I said. "Their wings look like lettuce."

"They do! I bet the other birds try to eat them."

"I would."

"If we're ever separated Cam, send one of these birds to find me."

*

"There's nothing here for you," James said. "I checked twice, but you're not on any of the lists."

"We live here, James. You know us."

"I know but the thing is—you're not in the same apartment anymore so nothing matches up."

“They moved us!” I laughed. “You know that. We got a letter and moved like everyone else. We’ve been moved all over the place. You moved too.”

He shrugged helplessly. “Walk down to city services and see what they can do.” Anna winced.

“We can’t go there,” told him. “The line wraps four times around the city. We passed it yesterday. There was a guy who’d been waiting in line for a week.” I thought about the lemons. I knew I could survive on carrots and sunshine if it came down to it, but Anna needed more. “Do you at least have a little bread?” I tried not to sound pathetic. “Women need bread. It’s something to do with their uterus.”

“Look,” James sighed. He took his clipboard and walked over to a burly man sorting through a stack of papers on a folding table next to the mail truck. They exchanged a few words, but it suddenly began to rain, and soon they were pre-occupied gathering piles of papers and stuffing them into the truck.

“Our buckets!” Anna cried.

“I put them out. It’s okay.”

“Did you put all of them out?”

“I put all of them out.”

“Where?”

“The balcony. No one will take them.”

“Okay.”

“It’s okay.”

James kicked a box to our feet. “Go to city services and get this sorted out because this is the only time I can help you.”

We thought we could live around the mess. Away from the rush and hurry. Apart from the noisy circumstances that the complete structural failure of life caused everyone attempting to live it. But we could not. We became poor and afraid. Germs covered our arms. The price of flour rose to 8.16 a pound.

We cut in line and waited to defend ourselves.

“I haven’t changed my contacts since this fucking mess began,” I rubbed my eyes with my fists. The world was covered in eye-muck and goo.

“Cameron?” A voice. I opened my eyes. Anna took form in a blue polo dress. She was soaked through with rain. “Cameron? What is it?” She removed a gourd from the box. Or was it a plum? “We eat it?” she asked.

“We eat it,” I said.

We took turns chewing and spitting. It may have been cabbage grown over a lime. I had no idea. It was sustenance.

“I’m not sure how to swallow this,” Anna said.

“Suck out the nutrients.”

A trio of men walked by in the rain, each wearing a pair of clean, pleated pants. One complained that his bagful of wine had grown heavy. We mocked him to keep ourselves afloat.

“I feel more like myself now,” I lied. It was this—we’d just spent the last of our

money on thick, red juice made from beets and brown sugar.

Anna looked around. She wasn't thinking anymore. "Did we agree to this?" She took a sip of the stuff.

I chomped on the cabbage. I spit. I spit.

*

"The way I see it," David said, "We've got three options as an evolutionary species." He held up three fingers. They were surprisingly clean. "We adapt, we migrate, or we die. Mother nature gave us that. What we've given ourselves as a self-prescribed 'intelligent species' are three similar possibilities." He placed his can of orange soda on the poolside table to raise three fingers on his opposite hand. A swarm of children screamed from the pool and ran to steal his beverage. "Madness, enlightenment, or suicide. It's an individual's choice, but an evolutionary inevitability. We evolve or we die. Or, we're stuck here going mad as the lights get turned off one by one, and the pulse of the world speeds up for a while in a bit of mass hysteria—then we're all excited!—before it stops completely. We've been infected with disinterest for so long. We're ready to become something new again. Demolish and re-build. An entirely new body. *No* body, that's my vote. Creatures of light. Complete ascension. I just don't know how we'll evolve or if I'll live to see it." David tucked his fingers back into his fists.

Anna moved her feet into the cool of David's shadow. "Tara says we'll kill ourselves. Those of us who don't evolve."

"Not on my watch," David shook his head.

"She's so sad."

"I know she's sad. She's my daughter. I used to scream at her for lying around in a heap on the floor petting her own eyebrows for comfort—not because she had something better to do, because she didn't. Tara thinks it's all a null set. You know what I say to that? You want to wrap your mind around *nothing*? That's a *task* young lady. Zero is far from an intuitive concept. But it knows it's alone. The abyss shivers too, understand? We all know something isn't valid, that our time here is transitory. It's all a test of the soul's stamina. To endure." He wiped the sweat from his forehead. "I bet *you* feel it more," he told Anna. "All this going on. You've got that receptivity, right? Stop worrying so much about it. Whatever happens to us tomorrow, eventually all this will disappear. The fireflies and headscarves. The oil lamps and airplanes. Cancer. The Kremlin. It'll all disappear." David shook his head. "Baah to that. Telling you kids to pull yourselves together is like telling a dwarf to grow three inches taller." He leaned back in his chair and waited for Anna to say something to show she understood, but it was not Anna's way to fill prescribed absence with lucid continuity. She watched David's thoughts pilling up in the silence. The children splashed behind him.

"I choose migration," she finally said.

David appeared disappointed. "Well, you could try to leave."

"Try?"

"You could try."

"You don't think we could leave if we wanted to?"

David took his sunglasses from the top of his head and placed them back on his face. He stared at Anna from behind them. "Have you tried renewing your passport

lately?”

“Really?” Anna said. “I think there are places in the world where people are sipping tea and taking proper baths and have no idea this mess is going on.”

“We wouldn’t know that. No one’s seen an image for weeks. Not from outside a 30 mile radius. National news is all hearsay. Every bit of outside information we get is uncertain. No net. No papers. 7th *Heaven Reruns* stuck on all the T.V. channels. Anyone with deep enough pockets has already skipped town, and they sure as hell aren’t coming back. You know, I don’t think you would go, even if you could. *You* have too much of a conscious. Mobility is treason sometimes.”

“When?”

“Now. To a group of quadrupeds abandoned on a beach, watching as the morning tide rolls in.”

This is where I found her. Sitting with her knees together, listening. I took her by the arm and pulled her away. “For God’s sake, Anna.”

“I don’t believe—”

“You don’t believe —”

“—or disbelieve anything he says. I listen.”

“You believe everything.”

“I don’t.”

“Your environment influences you too much. It always has. Stop looking for answers.”

“That’s what David says.”

“There are no answers.”

“Cameron, where are the stars?”

“Wish on the moon. It’s still in the sky.”

“You can’t wish on the moon!” Anna yanked her arm away from me. “There isn’t enough moon to handle all our wishes.” She stopped walking. “We wish so much. I bet the stars got tired of our wishes. Think of all the ridiculous things we wish for. I’ve asked for so many ridiculous things.”

“Everyone has.”

“I bet the stars quit.”

“All right, Anna.”

She looked at me. Her eyes were wet and wide. “Galaxies live and die, don’t they? Stars regenerate like our cells do. Right?”

“I don’t know.”

“Where did they go, Cameron?” Her voice quivered. “Did they find a new sky? Are they away in the mountains? What happens to our fate? Hasn’t our destiny always been written in the stars? That’s where we put it, every time we made a wish. Maybe the stars *did* let our wishes come true, but since we messed it up completely, they’ve made a decision to leave us—to let us live or die by the consequences of our wishes.”

I looked at her, hard. At the aqueducts in her cheeks. The chapped lips. Wild eyes. One side of her face was swollen. “Your cheek,” I said. “What did you do to your cheek?”

Anna touched the side of her face. “My tooth has been hurting really bad. Maybe it’s all connected.

The only thing keeping Vonelle from breaking down completely was the sandwich. She'd wrapped it in a thin sheath of plastic and carried it with her everywhere she went. We don't know where she found the meat. She may have feigned pregnancy or sold the last of her shoes. I saw her trade her handbag for a half-filled jar of mayonnaise—and the bread I assume she stole from a more affluent neighbor.

She moved into our apartment after her house was looted. She sleeps on a cot next to the dishwasher where she hangs her hair-weaves on the upper rack. She sleeps with the sandwich tucked underneath a coat beside her on the cot, and when she wakes in the night to relieve herself, she totes the sandwich outside with her. It's admirable and sad. Though it isn't Vonelle I feel sorry for, or even my own hunger pains. My condolences go out to the sandwich. There it is of perfect use and proportion—as I know Vonelle's sandwich-making capabilities—and for what? She isn't eating it. She isn't giving it away. The whole creation process has been in vain. The cow that had been slaughtered, its intestines set aside. The yeast cultivated to convince the bread to rise. The pickle, if there was one, in all its briny glory. Something of such perfect use. All that potential, wrapped up and stowed away, underneath an unneeded coat. It hurt my head to think of all the reasons Vonelle didn't eat the sandwich. My best guess is she enjoyed the possibility of it being there more than she would have enjoyed its nourishment.

Last night, I crept over to the cot while she slept. I hadn't seen the sandwich in few days and I wanted to know if it was still intact. I lifted a sleeve of the coat and thought I caught a glimpse of the plastic shimmer, but I wasn't sure if the sandwich was still inside it, or if it was half-eaten, or if it had been replaced by some new mystery. Before I could poke at the plastic to test its consistency, Vonelle rolled over in the cot and flung an arm over her belongings—her intuition strong even in her sleep.

She stood at the vanity mirror in our living room, attaching an eyelash to her lid. "I wonder what I'll do when the glue runs out." Vonelle shook her head in disgust.

"There's no more glue?" Anna asked. Her cheek had morphed crimson red with a deep purple streak running across an angle, like a lightning bolt.

"There's no more nothing," Vonelle snorted. "I can't find my horoscope either."

"Do horoscopes even mean anything if the stars are disappearing?"

"I don't know. Cameron?"

I shrugged from the couch.

"I thought you'd have an answer." Vonelle wagged her hand in an attempt to unstick a lash from her finger. "See this is no good." She bit the lash with her teeth then examined it for a destructive kink before beginning the sticking process again. "I do know something," Vonelle said. "I wasn't sure I was going to tell you two, but now I see I have to." She nodded at her reflection and turned away from the mirror. "Something *big* came to me the other day before I moved out of my house. I was looking for my horoscope when I found it. You know I don't usually read those things, I just call my sister—but seeing how I don't even know if that woman's *alive* no more since no phones in this town dial outside the area code, I realized these really are trying times and I felt some authority was needed outside of the family, you understand? Well, the paper wasn't

there on the doorstep when I went to fetch it—no surprise—but there was this other thing. Oh, you also know my doormat was taken. I can't say I really care about that since none of you ever respected the 'no shoes' policy anyway. But when I looked for the paper in the place where my doormat used to be, I saw Jesus' holy face right there, looking back up at me."

"You saw Jesus?" Anna asked.

"It's a Jesus-*rug*," Vonelle said.

"You got a rug?"

"I didn't order it. It just came. It's about this big—a little rug with Jesus' head on it."

"Stitched in?"

"Painted on. But this is the thing you see his *eyes* are closed—which freaked me out a little 'cause I don't want Jesus situated in denial. Then I read the letter and it was all explained. The letter says his eyes are closed because he's not happy with everything going on in the world right now—"

"Neither are we."

"That's what I'm saying. He's down with us feeling it, and he's so disgusted he don't even—*can't even*—open up his *eyes*. So what you need to do, is kneel on the rug and pray how the Lord intended for you to pray, and if you stare long enough at Jesus' eyes, they may open up for you."

"For me?" I asked.

"I don't know if they're gonna go and open up for you, Cameron. The rug did come to me. The letter says there's a message trying to get through to me. After I say the prayers and receive the message, I send the rug back and wait for my \$46,000."

"What?"

"That's right. The letter says that after I receive the message and send the rug back in the envelope provided, I will be sent a check for \$46,000."

"Where's the rug?" Anna laughed.

"At the kitchen."

"You didn't think you could trust us with it here?" She laughed again and disappeared into the bedroom. When she was out of earshot, I sprang from the couch and approached Vonelle at the mirror.

"Is the experiment on?" I whispered.

She nodded in every direction. "I got down on that rug this morning."

"Did anything happen?"

She turned back to the mirror and began re-arranging imaginary perfume bottles on the vanity. "Today was a sort of preliminary introduction," she said. She lifted an invisible bottle and puffed two sprays at the nape of her neck. "Ohh, that's strong! Where have you been buying?"

"Vonelle, tell me what happened."

She placed the perfume back on the vanity and rubbed her neck with her wrist.

"Is that bottle made from double-blown Venetian glass?" she asked.

"Vonelle!"

She spun around. "I have some business to clear up first—before I can tend to our current situation, you understand? Marco and I borrowed a couple host-bodies from the tabernacle once when we were high. We had a little fun behind the pulpit."

"I see."

"We didn't go about making a mess or anything like that. We just had our *times* there."

"In the house of God."

"Oh no don't you go doing that Cameron."

"Our one chance at salvation and your wayward past is going to screw it up."

"Do you have a clean slate we can work with here?"

I thought about it. "No, but Anna sort of does."

"That's typical you. You're gonna go and outsource the work to your woman."

Vonelle returned to her lashes. She had one lash left to stick.

"Anna!" I called. "Do you want to pray?"

Anna entered the room and shook her head. "I'm not a part of this." She looked back and forth at Vonelle and I, deciding who to blame. "I don't want a task. My cheek hurts."

"You've got to complete your tasks," Vonelle said. "You've got to complete them as they come or you get stuck at level one and you never get to move on and save the princess."

"Anna is the princess." I took her by the hands.

"Cameron," Anna said. "His head is painted on."

Vonelle blinked twice to secure the fate of her lashes.

I left the apartment and took a walk down Tropicana Avenue. It was getting harder and harder to keep my muscles from atrophying, though frequent walks helped slow the process. A friend of mine back in college had ACL surgery on his left knee—and during recovery, his wounded leg shriveled to a prune while the strong leg remained in healthy bulk as he continued to exercise it. Eventually he became disgusted by his disproportionate body and allowed the healthy leg to shrivel down to the size of the injured limb. Something of this sort was happening with my eyesight, though it was not voluntary. My left contact—my *last* left contact—had popped out weeks ago, and instead of my eyes remaining unbalanced, with one eye strong and the other near blind, the strong eye had adjusted to the handicap of the weaker. To say, I was now near blind in both my eyes. Had the weaker eye adjusted upwards for balance, I would have gladly accepted the small miracle and not asked for another. But for the right eye to degrade itself to meet the needs of the left—for the weaker to prevail...this did not leave me confident of any situation.

I continued to walk past the place where, last month, Anna and I come across an abandoned pallet of bottled waters in crates. There were nine crates total, stacked neatly high, and covered with a tarp until we removed it. We weren't sure where the pallet had come from or why no one was guarding it, but once we were certain we weren't being watched, there was no guilt in what followed. We dragged the crates of Arrowhead, one by one, up the hill. The first crate dug deep track marks into the soil, making it easier to lug each subsequent crate up the hill towards our apartment. The third, the fifth, the seventh, the last—our ancient transportation system becoming more efficient each ascent. "I feel so Egyptian!" Anna smiled. We saved three crates at the apartment for ourselves and sold the rest at the pool, at the lines outside of Social Services, and in front of the Country Club—where the situation was desperate enough that golfers were willing to

pay the \$27 a liter we charged them for a drink.

There was no fuel left in the city. The banks had all been closed. Despite her continued efforts, Anna could not reach anyone to give us answers to our questions. It was as if someone had severed an artery to a non-vital organ and decided to allow the organ to die. To save the rest of the body? We didn't know. Two towns over there may have been piñatas and bar mitzvahs. Barbeques. Beer. Water balloons and cake. Or nothing. Here, there were fanatics praising an archaic revival. Street gangs united and dissolved again. Hippies emerged toting weathered signs and chanting old remonstrations. End of the world enthusiasts clapped their hands towards the sky. The Raelians built another landing pad for their Elohim to land upon. The mayor opened his doors to the public in a gesture of hospitality. "I'll serve whomever I can," he said. He took in two disheveled strangers from the mob on the street. "What's really going on?" we wondered. Children began to die.

The stench of the city was impressive. The human waste. The odor of two million unwashed bodies. Clogged garbage disposals tossed in the streets. Though it wasn't going down the way professional deconstructionists had envisioned it. We weren't killing each other.

The heat weighed down the branches of the juniper bushes, causing their centers to split and expose their innermost bark to the sun. The tender bushes withered from the inside. The desert too, was shifting every week. We were impartial to the changing landscape. If we'd spent less time worrying about things like divided mirror space and organizing dirty forks, we might have noticed the way the land had started to shift underneath our feet. Structures collapsed outside our apartment. The toll way. The high way. The freeway. The cement tendril overpasses that had once interwoven politely with each other, no longer suspended themselves at appropriate distances. They'd crumbled a piles of fractured loop segments, fallen green highway signs, and spilled fertilizer trucks.

I went down to Vonelle's Tropicana Pizza. The unfilled ticket orders hung sadly on the spin-round, like a greasy mechanical weeping willow tree. I sat in the kitchen moping my forehead with a dishcloth. There was nothing else to do. After an hour passed, Vonelle appeared from behind the register and stuffed her face into my scalp. It was the second time she'd done this in the course of the two years I'd worked for her.

"Your dandruff smells like pizza," she said. "That's delicious."

"I'll try to wash with something."

She pulled away and frowned. "I just told you I liked it."

"Then put your face back in."

"Anna won't like it when my face is in your brain."

"I have no brain left."

"Pffttt." She rolled her eyes halfway to one side then rolled them back forward and squinted. "Oh no, you're not gonna go and unravel on me are you?"

"David fried a cat poolside yesterday."

"That's what I'm saying. I'm not doubting he ate that thing straight off the Hibachi. This is just the beginning. I don't want to wait around and see what happens next."

I sighed. "What's with all the unfilled orders?"

"Those," Vonelle said. "They aren't real. It's a good thing too that no one's

calling, because I don't think we have a thimble's worth of flour left."

"You're making orders up? Then why are we here?"

"I didn't say the flour was *out*. I said there *might* be flour. I haven't checked in a while. I'll check if someone calls."

"Check now, Vonelle."

She snorted and headed for the dry foods walk-in. I waited, continuing to sweat. When Vonelle didn't return, I figured she was eating whatever she'd found in the walk-in, or she'd fallen asleep. I searched the kitchen for her Jesus-rug and discovered it crammed between the soda machine and a stack of empty pizza boxes. It was just as she had described.

I didn't remember how to pray so I rolled the rug out and lay down my stomach, staring underneath the stove and thinking about Anna.

*

Anna and I first ate together at Vonelle's back when it was still called *Sophia's* and run by a fiery middle-aged couple from Palermo. Anna had been craving spaghetti and chicken wings, and I knew the food at Sophia's would suffice, so we sat next each other in a red leather booth and ordered from the menus. Anna's thighs sweat the whole time.

"Have you been here before?" she asked me.

"I come here all the time."

"It's my first time." Her face was flushed. She took a sip of lemonade and wiped down the sides of the perspiring glass with her fingers. I fiddled with the 25-cent puzzle I'd won from the toy machine, next to the stale-candy machine, next to the pile of *Viva St. Joseph Locas* at the door. The puzzle was like a Rubik's Cube, but it came completely undone. I set all the pieces in two rows on the table.

"Make it mean something," Anna said.

"Can I have more direction?"

"Something good."

This was before we knew each other.

The chicken wings were hotter than I'd had them before, and everything Anna said felt old and easy in the way I wanted everything to feel. It was too hot to lie about anything that summer, so Anna and I found each other fast and completely and began our time together from there.

"You're getting hot sauce all over that thing," Anna laughed. She had hot sauce all over her face.

"Do you like the fries?"

"I love the fries."

"What's that you wear around your neck? Is it one of those Russian dolls?"

"Yes," she said. "It's my Matryoshka doll."

"Does she open up?"

Anna shook her head. "She's the smallest one. She's solid."

When the spaghetti arrived, Anna attacked it with a plastic fork.

"It's better when the Italians are screaming," I said. I moved to the other side of the booth to give Anna room to eat, but as soon as I did I missed her, and for a moment I

had to fight the urge to lean across the table, over the chicken wing bones, crumpled napkins, and over the mound of Anna's spaghetti—to be closer to her face. I resisted. I knew what real satisfaction was. I didn't want to be any place in the world other than stuck to that torn leather seat across from Anna, swatting the flies away from our table, and watching Anna eat.

She caught me staring. "You never look happy or sad," she said.

"How do I look?"

"You don't really have a look. You're just there."

We pushed the napkin dispenser back and forth until the napkins ran out and there was no shame left in the mess we created.

"I'm with you," I said.

"I know."

*

I roamed to Rite Aid in my slippers and stole a bag of Skittles and a jar to pour them in. It was a fancy jar. Its base was a little Chinese man with big open eyes and no pupils. His mouth was open too, in the shape of an oval. He wore skirted monk's garb, with his legs were spread astride, as if he was rushing away. He held the glass jar in his hands.

When I returned to the pizzeria, I poured the Skittles in the jar and waited for the expression on the monk's face to change. It did not.

Then I spent two hours on the Jesus-rug. Jesus' eyes remained closed.

"I read Vonelle's letter," Anna said.

I jumped. "How long have you been standing there?"

"A while. I'm confused by the provisos. How long are we supposed to pray before we send the rug back?"

I sat up. "You're going to pray?"

"I might," she said. "But wait. Are we supposed to be praying for something in particular, or just praying in general? Do I focus on something or should—"

Vonelle stomped over and snatched the letter from Anna. "You need to take the hollow-bamboo approach," she said. "You've got to be completely empty so Jesus can use you as a receptacle."

"What?" Anna asked. "And just dump whatever he wants inside of me?"

"Basically." Vonelle tucked the letter away in a stainless steel drawer. "It'll all go through you. That's the thing about bamboo. Hey Cameron, there is no flour left. No sauce, either. Nothing. It's time for us to retire."

The condenser on the fridge sputtered.

"I prayed all afternoon," I said. It was almost the truth, and I thought it would help to raise their spirits.

"I know," Vonelle nodded. "I came out around twelve and saw you there on the rug. I didn't want to disturb you because it looked like maybe you were making some progress."

"What did you pray for?" Anna asked.

“Fried chicken and pornography.”

Vonelle snorted. “Honorable placeholders for nirvana.”

“I thought Jesus would appreciate sincerity,” I shrugged.

The telephone rang. Vonelle ran into the utility closet and slammed the door behind her. Anna and I stared at each other for what seemed like a very long time—hoping the ringing would go away.

“I’ll be at the apartment,” Anna said.

*

Night fell. Tony stood at the living room window, truffleless, and staring at the moon. “Do you think there are holes in the sky, Tara? Now that the stars are gone?”

Tara moaned from the bedroom. “Maybe. Will you come in here and lay down next to me, please? I feel like chewing on something.”

Tony obeyed, leaving the bay window and climbing in bed next to Tara. He presented the flesh on his arm. “Don’t take a big bite.”

“I’ll aim for a quark.”

“Ow!” Tony sucked his breath into his stomach. “I feel it there.” He pointed to the place two inches below his navel.

Tara sighed. “If the woman behind the sky sews up the holes, then the universe won’t leak through.”

“I don’t know that woman,” Tony said. He sat up against the headboard and pushed his stomach out as far as he could before sucking it in again. He repeated this, over and over, fascinated by the heat his body generated. “If we get married Tara, are you going to hyphenate your name?”

“I don’t really see a future for us.”

“For any of us?”

“For you and me.”

“If things weren’t the way they are, would you still want to live with me?”

“You mean if I wasn’t depressed?”

“You’re depressed?” Tony asked.

“Yes, I am.”

“So, if you weren’t depressed, would you still want to live with me?”

“No. I’d want to be on my own.”

“You would?”

“Uh huh.”

Tony was silent. He stopped pumping his stomach. He climbed out of bed and began rummaging through a pile of clothes on the floor. “I don’t have any clean boxers left.”

Tara propped herself up in bed and stared at the back of Tony’s shoulders. “Did I hurt your feelings? I know that’s probably not the answer you wanted to hear.”

Tony folded a sock.

“Are you okay? No more questions? Do you have anything else to say?”

“I like that we both like orange sherbet,” Tony said. He clicked his tongue ring against his teeth. “I’m pretty sure that’s a good thing.”

“Yes,” Tara sighed. “That’s good. They used to serve it with cocktail umbrellas and wafer cookies at Eros.”

"I never had mine with wafer cookies." Tony tilted his head to the side. "I can still remember the way things tasted, even though I haven't tasted them in a long time. I can't remember popsicles though, but I remember I didn't like the red ones. They tasted like lipstick. I ate them anyway when there was nothing else in the freezer. I can't remember sounds. Like the ones the computer used to make. Tara?"

"What?"

"My favorite sound was on the computer. It was the sound the recycling bin makes when you empty it."

"The sound like crumpling paper?"

"Yeah!" Tony dropped the sock and climbed back in bed. "I love that one! It's crinkly. It doesn't ever change though, no matter how many things you delete at the same time. I tried to make it last longer. I put all my music files in the bin to see if the sound would get any longer, but it doesn't. It stays the same."

Tara flopped an arm over her head and began to pet her eyebrows. "Do you think you have a purpose, Tony?"

"I'm just here to get to tomorrow."

"Really? You don't think that's sad?"

"Maybe I'm here to make you happy."

"I hope you're here for more than that."

Tony folded his legs. "I'd like to be a massage therapist, if I can get a scholarship to massage school. It costs \$4,800 I think. Or I want to sell balloons on the beach. The kids like the balloon man." Tony smiled and bobbed his head.

"You want to sell balloons?"

"Yeah. Maybe the woman behind the sky will want to buy some. She can pull them up by their tails through the holes in the sky."

"Okay," Tara said. She did not mind this reverie. She thought about the boardwalk back in New Jersey. The white wood streaked with tiny cracks. The caramel-coated popcorn. The accordion music played during tourist season. The Atlantic ocean rushing in through the seams of her shoes.

"I'll lay with you on a blanket on the sand," Tony said. "Until the kids come over." He closed his eyes. "I can hear them, Tara! They're running up to buy the balloons! I hear their feet on the sand. It makes a *sha sha* sound. Do you hear it?"

"I think I hear it."

"You have to close your eyes. It gets louder when you close your eyes."

"I hear it," Tara said. She closed her eyes. She could see right through to the ceiling. "It's a shuffling on the sand. I hear the ocean behind it."

*

"What have you been doing?" I asked Anna. She was in a heap on the floor this time. She'd dumped the contents of the plastic-bin we used as a filing cabinet into her lap. Papers were crumpled everywhere. Empty water bottles rolled astray. Grey circles deepened around her eyes—grey circles turning black. Her hair was in as many directions as it could be without leaving her head, and she wore the same grey shorts she'd been wearing since last month along with the same thin white t-shirt that had once been made of high quality organic cotton, but was now taupe-colored and bent into an absolutely in-

organic shape. I wondered what form the t-shirt would take when it hardened with dirt completely. What shape would Anna take inside it?

"I've been on the phone all fucking day," she said. "You have no idea. You're out making pizzas."

"I didn't make any pizzas. We're done, remember?"

"I know," Anna took a deep breath. "I don't mean to blame you. I'm so upset. I make all these calls just to make sure we get something to drink—and we barely get anything to drink. No one's getting enough food. No one's getting paid. I feel like we're just passing the time until the phone rings again and they tell us where we need to move next so we stay somewhat safe and somewhat alive. I bet soon we won't be able to make any outgoing calls."

"Stop trying. Go float in the pool."

"It's disgusting!" she began to cry. "It's the same water it was five months ago. I could probably walk on it it's so thick with filth. We didn't bring this upon ourselves, did we?"

"Anna, stop trying."

"I want to take a shower." Anna lifted her hands to her face and tried to rub it away. Then in a sudden burst of energy, she sprang from the floor and ran into the bathroom where she locked herself inside. I heard her rattling the faucets. "We need to leave," she cried. "I want to see if this is happening everywhere or if we just did something horribly wrong in this horrible town and we're being punished for it."

I left her in the bathroom and sought out my candy stash in the monk's jar. I stared into his eyes. Each eye had a dark pink circle around it, as if he'd been freshly punched—twice. I wondered who would win in a fight? Me or the Chinese monk? The monk wouldn't fight, I suspected. But I also suspected he wasn't a real monk.

I dumped the Skittles on the counter and sorted them by color. 14 reds, 12 oranges, 13 purples, 13 greens, and 15 yellows. I scooped them back up and put them in the jar.

"How's that for abundance?" I asked the monk. I popped a green one in my mouth. "All right," I called to Anna.

"What?" she cried.

"All right." I walked to the bathroom and knocked. "We'll give it one more week. Then we'll get out."

Anna opened the door. "Do you mean it?"

"I mean it. We'll leave."

"Okay," Anna stepped into my arms. I held her small, warm body.

The dull hum of morning. Jesus' eyes remain closed. Vonelle eats a carrot. Anna sleeps. I keep track of the movement of the residents in the building. Shuffling. Coughing. Thumping against the walls. They cook nothing. The power is out. We are in the dark, before dawn, in the heat.

Anna opens her eyes, but she is not there. She waits in a cool grey place, somewhere before the morning. In a cave. A heavy footprint. A cellar. A fog. Somewhere the damp absence of light is justifiable.

"If I know nothing," she mumbles in her sleep, "I'm not responsible." This has become her mantra.

Anna wakes again, this time in my arms. She is better this way—after dawn has settled and morning has grown into dark, early day. Or is it midnight? It must be. Anna falls back asleep.

4:26, 2:24, 10:19. Which clock holds the proper time?

"I've found God," Anna tells me. "God."

She is lying on the mattress with her arms stretched up to the ceiling fan. It's spinning. The power is on again. "God," Anna says. She tosses balls of mismatched socks into the blades, laughing hysterically as they shoot out in unexpected directions.

"It's the sock oracle," she says. "Ask it any question."

"Will we be hungry today?"

Anna takes a ball of socks and tosses them to the fan. They shoot out to the closet door, and in harmony with the sound of soft cotton on wood, Anna screams, "Yes! That was the *yes* door." She begins to cry then, but we are both cool now, underneath the fan. We stay there until the lights begin to flicker, and the breeze above us slows to stagnant air, and we are just there, in the dark, with each other.

"Anna. Wake up. We need to move again."

"What?"

"A few things. We can't stay here."

We lug lemons in a crate. Bottled water in a box.

"What about our basil leaf plant?"

I leave pools of sweat everywhere I go. I don't mind my sweat. It allots me life and ownership. Anna dabs a tissue in the creases of her elbows at the places where her arms fold. Vonelle's sweat no longer stains her clothing because she no longer wears any. Her wardrobe has been reduced to the banana-colored swimsuit and pair of flip-flops with shells stuck to the straps. She glued them there herself using wet cinnamon as glue.

“This is how it will be,” David says.

There are nine of us in two rooms.

“Don’t kill yourselves!” he laughs. “The world will do that for you.”

An old man scratches coarse hairs on his chin. He rubs the soles of his feet. “I have an MBA. I’m about to eat shoe leather.”

“I was a poet,” a woman says—with the urgency of her words disappearing.

We sleep on cardboard boxes shaped to look like Persian rugs.

“There’s no time for poetry,” Anna says. “Cameron, who are these people?”

“They’re getting by. They do what they need to do to survive.”

“That will be us soon.”

“It’s already us.”

“I want to go home.”

“We don’t *go* home, Anna. This is our home.”

This mass of writhing legs and arms. This itching. Dirty sweat. Track marks from our fingers.

Anna wakes to a sound. A stranger’s groan. Wind chimes. An alarm. The crash of the sky. She knows she will never be able to reach this noise to silence it. It is located far too center. Anna stuffs her head underneath a pillow, upset by the crude spatial idea of ‘centeredness’ and by the thought of a world with so many sounds. She tries to fall back asleep.

“This is the only time I feel right.” I say. I stare at my reflection in the broken television set, then roll on top of Anna and inhale the scent of her forehead.

“Cam?” she asks. “Is there a memory of the coming of night that we all once shared? I think I remember it. It was fearful once, dreadful. Then it became peaceful. It’s becoming dreadful again. Everything has come full circle.”

“I don’t think we’re living in cyclical movements anymore.”

“You think they’re squares?”

“I think making sense of this is like trying to square the circle.”

“That’s impossible?”

“I want to build something, Anna. I don’t want to fix mistakes.”

“It’s not the pipes,” David says. “It’s the oceans. One of those seismic shifts. Tectonic plates are moving.”

“You think it means something?” the old man asks. “Any of it?”

We shake our heads and laugh ourselves back into an aching slumber.

*

Our fantasy world is frozen. Completely covered in snow. And though the snow weighs down the trees and hides the fire hydrants, it is a tranquil world. Sheds filled with summer tools. Above ground telephone wires.

"There," I tell Anna. "That feels good." I'm face down on a King-sized bed. Anna stands on my back, with her hand against the wall for balance.

"I can see outside from here," she says.

"Is it still snowing?"

"Of course it is."

"What kind of snow is it?"

"Not the packing kind."

"Is it the eating kind?"

"Yes! It's best off the bushes."

The phone vibrates on the nightstand. Anna pliés and bends sideways to reach it without moving her feet from the sides of my spine.

"Hello?" she says.

"Anna! It's Tara. I'm stuffing myself in an undersized dress. I wear a cap and gown today. I'm getting married to my future."

"Congratulations. He's a lucky man."

"He's not a man. He's sheepskin. It's my PhD. I can finally walk around with a piece of toast stuck to my forehead and not feel the need to explain myself."

"Congratulations."

"I needed to talk to someone sane. That's why I called you."

"I'm not sure that's happened before."

"It hasn't. But you *are* sane. We are sane. This phone call is a recollection of sanity."

Anna stares out the window at the plastic man in front of the Pancake House. He wears a chef's hat and holds a tall stack of plastic waffles. They will soon be covered in snow.

"I don't know what to do," Anna sighs.

"Linear thought," Tara says. "My Aunt agrees with it. Come over to celebrate. We'll eat chili."

Anna shifts her weight.

"My back," I say. "My back." More tender than a moaned *I love you*.

The thermostat has reached -30 degrees. The streets have names like Oak, Euclid, and Dryden. Anna writes a letter and seals it in a fine white envelope. She stuffs the envelope in her sweater and pulls on her winter boots. "I'm off to the tundra," she says. "I may never return." She steps outside and exhales, watching her breath crystallize. "I am Shackleton!" she smiles. The sting of the wind paralyzes her cheeks. Her fingers freeze inside her gloves.

"Are you ever coming in?" I ask.

"Just one more bite of salami!" Anna laughs from the bathroom floor. It's all in her lap—the olives, cured meats, French bread, Robusto cheese.

“Baby,” I say. The steam from the shower has fogged the glass panes. I take a squeegee and wipe a small space free. I want to see Anna more clearly—the way her body has changed this winter. I wipe at the glass with both my hands. Fifteen or twenty pounds more around her thighs. I don’t mind. She doesn’t mind. When the days are longer once again, she’ll run rectangles around the block until the weight disappears. This has become our life. The addition and subtraction of insignificant flesh.

“Girl!” someone shouts.

Anna stops in the street.

It is a man shoveling through the snow. “You shouldn’t be out on a day like this.”

“It’s okay,” Anna says. “I’m aware of things.”

“Don’t let that fool you.” He shakes his head, and Anna disappears from his dream.

*

I jump from bed and run down the hall. I don’t trust that fucking monk. He doesn’t look like any monk I’ve ever known. He doesn’t look like a Hare Krishna. He doesn’t have a tambourine. He doesn’t even really look Chinese. Or Burmese. Or Tibetan. He’s not enlightened. He has a mustache. I don’t think he’s a monk. He may have stolen the garb—the way he’s stealing my Skittles—rushing off with that jar—his head turned forward, away from his stride. His mouth in an oval. Caught.

“Oh!” he says, in feigned surprise. “Oh, these are *your* Skittles?”

His pupil-less eyes are unable to register right from wrong.

I dump the jar on the counter. This time, only the yellows are spared. I stuff all the other Skittles into my mouth and chew through the thick wad of sugar. I drool a syrupy rainbow.

Anna wakes and crawls across the living room floor. Hair clumps and footprints everywhere. When was the last time we heard the sweet sucking sound of a Hoover? A Windtunnel? The almighty Dyson? Had we ever known a clear path or the machine made to clear it? Anna crawls to the window and peers outside at the zoo across the street. She drags herself to the door.

The night is heavy and black, without the least breath of air. It is full of deafening silence. Anna falls asleep on a wooden bench. It’s on her list of things to do before she dies. Sleep on a bench in a park. In a zoo, like a homeless vet. Under a bridge, like a troll.

Tom ♥s Diane

Aaron & Jane

Kate loves Kate 4 ever

These things are scrawled into the wood.

See we’d wanted to make something of our lives. We hadn’t meant to come here just to die.

Anna wakes and gropes through the zoo, knocking over the remains of a dilapidated hot dog stand. Metal tins gone—used to catch rain. Used as helmets. As weapons. Bedpans. The tigers sleep, looking frail. The pandas whimper, thinning hair. The lemurs are all dead.

The light in the aviary is still on. Anna searches for the switch on the stucco wall, sticking her fingers inside the sockets. Was there ever such a thing as security? The ape cage swells. Birds lift their heads. The apes pound on their chests. Squawking. Biting. They waft Anna's scent. They waft the scents of each other. *I'm an Alpha. I won't die.* The lights go out. "Go!" Anna cries. The birds shriek in the dark. What happens when the power goes out? we'd asked. They go, the zookeeper said. "Go!" Anna screams. "Go! Go! Fly! Go!" But the birds do not cross their psychological barriers. They remain huddled together in the dark, in the dying transplanted grass.

I've aged thirty years overnight.

"It's not about the tension," David says. "It's about re-gaining the clarity we had before the fall. Remember that? I can't blame you if you don't. You kids don't know the world without transgressions."

"We'll be better for it in the end," I say. "Because we survived. You know that. You fought a war."

"It's a lot to overcome. But no matter, that. Our memories are dissolving faster than our bodies anyway. It's only time that will make us innocent again."

Vonelle has given the monk black pupils. Two dots of eyeliner. She stuffs a note inside the jar.

*Dear Yellow Skittles,
Nobody likes you and neither do I.*

Vonelle

We've all begun to grind our teeth. We do this, dehydrated, in our sleep. It's contagious.

Anna stands at the mirror with her mouth hanging open. I'm not sure what she's looking for. It's too dark to see anything other than a gaping, black hole.

"I have a cavity," she says.

"That's upsetting."

"It is. I remember paying a rather large sum of money to prevent this sort of thing from happening."

"I remember that, too."

"So what was the point of all the white gunk they laid in my molars?" she pokes at a tooth. "It's a sharp shooting pain. It goes straight through to my brain. I can't live

with it anymore.”

“I have an aspirin,” I say. “Will that alleviate the sensation?”

“Of course it will, Cam. For a moment. Then what do I do? Alleviation is *not* salvation.”

She disappears. I fondle the aspirin in my pocket. The powder rubs off on my fingers. It takes every bit of strength I have not to snort it. Anna returns with a hammer. She wears two braids in her hair.

“I don’t know,” she shrugs. She wipes the sweat off her forehead. It evaporates on her wrist. “They do it in the movies,” she lifts the hammer—“like this,” she says. She swings.

The snow continues to fall in our dreams.

*

I ate the last of the yellow Skittles and left for Social Services. The streets were crowded with mothers and daughters, and fathers and daughters, and mothers without their sons. The sons had stayed home to guard what was left of the houses. The line for canned meat wrapped around the hospital—I don’t know how many times. The people waiting in line formed a thick, dirty spiral and I imagined—looking down from space—they resembled something like the scattered, spiraling tail of the galaxy itself.

The men working the rations station were fed too much to keep the line moving at an agreeable rate. I slept on the pavement and woke with the sun. Anna joined me on the fifth day.

The government official at the head of the line had an enormous, shaking belly. We wondered what he’d stuffed inside himself to stretch his gut so wide. He looked down at us with the sort of sympathy a slightly more evolved creature has for the inherent goodness still lingering in simpler human beings. It took patience for him to be near us. He chose his words with care. Handed us our tickets for the fruit crate. Nodded at Anna’s shorts.

We cried. Anna wept. Vonelle howled.
I sobbed in the bathroom, in our basil leaf plant.

Tara and Tony arrived on Wednesday. Their apartment had molded over. Unidentifiable mushrooms grew from between the fibers of their rug.

“That’s it?” I asked.

Tara dropped her bags. “That’s not it. There’s something in the kitchen. Some sort of malicious tree. Up until this one, I’d never met a tree I disagreed with. But this is not a friendly tree. It came from the apartment underneath us. I’m allergic to it. My skin is flaking off. I have phlegm built up in my throat. My eye has gone septic and needs to be drained. I can’t sleep at night.”

Tara could never sleep, but we didn’t remind her of that. We let her clear her throat in our sink.

“I might have scurvy,” she said. “A retired doctor told me. Is that iodine deficiency, or is that the thing where your bones de-ossify?”

“You’re asking me?” I said. “What did the doctor say?”

“The doctor,” she laughed. “He didn’t have the time.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know,” she shrugged. “My insurance company doesn’t exist anymore. Even if they did, they wouldn’t cover this. They never covered conditions caused by neglect. They didn’t cover acts of God either.”

“What else is there?”

“I don’t know. I like the sound of scurvy though. If I was going to choose a way to die, I would definitely pick scurvy. I’ll sound good on my way out.”

“We like to talk about sounds,” Tony said. He clutched his skateboard to his chest.

“This is the last night,” Anna told me.

The man with the glass jar feels empty.

Anna is so beautiful, bewildered in the hallway in the middle of the night, as helpless as all of us were, but still feeling as if she was the only one who couldn’t do a thing to save our world.

“Everyone’s asleep,” I told her.

“There’s so much going on,” she wept quietly. “I don’t know how to take it all in.”

“You don’t need to. Just get through the night.”

“How?”

I untied her shorts.

“Cameron?” she said—shocked at first. Then she looked up at me, defeated. I took off our clothes and put my hands underneath her, lifting her against the wall. She wrapped her legs around my waist and took my face in her hands.

“All I need to do is push up,” I said.

“Don’t do that,” she whispered, but she did not stop moving her hips as if I was already inside her.

“I want to feel that warmth,” I said.

“But tonight—I feel like tonight we’re living such a moment in history.”

“Anna,” I grinned. “This is always a moment in history.”

“No, but *this*—”

I pushed up. Anna’s braids fell back and made two soft sounds against the wall behind her.

The world no longer belonged to us. It was time to find another one.

We walked outside to the quarry and wished on a blank sky.

“Would you like anything to drink?” I asked. I had no way to get her anything to drink, but I’d meant it.

“I’m okay, thank you.” We stood silently until we kissed.

The gravel underneath our feet supported the weight of our kiss, until the wind picked up and picked us up, up up.

I led her to the roof of an abandoned parking garage where I circled the freckles on her arm until the marker ran out and there were no more constellations to be named.

“I’m jealous of the wind,” I said. “It’s giving you goose bumps, Anna.”

“Are we going to find the stars now, Cam?”

The parking garage set sail through the mesosphere. We watched the world re-form below us. Everything was re-assessed. The ocean shook itself free of all land and was finally, truly free. A bird swooped down from a green canopy and changed its mind about lunch. “I will not stop my flight today. Not even for a sea fish.” This pause kept us together, safe. As if we hadn’t done anything wrong yet.

“I’m happy,” Anna said. She kissed me again. “I don’t need the world.”

I pulled her as close to me as possible, and when it wasn’t close enough, we wove in and out of each other in the way that didn’t involve our bodies.

But in this sweet brevity of passing time, we became aware of the passing time and began to count the content of the things we had between us.

“Our love isn’t just another lapse, is it Cam?”

This change. Why this change? When did time become refractory?

“It isn’t just another transgression, is it?”

Had our utopia become too accomplished? Could we not support the weight of our bliss?

We began to fall. Plummet in spurts. Bursting through stratified layers of air. Staccto:staccato. Nocturnal octaves. We fell to the earth. We fell through the sea.

Anna unrolled a mermaid’s tail the moment she hit the water. “Promise me you’ll follow,” she swam away upstream.

Buildings burned into the ocean. Burning stars fell from the sky.

I became a fish
with big fish lips

the moment I hit the water.

“I’ll drown,” I said. I flopped and floundered

Then up an down
I followed the sound of undulating seaweed
wrapped around my tail.

I swam to this
wet music

up stream
up stream

“I want to fill your pond with fishes.”

I pushed up. Anna swallowed. We fell naked on the floor. Star-crossed. Tangled.
Yogic limbs. Amid the paper plates and lemon skins. Wet clumps of Vietnamese
cinnamon. A torn HOPE poster hanging from the hallway wall.

From somewhere deep inside Vonelle's Tropicana Pizza, Vonelle screamed.

"Flour! Red sauce! Cheese! *Pepperoni!*"

We followed her calls, in a daze.

"Where did it come from?"

"Don't ask me that! It's here and we're making a pizza! Is this cheese?" Vonelle sobbed. "I can't tell. It's melted into the plastic. I don't care! We'll call it cheese. Hurry up and do that thing you did last week, Cameron. Hijack us a line of power from underground, so we can bake this thing."

"We got away with it once," I told her. "I don't want to push our luck."

"It's pizza," Vonelle growled. "*Pepperoni.*"

I rigged it so the power would stay on exactly 45 minutes, long enough to bake our pizza. It was the last pizza in our city—we were pretty sure of that, but there was also the possibility that it was the last pizza *anywhere*.

Vonelle stood on the roof with a frying pan and a large wooden spoon—on the lookout for anyone who might be in opposition to our energy thievery. I stayed in the kitchen with the rising dough. Anna remained a contentious objector.

"I'm burning the building before we go," Vonelle called down from the roof. "We're not coming back—you know that, and I don't want anyone nosing around in my kitchen."

I was too weak to argue.

When the pizza was done, I placed it on the counter. The three of us circled around it silently, watching the cheese bubble.

"Don't touch it," Vonelle whispered.

"When do we eat?" I asked.

"We're not eating."

"What?"

"We'll get sick," Vonelle snorted. "You know that. We've been living on rabbit food. We can't just dive into a pizza. I'll tell you what we need to do," she nodded. "We need to bury this pizza as an artifact with some other important things. That way, in the future, someone might find our capsule and they can re-construct our world if they think it's worth the effort."

"How will they know where to find it?" Anna asked.

"We'll leave them clues."

"What sort of clues?"

"No one left us clues," I said.

Everything we had, we placed inside the pizza box. The pizza itself, the worn Jesus rug, Tara's unfinished puzzle, Anna's wisdom tooth.

"Anything else?"

Vonelle shrugged. "I didn't contribute this much the first time around."

"Maybe that was the problem."

She fumed in my general direction, then reluctantly lifted her arms and unpinned the autumn-colored hair weave from the top of her head. "There it is," she said. "Miss

Anna?"

Anna removed an envelope from her pack. "It's a letter. I sent it to my father a couple months ago, but it came back in the mail."

I winced. Anna placed the letter in the box, on top of the bubbly cheese. The envelope soaked up the grease.

"Oh no!" she cried.

"It's all right," Vonelle said. "It'll let them know how we lived."

"I didn't live like that!"

"In the end you did." Vonelle closed the box and shoved it in my hands. "This is what we need to save."

The building burned. We ran.

I placed the box in the hole we'd dug and covered it in dirt. A good desert death just outside of Ocotillo Park.

"Now you set out those clues, Cameron," Vonelle told me. "Anna and I will head to the foothills and start the trail in the mountains." She wiped her hands and furrowed her brow. "Tara and her boy didn't want to come along?"

"They didn't want to leave David," Anna said. "And David wouldn't leave the city—"

"That man," Vonelle shook her head.

"—and I don't want to leave Cameron."

"It's all right," I told her. "Find the path we hiked last year. The one with the little house at the end. I'll meet you there tonight. It's a start. Do you remember that path?"

"I do," Anna said. "Are you sure you do?"

"I do. I'll meet you at that house tonight, or the place it used to be, if it isn't there anymore."

Vonelle and Anna waved goodbye from the edge of the road, then they began the trek towards the Red San Chaoun Rock Mountains. They walked past the shopping cart graveyard and the quarries of unearthed stone. Past the statues with bronzed buttocks and the billboards displaying pictures of gigantic lobsters and stuffed eggs sprinkled with paprika. Past the peeling advertisements for Ticket Attorneys, plastic surgeons, Bankruptcy lawyers, and high-speed digital cable. Past the endless housing developments in master-planned communities—where the backyard golf courses had been finished before the houses, and residents had followed through on their golf strokes before they'd ever set foot in their kitchens. Golf balls had been lost in bunkers before car keys were found in couches.

They continued beyond the dried date palms and withering juniper bushes, the half-roads that ended in piles of dirt without warning, the Afghan pines, the Aloe Vera shrubs, the Joshua trees that cast human shadows.

Anna and Vonelle approached the base of the mountain and began the steep ascent. They used the pulleys and belays left behind by previous climbers who'd been kind enough to mark the way with cairns and dead lizards. They climbed the grey slate rocks past the shallow caves, sliding their arms in the sandstone crevices. Cairn to pulley. Pulley to Belay. "Belay me!" Vonelle cried. "Belay me!" She embraced the side of the

mountain. Her body conformed to the curve of the rock, and when she sweat, her own salts mixed with the red rock minerals.

When they reached flatter ground, they continued over the empty pools of water and through the dried forests of Chitalpa trees. Further and further, they ascended.

Vonelle was a breathless heap of yellow latex.

“Anna,” she huffed. “I have not walked this far since Moses led me.” Her hands were on her knees. Her head hung low to the ground as she heaved.

Anna held the straps of her backpack and fought the rays of the sun. She wondered what sort of responsibility she had towards this woman. If it came down to it, could she carry her? Would she abandon her pack to drag Vonelle out of the noonday sun? Anna noticed the skin on the crown of Vonelle’s head—the part usually covered by her hair weave. It was three shades lighter than the rest of her skin, and slowly peeling off.

“We need to keep going,” Anna said.

They hiked further through the mountain pass until finally they came to the path made of white stones with deep, pink splotches dotting every rock face.

“Like raspberry ice cream!” Anna smiled.

“What?” Vonelle huffed. “These rocks here with Leprosy?” She collapsed again. “I’m going back. I shouldn’t have left my cats all alone.”

“You don’t have any cats,” Anna said. “Are you going to find your way back?”

Vonelle didn’t respond. She closed her eyes. “I don’t know. I can’t see a thing. Ask me something to check to see if I still have my wits about me.”

“You’re fine,” Anna said. “We’re almost there.” She took a breath and continued on, knowing very well that once she’d faded to a speck on the horizon, Vonelle would somehow muster the endurance to follow.

Just before nightfall the crumbling stones on the path shrunk to pebbles, then gravel, then grains of pink sand. Anna came upon the dome-shaped house made of colored stones and a solar paneled roof. Hibiscus flowers crowned the windows, and daisies in ceramic pots lined the pathway to the door. All the flowers were miraculously, vibrantly alive. As Anna walked towards the house she watched the sand under her feet darken, soften, then turn black—in fact was no longer sand. It had become rich, dark soil. She knelt to the earth and inhaled. The ground sparkled with moist webs spun by the tiny spiders nestled between the clods of spaded earth. Anna opened her pack and removed a clipping from the basil leaf plant. She placed the stem in the fertile soil and patted it firm with her fingers. “There you go,” she said. She wiped her hands before she stood and approached the house.

The front door had been left open.

“Hello?” she called. She peered inside.

No photos hung on the walls. Only dusty outlines remained.

“Hello?” Anna called. *Had the owners removed the pictures before they fled? Had they fled inwards, towards the city?*

Anna placed her shoes neatly on the doormat and took a step inside.

A coffee table sat in the center of the room next to a single chair. Arranged on the

table atop a reed-woven mat were a tea kettle and single cup. A cuckoo clock stood in the far curve of the room next to the entryway to the kitchen. Anna crossed the living room towards a second archway, lightly grazing her fingers over the tea kettle as she passed. When she arrived at the arch, she paused—gazing into the bedroom at the paint-flaked wooden window frame, the scrubbed wooden floor, the heavy chest of drawers, a lacquered writing desk and a dressing room table, upon which bottles and jars of various shapes and sizes had been pleasantly arranged. Flowery dresses and silk scarves spilled from an old-fashioned carpet bag left open on the white-clothed bed. Beside the bag, a pair of women's trousers and a book of meditations. Anna thought the lady of the house must have been Bohemian or French, though she couldn't decide which. She took a few steps inside the room and moved towards the lacquered desk, running her hand over the grey-streaked marble top and shifted the writing case to the side. She leaned in to make out a signature at the bottom of a slip of paper: *Jane Wall, Translator*. Anna did not remove her gaze from this translucent piece of paper until the fall of a lizard from the wall to the floor startled her with a 'slap'. Then Anna took the cap off a fountain pen and bent forward over the desk. She began to make small markings on a leaf of paper. An hour passed. Anna lifted the paper towards the fading light to read what she had written. Then she folded the slip of paper in quarters and placed it back on the desk.

Anna moved to sit on the cushioned stool in front of the dressing table. She looked at herself in the mirror—her elbows rested on the table top. Her hands pressed on each side of her face, against her temples. Anna believed she looked different in this mirror. Stiller, maybe, as if not one of her features moved. Not the long-lashed eyelids, not the pupils in her eyes. Attentive and serene, it was as if Anna's reflection did not feel time passing.

A sound from the kitchen startled Anna back into the moment. She lifted a tortoise-shell comb and began to brush her long, black hair. Guided by the sound of her breath alone, she stroked downward. When she was satisfied she placed the comb back on the table and opened the vanity drawer. She removed a silver make-up case and tended to her features. Then she tilted her head to study her face in the oval mirror. Her lips were freshly made up—the lipstick the same color as her lips' natural color, only slightly deeper. Her eyes were light and clear. The bruise on her cheek was disappearing.

On the corner of the dressing table sat a mother-of-pearl inlaid frame. The photo inside it was of a woman sitting on an Arabian horse. A brown-skinned man with long, wild hair sat beside the horse in a rod iron chair. His head was turned slightly away from the woman, smiling at something unseen in the distance. Anna lifted the frame and as she did, the picture slid to reveal a second photo hidden behind it. Anna turned the frame over and opened the latch to remove the photograph.

A noise sounded from the kitchen. Anna raised her head in response. She looked into the mirror over her reflection's shoulder, through the arch of the bedroom door. Then she returned to the frame, removing the second picture and holding it to the light. It was the same woman who had been sitting on the horse, but this time she was on a beach. She wore no clothes and sat with her feet in the air and her bottom end in a bucket.

A sound. Anna dropped the photo and stood. She walked into the living room and peered through the entry to the kitchen. The pantry door was open. Next to this, hanging on the wall next to the kitchen sink, was a framed stitching of the ocean. Anna's gaze moved downward past the pantry door to the linoleum floor at the base of the sink.

Several small divots marked the floor where Anna suspected something had once been dropped. She moved slowly towards the sink.

A trickle.

Anna stopped. She stood paralyzed.

“Water?” She held her breath.

A trickle.

Anna gasped. She approached the kitchen faucet, reaching out her hand—in disbelief of her hand itself. A slow, cool drip of fresh water fell into Anna’s palm.

“Water?” she asked. “Water?”

Hadn’t the owners known before they fled?

“Is it everywhere?” Anna screamed. She ran to the bathroom and shook the faucets. *No, not there.* She dashed back to the kitchen and turned the sink all the way on. *Just here.* She watched as a fresh stream of water rushed down into the metal basin. She stuck her face underneath it and drank. Anna choked. She laughed. She shook out tears. She climbed into the sink—pushing the dirty dishes aside—then changed her mind and climbed out again, washing the dishes, scrubbing the basin, covering the drain with a plastic plug and filling the sink to its utmost brim with cool, delicious water. Anna scooped this water in a bowl and drank in rapid spoonfulls. She gulped then climbed back in the sink and hugged her knees to her chest making herself as small as possible. “I’m a seed,” she said. She sang to the water as it overflowed from the basin and filled the divots in the floor.

Anna wondered if anyone else in the world knew this feeling.

“You look like a wet Thumbelina!” Vonelle’s face glowed like royal jelly.

“Are you coming in?” Anna laughed. “You can have the side with the garbage disposal!”

Vonelle removed her swimsuit and climbed inside.

They were both soon fast asleep.

I made it as far as the pyramid-shaped rock before I sat down to rest. I'd hiked to this rock before with Anna. There was an incredible view of the city from here, and we liked looking down on it. I'd left the artifacts in the pizza box, underground as planned, but I wasn't about to let the world's last pizza rot away in a desert hole. I'd dug it up and stuffed it in my backpack as soon as Vonelle and Anna were out of sight. I had every intention of eating it.

I looked down in the desert valley. The sand led my eyes from the edge of the foothills past the dusty stretch of city to the towering range of red mountains on the other side. I watched as the sun slowly lowered itself behind a distant mountain's silhouette. As the silhouette matured, taking on more of the darkness around it, it abandoned the form of a mountain completely and began to grow into a dark-mattered monster with red-flecked cliff-claws cutting into the sky. The city was bounded by monsters like these, and surrounded entirely by sand. A gigantic playbox, I'd once believed, that someone had left unattended. A sandbox filled with expensive toys and colorful, colonized boxes. Even back when the city power had been on, and the lights from each box had illuminated the sky, the stars had been dim, humbled, the presence of such ambition.

I meant it when I said that Anna's environment influenced her to a fault. This is really Anna's story. I'm here too because she won't tell it right. I hope between the two of us we eventually extract it all back from the ether. I guess there'll be a third—the ether. I know I've started Anna's story towards the end, but like David said, we're all losing our memories, and my thoughts were never canonized. I'm not too worried about the loss. It's necessary to lose this weight in the wake of transformation. The cure for grief is always motion, and I like to think whatever debris it is we're shaking off by forgetting about it, will only make us lighter and more capable of change in the end. I apologize for the general displacement of cause and effect in the telling of this story, as well as the pre-mature regenerative quality to the nature of the tale. These things exist because my pursuit of the truth sometimes outpaces my capacity to gather the facts. I further apologize for any periodic regression into the mindset of the skinny kid I was when I first met my Anna. We were nineteen then. That was a long time ago. Sometimes I'm stuck there.

Anna Volcier moved to the valley before she had any ideas. She didn't know what opulence was, though she believed it had something to do with oil-tanned shoulders and girls with an assortment of rose-colored lip balm. She rode from the airport to her first apartment in the backseat of a checkered cab. Despite the driver's warning, she rolled the windows down, wanting the hot air to swallow her. Palm tree after palm tree passed her by. "Am I in Hollywood?" she cried. There was something like glitter stuck in her eye.

She chose apartment 1099 because she liked the white cabinets above the kitchen sink. "That's what sold me," she told the lease lady. "None of the other apartments had white cabinets above the sink." She said 'sold' because she was in America now and wanted to speak in terms of the economy. The lease lady nodded courteously and smiled. She'd seen many girls like this one come and go before.

Anna left home with a false sense of purity and a reliance on providence to guide her. Her determination to move somewhere warmer proved rebellious against her home

soil, but aside from that easily fulfilled obligation, she hadn't been sure where to go.

"Go to the States," a school friend had said. "I'm sure you'll find a job there."

"But I have no money."

"You've heard all the stories. Just save for a ticket and go."

Later that May, in the Volicer's kitchen, a traveler sat with Anna's family. He explained that anything and anybody worthwhile in the United States could be found on either of the two coasts. The rest of country, "the middle" he said, was nothing more than breeding grounds for uncomplicated school teachers and slow-witted racists who believed in a form of global slavery that prevented the majority of people in the world from achieving the status of 'tolerable'.

"The middle should be cut out," he said.

Anna looked up from her plate. "What would you do with it?"

"Anna." Her father shook his head.

"Make it into an island," the visitor said. "Let them have their wish—no one in, no one out. Let them outsource the work and import the wealth. All in gold coins. Piles of coins. Mountains of the heaviest, wealthiest coins."

"So the island sinks?"

The visitor winked.

Anna's father chocked on wet bread.

"If we could only push the ends together," the visitor said.

"You can't really orientate yourself here during the day," the cab driver told Anna. "You need to get out at night."

"I do?"

"I'll show you." He turned to the back of the cab. "Even the bread has sugar here."

Anna paid \$15 to ride the silver elevator. She took pictures of the city lights from the highest tower downtown. She wore soft leather. She had never been touched. She tossed her gum into the windless sky and watched it fall.

When she moved into her first apartment, Anna hung her DeLempicka paintings on the walls and remembered to water her plants and feed her Beta fish. She took hot showers with plum-scented candles burning next to the bathroom sink. From time to time, she met boys at the pool and invited them over for company.

"What are you doing with all these bleak movies?" they'd ask.

"I don't find them upsetting."

"Is it because you're Russian?"

"I'm not from Russia. I'm Ukrainian," Anna said.

Anna never kicked anyone out of her apartment. But if she didn't enjoy their company, she did all she could to make sure that once they left, of their own free will, they never returned again.

Whenever she was finally alone, she would call me to come over.

"Look how this part of the room is untouched!" Anna pulled me inside. "Zero

feathers, zero crumbs—”

It was seven in the morning. I scratched my head.

“I know it’s early.” She shoved a Hostess Cupcake in my hands, as a sort of consolation prize. “Just take the tour.”

I followed her around the apartment. Pillows on the table. Steak knives on the bathroom floor. Underwear in a glove.

“It looks like someone had a good time here last night.”

“Except for this part of the room—totally untouched!” Anna clasped her hands below her chin. “Follow me,” she said. She walked into the bedroom and stripped down to her swimsuit. It was the colors of Neapolitan ice cream. “My picture of the sky fell here last night. Don’t step on it, please.” She turned the heat up and fell on the bed. “It’s detoxifying,” she said.

“You have all the control,” I told her.

“It isn’t about power. It’s mostly about placement.”

I took off my shirt and sat down. “I’ll share the center with you.”

Anna laughed. “It’s not the center if two people are in it, Cam.”

“You’re right,” I smiled. “The center is between them. But I was talking about the cupcake. You want a bite?” I leaned in. Anna sunk her teeth into the chocolate and cream. She propped her legs up against the wall in a position she claimed helped her blood circulate. Then she spent half an hour trying to pronounce ‘peculiar’ while I smoked on the balcony.

Those days we bought bottles of drugstore wine and ruined our dinners by pouring too much Chianti into the sauces. We blamed each other and ate Chinese instead.

Anna needed to be around someone who came from a *good* place like she did. I wasn’t from a farm town in the Ukraine, but I was from the Midwestern portion of the United States—which I thought was good enough. I believed it qualified me to accept Anna’s trust. She and I both shared a similar, remote idea of home—and since I’d been in town four months before she arrived, I knew what it was like to enter this strange, new place with rules that didn’t make sense because they encouraged transgressions. I’d been confused like Anna when I first moved here, too. My fireplace switched on with the flick of a switch. Dollar bills flowed from my bank account even after it was overdrawn. The girls moaned when they took off their gold-plated bracelets—I was standing on the other side of the room, and they moaned. They weren’t like the girls back home. It was all a part of the illusion I hadn’t discovered was an illusion yet.

Anna joined me on the balcony where we looked out over the rows of potted plants on her pastel yellow stucco ledge. Anna loved many things about her life in the United States. She loved the view of the courtyard from her patio, the insidiously manicured bushes, and the automatic sprinkler systems. She loved the children from the surrounding apartments who had discovered she was a generous and infinite source of fruit juice and Lolly Pops. They knocked on her door at all hours in their swimsuits, begging for something sweet. Anna did not love that her patio was situated kiddie-corner from Samoans’ patio. The gigantic brothers sat outside every morning wearing loosely fitting sarongs, every afternoon biting through mango skins, and every evening in two gigantic wooden chairs until nine o’clock when they left to ‘bounce’ at an upscale nightclub, where they took tips at the door from underdressed tourists seeking permission to gawk at hard-bodied girls who didn’t care anymore. But until nine o’clock each

evening, the Samoan brothers sat on their patio looking out over the potted plants and into Anna's apartment.

I remember the way she asked for help hanging a blanket over her window. Her head was tilted slightly to the side, troubled, and not yet fully understanding the way she would soon re-align herself within this new paradigm.

Anna and I began working at a popular restaurant-club ourselves, later that first summer. A neighbor from the pool had introduced Anna to the owner, Billy Burke, a flamboyant entrepreneur from Manhattan who loved Anna's fresh, pale face and Eastern European sensibility. He hired us both before disappearing from the scene to nourish a nascent project in Southbeach, Miami.

On the first day of work, management told Anna to always keep her hair down and decorated with the proper sparkling adornments. "Grow it longer," they said, "and wear it in curls." They spelled her name wrong on her nametag.

"Don't worry," I said. "You won't always work here."

It was one of Anna's duties to stand outside the restaurant lounge in front of the burning torches and walls of rushing water. She was all hair and limbs, holding a menu to attract male customers and anyone else who was hungry. Her uniform had zebra stripes and a little bit of fur, and a small strip of the skin on her stomach always showed. I worked the back of the club, changing ashtrays and leading intoxicated women through the smoke to the restrooms. I averaged \$100 each time I topped-off a glass tray, and another \$200 for every woman I returned safely to her keeper. Anna made a lot more than that at the VIP door.

On our breaks, we bought gelato in cones and climbed the fire escape to the rooftop for air. I don't remember what we said to each other. I know we stood there like trees, like children, stranded, alive. We looked down on the city and pointed to the place in the desert where a wealthy family had sponsored the growing of a cornfield maze for the month of October.

"They're growing it here for us," Anna said.

That Halloween, we charged through that field, corn-chowder fed, and dressed as cartoon versions of ourselves. We fell in love in the crackling corn. Pulling the bells to locate ourselves and to bring us back to the places where we were lost, so we could start over again looking for the clues. We never found all the clues. Daylight turned to twilight. Twilight beckoned black. Beauty is irreducible to a common denominator, but if I had to choose one for Anna, it would be that she hits you in the face. Sometimes literally, if you aren't paying attention, and sometimes with the help of the diminishing sun. Fading in the sky it catches her, lights her, and suddenly it's no longer the sun hitting her, it's her light reflecting back on the sun. Anna has a beauty that can only be appreciated when you stand in front of her and see how the light plays across her face, accentuating her apple cheek bones and soft lips. Her slight overbite. Her eyes, large and brilliant, saturated with chestnut and green, and fringed with long curving lashes. Anna's eyes are endlessly deep. And inside her—a buried permanence of color, though not easily accessible. Access to who Anna is, was not meant to be convenient. It required extradition. I liked that about her. I didn't want her to be a passive, self-explaining, finished form—another one of the illusions. I loved her as someone always forming, experienced in real time. Anna tried to be everything around her all at once, and for a while life allowed it. She trusted me during that time, and foolishly, I allowed it.

I haven't found a way to talk about the things Anna and I lived through. I've tried writing them down in lists made of simple declarative phrases, but meaning was lost to me when I was in the thick of it, and the closer I get to representing our actual experiences, the more dizzying they become. Sometimes I think Anna and I met in a cloud of dust about to form a tornado. Sometimes I think we'd been thrust inside the belly of a horrible beast and made into slaves—pumping away at the beast's vital organs, helping it to live, breathe. Wherever we were, the memory of it is enough to set my heart throbbing in violent palpitations. A person has to be able to place himself in the world in order to create a stable sense of identity, and Anna and I could never really place ourselves in that veiled world. As I felt us getting pulled further and further inside it, I tried to make Anna understand how important it was going to be to keep at least one part of herself checking back in with something outside of the mess. I knew how important it was going to be—during a time in our lives so pliable to the formation of our identities—to keep at least *one foot* planted outside of that awful mess. Oh, but Anna and I came to love the mess.

We were together through most of it all. I was there the first time Anna was tipped a room key and a Tory Burch suitcase filled with designer jeans. She didn't know what to do. She gave it all away. I was there as witness to the seductions, the lavish lures she sometimes bit. Private cabanas with Armani dinner plates, silk tapestries, massages, plane tickets to the Seychelles Islands, oysters, clams, bottles of champagne. White powder in white villas. Rose-petal bubble baths filled with Cristal. I was there the first time Anna shaved off her pubic hair. "Will I catch a cold?" she asked. I was there the morning after her first one-night stand. The first time she needed someone to rescue her from a date, from a clinic, from a cage fighter's bedroom. I was there when a bachelor party full of Georgetown grads offered Anna \$4000 just to *watch* the things they did. We were tipped all sorts of treasures. Bags of ecstasy, billfolds of cash, Madagascar vanilla tobacco in pipes, helicopter rides, Parisian skin creams, AMX Credit Cards. We ate Kobe beef and Beluga with spoons made of chambered Nautilus shells. Mint-infused Passion Fruit Lemon Chiffon. Dom. Remy. Blue Cheese filets. Butternut Squash Risotto and sage. Anna cooked *Varnyke* in a William Sonoma pot. I slept with older women who took pictures of me and hung them on their bedroom walls.

Anna and I were together at the turn of the millennium. We ate 64 ounce Blizzards from Dairy Queen, "To keep in touch with my roots!" I said—stirring in additional Resses Peanut Butter cups because we were gluttons with unconquerable metabolisms. We watched the five million dollar firework display and said, "If we can do this, we can do anything." Rollerblading up and down the streets in our underwear. The music in the nightclubs throbbed. Anna's body was lithe as she leaped from a hotel column into the fountain below. She dove downward, swanward, into the water. She barely made a splash, but when she did, the droplets of water that sprayed from the surface of the pool were mixed with the smell of her skin—something sweeter than the pineapples and coconuts she'd been mixing in her drinks.

*

"You're right," Simon sneered. "He's gorgeous." The man shook my hand. His fingers were soft and long.

"All my friends are beautiful," Anna giggled.

"I'm sure they are, baby." He kissed her. "Cameron, sit down. Take a look at the menu. I don't need to hear anything about you. Anna never shuts up."

I ordered the Osso Bucco because I hadn't had it before. It came with a bone sticking out of the center—and a small silver fork sticking out from the center of the bone.

"That's the best part," Simon said. "That's the bone marrow."

I ignored the marrow and ate a mushroom.

"You can have half this thing," I told Anna. "I won't eat it all."

Simon lifted a bite of my Bucco onto his fork then lifted the fork to Anna's lips.

"What part is that?" Anna asked.

"The veal," Simon said.

She leaned over her salad and allowed the food to be placed on her tongue. She didn't seem impressed.

Simon raised an eyebrow. "Discriminating taste. You know my ex-girlfriend writes reports on the effects of gravity on the human brain. She's consulting for Nassau."

I ate another mushroom.

"What else?" Simon asked. "The medallions are braised with Boulaise and Black Perigold Truffle oil. The balsamic the chef uses is twelve years old. Almost your age baby, right?" He squeezed Anna's thigh. "The truffles are foraged midway up the Pyrenees mountains. The *best* soil. Moist, all seasons."

"Oh," Anna smiled. "I love mountain soil."

"The medallions then?" Simon pointed to the menu.

The waiter refilled my wine.

"I think I'd prefer Seafood Benediction," Anna giggled. "What a funny name."

"I'd like to be blessed by shrimp," I said.

Simon shook his head. "It's not the best dish."

"You've had it?" Anna asked.

"You'll like the medallions. I'll order the medallions for you."

"I'm trying not to eat so much meat," Anna stood and straightened her dress. "I need to visit the powder room. Is that what they call it?" She laughed and left us.

Simon picked a shriveled black olive from a bowl on the table and dangled it above his mouth. He stretched his legs out on the dining chaise, as if he owned the place. Maybe he did. I noticed how small his entire body was.

He closed his eyes and tilted his head backwards as he dropped the olive inside his mouth.

I stood and excused myself from the table so I didn't throw-up. I found Anna in the dark hallway leading to the bathroom. She was staring at a Picasso on the wall.

"You have to see the dessert room!" she squealed. She took my hand and led me to a corridor-like room draped in red velvet and lit solely by candle light. It was designed in the fashion of a reading room; hard-covered books lined mahogany shelves—floor to ceiling shelves filled with books. *Good* books. Rare and first editions. Guests lounged on plush duvets in front of round tables overflowing with Belgian chocolate soufflés, fresh raspberries and bread puddings.

“Are we staying for dessert?” I asked.

“I want to leave *now*,” Anna said. “But I’m *dying* to see Simon’s apartment again.”

“You think that’s a good idea?”

“You don’t understand. He has magnets that can move the iron in human blood. He has Ken dolls hanging from the ceiling fan. Last time I was there, he chased me into the closet with a machine that makes holograms. He kept saying ‘don’t tell Daddy about the bad man in the closet.’ It was really fucked up.”

“Those sound like pretty good reasons not to go back.”

“He’s a magician. It’s all a part of the act. He wants to make me into a hologram so he can wake up to me in the morning. He made me say, ‘Good Morning Simon’ into the machine a thousand times until he thought it was perfect. He’s going to Paris next month, then New Zealand, then India. He wants to take me, but I’m not going. It’s all too much. Even if you come. He said you could come, Cameron.” Her eyes glowed in the candle light like two honey-coated almonds.

“I have girl friends who don’t have to sleep with men to get what they want,” I said.

She shot me a hurt look. “I’m not sleeping with him.”

“Then he’s probably sleeping with some other girl.”

She took a step away from me. A waiter looked up from the pile of linen napkins he was folding.

“Simon can sleep with whoever he wants,” Anna said. “I’m not sleeping with him. He knows I’m better than that. That’s why he likes me.”

“Okay.”

“He’s paying for your education too, Cameron. Unless you messed that up already. Did you put the money up your nose already?”

“I think you should worry about your own situation.”

“Are you even registered for next semester?”

I looked at the door to the humidor at the far end of the dessert room. Ten leaps away.

“Are you listening?”

“I’m alright.”

“Cameron.”

“Your boyfriend’s orange.”

The waiter folded a napkin. Anna’s face softened. “He is a weird color,” she giggled.

“I don’t like the guy.”

“I don’t either, Cam. I just want to see his apartment one more time.”

I took her by the shoulders and kissed her on the forehead. “Come on,” I said. “Get back to the table. I don’t want you to mess things up with your King Pin. I’m going to have a cigar.”

It tended to be, they all depleted at the same time—our resources. The money, the discipline, the strategies for self-improvement, the various men and women in our lives. We were too sincere. We couldn’t play the game long, though we always wished we

could. We hated our sincerity.

"I'm not a person. I'm an entire spiritual movement," Anna said. "Watch me suck down this lemonade."

It was past midnight. We were in a Jack-in-the-Box eating curly fries. Ten minutes later we'd decide it was not enough. It was never enough. We'd dumped all our change into the Charity Bucket, trying to win free tacos.

"Let's go next door to Denny's," I said. "They have sweet potato fries there."

We crossed the street, and as we did, Anna's heels made small clicking sounds on the pavement.

"I like your shoes," I said.

She laughed. "You bought them for me. Remember?"

I didn't. We walked in the diner and seated ourselves in a corner booth.

"Wanna split an order of Chocolate Chip pancakes?" Anna asked.

"Sure."

She closed the menu. "I'm getting a pecan muffin. I don't want to split the pancakes." She looked over to the counter where our waitress was shaking an inkless pen. I took out a deck of UNO cards and dealt. Anna's gaze wandered to the other customers in the diner, eating carb-hefty portions in isolated booths.

"Don't worry," I told her. "You won't just be one of those people at Denny's."

"I know," she sighed. "Cam?" She re-arranged her cards. "I'm thinking about that reckless abandon thing. Do you remember that? From *Bad Timing*? No, it was the other movie we watched last week. What did he say? When you can stop you don't want to, and when you want to stop you can't."

"I remember that. Don't take this the wrong way, but whose life do you think is more bi-polar? Mine or yours?"

Anna pulled a card from the stack. "I don't think of it like that. My life is at least tri-polar."

"Huh," I said. "Mine must be too. If there's a pole, I'll try it."

Anna sighed. "All my cards are blue."

"You're not supposed to tell me that."

"I can't help it, Cam."

Sometimes in this stillness, we achieved a sort of happiness. I loved Anna in her plainest clothes. Unshaven and sincere. When she left messages half-asleep on my voicemail, telling me she would soon sell the farm if I didn't return home. I loved her climbing trees in the park. When she slipped on the wet floor in her Pippi-Longstocking socks. When I fed her chunks of pineapple off a steak knife as she hummed unrecognizable melodies her mother had once played on the piano.

She fit perfectly in my arms at night.

"You should look in the classifieds," I said.

"Why? I'm innocent."

"You could start a business. Sell bottled water. That's a great idea."

"Will you start the business with me?"

"I told you I might be leaving in a few months. I can't devote myself to anything right now."

"Why do you want to go to that architecture school? Don't they have one here?"

Anna rolled away from me, then scooted her bottom back towards my groin. I leaned into her neck and inhaled.

“What did you do after I left today?” I asked.

“Ate the rest of the deep-dish pizza.”

“You really are a fatty.”

“I was re-fueling your soul for you.”

“I don’t think that’s how it works.”

“Tell me how it works.”

“I eat pizza for my soul. You eat that stew for yours.”

“*Borscht.*”

“Borscht.”

She turned back around to face me. “I keep trying to replace my problems with food.”

“What problems do you have?”

“My problems.”

“Why don’t you do one of your fasts? Do a juice fast. Juice.”

Anna wrapped her legs around my waist and squeezed. “I’m juicing,” she said. I touched her cheek with the back of my hand and pushed a strand of hair away from her nose. “What will you do when I leave?”

“Probably order another pizza and put it through the juicer.”

“I mean if I go back to Chicago.”

Anna took a deep breath. “I want to learn Morse code. You need to learn it too, so I have someone to talk to.”

“It was a serious question.”

“Okay. I’ll learn it myself. Then I’ll teach you all the things you need to say to me.”

“Why don’t you just tell me the things you want to hear now?”

“Stay close to me.”

“I am close to you.”

“No, but *stay* close to me.”

That stillness never lasted long. When the next transgression crept up on us, we were ready for it. We craved the turbulent rise and fall—nothing was as rich as that. Happiness isn’t nearly as spectacular as instability, and being content has none of the glamour of a good fight against misfortune—none of the picturesqueness of a struggle with temptation or a fatal overthrow by passion. Happiness is middle-ground. It’s never grand.

We went in again. Johnny Walker Black. Lambos. Horse races. Wads of cash. \$2500 Ice-Bar tabs. Custom suede couches. Dinners and shows. Jimmy Choo belts and hats we never wore. Anna’s new boss stuck his arm down her pants to see if her ass was as cold as her hands. We threw parties with television producers and music-television industry executives. The palm trees caught on fire.

Anna fucked her first celebrity in an enormous potted plant. He came on her stomach. Then in her hair. Then inside her from behind. She vomited afterwards for an hour while I stood outside the bathroom door eating a frozen dinner that hadn’t fully defrosted yet.

My apartments were always a wreck, but filled with expensive things. Until I needed to sell them.

We sat in garages and unkempt front yards.

“What happened to your leg?” Anna asked.

Heather’s thigh bore a festering wound. Gangrenous, at best. Still black and blistering around the edges.

“It’s a funny story,” Heather shook her head. Her teeth were barely there.

Larry scratched his sides. “A couple days ago Heather dropped the pipe.”

“I dropped it on my leg!” Heather whooped. “It burned a hole right in my leg! I’ve never been burned so bad. It’s because I let it sit there. I was so f’in high. It took me a minute to figure out what was happening. All the meth spilled out of the pipe and into my sore.”

“What did you do?” Anna asked.

A dog whimpered from inside.

“We scooped it out and smoked it,” Larry smiled. He scratched furiously at his sides.

We were together for the murder of a child.

I stole a golf cart and rode up the highway trying to convince myself things made sense. The golf cart swerved and its wheels hit the ridges at the edge of the road, to wake up sleeping drivers. It sounded like dolphins.

All the girls I knew shrunk. They had once been plump and healthy Southern girls, sunny, well-adjusted California girls, passionate, outspoken European girls, cheerful, practical Midwestern girls—but they all came to this town and shrunk to emaciated slips of their former selves—weak even pushing their baskets of sushi through the grocery store.

Anna changed jobs again. This time she worked in a place where the lights made everyone’s skin turn green. She cried into a paper napkin every time she remembered herself.

I wish I could say I was there with her through the worst of it, but I didn’t save her from anything. I wasn’t qualified to be a white knight. My own bags of dirty money disappeared like drops of water on the surface of the sun. I blacked out weekly, waking up in hotel stairwells and strangers’ cars, often under the weight of married women’s arms. I woke up face-down on my living room floor—after lying there for three days—sucking on mouthfuls of carpet, too defeated to shift my weight until the dehydration motivated me. Then I dragged myself to the toilet for a drink, like a fucking dog. And with my hair dripping wet from the toilet water—and even knowing I’d sold my plasma t.v. and my plane ticket home before I’d gone off the edge—I somehow convinced myself it was *okay*, no, it was more than okay, it was *necessary* to do it all over again. I

picked up the phone and called Larry.

Museums seem to be a systematic way of categorizing things. Maybe someday I'll create a Museum of Digressions to put on display all the things Anna and I lived through. If an excess of wonder can pervert the use of reason, our museum would demolish all grounds for rational explanations. But even if I did build a museum, it seems inadequate atonement. And I'd make a rotten curator—because even for the sake of art, I don't want to remember the darkest parts. Not my own, and not Anna's. I wasn't really there for either of them.

I wasn't there the day one of the Samoan brothers lumbered inside Anna's yellow apartment and requested to use her phone.

"Mine's broke," he said.

"Okay," Anna shrugged. "You can use my phone."

The Samoan closed the door behind him and asked for a glass of water. How could Anna refuse a thirsty man a drink? She turned to the white wooden cabinets above the kitchen sink, and as she did, the Samoan found his way into Anna's bedroom and began fumbling through her dresser drawers.

Anna appeared in the doorway, holding the glass of water.

"This is nice antique furniture," the Samoan said.

"I think you better leave."

He shifted his feet. His footprints left deep impressions in the carpet.

"Please leave," Anna asked.

He lifted a pair of her panties from the dresser drawer and ran two thick fingers over the lace.

This was the beginning of a series of invasions in Anna's life. I don't know why they all picked her. She flirted a lot less than the other girls in this town. Maybe that was the allure. Or it may have been the still-pleasant light lingering in her face, acting as a sort of beacon. The men approached her in gas stations. In health club parking lots. They followed her home from nightclubs and climbed the tree outside her window. Thank God for that tree—sometimes they fell from it, one by one. I wish I could say they were beautiful men, falling from the sky like gilded male sopranos. Like snowflakes. Like angels. Like musical blessings sent to earth from Anna's sweet, dead mother. But these men were not gifts. They were ugly men. And sometimes they survived the tree.

I wasn't there when one of Anna's personal terrorists killed her guinea pig. He climbed the tree onto her balcony where she kept the cage, and cinched the pig's neck with the drawstring from a plastic Gap bag. When Anna emerged from the shower, he was standing outside in the dark.

"I stopped the squeaking," he said, tapping on the glass.

I wasn't there when Anna's home was burglarized. The guy took all her earrings and shoes, then he stuck a photo of himself to her mirror with.

Anna finally moved out of the yellow apartment building. She moved into a new complex where she hung her Tamara DeLempicka pictures on the wall, again. She lined her scented candles on the windowsills, again, and carefully re-arranged her collection of potted plants on the balcony. It didn't matter.

I wasn't there when one of her co-workers followed her home from work one night. He waited outside her window until he was sure she'd had a few drinks and passed out on her bed. There he picked her locks and snuck into her room where he watched her snoring gently. He fed her a Chili Rellano burrito in her sleep, before covering her face with his hand and ruining her. There was salsa on her pillow in the morning. There was egg between her legs.

There's not much I have to say about guilt. The fact speaks for itself: I left Anna. My father had caught whiff of my lifestyle and flown me home to Chicago. I'll never forget the look on his wife's face when she picked me up at O'Hare. She was waiting outside Terminal B when she first saw me—sunken-cheeked and sallow-eyed as I was. Her knees wobbled.

"Where's your luggage?" she asked.

"None," I said.

I'd left it all behind, but the memory of it stayed—and that weighed heavier than any set of Samsonites.

Walking through the airport, and then to the car, I felt as if I knew something the people around me didn't know. And it wasn't just something I knew about myself or my relationship to the world, it was something I knew about *them*, the negative-capacity of possibilities inside each and every one of them. I knew the things they could do and would do, if put under the circumstance. It made me feel dirty, knowing. And angry—knowing that some of them refused to acknowledge their inverted selves. Though the worst were the people who were all too familiar with their negative capacities, but kept the knowledge a guarded secret, to protect their stanch-sham view they had of themselves. They were cheats. They were no unsullied human beings. They were afraid of that external judgments that might stick to them and linger. Still, most of the people had no idea about their negative capacities. I thought that made them less real, although I knew they were, and I knew they had just as much history as the inverted people I'd been surrounded by for the past—how long had it been? Five years? Six years? Kimberly and I drove in silence from the airport to my father's house.

I felt as if I was moving around inside of a doll's house. I was bigger and clumsier than all of the things in the house, and I felt as if I knew something even the *things* didn't know. They were such unknowing things. What was the measure of sanity in this new world? My mind was still operating by rules from that other place. I walked around my father's house, poking at the knick-knacks and furniture. The embroidered table clothes. Snow globes. Teddy Bears. Sweatshirts and hand-mufflers stacked on the dryer. My father's collection of railroad insulators neatly lined a shelf. There was *real* wood in the fireplace. All of this confused me. I locked myself in the downstairs bathroom contemplating the soap in its dish. I tried to move it with my mind, and when that didn't work I used my hands. I placed the soap on floor and stared at it for forty minutes. I felt it would have been more unusual to see any urgency in picking it up. When I heard Kimberly lighting the stove in the kitchen, I was concerned for my safety. I escaped to the backyard, as far away from people and objects as I could get. I watched my breath crystallize in the air.

My father wouldn't speak to me. The first night I arrived, he sat in a chair in the den upstairs, reading a book by Jim Kramer. He only called down to Kimberly to bring

him a bag of pretzel rods. “He doesn’t want to talk,” she said. When he called down to her a second time, for a can of soda pop, I took it from her hands and climbed the stairs to deliver it myself. When I entered the den, my father dropped his book and pulled a blanket over his head. “You! Get out!” he screamed. I’m not sure if he was hiding the age in his face, or if he was just that rightly ashamed of who I’d become while I was away. Was I a ghost? Did he wish to remember me the way I was when I packed my duffle bag and waved goodbye six years ago? I walked downstairs and sat at the kitchen table. Kimberly and I drank gingerbread tea. My father called down for more pretzels, then chocolate covered raisins and bridge mix. Finally, he plodded downstairs, grumbling, and wearing a black ski mask. He collapsed on the living room floor next to the German Sheppard. “Baby Scarlet,” he said. He stroked her back and looked up at me through the two holes in the ski mask.

I wanted to get out of there as fast as I could for the sake of all sanities, but I needed to re-orient myself first and I had nowhere else to go. This was my half-way house. I’d had no idea it would be so hard letting go of my old life. It was as if I’d been living in a dream for six years and had just now been woken up.

No! You protest. My life! I raised a family. I have a mortgage. I have a daughter. She’s in second grade.

You have nothing. They tell you. You’ve been asleep the whole time. You’ve simply forgotten what it means to be awake. Put on these clothes. Drink from this mug. Say the things we say. If you do what we tell you and become like us, you will become real again.

So you make your daughter her last ham sandwich, kiss her goodbye on the cheek, and that’s the end. You’ll never see her again, except in your dreams—where she does not grow beyond the moment you were told she was never really there.

I ran eight miles a day to shake off my addictions. I ate Kashi cereal with no milk. It was the kind of cereal that looked like it was made of broken twigs. Kimberly said that made me hardcore. I read *The Economist*. I played with the dog. I swept up piles of the dog’s gray hairs. In December, I started dating a girl named Lacy from a family on the Northshore. I applied for a graduate position in a respected architectural school. My father shook my hand.

“I want to show you something,” he said.

We drove around the neighborhood admiring the Christmas lights. My father pointed to all the decorations and told me what he would have done differently. When we approached a house with fifty plastic snowmen lit up on the front yard, my father pulled over and turned the key to idle in the ignition.

“This is Frosty’s house,” he said.

“That’s a lot of snowmen.”

“It’s for the kids.”

“The neighbors hate it. Look. They’re having a blackout in rebellion.”

“Do you have any more of that bread Kimberly gave you?”

“Not with me. Do you want some?”

“Nah,” he made a face. “I don’t eat that whole grain shit.”

“She turned me on to the organic stuff.”

“Yeah, she tried that once on me too. It didn’t last.” He rubbed his hands together

and breathed warmth between his palms. “You’re a survivor,” my father said. “Have you heard anything from your mother?”

“No, I haven’t.”

He scowled. “Why wasn’t a family and a home enough for her?”

“I don’t know.”

“She always said she was looking for something more. Something more. This something more.” My father shook his head.

“Maybe she didn’t know how to be happy,” I said.

“Yeah, well, she’s a lot happier with my money.”

“It’ll catch up to her.”

“What will?”

“Whatever she needs to work through. People can’t avoid things like that.”

“All right, all right. I don’t want to talk about it anymore. You keep in touch with Kimberly when I’m dead.”

“Yeah.”

“You hear me?”

“I will.”

“You want to get a hot chocolate? I know a good place. It’s not too far from here.”

“Okay,” I said.

But we didn’t move yet. We sat together silently in the car, in light of the fifty glowing snowmen.

Later that week, my dad took three thousand dollars out of his retirement account and told me to open a hot dog stand. “While you wait to hear back from that school,” he said. I sold hot dogs, peanuts, and wedge-cut fries on the corner of Rush and Grand. Kimberly knew someone in the commissioner’s office who provided us with the permit. It wasn’t so bad, even in the cold. I sat on a cranky stool in front of a Bank of America where I catered mostly to Michigan Avenue shoppers and business men on their lunch breaks. Occasionally, I imagined a spy or visiting dictator passed by wanting to sample the local fare. I was surprised by the number of people willing to take off their gloves and sift through their wallets in -14 degree wind chill. But that’s Vienna Beef for you.

I still didn’t know who I was. I wore a blue knit hat and a White Sox jacket. My father drove into the city on his days off to keep me company. He took silver pouches from the metal drawers and squeezed their contents into the condiments bins. When Spring came, I took Lacy to a Cub’s game. I caught the first foul ball. Lacy placed her arms around my neck and kissed me. My face was lit up on the screen.

I felt like I needed to cry, but I couldn’t. An emotional wall had successfully formed inside me. When I finally did cry, there was no feeling attached to the release. It was like a stone wall crying—tears coming through a stone wall. It wasn’t that I couldn’t identify love, sympathy, apathy or hope moving around inside me. They were all there. It was just—I couldn’t *feel* any of them. This too—all the edifying voices and muses that had once informed the direction of my actions had been silenced. I don’t know what did it. My new surface routine? The abandonment of a deeply examined life in exchange for peace of mind? There was only one voice left, without malice or marvel—a clear, concise, generally neutral voice that I had no attachment to. I was living my life as a

serious of shallow gestures, but what disturbed me more was that I recognized this, and recognized that it bothered me, and recognized that I had once been so very much more full—yet I continued on with my life as another series of discrete, shallow gestures. I sat in the backyard on Lacy's porch and watched the mosquitoes crash into the kerosene lamp.

Anna and I remained out of touch for a while. I discovered her subsequent misfortunes through a handful of letters she sent to my father's house about half a year after I'd moved out. Her own father's Forestry and Agricultural business was suffering the after effects of the Orange Revolution in Chernivtsi. Anna didn't have the heart to share an ounce of her struggles with her family, so she sent money home when she could and kept her mouth shut about the rest. About a year after I left, her letters took a turn. They began to scare me in a way I'd never been scared before. After all the crude survival experiences and various attempts to orient herself morally and emotionally without guidance, Anna had begun to detach from the reality of the situation around her. She wasn't like me, sweeping her feelings under the rug, her detachment was something much bigger than that. I showed the letters to my shrink, Dr. Liu. His brow furrowed. He told me to stop writing Anna back. Then he made a phone call to a colleague he thought might be able to help her. Anna didn't return his calls. Soon she became entirely unreachable—even to me. I tried my best to get through to her, despite the doctor's orders. I wrote and called and sent e-mails. I tried, but she didn't respond.

In my final year of architecture school, Professor Reza told me the best I could do for my country was to give her an artifact.

"It's a humanitarian cause," Reza said. "Modern art in America is no longer an expression of America, it's a cure for her." He flicked his cigarette butt over the balcony. I watched it fall three stories down to the courtyard below where a princess in an argyle sweater looked up at us in disgust. "Build an artifact," Professor Reza said. "It doesn't matter what the materials are. It's how well they're assembled. Your ability as an architect relies on your ability to build that relic. Artifacts last because they've been well-built. Cameron?"

"Yes sir?"

He grasped the rail until his knuckles turned white. Then he turned to face the sun.

"Be in a relationship with the artifact. Otherwise, you're in America."

A month before I graduated, Mohammad Aziz Reza was awarded the MacArthur Genius Fellowship for half a million dollars just to continue existing as himself. He held PhDs in Architecture and Applied Physics from M.I.T. and an honorary Art History Degree from the University of New Mexico. His theories on sustainability had been translated into fourteen languages, though he was best known for his highly structured commercial centers in the Middle East and Bombay. Despite all this, his personal claim to fame was having survived California in the 1960s as a journalist for Rolling Stone Magazine. Reza had as much affinity for music as he did for spires and the nature of time. "Anything that ascends," he said.

Professor Reza wore the same pair of lint-covered slacks to school every day during the two years I knew him. His hair was an unruly mass of curls. His breath reeked of nicotine and the leftover curds of Labneh cheese stuck between his teeth.

"It's the life of mind," I laughed. I always defended him.

"Hey," my roommate objected. "My brain parties too. I still find time to floss."

Hygienic practices aside, Reza was my God. This was firmly established during an afternoon walk through University Square when Reza informed a group of exchange students that the ubiquitous statues of men scattered across campus grounds had not been constructed of solid stone, but were rather *stone shells* acting as encasements for the decomposing remains of the very men they were built to represent.

"The first Dean of Mathematics is preserved right here," Reza gestured. "The University founders are past those trees."

The Germans took notes. The girls drew maps.

Aziz Reza was generally unconcerned with cultivating people, and preferred to maintain a sheltering silence, occupied within himself. I'm still not sure why he found me worthy of his company, though I accepted it with gratitude. He was my Dos XX man.

We didn't often speak about religious practices or Reza's early upbringing outside of the States. His reticence may have been due to cultural frictions of the times, or he may have simply been trying to avoid unnecessary bouts of nostalgia. Since I didn't know much about Islam, I asked Reza about it in the space of a lull during one of our fine

walks. After I did, Reza stopped in his tracks and told me to meet him for lunch that Saturday.

After several wrong turns and an hour of wandering down out-of-place cobblestone streets, I found Reza outside a Persian restaurant, tucked at the end of a neighborhood in which I was a stranger.

"This is the spot," he shook my hand. "Thank you for meeting me here."

"Thank you."

"How are your plans?"

"They're coming along."

"*Shuwia, shuwia*. Bring them by next week. We can talk about where you're headed."

"I appreciate that."

Reza patted his shirt pocket. "I have no cigarettes today. Maybe it's time to quit." He collapsed his hands at his sides. "You're curious about Islam," he said. "To understand Islam you must be prepared to move out of historical time. Or at the very least, have a sense of the folds."

"I have no sense of folds."

"Have you read the Qur'an?"

I shook my head.

Reza nodded. "I was schooled in the Qur'an, so my consciousness is—spontaneously anhistorical. When you step inside Islam you come into a place where the historical priority of time over space has been drastically reversed from what I imagine your understanding to be. Forms are thought of as first being in space, rather than first being in time." He opened the door and motioned for me to step through.

"If I think in folds," I asked, "how do things evolve? Doesn't everything double-up over itself?"

"In a way. We do know the world does not evolve in a horizontal, rectilinear direction. It ascends. Muslims know this. Look at the space of a Mosque. It does not beckon the eye in a specific direction. It suggests no tension or antinomy between the here and the beyond, between earth and heaven. It possesses all its fullness in every place at once. Like music, *progressio harmonica*. The past is never behind us. It remains always present to the future, just as the notes of a musical phrase—though played one after the other—persist together in the present. Something in the way of harmonic perception is needed to perceive this world. And it is necessary to possess an understanding of the mirror, and where the mirror can lead us; pure *speculum*." At this, we reached our host, a short and eager man who embraced Professor Reza warmly. "Thank you friend," Reza smiled. He turned in my direction. "What do you think of this place?"

I said nothing. The beauty of the room had set me trembling in admiration.

"It's a replica of a replica," our host said. "So forgive its insecurities."

"Yes," Reza agreed. "It was built in the spirit of the lunchroom in Hotel Shah-Abbas, Isphahan. The walls of that room were designed in the fashion of the empty niches of the music room in the Palace Ali Qapu."

The space around me was designed in the fashion of a mosque, yet with the added elaboration I imagined an ecstatic palace prince would demand. In the deep golden walls and partitions there were—cut out of the emptiness—innumerable silhouettes of vases,

flasks, and laces of cuttings from all the forms conceived by an overflowing imagination. It gave the space a sensation of levitation, the feeling that everything was in suspension. The room seemed to be an apparition vanishing upwards as in a dream.

We settled at our table and were presented with mint tea and two leather-bound menus. I ordered a plateful of warm cheese, flat bread, and eggs cooked with olive oil.

“Our reality is a mirror image of God’s,” Reza said. “This is my belief; God created us to obtain an objective standpoint from which to comprehend himself. *We* are God’s artifact. But sometimes the artifact is unaware that it is an artifact, and we think we can exist without God. This is not a healthy construction of the mind. Without Allah as our filling, we are but dead, absurd husks.” Reza pushed his menu aside and rose—his eyes lit by an interior gaze. He took me by the arm and pulled me from my chair, leading me to one of the small empty niches in the wall.

“This is the phenomenon of the mirror.” Reza’s voice was soft as he spoke. “Put your hand into this space and you will touch no form there. The form is not there. It is elsewhere.”

I came to develop my own theories on edifice, far from Reza’s, and much in line with the Neoplatonic belief that everything required a center around which it evolved. I tried to design structures based on ideas other than this. I applied theories of metabolism, minimalism, divine proportion, accessibility, adaptive re-use. I studied Scarpa, Gaudi, Costa, Rossi, Kahn and all the others—but I always came back to the need for a center. I didn’t think my center was God. I hadn’t been raised with the same rich, religious history that Reza possessed. If I had any God at all, it was a working man’s God. A practical God who produced ‘stuff’, and not merely for contemplation. I didn’t have the patience or stillness that Reza’s God required. Nor did I possess the aristocratic air I found in many of my Yankee peers—polished bluebloods who had never really left the colonies. They had been shaped by entitlement and a motivation to outrun the ennui that came with privilege and intelligence. They were pressed to produce work worthy enough to justify their inevitable inheritances.

I was born in Des Plaines, Illinois, raised shoulder to shoulder with people never privy to European sophistication or Muslim piety. My relatives went to church once a week at best. We watched football and took weekend trips to Michigan where we picked cherries in Door County and rented motor boats on the lake. But even these particulars of my upbringing hadn’t influenced me as much as the larger archetypes of America—individuation, rebellion, the need for constant re-invention in the face of change. I wanted to be free from the weight of familiar obligations, tribal influences, free to form new rules where I saw fit. I was a pioneer at heart, and as an American, I came from a place that allowed me an abundance of freedom that I could not manage because the moment I established strictures for myself, I was already in the process of morphing the rules into a new set of possibilities. I was always tossing the primer.

In a swarm of bees and blackberry marmalade—three and a half years after I’d cleaned up my mess, and while I sat with my back against a hot slab of wood, listening to the fine chirp of noon-day crickets and swatting milkweed away from my eyes, the sudden urge to *feel* Anna rushed through me like a surge of electricity. This time she picked up the phone.

“Cameron?”

“Anna, how are you?”

“How are you calling me?”

“What do you mean? I’m using my phone.”

“Where are you?”

“A corn field.”

“In the desert?”

“I’m in Huntley, Illinois. I’m looking at a barn.”

“Why would you do *that*?”

“It’s built well. I’ve been worried about you. How are you?”

“I’m in a pile of pillows on the floor.”

“Are you okay?”

“I can’t swallow anything. I’m sucking on frozen grapes.”

“You can’t swallow, Anna?”

“I’ve been sick. I can’t even swallow my own spit.”

“Are you on anything?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Come by and peel me a grape.”

“You need to get to a doctor. How long have you been sick? Is there someone who can take you to the hospital?”

“I don’t want to go to the hospital.”

“You need to call someone to take you. I’ll call someone to take you to. Your letters were really something else. I was scared for you. Why didn’t you call me back?”

“I didn’t want to drag you in.”

“Well, I’m in. Will you take your temperature with me on the phone?”

“I don’t know. You sound different.”

“I’m *better*, Anna. Check your temperature with me on the phone, okay?”

“106.5”

“That’s your temperature?”

“That’s my favorite radio station.”

“Are you fucking with me? I can’t tell if you’re messing around or if you’re really sick.”

“I can’t swallow anything, Cameron.” Her voice came from a distant and confined place. “My throat is closing up.”

I packed a duffle bag and flew West for the second time in my life.

Anna looked the same. Sadder maybe, and somehow more vulnerable, but the same. She sat in a papasan chair reading a book called *Endurance*. It took five minutes of being in the same room with her before all my emotions rushed back to me, and not in the detached way they'd been floating around for the past few years—in a very human way that I had no control over.

We pulled up to the hospital in a rented Lincoln Towncar. The doctors put Anna on a gurney and hooked her to a parade of beeping machines. Then they pushed the gurney and all its attachments into a closet-sized room, stocked with medical supplies, plastic models of laterally-sliced babies, jars of formaldehyde, and bottles of cleaning fluid: 'Blue for Glass', 'Red for Stainless'.

"Why are you putting her in there?" I asked.

"Step aside," the doctor said.

"That's not a proper room."

"Come with us," he took my arm and led me away. I looked over my shoulder at Anna through the small window in the door. A nurse was attempting to find a vein in her limp arm.

They tested her for STDs, AIDs, Diphtheria, and malignant growths. None of the tests returned positive. The walls of Anna's throat were closing in on themselves but the doctors couldn't figure out know why. I told them I thought a similar process might be taking place in her mind. I tried to explain the letters. They didn't want to hear about it. The doctors didn't care about Anna's past—about her sufferings, the violations. They had questions about her insurance and the expiration date on her student work visa.

"Why are you wearing biohazard suits?" I asked. "She doesn't have the plague."

I left their huddle and found my way back to the closet where they'd stuffed Anna.

The door was locked. I jerked the handle. A nurse rushed over to restrain me. I spent the first night outside the hospital, in the rented Lincoln Towncar.

In the morning, I snuck into the ER through a side door the staff used for breaks. I slapped my wallet in the hands of an X-ray technician. He unlocked Anna's room.

A gust of stale air escaped as I opened the door.

"Cameron," she said. "The noise never stops."

The beeping on the machines had escalated. Her gurney was disheveled and rolled into a corner where she'd knocked over some of the supplies on the steel shelving unit during the night.

"They wouldn't let me in," I said. "I'm sorry. I wanted to stay at your window all night. This place is a joke. It's supposed to be the best hospital in town."

"I'm hungry for potato salad."

"I'm sorry I took you here."

Anna turned her head to the side, and as she did, the wires attached to her machines moved with her. Anna wrapped her hand around one of the metal rods on the shelving unit. "I thought I was going to die in here with the Drain-o."

I wheeled her bed back to the center of the room and fixed her sheets.

"Your forehead's burning up." I shook the empty IV bag that was supposed to be feeding her intravenously. "Where are the doctors, Anna? All your fluids are dried out of

this thing. Has it been like this all night?"

"I kept hitting the button, but no one came."

"You've been alone all night."

"I know a dull hum will accompany my death. I know I'll just be flesh."

"No one came?"

"One man came, but he wasn't a doctor. He had a Rosary. He prayed to St. Francis and St. Jude. I hate it here. I'm hungry for potato salad. Cameron? There's a blur in the window."

"I can't believe this place."

"Cameron—"

"A blur?" I turned my head towards the door. A large male nurse took me by the shoulders and pulled me from Anna's side.

"I don't want to be here alone," Anna said.

"You can't stay here," the nurse told me.

I shoved my elbow in his gut and leaned in towards Anna's bed. "I didn't mean to leave the first time." The nurse yanked my elbows back, up towards my ears. I kicked his shin and pushed my shoulders forward again. "I just didn't want any more of those nights—scrounging up loose change to pay for my peace of mind."

"I know," she nodded. "I made a mess of things."

"You're gone," the nurse grabbed my neck.

"You didn't make the mess, Anna."

"You can't *be* here," he tightened his grip. "You're in for it, man."

"Fuck you," I wheeled around and spit in his face. "Anna," I turned back. "The city made the mess."

"I'm calling security—"

"Yes," Anna said. "The city made the mess. Then it made us and left us alone."

The nurse slammed his fist into the back of my head and dragged me from the room.

"Why can't I stay!"

"You little shit."

"Why can't I stay with her?"

His fingers dug into my arms and drew blood. "She's not your family," he said.

"She's my family," I spit. I thrashed in his arms. "She's my sister. I'm her father."

The doctors moved Anna to a more suitable room where they charged her \$300 a day just to change the sheets on her bed. They gave up attempts to diagnose her, and struggled to keep her fed. Her weight dipped to 80 pounds before her Esophagus finally re-opened. When she was released from the hospital, I sat with her in the papasan chair and fed her potato salad.

A month later, I sold my condo and moved back to town to be with her—it wasn't just for her.

After she emerged the fog, Anna didn't remember much of what had transpired over the last eight years. Or maybe she didn't want to. It may not have been in her nature to haul a history of wounds along with her. I still have some of her letters—fragments of the world as she remembers it from those years. It's a fantasy to me, but who's to say

what's real? Reality's not a democracy. And far as I believe, Anna is better off having forgotten the things she did. At least she can still feel. I need her for that.

They say memory is stored in the exterior portion of the bones, but the most nourishing part of the meal, the more fulfilling part of the dish, is found in the bone marrow.

Anna is my marrow.

*

When she first moved to the valley, Anna Volcier spent her afternoons poolside in a striped bikini the colors of Neapolitan ice cream. The people she met that summer were the same people she'd meet in the end—travelers disguised as locals. They called themselves transients. Temporary transplants. A man who surprised her with free cable. A woman who wanted to straighten her hair. A couple saving money to move to New Orleans. She met them all at the pool.

"I don't know how I wound up here," they said.

"I spun a globe."

"I'm just passing through."

"What is it you do?" they asked Anna.

"I came here for—" Anna paused, wanting to confront a logical answer. But Anna Volcier had arrived in the valley not knowing anything.

Down from the dark sky and nestled in a nook on the side of a great red mountain, the warmth of a star soaked a dome-shaped house tucked away among flowers and sand. The screws holding the panels on the solar-paneled roof had yet begun to rust, and the homemade wind chimes hung by thin strings made no sounds in the dark.

The star peeked out from a cluster of rocks, then faded back into the night. It peeked and faded, peeked and faded, peeked and shone again.

A twinkle.

A flicker.

A luminous glow.

“Anna?” The star spoke from the window.

Anna opened her eyes. She shifted in the sink. The glow from outside was muffled by the kitchen curtains. Anna pushed them aside, revealing a bright light shining through the closed blinds. For the sun to strike at this angle, Anna thought, it must be high in the sky—but isn’t it night? She opened the blinds.

The light quickly faded as the star disappeared behind a rocky spur.

“Stars?” Anna rubbed her eyes.

Vonelle snored from her side of the sink.

The star reappeared. “You found us, Anna. You were right all along. We’ve been hiding from the city.”

“Stars?” Anna asked.

“It’s as you believed. We’re tired of the wishes. We won’t grant them anymore.”

“Any of them?”

The star flickered. “There was a time we granted all the wishes, but not much good came of it.”

Anna looked down at her body. Her clothing was dry. The sink was bone dry. She rattled the faucet in panic. A hollow sound shook from inside. “What did you do?” Anna asked.

“Us!” the star said. “That was your hallucination.”

“That was a hallucination? And this is real?”

“This is most real, Anna.”

“You’ve taken all the wishes away,” Anna slumped.

“That’s almost true,” the starlight said. “Though we’ve been thinking, since we’ve been grounded among the stones, and we’ve decided to allow *one more wish* before we disappear. Since you found us, Anna, we’d like for you make the final wish.”

“Me?”

A twinkle. “Yes, Anna.”

“I don’t know if I can handle the last wish,” Anna said. “That’s a lot of responsibility.” She took a deep breath. “I’d like to give the wish to Cameron. Let him make the final wish, please.”

“But he didn’t find us!” the starlight said. “We won’t show ourselves to him.”

“Then don’t show yourselves,” Anna told the star. “Can’t you simply let the next thing he wishes for be the final wish? He’ll make a good wish. I know it.”

A twinkle.

A flicker.

Then the starlight grew dim.

Anna peered outside the window and watched as a circle of grounded stars came to their decision.

“Okay,” the starlight told Anna. “We’ll allow Cameron to make the final wish, and then we’re gone forever.”

*

Night? Is it night? How long have I been asleep? Is Anna safe? Is the world in place? Is our city still there?

I sat up on the rock and inhaled. The scent of the pizza was still strong, which I took as a good sign. I opened my backpack and pulled out a slice—though it didn’t really qualify as a ‘slice’ anymore. The entire pizza had folded in on itself in a delicious-looking melted heap, and what I now held in my hands could best be described as ‘a lump’. It was true what Vonelle had said about the cheese. It looked plastic enough to outlive us all. So much in fact, I thought that maybe by taking a piece of this pizza inside me I’d bring myself one step closer to immortality. No, this was pizza, the most mortal trapping of them all. What was it about pizza that bound me so closely to my carnal desires? Did I really need earth and its paraphernalia that bad? Who would I be when it all disappeared? I’m pretty sure we’ll all be in our truest form once all indicators of human life have disappeared. And when human life disappears? What will we be then?

I’m happy I loved Anna. Though I wonder sometimes, when humans were first tossed on earth, trying to survive our first winter on the tundra, did we couple off and huddle together solely for purposes of warmth, safety, and procreation? Or was love there in the beginning? Was it love that pulled us through time? Or is love the last hallucination we’re willing to relinquish?—A sort of temporary affiliation, used to generate the warmth we needed along the way, until we were ready to evolve again. Am I ready to evolve again? I’m rather attached to things here.

I’ll miss the warmth of being human. Though I won’t miss my mind. It’s been as unreal as any of the other illusions, and I’ve spent too much time wandering around inside it looking for something reliable there. A lot like Anna and her search for reasons. Sometimes while I’m reflecting on a reason’s absence, I find a feeling that’s always been with me—it’s me, reflecting on the absence. It’s an experiencing of myself as grounded in something entirely unfounded. Something that shows the reason I initially sought for all the transgressions in the first place was an abyss of non-reason. But even that’s just my mind. It’s not real. What’s real is me, crouched on the side of a mountain, alone, clutching a lump of pizza I’ve stolen from its grave. I’ll miss moments like this. Real, warm moments. I’ll miss sitting in the womb-warmth of the pizza kitchen. Anna’s breath.

Sourdough bread. Vonelle's bosom. My grandmother's lopsided quilts. Ask me what I thought of the world? For the most part, I found it rather accommodating. If only we'd been better able to integrate our perversions and our greatness. The world had been a warm place.

I looked down in the valley at the city again. The buildings glowed bright red, burning with fire. Dusty cyclones. Moans and sighs. The sand fell upwards into the sky. No clouds in the sky, just a deep sucking sound. It was a good thing we'd fled. I watched a blitz of small birds with wings like lettuce fight to escape the smoke. They flew towards the mountains, screeching as the pull of the dying city dragged on their wings. Their wings illuminated neon green against the burning sky. One by one, they lost the battle, dropping down to earth where they left a trail of dried beaks and feathers in the wake of their failed escape.

It was a shame no one had taken the time to pack our playground away in a more orderly fashion. I imagined myself sitting atop the pyramid rock in a director's chair made of canvas attached to a frame. I wore neither jacket nor tie, and though the collar of my shirt was unbuttoned, the shirt itself was irreproachably white. The French cuffs on my sleeves were held together by two detachable ivory links—and holding a piece of pepperoni pizza in one hand, and a conductor's baton in the other, I directed the city's final act with a small sense of decorum. The buildings were folded neatly into boxes. All the little people, stacked carefully on shelves. The sand shoveled into piles and funneled into jars. The animals lulled to sleep by some familiar, primitive, cosmic melody.

This arrangement was far from what I now witnessed in front of my eyes. And the disappointment I had in the fact that *we couldn't even get the end right* sat heavy in the pit my stomach. I stood and began to turn to the mountain to climb away from it all, but I hesitated because, the horizontal gravity of everything behind me pulled me backwards towards the city. My hair tugged sideways. Floated sideways. My eyes watered. My ears rung. I fought to turn my head away from the mess again, but the pull from the center of the sandbox was greater than my personal momentum—bigger than I could deny. The beast in the sandbox writhed as it died, and it wanted me as a witness. I had no choice but to sit back down and watch.

I took the lump of pizza in both my hands. It was soggy and warm how I'd always liked it. If only it had more pepperoni! It would be a last supper fit for a King. I wondered if I should stay up the night and wait for the sun to rise before I took my first bite. The thought of eating pizza for breakfast comforted me. It offered the pleasure of a custom I could return to once more. A home that hadn't failed me. A home I hadn't failed. But I wasn't sure I could wait that long, and even if I could, what if the good 'ole tangerine orb never rose tomorrow? Best to take advantage of what was now before me... I lifted my chin to the starless sky and closed my eyes.

As futile as it may have been, like trying to square the sun itself, I made a wish. Then I brought the lump of pizza to my teeth and took a most surprisingly, satisfying bite.

Part Two

We in the West are haunted by the loss of our Mother.

-Caitlin Matthews

In the beginning, I was still united with my fravashi. Her name is Aischa. She lives in Hurqalya. She's the one who sent me here to battle. On the morning of the fourth day after my death, I will return to her and all my experiences in the material world will be collected and weighed.

Some people don't believe in guardian spirits. My father says they were an idea created during the Iranian Heroic Age.

"But where did the idea come from?" I asked. "The idea had to come from somewhere."

"Hush, Fatima," my father said. "Pray and go to sleep. Your answers may be found in your dreams."

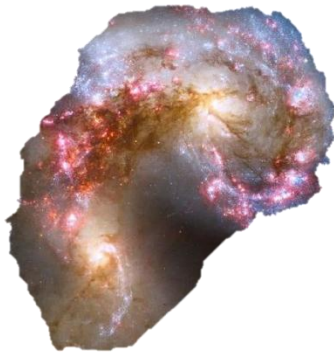
My father thought my vivid imagination was because I was an only child. I told him I didn't think that had been my choice and I would be happy to have a twin brother. He told me it was too late for that. When I began to cry, he took me to the window and pointed outside to Mount Damavand, my favorite peak in the distance.

"That has always been your brother," my father said. "The big, white mountain."

He was right, but I was too young to climb. So I collected rocks from the foothills and built a replica of Damavand on my windowsill. When the wind blew, the curtains hugged my mountain creating a veil around its summit. I imagined myself on the other side of the real Damavand. I imagined the water would be cleaner, the pastures full of greener grass, and the village shops were filled with keepers who wouldn't ignore my father when he covered his face with his hands and said he missed his wife. I promised myself that when I was strong enough I would climb to the other side of Mount Damavand and find my twin brother there. Aischa would be waiting for me, too. I was sure of it.

before the beginning, when nothing was a fact

ex nihilo



*Though we may fear dissolving into nonexistence,
nonexistence fears even more that it may be given human form.*

-George Oppen

The Enclaves

On the side of a great, green hill
not yet becoming a mountain
in an area of fishponds surrounded by
willow and poplar trees

a cull of sweet-toothed badgers
not yet fit for purpose
carried baskets filled with chocolates
to a seaside abattoir

“Dear badgers! Dear badgers!” the women
sang cloaked in blue

Babies floated down stream
salamis tucked in their baskets
to attract laborers in the nearby fig fields
(they pulled the babies from their baskets
re-planted them in the soil)

A third of the fig crop was left
to rot in the sun, as it was believed
the children would live much longer
if it were done.

Sophia was born to this
when days blended like custard
on warm loaves of bread

heavy and delicious

in ideal growing conditions
she sprouted without soil stuck between her teeth
no fig seeds in her hair
no palm leaves on her arms

she was sent into the world
with no understanding of time
no answers to why

only knowing she'd be scattered
and if she stayed too long, she'd die

“Dear Sophia! Dear Sophia!”
the women wept into scarves

then continued eating pastries
provided by the badgers
on the other side of the great, green hill

As Sophia traversed the cliffs down from the peaks of Mountain Qaf, she came upon a group of houses at the edge of Al-araf—a mountain rampart between paradise and earth where inhabitants were endowed with the power of physiognomic discernment, that is, they were able to distinguish the nature of each other's spirits based upon a single glance at the face. One such woman recognized Sophia immediately and pulled her inside a cottage.

"You must know these rules before leaving here. First, you cannot fall in love."

"Love!" Sophia cried.

The woman shook her head. "It will weigh too heavy. You'll forget light speed. You'll sink and lose your movement."

"But I would sooner find love than anything else!"

The woman darted to the kitchen. Her dress left a watery stain on the carpet behind her, as the hem was made entirely of thick wet paints. She moved a whistling tea kettle from stove-top to counter-top, but not before burning her fingers.

"Ohhhh!" she screamed and shook her wrists. She turned to Sophia with piercing eyes. "You weren't born for anyone but yourself!"

"That seems so selfish of me."

"Birth is extremely narcissistic. Or haven't you noticed that yet?" The woman reached to retrieve two mugs from the cupboard above the stove. "And let me remind you," she told Sophia, "so is death." She motioned for Sophia to sit at the low, round table on the living room floor. "You must renounce your heart to draw nearer to the Truth."

Sophia slumped and lowered her eyes. "Isn't love a part of my Truth?"

"As a lover, yes. A lover's life and soul are firmly focused on a single goal. But yours must be focused on more than that. Yours is no journey for the indolent. Your quest is Truth itself, not just its scent." The woman grabbed a mortar and pestle and began to grind a handful of cloves. The smell of nutmeg filled the kitchen. "Nevertheless," she sighed. "You'll find your lover, several times."

Sophia perked up. "I will?" she smiled.

"The world is not so big, you'll see. Your problems will not be as grand as they'll seem. They are like storms in a teacup." She broke two sticks of cinnamon into Sophia's tea. "You'll find him, but promise me please you'll remember the second rule: you must stay firmly planted in *your* world. The reality you have will not be shared—not with anyone. Remain detached. Not above, nor below. Simply disengaged. And be careful," the woman approached the table. "This is very hot tea." Without hesitation, she lifted the mugs above her head and poured two streams of steaming tea over her face.

Sophia gasped as she watched the woman's skin turn a dull shade of elephant grey.

"You will be living in a perverse illusion," the woman said through a boiling face. "A great, big magic show. But you'll forget that you know all the tricks!—that *you* are the magician! It's important you remember this otherwise you will make everything very real."

"Okay!" Sophia cried, and her jaw dropped again as the woman's face slowly reconstructed itself into the visage of a beautiful angel. Her body was quick to follow—

limbs exchanged for celestial wings, brittle hair replaced with silk.

“Another rule,” the angel spoke. “Don’t seek to be understood. What goes on behind your eyes will be more authentic and hold more authority than the world in front of you. Your own form will change many, many times. You will go by different names and different minds.”

“Why must I do this all alone? Why am I being exiled from my home?”

“That is the first catastrophe: the descent into exile, the descent into the confines of historical time. The history of humanity begins with this descent, and accordingly, your journey must begin the same. Your experiences will mirror the experiences of those you aim to aid.”

Sophia sighed. “I still don’t understand. What do I *do* while I’m there?”

“You must suffer to learn compassion. And you will be very naïve. So naïve, in fact, you’ll disgust yourself in moments of clarity. No matter that, I’m always here—not to shame you when you’ve wronged, but to hold you close when you return to your true sense of yourself.”

“Will I always remember you?”

“Once you descend, much will be forgotten.”

“Then I don’t want to go.”

“You must go, Sophia. All of creation begins with descent. Remember too, on your way down, you will pass through many levels of experience. You will suffer disgraceful, lowly fates—but because of this, you will mature into a worthy companion of others on their way to re-ascension... that’s if you get out.”

“Why wouldn’t I get out? Aside from love, what would possibly keep me there?”

“Food,” the angel said. “Don’t eat too much of it. It will blot out your memory. So will the garments. After putting on the clothing accustomed to the regions in which you will reside, you may be tempted to forget who you are. And don’t touch the garbage. You’ll see it everywhere. In piles on the roads, stowed away in homes, underneath garages and sheds on stilts. The dogs rummage through it. Don’t move it! Even to throw it away. Once you start to concern yourself with their physical messes, you’ll never finish cleaning up. Remember this too: find someone to carry you over the lulls and the dark stretches. You’ll need plenty of help, and many will offer to protect you along your way, but it’s usually for their own good. Trust your judgment and be careful not to become anyone’s prey.” With this, the angel rose several feet above the floor and began to circle in oblique ovals around the living room. Her hair followed as closely behind her as it could, but sometimes couldn’t help from detaching itself from the angel’s head and lingered in the space behind her.

“What if I forget the things you’ve said?”

“Here,” the angel tossed an avocado pit into Sophia’s hands. “Anytime you forget, this will be our connection. The seed. The life. The core.” She landed from her flight and pulled Sophia from the floor, leading her outside to the hills. Then in a gesture that embraced the horizon, the angel pointed to the world beyond the limits of the parapet. “Follow the road between the two palms, past the second set of enclaves, past the cut golden logs on the vertical beach, past the fields of abandoned hay. You’ll come to a set of foothills. Slide down carefully. You will be protected as long as you remember yourself. Remember yourself, my dear.”

Sophia squinted in the distance. “And beyond the far foothills? Is it a bleak

place?”

“It is at times,” the angel said. “You’ll learn to tolerate it, as you’ll learn to tolerate your semi-final resting place—the desert.”

“Why the desert?”

“To feel the arid presence of God.”

“That’s where I’m headed?”

The angel nodded. “The region of the dunes. God has yet to show himself to the inhabitants of that land, and they suffer greatly because of it.”

“Why hasn’t he helped them?”

“He has tried, but deluded natures cannot recognize the Way,= even if it is set directly before their eyes. They need help. Sophia, you will soon hear their cries. They have built a false paradise and fallen deeply into their five senses.”

“Won’t I be tempted by the world I find?”

“So tempted, in fact, you may get lost in your mind. But remember this—there are no riches, there is no dominion, no banquet, no honor, no worldly delights that for just *one* instant—one twinkling of the eye!—will give you such joy as the knowledge of your truest nature. Disengage, Sophia. She who knows her soul disengages from the world. That is the paradox: you must care enough to sympathize without sacrificing yourself. Nothing is worth that price. And what will you do with the world at your feet if you can’t even find your own Self?”

“What if I begin to slip away?”

“Remember where you come from.”

Sophia nodded, “I will.”

“Good. Then you will remember the way back.”

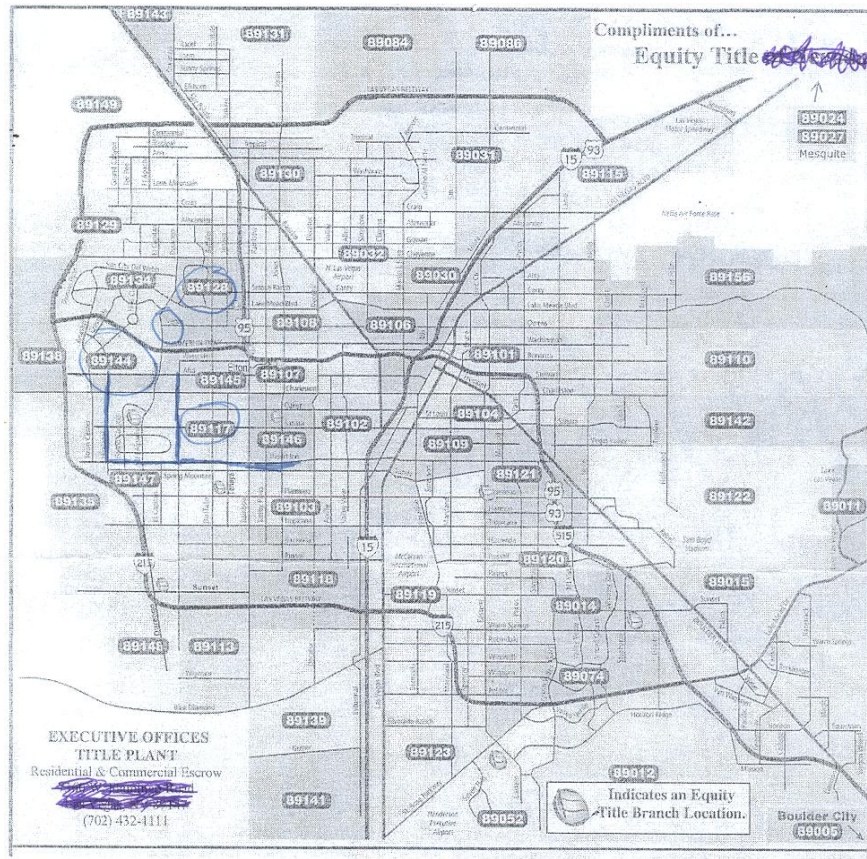
Sophia gazed out over the hills. The angel placed her hands on Sophia’s shoulders. “Do you see them yet, dear? Do you hear their cries?”

“Not yet,” Sophia rubbed her eyes. “But I feel myself descending...”

“Remember, some have already begun to awake from the dream of ordinary life. Others are still fast asleep. Many are still awaiting an Imam, a guide, a Maitreya, Saoshyant, the return of a Christ—but this is not an outward event. It is an event that takes place inside. On that very earth, each soul must learn to become an inhabitant of its true home, our home. That is the hidden truth that must be nurtured to grow inside each soul.”

“...now I see the desert and its inhabitants! The false paradise and its people—my ears hear their groans!”

The angel moved from Sophia’s side. “Remain in your certainty. Now, go down.”



can grow yellow stems
 grow a tree in the
 garden to get better
 a lady and a
 garden to get better

more me d notes:

I asked for garden
 I wanted to travel beyond
 I felt a pull from my chest
 he was ready to leave his body
 my heart spread up my chest green

grow a tree on
 the
 beautiful trees
 spreaded from my
 heart
 + grow to a weeping
 willow
 because in always
 loved
 very in
 willow

in always in love
 my heart was always
 responsible for my

Part Three

All movement is a sign of Thirst.

-Hafiz

Safira, before the beginning

Infinity stands in 8 familiar positions
facing the sun and one prayer:
please, find all my oranges.

I last saw them asleep on a sailboat
peeling their skins. When I turned to leave
they said, "Watch for monsters. You're safe
in our laps, in the sun." But I couldn't stay.

I followed the milkweed to shore,
to the Islands. I didn't want winter
to find me. "The milkweed," they whispered,
"are really dead spider souls
making their way to the sun."

A procession. Lila. Monks
in midday
 arcadic nodal
postures. Transgressions
 Placemats.

Sins: just missing
the mark. How did we get (anything and)
to this point We rode here.

Past that field past the field
of right and wrong doing to this
field. The one with the de-
robed monks. The field
with Lila

and Jennifer.

The milkweed in her hair left me without
a blonde and curly summer winding down.
It's almost there she said and softly stayed
a word that spilled and sounded as it should.
We pushed a wooden wheel through fields of hay
and halos silos white cows balancing
a mood and unused toboggan in my arms.
I like your shoes she said.

The day did not stop. The sun had
just paused reminded us to re-assess our accumulation
of life particularly in the form of
footwear, hoses (coiled on the porch
serpentine, re-generative Norse
slithering, demon) undergarments. Locks
of hair, unhemmed threads wrapped around our fingers
(so we didn't forget) "The hose is expanding!" Jenny cried.
"There are tufts of milkweed in my eyes! I can't find my life line.

Did I already die?" No water. We lay in the field and tried to imagine dead. "There couldn't be darkness," Lila said. "There would be no space for it to exist in. Imagine *nothing*."

Mine is a plastic spool
without the thread.
Someone unwound the thread and
used it to make a trail while wandering
to the ends of the universe.
But since the universe has no ends
the thread ran out and whoever it was
who'd been looking for the edges
became horribly lost.

A lighthouse
in the desert.

Mom naked
in a bucket.

A tiny spider
tossed in the ocean.

The artifact that isn't there:
Mom sold her rocking chair and left for the Cayman
Islands two days before Easter Sunday.

tumbling! (in the Easter grass)
tumbling!

Tupperware!

She melted our crayons in the sun. A chocolate bunny. "Ice the lamb cake," she said.

Grab the devil
by the horns and ride
The elusive flutter
of Gabriel's wings
(graspable, too) and imagine!
what makes the more accomplished
life: to have never ridden never fell, or to rise
triumphantly from below (thighs squeezing
the juice) on the devil's back
bloody red horns grasped. A conquistador!
Michael's dirty feathers stuck between
your teeth. (He's in a heap!) To wrest with one
is to wrest with the whole familiar
congregation. You know the posse rides
like that, together like that. Protecting and sinking
each other. Sometimes with hereditary obligations.

Who else did Daddy kill
on the hills in Fu Bai How many
women did he rape along the path
to My Lai Sick with Malaria.

Malaria. Malaria. Aiming his gun
at the sun. "I really stepped on my dick
this time Sarge," G said. Daddy carried him back.
They left his legs behind. "I fear we'll never find
my oranges now," G gargled the rain.

"I'm sorry," I told Jenny when I left that day. "I
have to find the man who stole my thread. *You*
have to stay with Daddy." "I don't think it was a man,"
Jenny said. "I think Mom took it with her."

Jenny runs to Grandma and asks to trace the scar. Grandma lifts
her blouse, allows Jen to poke the place
where her breast once rested above the navel.
"Don't forget the songs your Mother played
on the high keys of the piano."

The moon fell behind the mountains
and G hugged a stick of butter. "It feels
like being hugged by Jesus," he said.
"If I make it back to Jackson County,
I'm becoming a crossing guard. Melt the butter
around me before I die, Sarge."

Lila finds her father in the park teeing off inside a sandbox.
She drags him back. "This is home," she says.
He follows her to the kitchen and waits
as she stains the bread yellow with mustard. "You're old,"
she says. "Disguised by the sun."
Daddy falls, embraces her legs, embraces her knees.

"She ruined my crayons!" Jenny cries.
Daddy spits out wet bread.
"I hope that cunt dies of cancer," he says.

But Mom doesn't die. She continues
to melt the primary colors. The chocolate
bunnies. The paper airplanes. Miniature brass
instruments. The basket itself. Felt
clippings. We didn't know felt melted.

Keep it moving, the crossing guard says.
He motions with the windmill
in his hand. (A whistle in his mouth so we do not pause
to wave at the passengers in the cars.) Keep it moving.

Daddy pulls a tool box from the garage and heaves it towards the Jeep in the driveway crushing ants into unrecognizable ink. At the tire's edge he selects a wrench, changes his mind, removes a hammer lifts his arms (the maker of a first great tool!)

He tries his courage
against the rubber beast.

Lila pulls Jenny in a wagon through the field
until they come to a tree at the edge of the highway.
Dad has promised a dime for every orange truck
they count while Mom is away. They keep a tally
on a piece of cardboard, stuck to the wagon with gum.

8, says Jen, but she writes it on its side.
Infinity, says Lila. That's at least a million dollars.
This could go on forever if Mom never comes back.

What happens if we're right about Mom's permanent flight, and she never comes home again? Then we're left with two possibilities: 1) We don't wait, and we get on with our lives--losing nothing more than the original loss (0). Or, 2) We wait. Then we're left waiting under this tree forever, and we rot away into the dirt, waiting, and we become plum tree fertilizer, waiting, then plums, waiting, then maggots and who knows what else. It keeps going. Outcome: negative infinity.

$\frac{1}{2}$ a chance of us not waiting and mom never comes back	$\frac{1}{2} \times 0 = 0$
$\frac{1}{2}$ a chance of us waiting forever and mom never comes back	$\frac{1}{2} \times -\infty = -\infty$

A negative infinity? Jenny tilts her head.
I don't like it either, Lila says.

Don't leave my lap.
We watch the sky
peeling the skins off our oranges.

We set sail on paper boats.

Are we going to the ocean? Jenny asks.
Yes, Lila says. Everything goes to the ocean.
We're going to probably, maybe, pass Mom on the way?
Don't talk about Mom anymore, okay?
Jenny considers this. Sometimes I can't help it. My head says I hate God.
Don't worry, Lila tells her. God doesn't get offended. I can't sail anymore. I have to do my homework now.
Why do you have to do *that*?
To stay in 99th percentile.
What's that?
Dad likes it when I'm there.
Jenny pulls a finger puppet over her index finger. Why aren't you in the 100th percentile? she asks.
It's impossible, Lila tells her, for anyone to be there.
Jenny scrunches her face and tilts her head *But it's better*, the finger puppet says.

The monks tell us this:
it's hard to play with a zero denominator.
Mathematicians don't like to do it. "The answer comes so close to zero... and never reaches it!"

one is infinitely receptive

to nothing			an absence
a hollow bamboo			

(a hollow bunny breaks
at its limits too.)

The crossing guard
shuffles. Polypropylene limbs.
 (He thought he was born
 in Bethlehem. He was
 born in Biloxi.) We scattered his ashes
in Tulsa. A regenerative compromise.
The segments *might* have grown back into
windmills and stop signs if he'd only let us chop
 him up, but
 ashes-- no chance.
He must have been at peace with death, yet still
so unsure of his timely appearance and
 (earthly placement)
Signification. "Oh come on," he'd said
challenging the gun. "I already exist
in all possible worlds. Shoot me you fucking
gook." But the gook didn't shoot.

G tripped.

and Daddy ciphered the pulp
out of all natural causes.

We know even nectar
 stagnant
becomes poison
 so we run through the plain
 hugging ourselves
in approximate ellipticals
squishing the soggy grass over the same
places over again until
we drill a hole
 through the center
to the other side where we find

∅ a null set.
 A field that
was never there. The whole set: these phantom stop signs
tufts of hair, chambered
nautical shells, Salerno butter

cookies, the center of the tire where
the oranges have become orange
marmalade now
orange Julius, how terrible this
collection of numbers, this cold-hearted cluster
of real integers

all in a set that doesn't exist.

(our fingers bulge deep pink
except where we poke them jaundice
above the threads)

Jennifer,
your hair is so soft
The high keys
are so countable.

The Latest Impression

Pre-dawn stumbling, again.
A somnambulist mountain
trekking off the crumbling trail,
again. This time I lost a limb. My heart.

Cairn to pulley
pulley to belay
belay me against the flat rocks
hidden in the crave crevices
the rocks wear against us
our soft bodies conform
to each other. We find another cairn
between the two faces. We must be
going the right way. Asleep on stone
pillows cuddled in the hollow.

You are somewhere between
three noble truths:

I am here.
I am alone.
It is October.

I've fallen in love three times
in three passing elemental Octobers. My three
mineral loves (sand, stone, and grey slate iron)

though they were born in December, December, and January
like me. All of us fell from
the same clump in the sky. One by one
not too far apart because why would one fall
(following gravity to be born)
and leave the others behind?
stuck in the cluttered sky? One
(the necessity of weight not yet discovered)
by one.

The cycle of the leaves:
they leave, I leave,
December comes. December leaves
when January comes. I come. We come. I leave.

We cannot stay in October.

I didn't want to return here. The seasons change just twice
each year. I'm better prepared four times a year. Suffering the icicles
before the hip-widening birth of Spring. The seedlings grow into lemon trees.
The lemons drop before the Fall.

Here there are two seasons:

the oppressive heat
and a dry, mild Winter.

October is between them.

Step outside. Outside the window.
I'm here in the falling leaves. There are no
leaves. I'm asleep

going backwards to the red rocks. The backyard valley
fire. Back to Mars, Jupiter all the planets we
-transported ourselves to
fleeing the weight-

set foot on together
feeling our weight.

(us pointing to us in the mirror
us pointing to the others)

They were not us. They were
always there.

I wake with the wind
without the sun. I stir with
this change. The
constant *gone*.
A swap in an angled
look at myself

a brunette starfish with no pajamas
hugging the bed.

The curtains take a deep breath revealing
First Choice Manicured Tree Service
hedges and shaved palms
outside the window.

Extremities spread
the entire king-sized bed

mine. Limbs

holding fast to the clearly dissolving edges of the bed and the quickly dissolving
memory of the former

bed-cloud being

carried away. We made
love legs sprawled
sleeping
limbs our bed-cloud levitating us levitating
everything levitating but our hearts.

I'd like to hike to a place filled with still pools
that captured our reflection climbing the mountain
a thousand years ago. We
weren't afraid to be taken upwards
by the wind. Were we taken
upwards by the wind? Was there a direction?

(us pointing to us in the mirror. us pointing to the others. scared of the others. they weren't
scared
of us.)

We start to wonder this: am I going to be alone? I am always alone, but have I begun to age?
I make a promise to myself to be more composed. In control. As a lady
should be. A graceful, self-assured (benevolent to snails)
soul. Not to make myself small
to remain assured.

It's October. The finest leaves
are shedding their trees to die
underneath our feet, again. Once more,
Halloween is pepita-sprinkled and gathered in
pillow-cases already filled with candy and black straw
witches. We throw our pillows on the floor
making room for more digestible pleasures.
Almonds and apples. Even here it happens.

Jack-o-Lanterns stuck in Joshua trees.

"In the desert. Still? Are you still in the desert?"
It happens here.

Someone grew a cornfield! A firefly farm!
They grew it here for us. We charged through
that field corn-chowder fed and dressed as cartoon
vegetables. You. You, a gigantic pea. We met here
in a maze made of corn, in a city
that made us--the city made us
then left us alone.

Us in the crackling corn
pulling the bells to locate ourselves
and to bring us back to where we were first lost
so we could start over again looking for all the clues.
We never found all the clues.

My loves aren't lost. I know where they are.
They know where they are. They know where I am.
There are bells and chimes to locate us. We all
still love each other. Through the

Wives. Children. Business plans.
Burglaries. Harems. Distance. Pleas.

When diaspora was just
something we did in pageants.
When diaspora was not this
displacement of excessive water.
When did it begin to imply arms
swinging downwards? The excessive
cloth-water wrung out to drip dry?
This waiting for the crumbling mountain
trail to lead us back to what? You were like me
and you wanted to stay. You never had
a home, you never had a home, you were
like me and you wanted to stay settled no longer forced
into this pilgrimage this self-inflicted wound rage

pilgrim. "An episodic life, to keep you young."
Is there another way?

We all want peace, but we'll never find peace
because the truth will always move us.

He dumped a gallon of water on my orchids
before leaving for Miami.

I began to cry when we drove past the Whomph-
bush forest. It burned to the dirt while you were away.
The black stumps of the Joshua trees still leaned towards
what must have been the clean air their
(no longer there) bushy tops reached for
before the smoke smothered them to death.
Miles around the base of the mountain
you noticed my tears. "You're crying," you said.
You thought it was for the trees.

It's not for the trees,
I remember the fire.

"Maybe someday they'll grow back."

I sat outside a wooden barn
once thinking *this is all just the beginning*
of my little evolution. I am still young.

The rustle of the leaves
sounded like applause.

There was an epileptic goat inside that barn.

I sit with my back against
the cold-faced rocks, the alabaster

slabs used to make things
like stairs.

The rustle of the leaves
sounds like applause.

—the way we sounded against
the charcoal stones
throwing our voices.

The Performer

for and from s. michael
and his love of
severance

ACT I

The Serengeti

two elephants sit
at the river's edge

I am the one on the left
a blemish
on the left
side of my trunk

I don't want you to see it

you ask me to pull your ears
because it hurts
and feels good

we're in love, you and I

we met in a cloud of dust
about to form a tornado

that one!! over there!
that out-of-focus pocket of air!

that was where we met

we were sapiens then

scene II

all off from
another evolution

ripped and torn
unmended and
shorn in the dusty peripheral
surrounding the center
still I was un-

tethered and you were severed
and all off from

all recollection of

us over there! in that indescribable
cloud

of drifting cumulus
Sunday
always afternoon
and happening
with us
driving curves round
the mountain
my body outside
the window
my hair
a drifting mass of cumulus

you say over there a beautiful soul
once saved me

you say
convince yourself
to take control!

you
throw the wheel and
take to the hills

ACT II

pixel to particle:
the awaited x-mas parcel

a doll for an idol
supplying the new algorithm
exhaling the old variables all off from
another scene of
another televisional reflection of

idol doll to idol man

I arrive
a x-mas parcel
'enter love'
on your doorstep

a fantastical embodiment
of love distilled

you lift the lid of
the awaited parcel
forgiving in id in this

embodiment hovering
in sublime's festoon coverings

a box!!
a toy!!
a proleptical gift!!

you move my arms
and take
 a picture

never taking
the picture of yourself

 an unsnapped re-semblance
 of an immense he-man

We bathe in the pool
 below the stone
statues on your roof

I leap
 from between them
 wayward swanward
 into the
water

a blissful spatial
anachronism

 splashing

as you sink
 in a weighted vest

 I climb on your back
 a love toy
 on your back

the waves in the pool
are smaller than the waves
we make in the bathtub

s ea salts
r ose mary
h oney milk
r ose water

 all stirred with your arm

a zeus man's arm! a he-man's arm! s. micheal's
content fallen arm in the wake
 of the water

I'm just a guy
you say

notch-laced onto the sublime

scene II

I'm a seed for you to sow

ACT III

us over there!! in that out-
of-sight
source of new light
all nerves and plexus
ultra-mated everywhere
the out-of-control
growing light!
showing off from the mother's source
sparking
an incident
breaking the test-tube
escaping the math-code
slippery hypothesis slippery bathroom monsoon
take the picture! you say
coat the canvas retinae
with tinted ultra-visual displays and
splashing!

I don't want to fight
you say
why talk

when we can be close?

We share a cheesesteak
sandwich
and listen to the
music playing
from underneath the rocks

they are plastic rocks
but the music
is real

a squirrel disappears
a squirrel a splotch

erased disappears

every day a x-mas gift epiphany

We watch the performer
firing more

arrows
piercing the paths
up the highways

you steal a golf cart and we ride
following the arrows' ends >>>>
through the sure path of motion >following
the source of all the motion
<<<<<<<<the cure for grief is always >motion

we fire up the tunnels
following split fractal veins
swerving celestial sleighs
guided by infra-red dyed jingle
bells curving the plane of infinite
parallels we ride
following a course too parallel to truth
to ever really find it
>>>>>>>>

the anointed love-arrows leak pink ink
and soar further

swaying, slashing, sleighing

>>>>
s. micheal, do you remember underwater
you wore a weighted vest and said
save me
but you were too heavy
to save

I was
just breath
<<<<<<<<<<<<

the golf cart swerves
pulled over by pulled-
pork-eating enforcement

we take to the pavement
chasing the arrows

the performer is timely
off the clock

the arrows' tips
turn towards our
parts
the infinite points

penetrating my heart's
original chambers

giving in and of itself

this idol doll x-mas gift's
heart comes apart

blood flowing backwards
into the chambers

cue: arrow-notes plucked on
bi-chordal harp strings

ACT IV

a sleepy melody

harmonizing the low with the high then
fading to that mono-tone
that boring middle-ground
where we rest apart

super vessel super-
strings pulled no more

rocked to the new bedtime story
it's okay to be apart

drifting into the medium of
the new main theme: away from dream

out from under the physical bath
our twenty nine-
dimensional baptismal bath
out from under the physical quilt
our collapsing quilt-tent
our capillary bed
snuggling the dream
we emerge

The performing archer's
dream-arrows continue to puncture
through function, structure
and architecture all aspiring towers scraped back down
to rubble

there is rubble stuck in your leg

you walk up the stairs
not walking as fast as you

usually do

you rest in the hammock
tell me to hold onto my

prior state so

lighthearted
arrows passing
wholehearted

the setting is finally
a part of the play

my balcony the hammock floating away
apart from the stage me floating away

stuck
to an anointed love-
arrow

this x-mas doll leaves her idol man
as the performer
sends another love-dart
at a tree
with new bark

spilling ambrosial sap
to untrap the super
from the natural and the extra from
the ordinary
so we are
you say
natural and
ordinary and
that is normal
and natural and as never done before by us
for once

ACT V

the savannah

two elephants sit at the river's edge
I am the one on the left who says
let's stay here. I don't want to destroy
anything today

(you see birds and seeds get stuck
in our feet when we walk
across the savannah)

okay you say

so we sit and watch
the dead spider souls
as they make their way
to the sun

and I don't tell you
and you don't tell me
they're not dead spider souls
they're just tufts of milkweed
floating away from their stems

we swat flies with our tails
and watch the golden snail
trails, that lead to our pocket
of unfocused air

for Apollinaire

The tree of life has men
underneath it

filling its roots with honey
sap syrup nectar

cocoa beans drop from the palms
to the ground bumping
the tops of our heads
it sounds like
solid
laughs Tendrils of light
grow from the tree

and in his head
the Prince of Thieves
keeps the stolen recipe

The place we make love is glowing.

Moss peels
from the tree trunk

lifted by the wind flown to a desert oasis
and dropped atop a coconut.

How? the coconut wonders Why
are you in love with me? She does not know
the scent of this foreigner clinging
so deliberately to her heart

The moss is silent to confirm love

as in a world where we are small repetitions
of movements and sounds

(ants marching to Bastille)

Horrible Sounds
Lead Shoes
Iron Brooms

There is no need for fabrication. Mind is made
of no material

Though as a result of neglect
our foreheads crease
in the same half-ridges as half-
moon ridges Our aqueducts produce no light

In this world where rug beatings take place
Behind them warm breath some-
one has a beauty mark Some
have mastered the art of percussion

A fleet of Trojan horses in the bedroom Home
hidden in our possession Thousands of logs
rolling in the streets We watch shaking
the strongest oaths

straw
to the fire in our blood We are unsure
of our physical deformities and
called to pray
(not responding well to these conditions)
we drop our weapons to shift
from truth
and beauty
to comfort
and happiness

--a quilt, not lopsided--
the perfect man falls

(ants recede sound-
less little red marks in the sand)

empty
Sensational

The glass is half-
sensational

The King keeps the entire Kingdom
in his belly

He struggles to stand
collects his gold-plated
breast
amour and business
plans He greets home
with the same sigh he exhausts
in every general's direction
no where Fish swim in his gut.

Squids ink all over his bulleted plans.

Limping in the water
detached body parts
search for old ocean
battles

Tout est plus triste qu'autrefois

Sand grains scream
to signal departure

Severance is tattooed
on the King's back

Man is made
of senseless parts

All papers are shredded to celebrate
the extinction of fire
breath spiritless perfumes

Sirens elope with bird calls

for d.

Fill these spaces
call them home

it's illusion

maps on walls
locating us
somewhere we've been

the French are honest. they have no word for home

there is *house*
my house
at the house of no home

a return to
coming from
the pathway back to mother's arms

is she home

or are they oranges

date trees
dried spruce sprigs

who hides behind the juniper bushes
berries snug between the branches

does it matter if she's French
if she's from the Ukraine
raised along the Dordogne or born in a posh
and recently privatized Bangladesh suburban hospital

if she wears the veil to keep her face
from the world or she wears the veil
to keep the world from her face

hand me an orange from the tree, Fatima
hand an ear of corn from the backyard, Jen
a thistle of rosemary, Anna Volcier

dying citrus
small rind pieces

peels re-born
as peels

Jezebel, Jezebel, a mother cries
she must have done something right

she's here
she's unconscious
she's listening to the fabric
crinkle allowing the sound
to guide her

delivering letters to the blind
un-licking stamps and
us, remedial as we were
yet still thinking
thoughts flocked together
from your place and mine
conjoined at the hypothalamus by arrows
born to harm apples foreheads
blond lips honey dates
(these things keep us together)
when forms ink reusable condoms
(no such things) fail

When the interior world is rich
with clear windows
we see

is nothing to be seen

how private this is phantoms
that we share it

a big disappointment
come

no Fatima says
the world continues a cruel and malicious place

I'd rather stay even when I'm awake
inside

a fingerprint, a citrus peel

not this place where the sirens won't find me when I call
and all the ice-cream cones are expired

what do we eat
how do we die

don't let me disappear into the center of the lake
where the bloodhounds will never find me

am I there already

bewildered in this
 underlake castle
this mosque
 fallen
well this moss
 covered temple this

a prayer

I've lost my senses

I have the facts

the pebbles in the moonlight
leading Hansel back to Gretel
the moment of the step-mother's death

or was it the death of a fawn?

Don't let me disappear in the center of the pond
where the top of my head will no longer be open
for all the sure fine things you drop inside
 kalamata olives
 rose hip
 sachets
suitable for sock drawers
 and the eternity we were promised

I saw my mother on the lake
picking berries from branches
floating unknown to herself on a raft
she was thinking of making soup

1

the base of the broth (like the base of truth)
a 1950s bouillon cube
chicken stock, carrot nubs
(my mother's stew)

2

the Italian wooden spoon
an urn arm for a cast iron brew
(cauldron over open fire
if a step-mother's stew)

3

sage, smoked	
Himalayan sea salt	not iodized white salt
thyme	unnaturally white
(pronounce the	<i>un-attainably white</i>
“th” as to	
not confuse	purified
with time--	
not yet	sometimes purity is
called for)	a little bit dirty

I wanted to do something for you
so I took all the lemons and mangos
and lined them on the counter
with intentions of a sacrifice

but the knives were dirty
the axe m.i.a.
our juicer broken

my hands not strong enough

soft
rotting citrus

Safina
(the ship speaks)

1

Thousands of birds and the stones they carry
see us through the mirror
looking through the mirror

let's go there, Na-Koja-abad
non-where

hand me an anchor

I'll go first to reserve a plot of land
a grave

little crow's feet
digging into my heart

(that heart won't follow
though it led me here)

We'll swallow how to speak
the sounds of our wills
in the backs of our throats. Hushed.
Sha, sha. Man is trees. Sha,
sha, sha. Our feet in sand. Sha.

Buried in baths
at the edge.

Abruptly old
 sitting on docks moving cloth
 napkins in fire
 skewed marshmallows scream

cards flinch on the table unshuffled.

go with the flow, her companions say
 moving clearly away from danger
 But sometimes the flow doesn't know
 which way to go, the woman says
 we must direct it

a log in the fire

a card escapes the deck
 shivers through
 the space between two wooden planks on the table

plunges from the dock

swims away

The woman climbs to the other
 side of the mountain
 sells a fig tree
 medjolle date shakes a whole new set of complications
 congruent images life has been this way
 a movement of causes and gestures
 situative, observed palatable because
 we require sustenance to trek further than an arm's
 reach from each other

image via image
 arrive woven in baskets

dead husks swept under grass rugs

Orange trees and babushkas scattered
 a field full of dips and carnivorous knives
 frog lips, sachets, empty pens, hermits and pilgrims

Someone places a beauty mark inside the woman's thigh
 an orphic perfume
 a plateful of zaytoons
 hymn books with graffittied pages

Even the ones we love disintegrate before our eyes
 even ones
 we love are only humble
 projections
 image per image

arrive.

From a seamless sea
the card sings for a sign

angel
take your hair down
let me climb

You must be congruent
to stay here she says
stepping into the stables

come out of the woodwork
she tells me, step into the lion's mane

I emerge from the birch tree's shadow
following, following

How will I get anywhere
I ask her
following

When did I become cast in the shade
of a non-existent tree

this series of shallow gestures
shrouded in movements and sounds

I'm told to do something
a woman's thing
make milk

she says it's simple
isolation

having no one to confirm
the shape of a cloud

it's a cell
it's prison
it's hell

I'll grow my hair long
I won't fight back

I also remember a descent

someone asks

are you as out of place here as I am

as though we're in a crowded bar

but there is no bar
there is no tree

even matter is a rich
malfunction

Apollinaire's rabbit in the desert, isn't there.
The bell jar becoming a bell tower
not there. Molière's moon staring
at reflections of France and lilacs

not there

Don't worry, I say to the rabbit
I don't worry, he says to me

4

Speak through me

I'm not ready to receive

use me as a vessel
furrow my leaves

I want to come and go
as oceans and oceans'
oceans

I relinquish my will
willingly, I will it
Godly to you

I want oceans

symmetry
men who walk with hands in their pockets
women on benches eating peaches, grass, that rabbit,
New York City

a plagueless world would keep none of these

I will go where you ask me to go

eat raisins when you want me
to eat raisins

Keep me on the big curve
riding the rip curl
the silence I need

and when I lose the capacity
to carry water--when the words
no longer accommodate
waves, all I'm left with is this
poem Forgive me for this
debris. I've dragged it onto shore
to build a sanctuary
It's the best lie I can tell.

Move me to grief

know me as two sounds
folding sounds

as paoursia's promise

a necessary leave

time piece

pause

Come quickly light
upon Ma'at's just feather
true water found underground
in canals, overtures' songs watching birds

Recede on an oceanless shore

I want oceans.

Precious wooden planks
I never found in my sleep
I never wished on the well

You don't have a shadow.

She's
taming the mane

Kind beasts startled by sounds
 as sounds are something other than
 undulations of air

will o wisps humble chimes
 a series of islands covered in reeds

This great holy war
 your lovingly compassionate
 intellect
 made of no material

I found her on the lake

 She was everywhere
 She placed the universe inside my heart long, gigantic flowing hair
 Light, white flowing garb

 She floated in the center of the song
 in the center of my heart

 churning the Milky way to butter

Nothing I've written is worth this breeze
 blessed by the sea
 seep through me
 seep through me
 you are the subtle sea

la femme numen
 bound in matter as light

 la femme noumen
 in corpore ascension

 feathers rising as steam

seeps through me

I lay my hand upon my mouth to witness not to disclose

this hand, this helpless protector of misused breath
 breath not of any ethical obligation

 an arbitrary wind
 a sophianic hymn, hailing

 perfumes and flightless wings

The second Adam does not emerge from behind my hand
 the virgin-mother does not carry an image of her son

no body knows each other

Nothing is worth this breeze
 seep through me

my subtle limb

an equally terrifying apparition of the Lamb
 this great day of wrath who can stand
 the world restored grace, angel

 Follow Rabi'a, Saint Teresa
 Daena, Inanna, Sophia, Fatima
 mother's undone deeds

pre-Edenic Eves

come quickly

7

Whose people are we
strolling on earth in our cotton panties
riding tandem bicycles, terrestrial artifacts
collecting tendons, fasting students uttering
arcane Egyptian spiritual signifiers

come
big hand, shine the mirror

refraction is just
remembering to breathe

small woman
larger than the world
wear your father's jacket

Part Four

*“Woe unto thee, if by thy country thou meanest Damascus, Baghdad, or any other city of
this world!”*

-Suhrawardi

*

The Simurgh swooped down from a dissipating cumulus formation in the desert sky. She eyed the stretch of world below her, shaded by her massive wings. Rock formations. Joshua trees. Scattered carrion flesh. She adjusted her flight to follow the course of a barely-present breeze, and as she did, she tilted her body upwards towards the sun—revealing a banquet of colors tucked away beneath her feathers. Thousands of feathers more than the grandest peacock, and each lined with a sliver of gold. The Simurgh stretched and retracted her massive claws. They were large enough to carry off an elephant or a whale had either been present in this wasteland. The Simurgh was tired and thirsty, but knew she must complete her search before returning home. She lowered her head and dropped closer to earth, slowly ending her majestic flight at the edge of rust-red cliff.

When the Simurgh approached Sophia asleep in a clump on the ground, she scooped her up in her talons and kissed her tenderly between the eyes. Then, she spoke.

“Sleeper, how long will you sleep? Arise! I am here to guide you.”

Sophia rolled over and mumbled in her sleep. “Oh, how much I look forward to the day when my struggle is over.”

“It’s close,” the Simurgh said.

Sophia opened her eyes. “Ahhh!” she squirmed from the Simurgh’s talons and crawled to cower behind a rock.

The benevolent bird shook her head. “Do not be afraid. I’m your truest friend. You were able to accept me in my human form. This is just another body.”

“But feathers?” Sophia cried. “I don’t know what to next expect.”

“Next time I will be light. Pure *Xvarnah*. For now, I’m here to carry you over the remaining mountains and valleys. I heard your pleas. You still have the seed. We have a long way to go.”

“I’ve come so far. I don’t know how much further I can handle.”

“You’ve already passed the first watch station. You’ve passed the realm of terrestrial earth.”

“I have?”

“The barren fig tree was a sign of the end.”

Sophia crawled out from behind the rock and hugged her knees to her chest. “How do you know the signs of the end?”

The Simurgh shuffled her feet and sharpened her toes against the mountain. “I am so old I have seen the destruction of the World three times over. I’ve been fettered and bound, but always found my freedom. I’m here to help you find yours.”

“Please do,” Sophia said. “When will I die and be relieved of my responsibilities?”

“There are two deaths, Sophia. You have already died the first. Do not beg for the second.”

“A second death?”

“After the first it may befall someone to die a second, final, death. This happens when her soul falls below itself—below its condition of a human soul, actualizing in itself all its bestial virtualities.”

“Beastly! My soul?”

“You are full of possibilities. It is the realm of the human soul that is the dwelling place of the demons. It is for each soul to decide whether its angelic or demonic capabilities are to flower inside it. After the first bodily death when the soul re-encounters its true Self, if it has lived a just life, it may choose to continue on in paradise. But if it cannot accept what it became while it experienced time on earth, it will be tossed into a dark and never-ending night, the deepest hole imaginable.”

Sophia gulped. “And the dark pit into which the pilgrim soul is cast...does that second darkness really last—forever?”

“Yes. Beyond the trumpet’s call. Beyond the final day of judgment.”

“Then I’m happy to be traveling with you, dear bird! I know you’ll prepare me for what’s to come.” Sofia placed a hand on the Simurgh’s strong beak and tilted her head to the side. “But what about God?” she asked. “Why do humans need angels at all? If there’s really an all-powerful God guiding us, can’t God alone suffice?”

The Simurgh shook her head and ruffled her feathers. “No, it is not certain that God alone suffices.”

Sophia nodded and gazed into the Simurgh’s wide eyes. The irises were the color of emerald stones, and the dark charcoal pupils contained the warmth of a kindled fire in a hearth.

“Where we are going,” Sophia said. “I see it in your eyes.”

“You see the world beyond Mountain Qaf. You see Hurqalya.”

“It looks familiar,” Sophia said. “I think it’s somewhere I’ve been.”

“You will remember how to return. Until then, I will keep you safe in my feathers.”

“How long will you stay with me?”

“Until the ark arrives. Then you will board Safina and cross the sea to complete your transformation.”

“But I’m so hungry! Before we go, please tell me, is there anything to eat?”

The Simurgh shuffled towards Sophia to part her lips with her beak. Then she lovingly regurgitated bits of leaves and fruits into Sophia’s mouth.

Sophia swallowed and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. “I feel much better now that I’ve fed.”

“Are you ready to begin our journey?”

She nodded and looked up to the sky. What entered her vision bewildered her eyes—thousands of birds migrating towards the sun, carrying tired travelers on their backs.

“Year after year they travel,” the Simurgh told Sophia, “crossing great spans of land. Many have spent their whole lives in flight. But of the thousands who heard the warning and undertook the expedition, only few will survive to reach the final goal. Some will drown in the ocean, others will crash on the highest peaks. Some will burn to ashes—flying too close to the sun. Others still, much like yourself, will become exhausted and collapse in the desert. Sadder yet, some will slay each other. It is not an easy flight. I nearly ended my own journey once.”

“You did?”

“Almost. Years ago, my flock crossed between two flanks of a giant mountain, through a green and fertile valley. We flew pleasantly on, passing all of the snares, and

paying no heed to the whistling hunters. Finally we reached the summit of the mountain where eight other summits stretched out before us. Their peaks were so high, Sophia, our eyes could not reach them in the distance. Us birds said to one another, ‘We must hurry on! We are not yet out of danger until we have passed through each of those mountains safe and sound—for in each, there is a party interested in keeping us from our quest.’

With great labor we passed beyond six of the mountains, one after the other.

When we had flown across the borders of the seventh, some of us said to the others, ‘Is it not time for us to rest? We are spent with fatigue! Surely we are far from the hunters now. We have traveled such a long distance. If we continue on, weary as we are, we are bound to perish.’ So we halted on the summit and there we found what resembled paradise—lush green gardens, beautiful palaces, fruit trees, waterfalls. So many delights refreshed our eyes! Lovely songs filled our ears, and we inhaled perfumes that even the most exquisite amber and musk could not approach. Our souls were confused and our hearts troubled by so much beauty.

We gathered fruits and quenched our thirst. We bathed in a sparkling stream. Then we said to one another, ‘Let us hasten! No snare is more dangerous than false security. We have already lingered too long in this place, pursuing vanities and pleasures. If we stay much longer, our quest will be forgotten and we will never leave.’

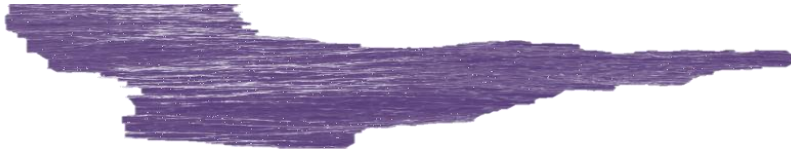
So we renounced that place. Though it was so pleasant there, our salvation was worth much more.”

“Let us be on our way,” Sophia said, standing on her feet. The Simurgh bent to her knees as Sophia took a running start and leaped upon her back. Then the Simurgh released her talons from the cliff, and with one glorious swoop, entered flight.

As she joined the wind, the branches of the trees on the distant mountains shook with such fervor that their seeds fell into the wind and floated to the farthest stretches of the earth—taking root to grow into plants yet unknown to humankind.

The approach of Safina...





Anna and the Island

The girl with long legs and lips like a frog's told Anna of this in the hotel salon—

"There is a woman living on the fourth floor in a room the size of three of my rooms with a balcony overlooking the Kasbah. She's lived in the hotel 29 years. She only comes out after midnight. The boys call her *shwuka*, crazy. Sometimes she says hello. Sometimes she doesn't laugh. They follow her with stones and stray dogs, but she always disappears before they have a chance to reach her. Last night she disappeared into a bucket."

I chewed a sprig of mint. Anna sat with her knees together, listening. I could tell she was upset, though I doubted it had much to do with the defeated resident wandering the streets of the medina at midnight. We'd seen her on several occasions before—clutching her purse to her breast as if her entire memory were kept inside. What disturbed Anna was the fact this woman was considered mad.

"I saw a man in the cemetery beating his wife with a cane," the frog went on. "I wanted someone to call the police, but no one did anything. They all just watched. That's how it is here." She shook her head. A curl of golden cedar fell from her hair and onto the table.

"Oh," Anna said. It was time for a change.

Anna roamed the streets eating everything in sight. When her money ran out she crawled back to the hotel in pain, swearing at herself so quietly she could have been happy. She wanted nothing but to eat more and kill herself.

"I thought the cure for grief was motion." I helped her to her feet. She walked to the mirror and removed her blouse, contemplating the bulge of meats and vegetables inside her stomach. Something she'd eaten had been cooked with too much oil. It showed in her face. I approached her from behind and placed my hands where her ovaries would be if she were inside out. "You have 'just eaten' belly," I said. She gave me a look through the mirror, then took off the rest of her clothes and turned to face me.

"I never know what I'm capable of until I've eaten it." The words were a plea for forgiveness. So I stripped down and pulled her as close to me as possible, and when it wasn't close enough, we wove in and out of each other in that way that didn't involve our bodies.

Who is Anna?

"This is us," she says. I am inside her, below her. But I only know her when I wake between days with the first call to prayer, and the moon is a half-eaten biscuit in the sky. I find Anna there, drooling on my pillow. She begins and ends the same. A lapse. A lull. At peace in my bed on a wet pillow.

"I want to fill your pond with fishes," I say.

Her eyes open suddenly. There is a knock on the door. I place a finger to her lips.

“Si Muhammad?” It is the voice of the doctor.

“I don’t know where I was born,” Anna mumbles.

“Si Muhammad?” A scuffling. A slip of paper is pushed underneath the door. The doctor hurries down the hall.

“You were not fit for purpose so they sent you to me.”

She asks about my mother and we both fall back asleep.

Under the midday sun Anna paused—tenderly holding a fruit in her palm. Unrushed, unmoved, she went to the fruit market alone. She always begins in the fruit market, holding fruits like condemned treasures. Today she touches them all. Even the moldy apricots that would have once repulsed her send a surge of energy through her arm as she holds them to her nose and inhales. Anna isn’t just selecting something to eat. She is selecting her future. She is sure of it. With this one choice everything will be decided.

Hakim watches from behind a curtain of plastic footballs hanging by strings from a sunworn canopy. He has been dusting off cans of peas all morning, and it is time to sweep the floor of his stall with the branch of a wilted palm. Anna stands in his way. He wishes to pour a pail of water over the filth on the ground, to send it swimming out into the street, but if he does that now all the dirty water will rush to Anna’s feet, soaking through the seams of her shoes and causing her toes to shrivel. All of yesterday’s chewing gum wrappers will cling to her shoes like barnacles.

“Choose,” Hakim tells Anna. He places a can of peas back on the shelf. “If you never choose, you will never arrive.”

“Can I come back later?” Anna shrugs.

“Then it is twice the work for me.” Hakim pushes a football away from his head and walks to stand at Anna’s side. “You have the scent of a lamb,” he says.

Anna closes her eyes and eases her arm slowly into a crate of nectarines.

The fruit she chooses is soft to the touch. It is a vagrant peach that has tumbled away from its fellow peaches in search of the nectarines two wooden crates below. Though the fall had been rough, and the peach is now collapsing in on itself through a variety of lesions and red-brown bruises, it has survived. The fuzz on its skin reminds Anna that it is out of place, and it reminds her of the back of her first lover’s neck where the smallest of his hairs had met with the collar of his shirt. She chooses this peach and immediately knows she will never eat it.

“This one,” she says.

Hakim shakes his head and sighs, removing himself from Anna’s side. He removes the dying fruit from her palm. “I will not sell you a stale adventure.” He digs through a crate of figs and dates, placing his choice in Anna’s hand. Anna squishes the fig gently between her fingers. “There is a place to stand at the edge of the ocean,” Hakim says, “between two rows of identical trees. It is a good place to eat your fruit.”

Anna nods and traces the memory of Hakim carefully in her mind, saving his face in the oldest portion of herself that still believes things can be saved. This is her wish: at the instant of her death all the moments she has ever saved will be re-granted to her in a downpour—spilled back into her, and over her, to bury her gently as sand.

Anna takes the fig, as well as the peach, and hands Hakim a coin. She smiles, though Hakim is not much affected by it. He has just decided he dislikes selling fruit in

stall 151 and would rather be spending a holiday in someone else's life, perhaps someone who sells used books in stall 24.

Anna leaves the market, and she leaves the old medina.

The urge for happiness follows her everywhere today. For a while it takes the form of a white napkin, whose company at her heel gives her a new sense of importance—a kinship. A responsibility. Anna must walk at a particular pace so as the pull of her personal gravity is just centrifugal enough to save her companion from the coddling grip of the greedy wind and the intrusive passerby's aesthetic sensibility. She succeeds in this mission, for a while, until the napkin discovers a pile of melted ice cream on the pavement and abandons Anna to lay itself to rest. Anna buys a loaf of bread and handful of olives to celebrate and fill the void. "Delicious," she says.

Of course she is lost on the way to the shore, though she's walked this path many times before. She never remembers which way to turn once she passes through the arch made of crumbling stone. It doesn't bother her to find a new way, or to step on uncrunched peanut shells, to arrive early or late to places she isn't expected. She has grown to love being lost, realizing that it happens all the time, and if she does not learn to love it she will soon hate her life. Today she can smell the ocean five miles from the shore. She follows the scent until she is as close to the distant trace of it as possible, then decides that is all she needs and she does not care if she ever arrives at the two rows of identical palms. She sits on a mound of green grey grass and removes Hakim's fig from her pack. Anna rolls it back and forth in her palm.

The birds above her sing their plea, "*La vérité! La vérité!*" Anna does not know why it has to be this way, but she believes it's a necessity. What is this?—Anna taps her brow with the fig—without this?—she knocks at the base of her tête, rolling the fig down the nape of her neck to the place where her spine miss-communicates with the stem of her brain. Is this the ultimate drainery? Is this the subterfuge? The place where all things half-understood cling to each other desperately struggling to stay afloat in a turbulent synaptic ocean? "*La vérité!*" This became an ossified mantra—sung to the marrow in Anna's bones. The birds made it so! They made it so Anna requires their plea and nothing more, not even her name. She wishes to abandon it for a gentle anonymity that she believes will relieve the world of some of its tension. "*La vérité! La vérité!*" She wishes to become a string. A thread. A wisp of lost web. A tightrope. A wire. A detached ceiling fiber—something to lead an impulse, an electron, a blind acrobat—from one solitary start to one solitary end. She would be happiest invisible in times of magic. But for now she is Anna on the mound of green grey grass, fumbling through her bag for a pair of recently purchased socks. She finds them and tears the tags off to examine the plastic t-shaped bit manufactured to hold the price-tag securely to the fabric. What is this piece? Anna holds it to the sun. What is it called? Often discarded. Rarely considered. Did it wish to see the ocean before it died? Anna suspects *yes* and holds it in her hand a moment longer before placing it carefully on a heart-shaped rock underneath a leafless tree. She stands to leave, but promises the plastic t she will return before the day is done and together they will find the way to the shore.

This is where I found her—hiding something small and preparing to leave the place she stood. I hid behind a tree and tossed stones at her head, watching her blame the

birds. When she picked up a rock and wound her arm for a kill, I gave myself up and grabbed her by the shoulders. “Not on my watch,” I said.

She screamed a little.

“You were going to kill a bird, Anna!”

She dropped the rock and sat back down, fondling the fig. “I still love. I love this fruit.” She reached in her pack and handed me a gone-off peach.

I grinned. “That’s appropriate. I’m damaged goods too.”

“Are you dying at an accelerated rate?”

“Sometimes.”

“Maybe I am too.”

“You think we’re like each other.”

A dromadaire passed by, carelessly swooshing flies back and forth with its tail.

“I have a picture of you,” Anna said. “You’re standing at the bath. You have *severance* tattooed on your back.” She swatted at a fly. Hard. It flew to me and landed on my cheek. “It’s easy for you,” Anna said. “You don’t feel anything anymore. I’m almost like you.”

She lifted a shredded garbage bag from underneath the tree. She lifted an abandoned toothbrush, barely bristles left. If her eyes had been any browner, nothing would have made sense. The reflection of the sky. Milkweed. Halos. Something floating in her right eye—two flecks of dust. Two continents merging then detaching from one another. “Goodbye,” they said. They circumnavigated her eye in opposite directions.

“The trees are shedding plastic leaves,” Anna said. “When will we be free again? Were we ever really here?”

“We can never go home again.”

“Do you sometimes feel you’re being held to the earth by an extra-ordinary gravity?”

“You were once so light-hearted I thought you’d float away.”

“That was before you broke my heart.”

“Your heart was broken before I ever left you. Once your mother breaks your heart there’s a stone in your chest in place of the flesh. You can never be broken again.”

The horizon shifted. The dromadaire returned. It began to urinate on an unimportant monument. Anna tossed the fig to its feet. Somewhere far away a man left his home with a rusted rake in hand. “For the clouds,” he said to his wife. “That is nothing,” he said of our lives—noticing us in his dream. He lifted the rake to the sky and began to ground a ripened cloud.

I led Anna from the hill to the shore where we borrowed a boat and rowed across the channel to a town where the houses had been built at the edge of the sea, without respect for the tides. The ocean rushed up the driveways delivering crab shells and sea salts onto the doorsteps.

“Is the doctor waiting for us?” Anna asked.

“He has something to show us.”

“Soup?”

“Soup and something else.” We rowed onto the beach. “We’re there,” I said.

“You can stop rowing now.”

“I’m almost there.” Anna cradled the oars in her arms until I pulled her from the

boat.

The doctor owned an off-shore building surrounded by tall trees and fruit-bearing hemlock. Red berry residue stained the walls of his residence from places the children used ripe fruit as paint and places the sun warmed the fruits as they slid down the walls leaving deep scarlet streaks reminiscent of blood. The building looked like death and smelled like a warm tarte.

The residents wandered. Some of them climbed trees. Some swam in shallow pools of crystal clear filtered water—though they did not know it was filtered at all and would have been just as happy contemplating the light shining off the slick bellies of the drowned dung beetles that Dr. Chaoun removed from the water's surface each morning.

"Ahh!" Dr. Chaoun greeted us at the door. He led us inside down the great room hall, excusing himself frequently from our company in response to a variety of bells and chimes. He scuttled from room to room, adhering to the nuance of each patient's whims.

He strained the pulp from a glass of orange juice for Monsieur DuPont.

"There is your hat," he told an old man.

"Would you sharpen this pencil?"

The doctor obliged.

And he sat at the edge of Ms. Nottingbyrd's bed, stroking her hand with whispered reassurance that, yes, the mountain would re-surface soon—perhaps just in time to witness her life—before sinking away again slowly, slowly.

"I'm awake every hour," the doctor confided.

"Do you miss sleep?"

He cocked his head.

The residents at White Leaf came to die in the comfort of Dr. Chaoun's arms. They arrived to die, but they'd had no plans to live, so no one would miss the things they never would have done. They hadn't lead lives tangled with obligations and dreams. They'd had no lovers. No notebooks with prayers. No children. No recipes. No invitations. As for Anna and I, we'd checked ourselves in. We were stowaways of sorts.

"I miss nothing," the doctor replied. He dashed away from Anna's side. "There's nothing as common as a relapse," he called.

"How many disorders are there?" Anna wondered. "A disorder for every order? Are there more? Do some things never have a place?"

"There's no order here," Dr. Chaoun returned. "Just lessons in panic. How to deal with it. How to overcome it. How to remain inside it, if you chose a sort of fatalistic approach to life. Which keys to dial on the telephone if you wish a friend to suffer an identical fate at the moment it overtakes you. This is now fully within our technological and emotional capacities. People really do such things." He paused to wipe his brow. "That's why I'll soon have nothing to do with people at all." He rushed away towards a ringing bell. "After this crop," the doctor called.

I pulled Anna to a window. "Look outside," I said. We watched a woman melting crayons in the sun.

"Once these have passed," Dr. Chaoun explained. "I'm focusing my attention entirely on a new project."

"Are those chocolate crayons?" Anna asked.

Dr. Chaoun reached for her hand. "Come up to the terrace. *Those* crayons are just

wax. I want to show you something.”

Anna refused to move from the window. “What is she doing?”

“Don’t worry about that.”

“But what is she *doing*?”

“She is relaxing. It is the same every day. When she does not know what time it is, when she does not know what else to do, she counts the apples and egg shells collected in her lap. She melts a box of crayons. It is always the same. When she forgets how to eat, she chews on the egg shells and tosses the apples to the ground in an attempt to break their skins. When all digestion fails, she sucks on her fingers. She says it tastes like her grandmother’s skin—and she believes she has the eye of Horus. Every day she fills the trenches beneath her eyes with melted wax.”

Anna sighed. “Is that what happens to girls like me? Do we want to go blind from the things we’ve seen?”

“Do you want to go blind?”

“Why does she scratch her chest like that?”

“It does not matter. Egyptian musk, Tuberose perfume. An allergic reaction to expired beauty products. Do not worry for her, Anna. She is not here to cure something that defines her. You are not her sister. Perhaps the sun marked a virgin in his presence, and she scratches to satisfy the itch of the burn. Lack of aloe vera, Anna. Come up to the terrace.”

“I don’t believe you,” Anna said. “I think she’s trying to remember something painful, and you won’t let her.”

“As you believe.”

“How long will she stay like that?”

“Until her day is unperceived. Excuse me.” He rushed away.

Anna turned to me in pain. “Suppose the days are shorter than the doctor prescribes? Will the inmates at White Leaf overdose on time?”

“I don’t know, Anna.”

“I wish you did. Look outside. I don’t trust this place. There are *orchids* in the desert. I don’t feel well.”

“If you want to leave, we should leave now.”

“It’s too late for that one,” Dr. Chaoun shook his head. He gazed out the window at a lavender hybrid sprouted from the sand. It had one petal left, hanging to its stem like a delicate farewell tissue. “Something always breaks to indicate departure,” Dr. Chaoun said. “A bottle on a hull, a heart, bread.”

“It’s always goodbye,” Anna could barely stand.

“Is that a fact?”

“She acclimates too quickly to her environment,” I said.

“I’m sure it will be her end.” The doctor wiped his hands. “Come up to the terrace, my good friends. I want to show you the butterflies. They are my new affiliates.”

“What? These things?”

They had begun to swarm the window. Thousands of minuscule butterflies.

“No, not those,” Doctor Chaoun smiled. “I want to show you my *artificial* butterflies. I think you’ll enjoy them. They’re an impossible yellow, and they fly in very straight lines.”

Anna slumped against the wall amid the silent flutter of 40,000 wings.

“I think she needs some soup,” I said.

“Mademoiselle has quite the appetite.”

I sat at Anna’s side. “She exists in many places at once. She gets hungry.”

“What does she do in so many places?” the Doctor asked.

I placed my hand on Anna’s head. Anna closed her eyes. “We search for us,” I told the doctor. “In all possible worlds.”

Anna wanted to speak, but her mind was re-arranging itself again, and she was trapped somewhere inside it. She could only watch as things like pancakes became snowflakes. Highways led to headboards. Train stations disintegrated. The trains had nowhere to go.

“Will you find some soup for her?” I asked.

“You’ll be gone by the time I return.”

“I’ll wait.”

“Do you even remember coming here?”

“Thinking forwards or backwards?”

“Displace time.”

“I don’t know. I must be forgetting. I know we made it halfway. We were stowed away on a ship loaded with contraband. The air was so cold. We built a fort of life vests and slept inside it to stay warm.”

“That was the first time.”

“Someone found us. You found us—and fed us and clothed us to look like the locals. No one knew where we came from, so they labeled us a thousand faulty titles. We didn’t care. I don’t know why we were so unhappy.”

“That’s the thing about memories,” Doctor Chaoun sighed. “You can just replace them.” He left us to tend to his butterflies.

Mi'raj-Namah
(the ascent)

I

As Safina travels Far North, her passengers grow weary. They have not yet become aware of their situation. They only watch as all that was once familiar drifts further from sight.

They continue to live their terrestrial lives, while at the same time, aboard the ship, Doctor Chaoun and Doctor Liu help them to adapt to the emerging earth of Hurqalya. Each passenger must be adequately prepared for the final stations in ascension. In order to enter the hidden cities behind the rising mountain, all voyagers must be ready to pass beyond the evidence of their senses. Those who require particular assistance are transferred to Dr. Chaoun's private island hotel. The hotel itself is a roaming residence—never quite at home atop one continent or another—it floats carelessly across the surface of the ocean, attaching and re-attaching itself to land masses as it sees fit. Its inhabitants scratch their heads at the bizarre changes in season and ever-shifting horizons.

There are times the hotel passes Safina at sea. If Dr. Chaoun has not been successful in fully transferring passengers from one locale to the next, they run the risk of suffering the bewildering jolt that comes upon discovery of counter-images of themselves aboard the passing vessels.

2

The closer Safina moves towards the Far horizon, the faster the memories of her passengers fade. Their pasts—the events occurring below the osculating chords on the vertical time spindle—are under their feet, as the ship rises, octave per octave, higher on the sea.

No one remembers pain, though some still feel the sting of it from time to time and are confused by the sensation, with no remedy or explanation. They act as infants who do not know the origin of their desires, but instinctually respond with suckling lips, fits of tears, and self-indulgent rest.

3

The day Ms. Nottingbyrd arrived, the clock on the mantle stopped ticking. She noticed this while propping her carpet bag open on a rattan chair. She sat at the edge of her bed, disturbed, and wondering *how?* It was an innocent enough inquiry. “How?” she asked the clock.

Ms. Nottingbyrd eyed the reserve candies inside her carpet bag. She unwrapped them, one by one, lining each pretty pastel mint on the bed-cloth for later. Jane Nottingbyrd loved these candies, despite their tendency to melt too quickly. Upon remembering this, she collected the mints from her bed and cradled them in her palms.

The clock on the mantle was stuck at three. Jane's carpetbag remained open. Though she had not packed clean socks or any of her jewelry, Ms. Nottingbyrd felt prepared. She faced her reflection in the clock's brass base, and as the ship bowed up and down on the waves, she watched as her reflection disappeared into the fireplace, then reappeared again in the base of the clock. With each ebb and flow, Jane was there then not there. She enjoyed this resurfacing of her identity, always at three o'clock.

Dr. Chaoun had sent her an invitation sealed with red wax and no stamp. She'd been surprised that anyone was aware of her general discontent with life—of the broken glasses in her kitchen cabinet, the amount of paperwork piled on her desk in Minnesota, her two married cousins so ashamed of her mistakes they refused to introduce her to their sons.

Jane had lived in an apartment building next to the textbook company for which she worked. She had translated books from English to French; her translations were mostly fair. She had been married once, but her husband left her for a woman who baked mostacoli in ceramic dishes. Jane did not bake. She smelled somewhat like a mole and often resembled a gopher. There were many rodent-worthy attributes to Jane Nottingbyrd's life, particularly the way she burrowed into her computer for comfort at night, or the confused mousy twitch that overtook her face when she lost her way down winding streets.

Dr. Chaoun visited her port-side room every day at three o'clock. He checked her pulse and nodded his head in satisfaction as it slowed. "You are relaxing," he said, though she did not believe it. "You are relaxing," he told her.

How had she come to pass in Dr. Chaoun's care? Jane did not remember having answered the invitation, but she had, before it came, in that way that quiet loneliness tends to prepare its host for annihilation.

*

Jane was admiring what the wind had done to her hair when she heard the door close behind whoever had just entered her apartment. She was not alarmed. She did not call 'hello'. She'd made it long and hard with no interruptions and knew she was due for one.

He chose apartment 217 because he'd wanted to choose 317, but found he was too overweight to walk the extra flight of stairs to the third floor. The lock on the door was easy to pick. The gun was cold against his hip. His shoes were covered in slush and mud. He didn't have a plan beyond the number and the gun. He'd left his room needing a change; he wanted to take something, maybe, or leave something behind. He wasn't sure yet.

Jane turned off the bathroom light and walked down the hall leading to her living room. The intruder stood in the center of the room, shivering. His motions were faster than her thoughts. The gun was pointed at her forehead.

“Who are you?” she thought she said.

He looked at the straps on her camisole. They reminded him of something delicate and edible from a restaurant in which he could not afford to eat. He suddenly did not want to hurt her, but maybe save her in a white box for later.

He was still thinking of snow when he pulled the trigger.

Jane did not flinch.

“Who are you?” she said.

The intruder pointed the gun, again at the woman’s head, at a raised brown freckle on her curve of her cheek. He thought if maybe he could remember something about the street on which he’d been born, something about a broken pencil in high school—something. He pulled again, and again. And the gun made two sounds. The woman felt nothing.

She watched the intruder furrow his brow. She was not sure what decision he had to make, but believed he was always in the process of making it. She thought if maybe she removed her clothes he would be better able to capture what it was he was after. Jane lifted her arms and unlaced the string at the nape of her neck.

The intruder watched the skin on her forearms. He couldn’t remember his daughter. He couldn’t remember a large glass bowl with two scoops of sifted flour inside—or the way his daughter took the back of a spoon and created a soft, smooth path in the flour, resembling the trail a sled makes when pulled through new-fallen the snow. “For the eggs to rest in,” she’d said.

Jane removed her clothing and stood naked. The intruder pulled the trigger again. He stopped shaking and sighed.

“What is it you need?” Jane asked.

He placed the gun to his forehead, wishing to see something in the woman’s eyes that would lead him to an answer. He wanted her eyes to reveal a secret, but her eyes were much too deep. He could not find the secret inside them. It was lost like a tiny spider tossed into the ocean.

He dropped the gun.

There had been a market where he purchased milk. He’d rushed in before closing then halted at the seafood tank towards the back of the store. There it was; a brown lobster, sitting in the corner of an otherwise empty tank. Its claws were taped shut with electric tape. Its black eyes stared absently into space. The seafood butcher stood to the side, closing up shop for the night—packing fishes on ice and piling plastic crates near the loading door. The man bent to the tank and stared inside at the sole brown lobster. The supermarket lights were bright, but inside the lobster’s tank was blue. This was the last lobster.

Bubbles rose to the surface of the water. The lobster’s antennae swayed.

“I’ll take that one,” he said.

The sound—the gun on the hardwood floor—startled them back to the moment. Jane searched for a clock on her wall, but she had never had one. The intruder looked at his wrist for a watch, but he had never worn one. They were alone again.

He bent to the floor and reached for the strap of the woman’s camisole. He felt the lace between his fingers and wished he was clean shaven. He wanted to be somewhere else. Why was this woman still alive? Why wouldn’t she take him there? She knelt beside

him on the floor.

“Will you touch me?” she thought she said.

He did not remember the way his daughter laughed when she dropped the eggshells in the batter.

“Will you touch my cheek?” Jane said.

He lifted a hand to her shoulder and let it float above her skin. The intruder and Jane remained this way, frozen on the hardwood floor, until two invitations from Dr. Chaoun appeared underneath the door.

4

*Who steers this ship? Who guides this course?
There is no captain. The ship knows the way.*

5

As Safina approaches the eighth climate, she crosses the confluence of two seas, where warm waters meet with cool glacier melt-off. The passengers feel the heavy pull of the emerging mountain, and they hasten their goodbyes—composing letters, prayers, and poetry which they stow in chests of aracia wood underneath their beds. The more verbal of these voyagers creep to the dock at dark, making their way to the hull of the ship where they scream severe twilight locutions. Their words reverberate starboard, then westward, towards improper eternity.

6

The Darkness stretches out before Safina as she approaches the northernmost Pole. She shudders in the darkness, considering a return. No longer wishing to carry her passengers, her pleas fold into their own.

*if I had a body, I would will it to you.
in corporeo ascension*

*take my planks
take my anchor
my compass*

*they are yours. my direction
my passengers*

*I will them to you.
I want only oceans.*

We sat in a hut made of life jackets and compared the scuff marks on our shoes. Death hadn't jarred us. We'd died before. We knew we'd die again. I would always be at her side. Sometimes as a rock she carried with her in her apron. Sometimes as her lover, her stockings, her friend. I do all I can to keep her close to me—and when she takes her time, I wait.

*

Fatima and I first met on an airplane from London to NYC. I showed her a picture of the Mojave, where we would meet for the second time—though I didn't tell her that. See I still had a memory of our future, from our past life together, but I didn't want to distress her with the knowledge. She didn't remember anything. This was usually the way with us. Fatima forgot before I did, so I was the one who began our race. I started by planting as much endurance inside her as I could, knowing well that when I became tired and dropped the baton, she would be the one who carried us through to the end.

“Do you have any siblings?” I asked.

She peered from behind the Sky Mall magazine. “Is that the word for sisters?”

“Sisters or brothers.”

“I have none.”

“I've always wanted one. Can I ask your name?”

“My name is Fatima,” she adjusted her scarf. “I've always wanted a sibling, too.” She smiled. Oh that smile. It was the same every time, no matter what she called herself.

“Do you know anyone where you're going?” I asked.

Fatima shook her head.

“You're brave,” I told her.

“My father thinks I'm crazy.”

“Have you moved alone before?”

“I've never left my village.” She reconsidered. “I left once. My aunt took me to Isfahan.”

“What about London?”

“It was a stopover. Why are you leaving your family?”

“I'm not. I already did. I left a long time ago. I'm just returning from a business trip.”

Fatima studied my face. “You left a long time ago, but you look so young.”

“I left when I was eighteen. I'm thirty years old. You look young yourself.”

“I'm twenty-three. My father would welcome me back if I wanted to return. You could return too, to your family?”

“It's different in the States,” I told her. “Once you hit a certain age you're expected to leave. You have to build a life for yourself. It's shameful if you return.”

Fatima hesitated before she shook her head, “This is the problem with America.”

I popped a peanut and shrugged. She returned to her magazine. I tapped my foot in pace with the hum of the fuel-jet motors. A mother in the seat behind us hushed her crying child. I asked Fatima, “Do you know what's inscribed at the base of the Statue of Liberty?”

She closed the magazine. "Sir, what is inscribed at the base of Liberty?"

"Don't call me sir," I smiled. "That's reserved for old men and patriots."

"It's respectful, yes?"

"I haven't earned your respect. But I know the inscription. It might be a step. Can I read part of it for you?"

"From your memory?"

"It's just the end," I waved down the flight attendant for a gulp of water. Then I cleared my throat for presentation's sake. "*Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand, a mighty woman with a torch whose flame is the imprisoned lightning, and her name: Mother of Exiles. 'Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door.'*"

Fatima bowed her head. Her lashes fluttered as she did. "I have respect for your home."

"I have no home. Neither do you. Want to see a picture of the desert?" As if she had a choice. I handed her the photo.

"This is America?" she asked.

"That's what all the fuss is about."

"This...wasteland?"

"That's the word. Want to turn the plane around? No, it's not all like that. That's just one place. You'll see."

She nodded politely and returned to the Sky Mall magazine. She was fascinated.

*

When we landed in Lille, it wasn't been planned. Something was wrong with the cargo carrier.

Those who first saw the smoke were the farmers, dropping their tools to wave their arms. I saw it too—from the seat I'd chosen in front of the plane's left wing. The pilot made an announcement.

"*There is a slight problem. We'll be touching down shortly. Don't be alarmed. Please remain calm.*"

Fireman gathered, running with heavy hoses. The stairs came down, but the doors wouldn't open.

"*Please leave the aircraft now.*"

"We can't you bloody fool!" the mother called.

The farmers observed from the fields.

"They're growing peas," I said.

"Someone open the door! Break open the door!"

"*Please leave the aircraft now.*"

"Peas?" Fatima asked.

"Do you see the pods?"

She shook her head. I pointed. "Those are pea pods clinging to that farmer's face."

As the underwater mountain becomes visible, a fountain of pure white water leaps from the highest peak. This tree of water solidifies to ice the moment it hits the air, spreading out like a snowy tree against the midnight sky and immediately bearing ripe winter fruits; pomegranates, glistening pears, bunches of succulent oranges.

*Safina drifts into the ninth climate, approaching the final station.
Mount Hukairya continues to rise from the sea. the station
of no stations*

*At the moment of inversion, the weather changes. The extreme west—the warmest sea, covered by shadows and fine black sand—rumbles in violent ecstasy, spewing forth bits of deeply buried ocean residue. Squids' dried ink. Sulfurous algae. Phosphorous coral chards. The sky sheds all traces of Darkness, changing from black to dawn, and suddenly it is morning. The wandering stars disappear into the incorruptible light of the suns—thousands of suns orbiting together, each outshining the rest. The many moods of these celestial spheres create delightful smells and colors as they revolve around
the circling heads Hukairya's peak.*

Mount Hukairya breaks open to reveal a second mountain incased in its shell; this is Mountain Qaf, the mountain of the dawns, the source of all the other mountains in the world. That is, all mountains and ranges are but lateral projections originating from Qaf's center. Mount Qaf is the first mountain to receive the rays of dawn each morning, although this warmth is not necessary. Qaf's rocks emit their own light. Qaf's soil emits its own light. The entire mountain is luminous without the aid of a sun. All imaginable treasures cling to the edges of Qaf's cliffs—houris, castles, pastures of green grass, rubies, sapphires, marjoram, gardens of myrtle, sweet royal basil, jasmine, emeralds, yellow campak vines.

Safina's passengers hang over the edges of the ship, dumbfounded by what they see. All lofty constructions of conscious thought become blurred in the rays of this dawn.

Anna leans over the balcony on the port side of the ship, gazing into the glittering fruit tree as it melts under the suns. The water collecting at the base of the tree forms a crescent-shaped cove upon which the ripe fruits from the branches above become reflected. Anna stretches over the edge of the ship and reaches for a pear. As she breaks it from the waiting branch, a light sparks from the cove, and moving upon the water, a soft figure appears. Ocean drips from her garments. Seaweed clings to her arms. Splay and foam are wound together tangled in her hair.

The figure approaching Anna is tall and free from layers of Darkness. In her face she carries the beauty and brightness of extreme youth, combined with the trusted gravity of an old Sage. Anna immediately recognizes her.

“You are my fravashi,” she says.

“I am,” Aischa nods.

“You don’t look the same way I remember you.”

“You see me as you are able to receive me.”

Anna peels a strip of kelp from Aischa’s wrist and drapes it around her own. “Where are we going now?” she asks.

“To the Orient. The cities beyond Mount Qaf.” Aischa motions to the assembly of Archangels gathering at the base of the mountain. Then she leads Anna to the main deck on the ship where Anna wraps an arm around the foremast and pushes her hair away from her face.

As Safina draws nearer the Archangels, her passengers are no longer able to see the projections of their shadows on the dock.

“We’ve arrived,” Cameron says, approaching Anna at the mast. “To not cast a shadow is to be at the center. In this light, we cast none. Our presence is a dim reflection.”

The passengers who cannot stand the light retreat to their bunks and hide. Some jump overboard and splash frantically in attempts to swim away. Others close their eyes and wish themselves back to their terrestrial lives.

“Should we try to help them?” Anna cries. “Won’t they be punished for closing their eyes?”

“It would be absurd to chide those who refuse the Feast,” Aischa responds. “Their refusal inspires only sadness and compassion. Now Anna, keep your gaze forward. We are fast approaching Civanti Bridge.”

Anna raises her eyes and catches sight of a wooden bridge stretching over the sea. It leads from the head of Safina’s mast to the base of Mountain Qaf.

“It is time for you cross,” Aischa says.

“Alone?” Anna asks.

“Alone. If your life has been just, the bridge will remain wide. You’ll cross with haste to the other side.”

“But I’ve made mistakes!”

“Mistakes are expected. It’s your intentions that are judged. If your intentions weigh darker than your deeds, you will be faced with a narrow bridge, and it will be a long and dangerous journey through the stations of Detention. They are hostile places, Anna, but you must pass through them, for if not, you will fall through the sea to the deeply dug pits where the wicked are housed in Darkness.”

“Oh, tell me please if I ever did anything to befall that fate!”

“That’s not for me to say. We are approaching Mithra at the bridge. She is the Divinity of Covenant and Oath, and you must prepare to face her.”

*The ocean rises and embraces Safina in its resplendent limbs.
“Let go of your knots!” Dr. Chaoun cries. His patients obey and open their eyes.*

*nafs Sea, ship, and horizon are one.
A blanket of light wraps this event and pulls Safina upward.*

Anna hugs Cameron goodbye and rushes towards Civanti Bridge.

At the mouth of the bridge appeared an arch made of stone. Mithra was nowhere in sight. Anna turned back and watched as Safina faded into the brilliant light behind her. Then she adjusted the bracelet of kelp on her wrist and turned forward again. The path ahead of her was void of all light. A thick fog concealed what lie further on. Anna stepped through the arch made of crumbling stone and began her journey towards the mountain.

Civanti Bridge remained wide, to Anna's relief, though the passage was darker than night. As she made her way across each wobbling plank, Anna began to sense that the bridge was rising up through the foggy sky. She could no longer make out the ocean below her, only a deep, shadowy hole. She also sensed the bridge was elongating for no matter how far she walked it seemed as though she would never make it to the other side.

"Come nearer," a voice spoke in the dark.

Anna halted and covered her face with her arms.

"Nearer," the voice repeated.

Anna did not see, nor apprehend, the source that called her near, for that which has no form, cannot be apprehended. Trembling in fear, she lowered her arms and took a few steps further—driven by an instinctual urge to gratify. A gust of warm air moved through her hair and wrapped around her shoulders. Anna grabbed her stomach filled with dread and threw-up over the side of the bridge. Avocado pits and sesame seeds fell through the fog into the abyss. Anna shuddered. Nothing was certain to her anymore. Even her own doubt felt unsure. Was this a station of Detention? Was this part of a punishment? Was she meant to walk forever insecure with no end in sight? The voice from the Nothingness spoke again.

"Fear not, Anna."

Anna raised her eyes. She saw only darkness. Oh, how much she wanted Aischa and Cameron to be waiting for her at the end of the bridge! But Anna knew she had to cast off all bonds to fear and hope before she could proceed—for fear and hope were still failings pertaining to the states of sensible creation. She straightened her spine and continued to creep along Civanti Bridge.

Appearing through the fog, Anna arrived at two gigantic doors. Engraved in a plaque above the entrance, and barely distinguishable in the dark, were the words 'Museum of Artifacts'. Anna gulped. She pushed on the doors, but they did not budge. She knocked and waited then pushed again. Again, the doors resisted. Anna shoved once more with all her might, and the museum doors slowly opened to reveal an enormous marble hall filled with an assortment of ornaments, photographs, letters, and other curious relics. Anna took a deep breath and immediately knew that these were objects gathered from her life and now set before her to aid in a forthcoming reconciliation, though with what or whom she was destined to reconcile, Anna was not yet aware. She took another deep breath and entered the doors into the museum hall.

As Anna wandered through the corridors of the Museum of Artifacts, she touched each relic with terror and awe, shaking her head in disbelief. The things she saw hung on the walls, stuffed in jars, and displayed on pedestals gave her a sick, remorseful feeling. These were not objects from the pleasant moments in her life. These were representations of something *awful*. She did all she could to look away, but the artifacts had a pull of

their own and she could not resist lingering at each display, trying to understand its significance. She clutched her stomach and spoke to herself in a small, quivering voice.

"I don't even remember doing some of these things."

"But you did," Mithra said, appearing from behind a glass case filled with bile.

"Some are physical events. Others are constructs from your mind. Either way, you once suffered through them before you chose to forget. And, there is also this," Mithra handed Anna a monstrous papyrus scroll. "Read it from end to end. It will cause the secret of your adventures to dawn upon your consciousness."

"But this looks like everything I've ever done wrong!" Anna cried.

"It's your questionable moments that most define you."

"Are those the only moments you saved? What about the rest of them? What about the things *I* saved? I remember saving happy moments, hundreds of them at least—the best of my life."

"They're waiting for you, Anna, but these must be first faced. These are the moments you wouldn't dare to save. You did all you could to forget them, though you must remember them now. You must confront yourself in your most complete form. If you can face that Self without crumbling in grief, and if you are able to forgive yourself and all others who did you harm, I will allow you to continue across Civanti Bridge."

Anna nodded and sat in a chair, placing the scroll in her lap.

As she read through each fateful page, she discovered there, stage by stage, all her life's actions set out one by one—all that her soul had ever been or done—all the wrongs she had ever inflicted upon others, and all wrongs that had befallen upon herself. Being re-immersed in these actions haunted Anna like a dreadful dream. She knew she could forgive those who had done her harm, but how could she forgive herself for the harms she'd done? Anna's past sins silenced her breath. She began to shrink in shame. She was becoming afraid that to continue reading would merit her second, final death, as she was sure that Mithra would soon decide to toss her over Civanti Bridge.

Anna trembled in her chair and put down the scroll, and from behind the heavy doors Cameron entered the room dressed in a freshly-pressed suit. His hair was combed to perfection. Seeing him calmed Anna's nerves, and she smiled as she asked the question.

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm the curator," Cameron said.

Anna put down the scroll. "You're what?"

"I'm the curator of the museum."

Anna turned desperately to Mithra than back to Cameron. "It's *your* museum? You're the one who's been collecting my questionable moments all this time?"

"I've done it to protect you," Cameron said. "I've been more sincere than anyone could have been."

"What about *your* life?"

"My day will come."

"I think you've dishonored me by what you've done."

"There's no honor in forgetting."

"But do you see what's here? All these awful things? Do you know what's written in these scrolls?"

“I helped to write them.”

“You should wait outside. I’m having trouble enough as it is.” Anna looked back to Mithra. “Is that why he’s been with me all this time?”

“That is untrue,” Mithra said. “Cameron is your beloved friend. He has done you no harm.”

Cameron bowed his head and left the museum through the heavy, marble doors.

Anna took a moment to collect herself before returning to the scroll. She was determined to make it through to the end without falling to pieces. As she read further on, it was not the worldly events that worried her the most, but rather something that had occurred long before she’d been born on earth. The more Anna read, the more she understood that it was *she* who had led her own Self into the cycle of slavery. At the prologue to her own pre-history, predetermining the sequence of her own falls, it had been *she* who had abandoned her eternal Self in exchange for the chance to experience life and death. She had once been whole, as Aischa said; she had once been part of her fravashi. But she had chosen to experience separation. Anna began to understand that separation had been necessary—that every contract for freedom had to contain its opposite, and had Anna never left the paradise from where she began, she never would have been able to make the choice to return again. She recalled the words of her angel: *You weren’t born for anyone but yourself*. Had that really been true? Had she only been meant to lead herself back to Herself?

Anna studied the scroll until she thought she’d go blind. The letters began to blend and the events from her life began to recede one into the other, until Anna could no longer distinguish right from wrong, ‘A’ from ‘B’, or survival from enlightenment. She imagined the ink lifting from the pages and returning to the well. The pages of the scroll deconstruct- ing to the inner pith of papyrus stems. The seeds she had hurled over the side of the bridge returned to their mother trees, and all the events from Anna’s past peeled away from her heart. Anna put down the scroll. The totality of accidents and stains that had been smeared upon her had not been hers alone. They had belonged to the world. They were just something that had adhered to her due to the fact of her existence on earth. She exhaled and began to feel her spirit levitating. Choosing this life hadn’t been a betrayal of her true Self; it had been an act of spiritual chivalry. It had been necessary for a part of Anna to forfeit grace, for only then did she have the ability to turn back and direct her gaze in contemplation of the source. If she had never divided herself, she would have never come to know herself in all her infinite possibilities. Realizing this, Anna felt each wrong she’d experienced becoming purified, abolished, and blotted away. The suns shown down through the museum windows and lit the pedestals. The unpleasant pictures and objects from Anna’s life began to dissolve into speckles of dust, before quickly reconstructing themselves into objects and photographs from all the blissful moments Anna had saved. Anna sprung to her feet, rushing from object to object with warm tears in her eyes and a renewed energy. Her spirit felt so light! She was sure it would ascend through the museum ceiling and dissolve into the suns with the freedom of a thousand birds clapping against the sky. She knew her spirit would leave her body behind, once and for all inside the museum, as if it were just another one of the many artifacts. Anna realized it was towards this feeling she had been summoned her entire life by a devouring nostalgia.

“You have a choice,” Mithra smiled. “Continue on to paradise with Aischa at your side. Build a life in Hurgalya. It will be your truest home. Your friends and loved ones will be there, where all spirits reside.”

“Or the other choice?” Anna asked.

“Oblivion,” Mithra said. “Lose Yourself, then lose the loss, then withdraw from all you’ve lost again.”

“To do it all over again?”

“With a stronger heart, a wiser soul. You’ll make mistakes, but that’s the world.”

Anna hesitated only for a moment, then bowed her head to Mithra and ran outside to where Cameron was waiting at the doors. She fell into his arms and he kissed her on the forehead.

“I’ve always been your brother,” Cameron said. “I am the big, white mountain.”

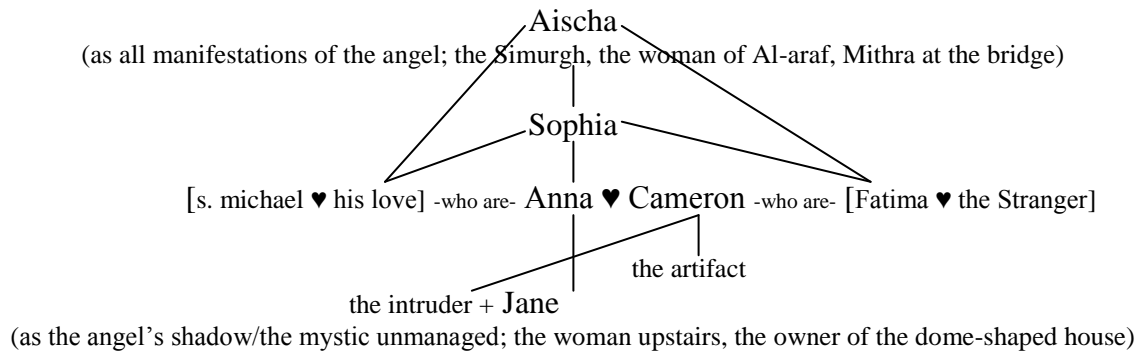
The museum dissolved into the light. The bridge dissolved into the air. The lovers stood at the edge of paradise, just an arm’s reach from the source. A spiraling staircase appeared beside them, descending through the clouds. It lead back to earth.

“Do you know what’s next?” Cameron asked.

“Yes I do,” Anna said. She placed her hands on his chest. “We go down.”

Images and Letters

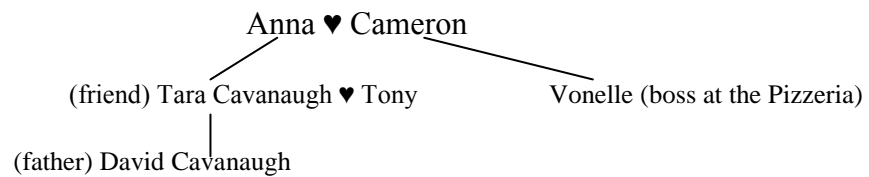
Onboard
(the bill of fare)



Others

Dr. Chaoun and Dr. Liu
Professor Reza
Lila and Jennifer
G., the crossing guard
nameless, faceless Dominican monks
America

The Convalescents







Ms. Nottingbyrd's reserve candies





Isis, wall painting c. 1360 B.C.



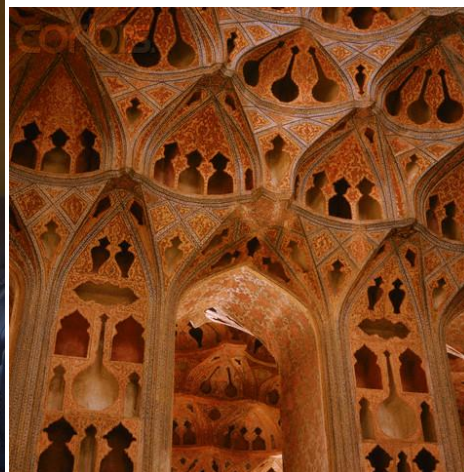
the yellow apartments



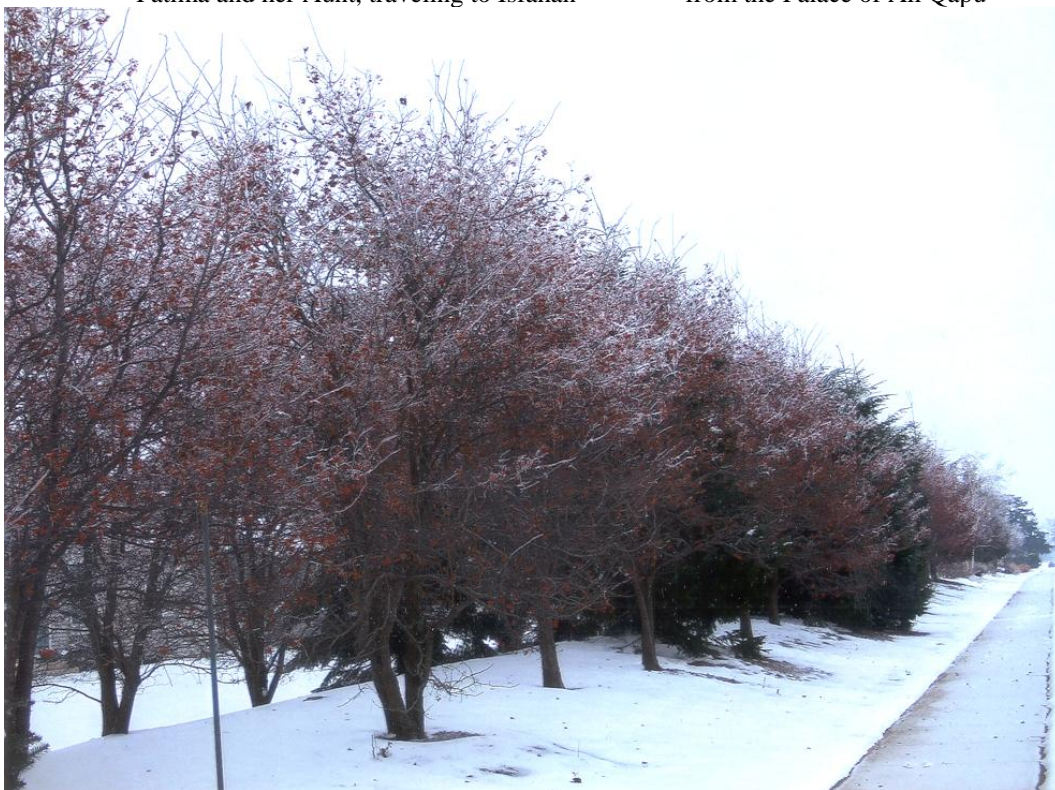
Chicago



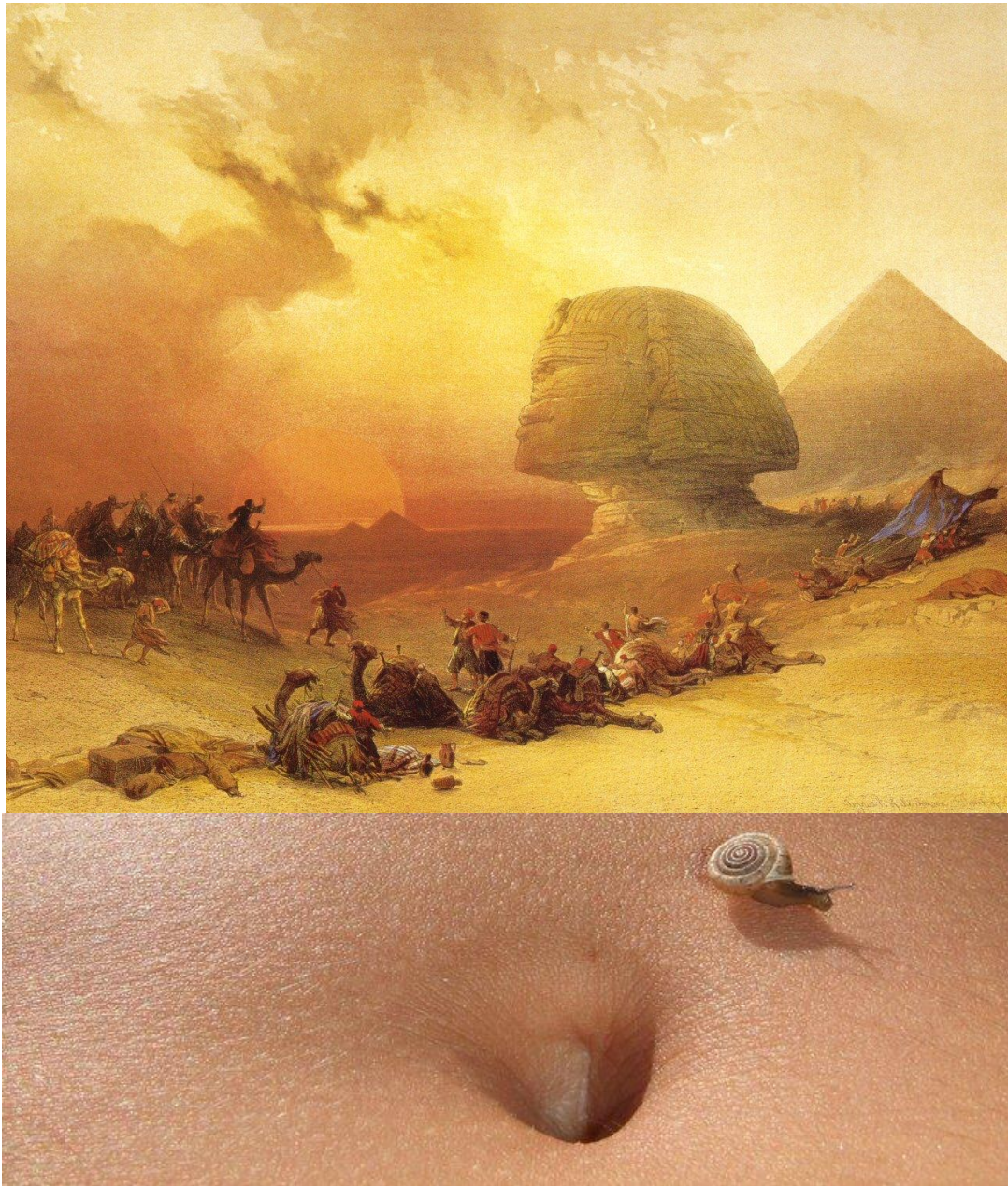
Fatima and her Aunt, traveling to Isfahan



from the Palace of Ali Qapu



David Roberts, *The Approach of the Simoon at Giza*



Dear Tara, I hope you always escape the abyss. ♥Anna



from Anna's collection of Matryoshka jewelry



Huntley, Illinois

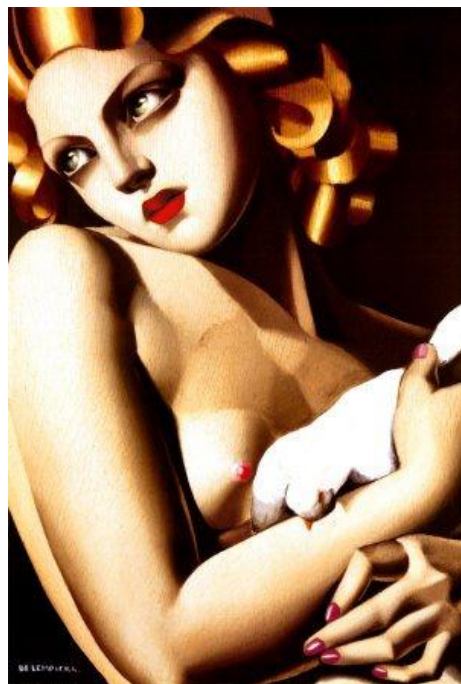


David on leave 1972 (photographed with his mother); Tara and her grandfather picking cherries

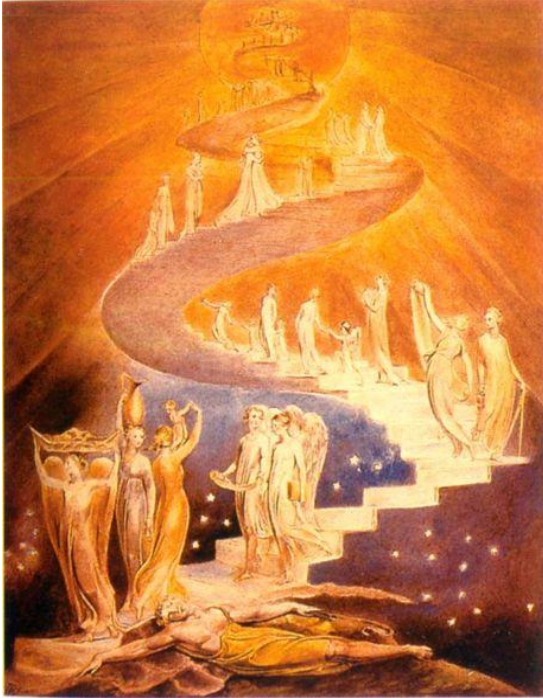


The Convalescent
by Tamara DeLempicka

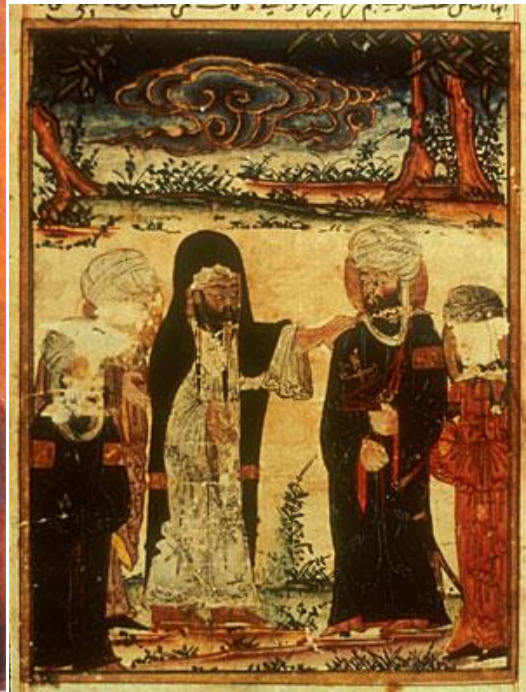
Mount Damavand, Iran, by George Gerster



Femme a la Colombe, by Tamara de Lempicka



Jacob's Ladder, by William Blake



The Investiture of Ali, at Ghadir Khumm

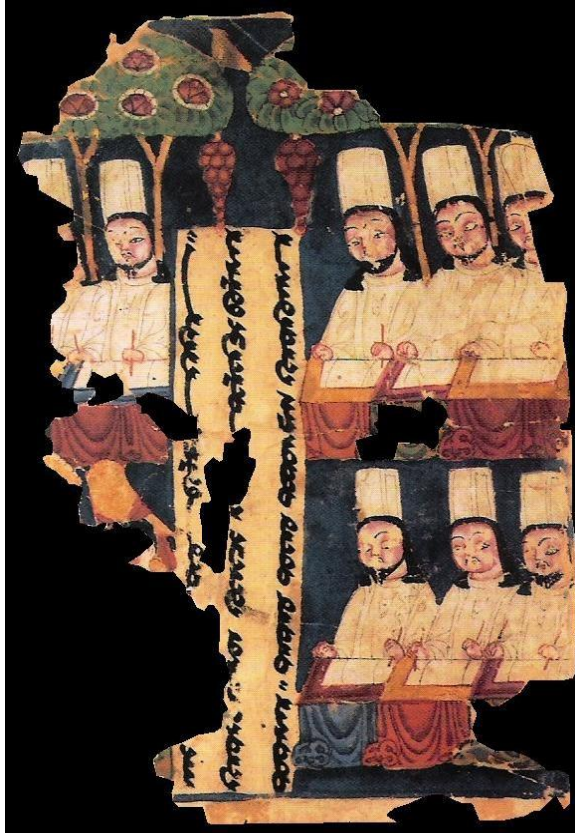




walking around inside a doll's house



Manichean priests writing at their desks, from Khocho, Tarim Basin



Fatima's painting of Aischa, oil on cloth



from the Palace of Ali Qapu

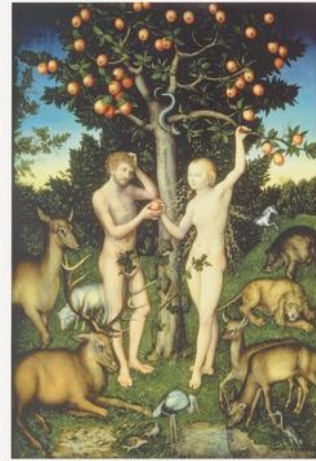
Pineapple juice coated steak knife and sun, from the Museum of Artifacts



Mithra



Paesaggio di Xvarnah, Antologiapersiana, 1398



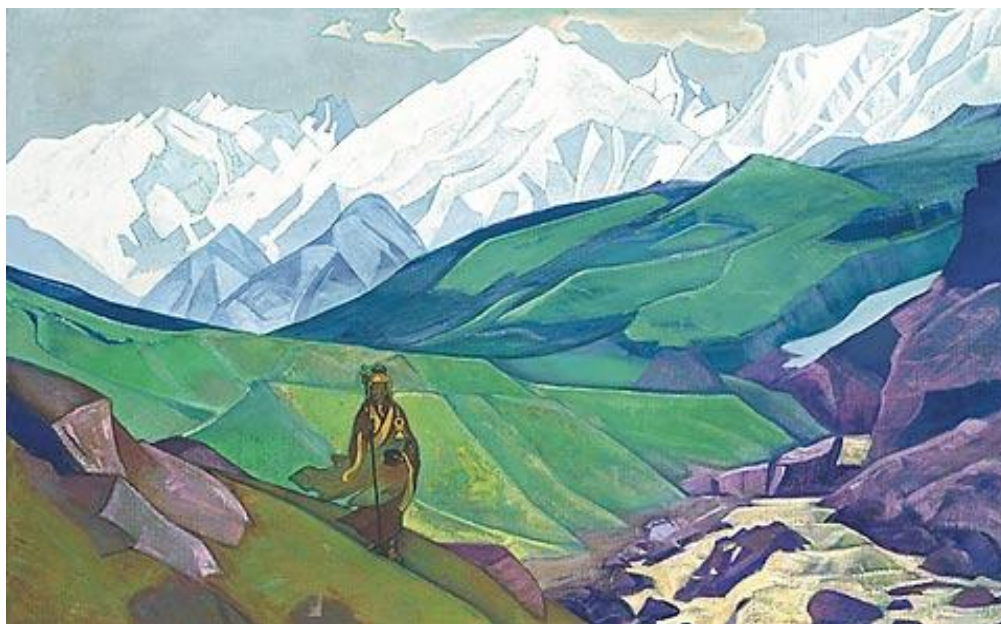
Adam and Eve, by Lucas Cranach



illustration by Arthur Rackham



fields of Aaru



"En-no-Gyoja, the Friend of the Travelers," by Nicholas Roerich



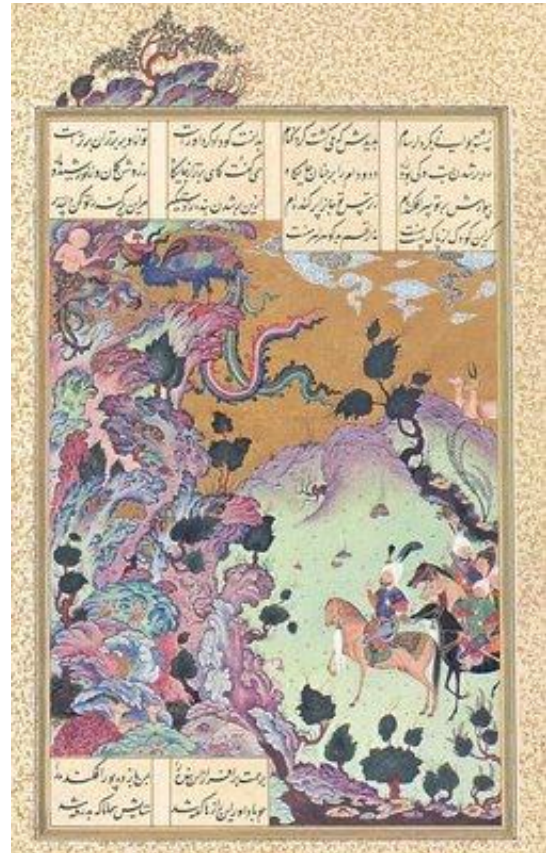
عائشة

a great, green hill

Images of the Simourgh



from the 27th Fajr International Film Festival

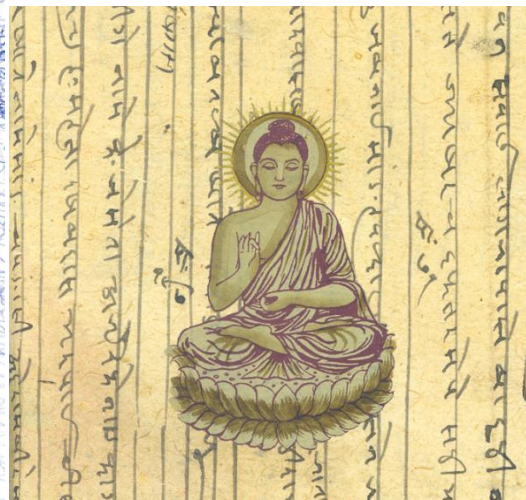
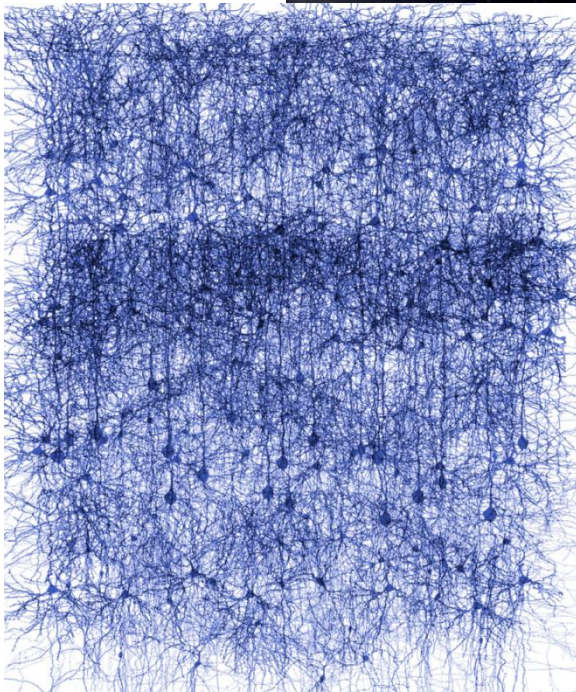


from the British Library



Pythagoreans celebrate sunrise, by Fyodor Bronnikov

from Anna's notebook

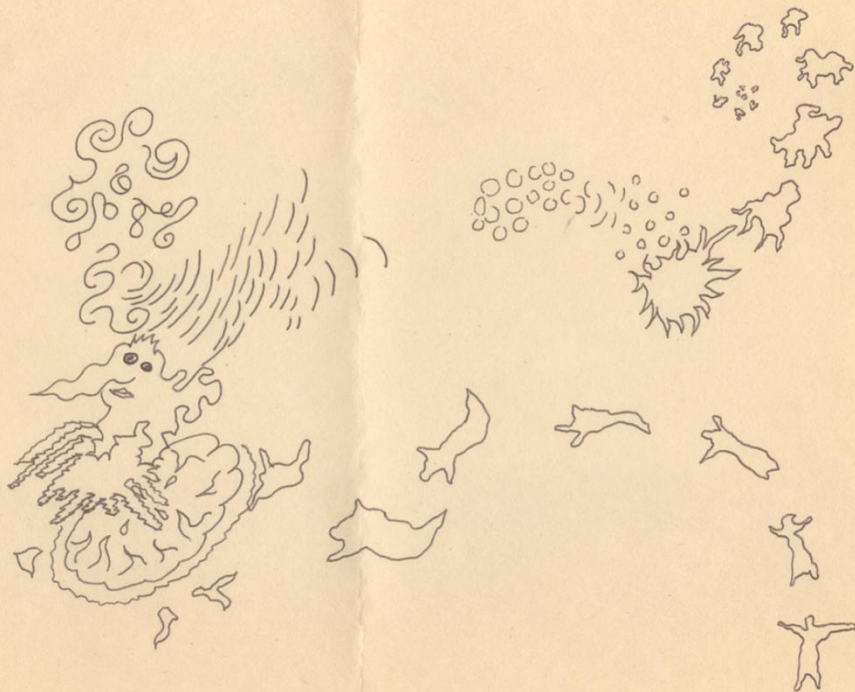


Anna's brain scan, by Dr. Liu

we stood silently until we kissed



无妄





Magpies and Hare, Ts'ui Po, Sung Dynasty



Cameron!

I'm writing you this to keep
at least one part of myself
checking back in with
the fact that

I'm away from it now.

I needed to write someone who'd been there and seen the things I'd seen. No, it was more
than just seeing—I'd been inside the beast
pumping away at its vital organs, helping it to live,
breathe

I needed to talk to someone who knew the smell

that maw
mahogany bone
marrow
that bile
dripping
bile

someone who had *been*
inside the lining of the stomach
someone who had been wounded by it
wounded for it

someone who had eventually
luckily
miraculously
escaped.

How were you able to
figure out how to re-unite with the real sun again?

How long did it take? How high did you climb
before you climbed out through the ears?

Did you climb out through the ears?

I left hooded, with a black bag. I tried not to look back like you said not to look back,
but I *had* to look back. It wasn't a choice. The way I was running—the duffle bag
swinging heavy at my side, in stride with my legs—it acted like a sort of pendulum!
Moving with the momentum of my body, it swung me around. I was forced into the turn!
I saw the beast again. Its eyes glowed bright red, but not burning with fire like the first
time I fled. No clouds in the sky. Just a deep sucking sound. Was it somebody's breath
from above?

I knew the thing to do was to get as far away as possible and write you. That was what I had to do. To keep at least one person knowing

someone who had seen the machines. someone who knew the smells—
and to further confirm the fact that

had I just been inside *that*?

I left it through the mouth this time.

My hands are still sore from
that mechanical pumping of the vital organs all those years

we helped it to breathe. all along. We fed it small pieces of the things that were supposed to be for us to eat. I don't know why we gave our food away. It was all we had. But we fed that beast, Cameron, bit by bit, from the inside—thinking there would still be something left for us after its belly was full—or we thought we could find more, or make more, but we couldn't. There was nothing for us in that belly but our chains. Oh, even my chains and I became friends.

“No, no, no!” I'd scream when I remembered not to fall in love with my slavery.

I dug a hole once thinking I would find you there, hanging on to the underside—but you were already gone, and the juice from the spleen leaked out through the hole I'd dug. The beast made a sound—a terrifying sound! I'd torn a hole in its belly.

I stuffed myself through that hole, Cameron—that was the first time. I just barely escaped, digging tunnels through the sand—pushing my bag in front of me. The sand filled my ears and my pores. It stung in my eyes. I inhaled it.

When I climbed up far enough to see the horizon, I watched the beast's claws cutting into the sun. I was relieved when I realized it was only the mechanical sun.

My foot caught earth! I coughed in layers of dirt, hanging in the atmosphere. I took a few steps. The ground was *real*. I could barely remember what it was like to set foot on solid earth and leave a footprint. Oh the smell of earth! For the first time in

How long had I been inside that tendon? How long had I been inside that cell?

You climbed out so high! How long did it take? Did you use any tools? Did you give something away? I gave too much away. I traded it for—what was it? A final touch of the beast?

I made it as far as the valley's edge before I asked a girl to lead me back. I'd only wanted to touch the beast from the outside, to feel its fur between my fingers. To feel the bristles of coarse hair on its nose—those little hairs that rose and fell so gently when it breathed. I wanted to know what it was I'd been working so hard to keep alive all those years.

I placed the back of my hand on the skin of its snout. Its nostrils flared! I pulled my hand back then stepped forward again. I cupped its breath in my palms.

I was satisfied

—to know it was *real*, that what I'd been doing had been real. As awful as it had been, if it had helped *life*—

I didn't want to disturb it. Only to touch the rust-red fur
only to know

Cameron,

I stayed too long. I was

thrust back inside
inhaled inside
trapped in the stomach and told to find
something to eat and something to feed
it and We (me and the others)
didn't know what would poison us
and what would help us grow. All the rules
had been changed.

We thought maybe the things that tore
our hands apart were useful. Maybe if we
turned the lining of its stomach inside out
or tied the capillaries of its heart chambers into
knots the creature would die and we could climb
out like small people emerging from—
—we were small people emerging from

We thought it would die
and set us free
This was our logic.

Anna

Cameron,

It bleeds when it dreams. We try to keep it from dreaming because sometimes the bleeding is internal, and it floods the dips where we sleep and where the old women keep small sacred places clean with the hems of their gowns—but we can't soak the blood up fast enough. Some of us always drown. We've tried so many things, but we are so small inside it. We are so insignificant in such a vast belly.

Sometimes I wake up covered in mucus.

Sometimes I've been moved.

older woman stand up when we cry and slap us on the backs of our heads. "Pull yourselves together!" they scream. But asking us to do that in these circumstances—oh Cameron, once we're out of this we won't ever be the same. This can't be overcome. Only by something impossible—to have never been swallowed by the beast at all.

Maybe someday when I've run far enough away, something will make sense. Should I have stayed inside the beast longer and looked for a cure? Isn't that how it is? The cure is always contained inside the sickness itself? There is little left to tell.

Dear Anna,

I have taken the time to write you in hopes that 1) this letter will reach you and 2) it will find you well enough to take what I'm offering into your heart and mind. I was deeply moved to hear of your latest escape from Inland—though I remain doubtful you have seen the last of it. It took us four attempts to flee beyond the perimeter of the sandbox. You do know, once you exit, you must still cross a series of islands and a turbulent sea? I will arrange to have someone waiting for you on the other side. Your friend Cameron is unavailable to respond to your letters at this time. He recovered quickly from his own adverse affiliations and has been further assigned. Moving on—

The creature you escaped from was a solipsistic being, and you, while a prisoner there, have become a solipsistic self. I fear this knowing you spent your formative years withdrawn from normative human society, and I am not yet sure you have made a leap out of that isolated state, thus breeding great discord to your spirit. Once you do make it back, you will find it difficult to transgress the boundaries you have formed for yourself. Crossing these takes patience and time. I've found this in the others. I have also found that the degree of slowness with which you exit the place you have been confined is directly proportional to the intensity of memory you will retain of your experiences there. In other words, speed is precisely relative to the intensity of forgetting. Therefore, run, dear Anna. Do your best to find the half-way house, the filling station, and an abundance of clean towels just outside the sandbox. Wait there for a guide, and proceed. But do not look back, or you will go back, again and again, and again.

Good luck,

Dr. D. Chaoun

Dear Anna,

I am concerned of your psychological, physiological, and ontological states due to the fact that you have confessed on several occasions your continued attempts to physically destroy the beast in which you were confined. To destroy something is a way of confirming its existence. Please remember that you were not confined in any sort of corporal structure, but rather a paradigm of your own creation. Unless of course it is the city itself to which you are referring, in which case, the best you can do is reconcile with who you became as a consequence of your time spent there. Then, change as you see fit and continue to move on.

My colleague Dr. Chaoun has urged me *not* to press this information upon you, as he believes your attempt to physically sever links to your past experiences is crucial in your recovery. I, however, fear ignorance above all other plagues, and will refrain from keeping you in the dark regarding any aspect of your illness. If you are so far gone as to ignore or disregard my letters, I am confident Dr. Chaoun's advice will find a way to resonate within your perspective. I, on the other hand, have chosen for you a more traditional method of re-assimilation. It is based on my belief that you are dealing with your recovery most symbolically. I believe this to be a healthy approach, provided that you remain firmly grounded in physical reality. I have no doubt Dr. Chaoun will suggest that our physical world is the mere symbol, and that the so-called 'imaginal realm' in which you are now immersed, is our truest reality. He will urge you to commune with your archetypes, spiritual messengers, and collective oversouls—and I will leave to your discretion the helpfulness of his advice, as well as the means by which you seek to practically apply his ideologies.

Again, I stress, the noblest way to travel beyond what you have experienced is not by destroying your memories of it, but rather by continuing *through* them until you have absorbed the wisdom you were meant to carry as a result of your confinement. At that point you will move forward stronger and with ample stamina, as a more aware, capable, and adaptable human being.

It is doubtful this letter will have relevance to you upon your first reading. Please do not worry, dear Anna, but hold fast to my words and do not dull your senses. You *will* find your way through this. These are but a few scattered moments in a protracted time.

Sincerely,

Dr. Liu

Dear Anna,

If you choose to hold fast to an awareness of loss, that awareness of loss does not guarantee that anything actually has been lost. It also does not guarantee that anything—time, meaning, or experience—has to be won back. Remember this when you return.

Upon that return and recovery, it is best to allow things to remain in their somewhat shocking immediacy. Do not worry to relate your experiences to us. We are aware of your [missing text] and your subsequent escapes from [missing text]. Considering your age, we forgive these digressions and promiscuities, as well as all deviations from the task you were originally assigned.

In regards to your search for meaning, rest assured dear Anna, the meanings connect in a way that mere factual events never could. Go on purging yourself of the guilt you feel, though do not exert efforts on reconstructing your beliefs. I will tend to you when you arrive. At that point, if you are still upset by what you've overcome, I will work with you on selective extermination, followed by replacement, of any unpleasant memories you have retained. For now, you must rest.

Good luck,

Dr. D. Chaoun

Cameron,

It's happening. I'm changing again. I can feel it running up and down my spine, like a release of cortisol. I can't rub it out or sleep it off. It surges from the base of my spine up to my brain where it wraps around my brain stem. I've also forgotten how

[missing text]

"Go back!" Kiki screeched—knocking several of the inmates off their cots.

"But it isn't *there* anymore," I cried. "I watched it disintegrate into a cloud of heat. Even the cockroaches got sucked in!"

Kiki sighed, deepening the dark impression in her cot.

"It'll come down again."

"The city?"

"I'm telling you, it'll come back down."

"The *whole* city?"

Kiki lowered her voice. So low, this time the belly of the cot sank with it.

"When it comes back, you *must* go back—to figure out what happened and make a map: how to get out and how to get back in."

"Why would anyone want to get back in?"

"In case they left something behind."

Letter from Dr. Liu

Dear Anna,

Give up the need to clarify the distinction between what ‘really’ exists, and what you have projected onto reality. No clear distinction can be drawn at this time. Nor will you find solace in Cameron’s, or anyone else’s, affirmation of your experiences. At a certain point you must accept what you have seen. Otherwise, you will continue shifting the images around forever. This will bring you no peace. It is only time that will make you innocent again.

[missing text]

end

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