

New Haven Review

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A Closet Full of Flowers

*Sorting through fragments
of my mother*

Jennifer E. Russ

One of the decisions my mother made before she died—one

I continue to find admirable—was to landscape the western side of our corner house in St Louis. The house was made of brick and had an overgrown strip of land that faced the side street. When I was growing up in the '80s, I'd nicknamed that area "the bear cave," because I imagined that wild bears lived there. Years later, the chaos of dead trees and unkempt shrubs was finally cleared away. My mother chose four hemlocks for the men to plant near the road, interspersed with some pastel-colored perennial flowers and hardy pink rose bushes, and she had a row of soft ferns planted closer in toward the house. She also picked out an array of smooth, irregularly shaped stepping-stones, which were laid along the inner edge of the fern-cover so that she could walk outside next to her garden. Many afternoons, I would come home from my part-time work to see her there, lumbering up and down the length of her plot, or leaning on her Peruvian bird's-head cane and examining the flowers beneath the trees, the unfurled scrolls of the ferns.

She liked looking out at her botanical arrangement from the two windows that faced west from her master bedroom on the second floor. When it was too hot for my mother to go outside, or when she was too sick, or too angry, she still spent long minutes gazing out at the garden from her room, feeling satisfied that something she put in the earth—something whose planting she had overseen, anyway—was blooming.

Perhaps I should make it clear that I had been in many senses

a precocious and exceedingly well-behaved child: a stellar student, an enthusiastic and somewhat talented violinist, and a sure-footed writer, all from an embarrassingly young age. (At 6 or 7, I was writing comic epitaphs on the back of paper placemats whenever we went out to eat. "Here lies the body of Mr. Holt, / struck one day by a lightning bolt.")

My mother's role, so it seemed to me when I was in grade school, was to shuttle me to violin lessons, and ballet lessons, and summer camp for the gifted, and, of course, school when it was her turn to drive carpool. She read my report cards and took notes at my violin lessons so she could remind me what to practice before I could remember. She bought me good clothes, even some fancy dresses from chic department stores. She made me pancakes on weekends. She did everything a dedicated upper-middle-class mother in the Midwest of the late twentieth century was expected to do. Yet I never felt she was satisfied, and I think I assumed that I was responsible for her happiness and therefore had to keep doing better and better at school, violin, anything I set my hand to.

I recently watched a clip of an old dance class of mine. A family friend had given me a copy of the compact disk he'd made from the original videotape. The timestamp read 1987, so I was 7 or 8 at the time of the recording. When I played the clip on my laptop, I was surprised to see my mother appear in the studio's wall of mirrors, her head tilting slightly to one side, her arms akimbo. She was sitting a few chairs down from this friend with his video recorder, one of a small group of parents watching the rehearsal.

She didn't seem to be smiling, but neither was she frowning. A deeply buried self-consciousness welled up in me as I sat watching the video, and the impatient question: What was she doing there? It felt to me that she was interfering, as if I must have been trying to keep it all together for her—stay on the beat, keep my posture straight. In one camera shot, I'm watching myself in the mirror, looking rather defeated and miserable as I hold my hands together in the shape of an egg. I dip and rise, dip and rise, trying to keep the egg's imaginary shell intact.

One afternoon at the music conservatory, a few years later, my mother joked to a friend's mother, "I feel so *poor*!"

We were in the hall, coming to or going from a violin lesson or perhaps a concert. I was standing a few feet away and heard every word. I felt a flush of concern and tightened my grip on the violin

case in my hand. I *knew* we weren't poor, because my father ran his own biofeedback and psychology practice and my mother worked full-time as well, and they both wore good clothes, and they had money for all our good clothes, for my own violin, for a thousand other things, some of which I didn't even know. So I dismissed what she said as an odd joke, even as I sensed the pain she was feeling and trying to ignore through this outward deflection.

She likely had to carefully budget for all these things for me and hadn't much time or money left for herself. But the day when she could show herself some attention never arrived. She was just forty when my father's first cancer diagnosis came. And after it went into remission, less than a year elapsed before my mother's own cancer diagnosis. After *it* went into remission, my father's second cancer diagnosis and his decline and death rapidly followed—all in the span of 5 years.

As it turned out, I couldn't keep things together for my mother. I couldn't save her.

In 2006, when I was 26, I wrote a long journal entry describing how, now that a year had passed since my mother's death, I could wait no longer and needed to clean out her closet in the back room upstairs. Besides the double closet, the second floor addition housed an old bed that I'd used for guests at middle school sleepovers, as well as the family desktop computer—a Compaq that had outlived both my parents.

The portable hospital bed in the downstairs spare room had been removed soon after my mother had passed away. The partially used bottles of toiletries had all been disposed of. The nurses and aides, their papers filed away, had moved on to other home health care patients. Hospice, though, was still sending me mailings with their suggestions for self-care, for ways of remembering my “loved one.” *Ha*, I wrote long-hand in my journal, *how could I possibly forget her?* My task, as I understood it at that time, was to sort through and organize all my images of my mother: sick, well, or at least in

remission; coiffed, bald, or bewigged; angry, expectant, scared to her core. How tenaciously, how lightly, ought I to hold her in memory? I wondered. I was concerned about how to do this thing called grieving “the right way,” and, I suppose, was interested in choosing wisely, as if it were something I had control over. Yet the way that memory takes hold doesn’t seem so much like a choice; it seems like a haunting. I needed to find the right spell, the spell that would turn the angry ghost into a crone, the crone back into a maiden.

My younger brother Benjamin was home from Knox College in Illinois, where he had just finished his freshman year. I took advantage of his presence at the tail end of his summer vacation to wrangle him into helping me clean out the spare bedroom upstairs. It was situated directly above the room in which my mother had died that past September, just before dawn. This spare room had been the place my mother stored the things she saved, things she didn’t want to donate or toss, not yet—not until after her death, it turned out, when it wasn’t something she would need to decide. That task was left to Ben and me, because our father Ken had died a decade earlier—also of metastatic cancer. How does that joke by Oscar Wilde go? “To lose one parent may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness.” I wasn’t laughing.

I coaxed Ben into helping me empty the wide dresser, claiming to him that we might discover something interesting there. We found three plastic shopping bags full of latch-hook rugs, along with some mangy bits of yarn and the hooking tools my mother had used to secure the yarn bits onto the rugs’ foundational grids. Metal and plastic hooking tools lay at the bottom of one bag, looking like instruments for a dentist’s tray.

I held up a finished rug that depicted an orange sun half-set in a blue and golden-brown ocean. When I was a kid, that shaggy rectangle of carpet had hung on the wall just over the head of my bed, where it gathered dust. Before I could decide which pile to put it in (toss, donate, or keep), Ben pulled a second rug out of the bag, this

one patterned with pale blue dolphins rising from the sea; then he dug out a third, conspicuously incomplete, which looked like it was on its way to becoming a school of colorful fish. I told Ben I could surely find someone who knew how to latch-hook to finish the border, so he could take it with him, if he wanted, when he went back to Knox—as if that would make up for his mother dying a week after his freshman year began. Lord, have mercy: I didn’t know how to let things stay the way they were; I didn’t know the alphabet of grief.

“It’s OK, Jen, I don’t need an old rug in my dorm room,” Ben said. He was trying to reassure me, I suppose, but his voice sounded impatient. Once the dresser was empty, he excused himself, leaving me to deal with the more feminine things left behind.

Lucky Ben, I thought, to get away from this glut. Clothes still crowded the towering racks in the sliding-door closet. I was surprised to find myself, at first, enjoying the process of sizing up and sifting through my mother’s old outfits; some, from the 1970s, were approaching vintage status. So many crazy flower patterns and fantastic geometric designs. I could see my mother wearing each outfit, looking regal and efficient, as I remembered her great sense of purpose, the fierceness of her will. A hypothetical newspaper obituary rattled off in my mind: “A geriatric social worker, Linda fought the injustices suffered by the elderly and advocated across the state for their right to low-cost prescriptions, fair housing, and dignity....” My stomach turned as I remembered what such language glosses over. What the steroids she had to take for swelling did to expose her personality’s barbed-wire underbelly. What fear did to compound her disinhibited behavior. What the confusion of her last months did to her mind. And what all of it, since I was living at home with her for the last two years of her life, did to me.

Soon enough, my progress at sorting the clothes into piles slowed. The colors staled and I froze, unable to navigate my way between remembering her best self and acknowledging her worst. I sat in contemplation of a pale pastel-striped shirt, as if it were a painting, and then felt a wave of repulsion. This insane, ruffled collar?

Who would dare wear such a thing in this world? It seemed to me that year to be a sparse and tender world, where we all lived in the gutter. But my mother had her eyes set on the stars, poor woman, piling her cart high with grandiose dreams weirdly enmeshed with notions of my success. She wanted to hire a limo to drive us to the premiere of a film shot in St Louis in which I'd been a child extra. She demanded that I keep playing violin through my father's first battle with cancer (when I was 11). After I decided not to become a professional musician, she convinced herself that one day my writing habit would, somehow, catapult me into becoming a famous Hollywood screenwriter.

I folded up that particular silk-and-polyester shirt and stuffed it in the donation bag, but putting the egregious ruffle in its place didn't resolve the conflict. No, there still was a squadron of outfits left, all apparently fancy brands, their maker's tags sticking up out the backs of the collars like tiny shields. How much my mother spent on these thin cuts of cloth! How much energy went into these wavy curlicues and dyed petals, all of which were only to be hung up in a back room, flat, bodiless, emptied of the power she had eagerly invested in them. What had she felt, handing over the charge card? What had she hoped for, for herself? A morass of hangers tangled in my hands. Clacked in their tinny foreign tongue.

Quite suddenly I felt tired. I was determined, though, to finish the task of translating these husks from their limbo into neatly folded and bagged donations. My unease with the clothes fought against an odd nostalgia for a past that I had lived only in snippets. And then I had to consider the long run of years I would face without my mother's presence in them. So I made a treaty with my initial decision to bag it all up and held back a few things to try on. A simple, green, silk button-down top drew my eye, and a jacket quilted in a diamond pattern, with colors like an old Russian temple's: blue, gold, green, white. I ran my hand over its feathery-light fabric and had the urge to pretend to be from a Russian town, the lady pulled in the *troika*, a central part of a completed story's mosaic. Every word

spoken or movement made would be a tiny stone helping create an irreproachable image, something stunning.

And just as quickly, I detached from the grand titles I'd imagined. There was so much flux beneath the surface, so much impermanence in the world. Still, for a minute in that room, I sympathized with what the jacket whispered to me about control, about a clean, perfect trajectory—no unforeseen weather, no unfair disease, no indignities.

I cinched the last bag's plastic tie and stared into the empty closet. An image came to me: my mother gracefully stepping out of a hundred-dollar dress-suit and feeling the cool air on her skin, reminding her of her past, the darkness her body had absorbed.

Of course, she'd had secrets.

Through joint therapy that I'd dragged her to, finally, I had learned she felt deeply hurt by her own mother, felt she came second, after her father—even, she imagined, when she was just a baby in 1950. I don't know if she ever grieved that perceived loss of motherly attention, that imperfect attunement. She was barely an adult herself when she had to make the choice to sign papers committing her younger brother, Barry, to a mental institution—neither of her parents could summon the nerve to do it. I can only guess how far his mental illness unraveled the sleeves of normalcy—whatever normalcy would have meant in the upheaval of the late Sixties, when she was a teenager. Through it all she smoked packs of cigarettes, smoked her feelings into a breathless hush.

What all her suffering was about exactly, I was oddly afraid I would never understand well enough, but I'd had plenty of signposts. There was her total silence about schizophrenic Barry, who in 1991, after quietly re-selling all his tropical fish to the pet shop, hung himself. He willed to me a Greenpeace sticker and an old slide-rule, and I saved the letters he wrote my mother over the years, but haven't brought myself to read them yet.

There were my intermittent raids of her hidden stashes of

candy—my mother usually kept them in the back of one of her desk drawers. There was her stymied anger, which she took out in playing shooting gallery games on the Compaq computer for hours at a time. And there was the day when, thanks to the steroids' disinhibiting effect on her mind, she told me point-blank that she hated herself. I didn't know what to say, but I can imagine that underneath the hate were self-judgment and intolerance and rejection and crippling shame, the kind of feelings that must have put a stop to her having any compassion for herself.

And so, having been exposed to all this, I became haunted—my mother kept raging at herself in my mind, even as she lost the energy to stay angry in her life. Once the cancer went to her brain that last year, she would (or could) only say a few scant words to me—asking me for reassurances, imploring me to be responsible—words that seemed somewhat less than her wardrobe, with its fancy flower prints and bold geometries, told me.

Then her clothes, too, became history.

That evening of the sorting, I dropped the “donates” off at a Jewish women's clothing resale shop, and drove back in silence. All that was left was her garden, and the earth. In my mother's patch of landscaping, the pink roses found their way to bloom despite the oppressive heat, and I hope my mother was able to bring her turmoil into the light of day there—maybe she didn't feel the need to share it with me, or maybe she didn't know how. Maybe she didn't want her precocious daughter trying to help her make a neat picture from all these fragments. Maybe my curiosity is, after all is said and done, a blind alley.

Yet I can't forget the thick navy-blue sweatshirt that Ben and I found alongside the latch-hook yarn in the dresser, a smiling, big-eyed, yellow cartoon sun plastered on its front under the words *Blue Cheer*. My mother had bought it a couple years before her death and had worn it often during cold weather. I learned only recently that *Blue Cheer* was the name of a rock band formed when she was a

teenager. Had she been a fan? Had she known the band was named for a certain kind of LSD? (Had she taken LSD?) I'll never know. But I saw a sign in the sweatshirt: a cheery face ringed with blue, the blue of some depression kept at bay. I concluded it was easier for my mother to live at a distance from her deeper feelings, pride bricking over the shame over the hate over the wound over the love. And maybe for a while it was best for me to do the same. I think how right it must have felt for her to keep that closet full of flowers.

The whole two-story house holds its peace now: Ben and I sold it finally, early in 2015, to a young couple. I have no idea what they've done with the back room, and I don't think about it much these days. Let them have it. I'm content enough here in my apartment in Oakland. A full decade has passed since that muddled sorting. My days now are filled with Bay Area sun and pale blue skies. I usually work alone from my home office, which looks out onto a wide garden behind the apartment complex. During the night, I often have regular visitors—the angry ghost, the crone, and even, from time to time, the youthful maiden appear: my mother, still alive. In my dreams her forms metamorphose one into the other, like the characters of myths written in another time and place, in a culture all but lost. And so I want to keep these memories known, just as I want to keep a few things close by me to look over at when I'm tired of this screen. Just as I keep that quilted jacket my mother wore, tucked away in the bottom dresser drawer in my bedroom. I can't quite bring myself to wear it, but I take it out from time to time, and touch the fabric, and wonder at how light it is, and how heavy.

The Chosen One

Kim Drew Wright

What does it mean to be lost? You lose a sock, a fingernail, a memory to time. You don't lose an entire person. But, of course, you can. Absent: too easy, like you just decided not to show up. Missing: can be the simultaneous action of not being there and the regret for the absence of the one no longer there. How long do you go on searching?

It's Friday night and Devon's rolled over in bed facing me, which means he wants sex. I count to five slowly in my head and sure enough his hand reaches over and pinches my nipple, hard. A moan escapes me, and, if he bothered to ask, I wouldn't be able to tell him if it was from pleasure or irritation. We've been together for three years, the longest relationship for either of us. We run like clockwork. Marathon sex sessions have turned into ten minutes on Friday nights between reruns of *Friends* and *The Late Show*.

"Be my little dirty girl," he rasps against my stomach and I thrust my hips up for him to enjoy, tug on his hair so he knows I'm into it—try to act like a normal girlfriend.

When I close my eyes, an image of a blonde with large breasts, kneeling in front of a man, is burned on my retinas. I shake my head back and forth on my pillow and remember to moan a little more. Devon likes when I moan and tremble.

When we were born, my sister and I, our mother was obsessed with Greek mythology. Other babies got teddy bears and butterflies for their nurseries. Ours had elaborate golden scrollwork and wallpaper covered in a fleet of triremes, little wooden warships, their rows of oars raised to sail off on presumed grand adventures. I guess she focused on the lavishness and romance, not all the incest and rape strewn throughout the stories. Sometimes I wondered if her imposing these myths into our mere mortal lives hadn't incurred a curse, something to anger the gods, or at least make them take notice.

We're in the ninth minute and Devon has swung my hips over to the edge of the bed, thrown my legs over his shoulders as he enters me standing up. His eyes are closed and his head reared back, exposing his vulnerable throat. If I wanted, I could kick him in the Adam's apple hard enough to end his life, claim it was kinky sex gone wrong. That would make for an awkward court case.

He opens his eyes and looks down at me. Caught unguarded, he must not like my expression because he finishes quickly.

"Damn, babe," he says. A few minutes later and he's back to the TV. I'm on the computer in the adjoining study. He shouts from the bedroom, "I don't know how you can watch porn all the time and never want sex."

I ignore him and open my notebook to a clean sheet.

As an animal control agent I don't always work normal business hours. The latest case is a bad one, a couple with at least thirty dogs in a doublewide, and I'm afraid that's a low estimate. I've worked on dozens of animal hoarder cases. They're all the same, deplorable living conditions and a person inflicting harm on animals they supposedly love. Vows that nobody could take better care of them uttered even as we're removing emaciated bodies from the property. One lady had ninety-nine rabbits in her home. When asked why, she replied, *Because a hundred would have been nuts.*

Today, though, is a Monday at three in the afternoon and the small office feels crowded with Mac, Annette, and myself huddled over our desks. I've just got back from surveillance and am confident that we'll receive a court order to extricate the dogs from the couple soon.

Mac is on the phone and Annette is at the copier machine. I lean into my computer and click on a popular porn site, make sure the volume is turned off. A dark-skinned girl is giving a guy a blowjob and I rapidly click to another trending video of a golden-skinned girl in stilettos bending over and pulling her panties aside to expose her clean-shaven crotch, like she's still eight years old. Mac's call ends

and he asks me how the surveillance went this morning. I glance briefly in his direction and nod my head.

“Good,” I say.

Come on. Let’s see the face. Turn around already.

Mac taps his pencil along the edge of his desk. Stands and shuffles a few papers.

The girl on screen is getting pounded from behind by a huge Latino man with a tattoo of a rose on his lower stomach. His face is blurred out.

Annette bangs on the copier. “Another freaking paper jam. I am so sick of this ancient piece of crap.”

“Um-hmm,” I mumble sympathetically but noncommittally.

Annette is seven months pregnant and is constantly asking me to do stuff for her, like fix paper jams.

I stare at the screen. I’m looking for a prettier version of me. The Latino pulls the blonde’s hair hard and the camera angle shifts to her face, which is pretty but with a nose too wide to be Piedra.

My mother always said my sister and I were close and photos

seem to prove that, but somehow who she was has gotten too tangled up in news stories and time-progression drawings for me to know what’s real and what is faulty memory. Like the myth of Atlantis that some historians swear is not only a tale written by Plato, but an actual island that once existed somewhere in the vast Atlantic. The story goes that Poseidon carved the mountains of Atlantis into a palace for his lover, Cleito, and protected it with rings of moats and walls constructed of rock, brass, tin, and copper-rich orichalcum so no men could reach her. Yet, even with all these precautions, one day a horrific earthquake sunk the mystical island, causing the waters over it to be impassible, gulfs and eddies the only evidence of its violent disappearance.

My mother is waiting for me at Faraldo’s, her favorite Italian

restaurant in town. Not that there’s tremendous competition in our

hamlet of Westbriar, Connecticut, which is nowhere near Hartford or the trendy seaside resorts. Still, even in this podunk part of the state, our family is considered nouveau riche since our money only goes back a generation. My mom's father had invented a clip to keep lawn hoses tightly rolled when not in use. It had been a hit on the newly popular QVC channel. The credit goes to my young mother, who'd had the foresight to fill out an application and send a sample clip into the show. Now you can buy them at any major retailer. Before that, my grandfather had been an accountant, his biggest claim to fame uncovering an embezzlement scandal at the Presbyterian church.

By the time I arrive, Mother has already ordered hot tea and the Caesar salad with chicken for both of us. Her hands are folded neatly in her lap waiting for me. Nothing annoys her more than lateness. She guards her time like she's working on the cure for cancer instead of organizing potluck suppers for the local branch of Conservatives for Congress.

"Hi, Evelyn. How are you?" I ask. My mother has insisted, ever since Piedra's disappearance, that I call her by her first name.

"Wonderful." My mother aims a closed-mouthed smile in my direction as I pull back my chair and place the napkin in my lap. She picks up her fork and we chew through the first few minutes.

She clears her throat. "Sources say Congressman Slade broke up with his longtime girlfriend," she says.

Mom is always using terms like *sources say*, *retaliate*, and *political action*. Usually I can nod and stay quiet and she'll move on to the next topic relatively quickly but today she just pauses after this comment like she expects me to say something.

"Oh, I hadn't heard."

"Of course not. I swear, I don't know how you survive with your head up in the clouds all the time."

"Well, it's a shame about his girlfriend, I guess."

"Is it?" She arches a finely plucked eyebrow and spears another piece of lettuce to pop in her perfectly pinked mouth.

I sigh. "I don't know, Mom—Evelyn. I'm in the middle of this

hoarder case and can't really think about anything else."

An image of the Latino's rose tattoo slides through my vision, replacing the sprig of lavender gypsophila in the center of the table.

"Really, Gillian. Why don't you get a real job?"

"You don't care about animals?"

"Yes, of course I do, everybody cares about animals but what about all the abused children in the world? What about them? You would think you'd spend your time focused on changing that, instead of playing with dogs and cats all day."

I nod and stay quiet. When my mother lifts her teacup to her lips, I notice how small the rounded bottom is, how it might fit perfectly in the palm of a young girl's hand.

After my father died, my mother took a married lover, a

politician of some rank. When her turn to host bridge club came around, she would assure the ladies he was just a strong ally due to the legislature she'd tried to pass in Piedra's name. At the mention of my sister, all questions would cease and someone would remark on the deliciousness of my mother's soufflé and wouldn't she share the recipe. The last time the politician visited our house, he gifted mother with a tiny golden llama. After a pitcher of gin fizzies she told me the story of the Incas and how they'd used llamas to conquer their mountainous territory to become one of the most powerful civilizations in history. Then she let me hold the golden creature. It weighed next to nothing and fit snugly in my preteen hand. She leaned back on the green-pillowed couch.

"They sacrificed their children, their special children," she whispered, "left them exposed on the mountain peaks for the gods," before rubbing her eyes and staring at me blankly like she'd forgotten I was there.

The apartment is quiet except for Devon's snores. I've been on half a dozen porn sites and am about to turn the computer off when I see her.

She's on her knees with three men's junk in her face. Her hair is a darker shade than photos but the eyes are Piedra's cornflower blue. I take a screen shot of an up-close of her face. I zoom in on the eyes. Flecks of jade ring the inner iris and I'm certain. My heart pounds in my throat while I clutch the phone to my ear. Its crazy thrumming makes it difficult to hear anything other than its flood of beats.

I am gasping, my mouth opening and closing with a little popping sound.

The roar in my ears starts to subside and I catch my breath enough to get out, "I saw her."

"Hi, Gilly. How are you? My shoulder is acting up but other than that I'm doing fine, thanks for asking."

"Frank this is serious. I'm telling you it's Piedra."

"Sure, Gilly, like two years ago when we spent fifty thousand of the bureau's money to go down to Argentina and bust a wannabe porn star and her boyfriend, who ended up suing the department, remember? I almost got fired for that one. Or the time before that when we went to Costa Rica? Or Venezuela? Look, I know this news story coming out of the Dominican Republic has got to be dredging up all kinds of memories, but you're gonna have to let this one go."

"What news story?"

A muffled voice says something in harsh tones in the background. Frank's wife, Mindy, probably telling him to take it easy on me. But who knows, maybe she's tired of my calls, too.

"What news story, Frank?"

"Jesus, Gilly. Stop watching porn for a second and turn on CNN."

I click on the bedroom TV and there's a photo of a girl in front of a cake with seven candles, smoke wafting up toward her gap-toothed grin. This is replaced by a woman frantically clenching and unclenching a gray cardigan, too heavy for the palm trees over to the side where a boy, about five or six, is standing with an older woman. Footage runs of a high-class resort in Punta Cana like a vacation ad, then they quickly switch back to the distraught parents, the mother

repeating, “They were sleeping. The room was locked,” over and over. I know most people watching will feel sympathy for her. Some will swear she’s lying.

Devon throws his pillow at me and grumbles, “*Christ*, Gilly. Stop waking me up.”

When I was still young I used to have fantasies that Piedra had

not been taken for harm, but stolen by an exotic prince whose own wife, either not to disturb her extraordinary beauty or who failed to carry a baby to term, remained childless. In these fantasies, Piedra lived in a grand mansion in a golden room filled with satin pillows in shades of pink and lavender, with servants that granted her every whim, enormous float-on pool toys with a view overlooking the Aegean Sea for a backyard. Those days I could actually convince myself to be jealous of my princess sister, while I sulked in my drab room with only pages torn out of magazines taped over faded Greek ships no longer seeking adventure. I’d turn my face from my newly acquired computer to the window, checking if the dogwood’s buds had opened yet—tiny green pocketbooks of promise—and wonder why they hadn’t chosen me, lying right next to her in the bed.

I was six when Piedra was removed from our lives. A woman

entered our hotel room, scooped her up, and told me to go back to sleep. I was a good girl and did as I was told. Mom and Dad came back from a late dinner at the resort’s cabana bar, not a hundred feet from our suite, to one less daughter. Mom shook me awake as Dad sped from the room to check the bathroom, their room, then under my bed, his movements getting faster, then jerking to a stop when he rapidly ran out of hiding places or suddenly realized the entire world was now one huge hiding place.

The first hour after an abduction is critical. Every hour after that, the chances your child will come home alive dwindle into a dismal abyss toward zero. If you haven’t found her within three days, the cops are only hoping for the best, usually the retrieval of a body

so they can try to piece together some sort of explanation. A very low percentage are taken by the classic stranger-danger scenario we grow up so afraid of. The vast majority are stolen by people they know, people closer to home.

When the police asked me later about the woman, I told them I thought maybe it was my mother or a dream. Everything had been fuzzy with sleep, the warmth of the vacation sun still clinging to our skin from earlier in the day, making little furnaces of our bodies underneath the sheets. My mom had snapped that *of course it wasn't her*, my father staring blankly at me.

When Hades asked Zeus for his daughter, Persephone, Zeus obliged without consulting her mother, Demeter, or Persephone. Hades tore a meadow of narcissus open and plucked her away to his underworld realm of the sleeping and the dead. When Demeter discovered the deception, she rained drought and famine across the land until Zeus relented and demanded Hades return the beautiful maiden to her mother for the sake of the world. While this makes for a fantastic tale, in reality the decimation only occurs in one suburban house engulfed in a neighborhood of abundance, and no matter how lavish the display of sorrow, none of it will bring the missing back.

There's a patch of dirt in front of the doublewide. Mac is ahead of me, right behind the two police officers that have come along to issue the court order for us to search the premises. He gets over-excited at these extractions, calls them *raids* and starts talking about how he almost went into law enforcement. The stocky policeman named Rogers knocks on the aluminum doorframe and the entire stoop rattles. A few dog barks pop inside, but mostly there's a low-emitting whine behind the door like an electric generator that could blow at any moment.

An overweight lady in a stained nightshirt cracks open the door and scowls at us.

"What you want?" She haughtily points her chin high and scans

down the men to me standing in her dirt patch like she's Queen of Sheba and we're disturbing her rest. When she opens the door further and Officer Rogers hands her the court order, I think she's going to let us in peacefully. Then she yanks on Mac's arm hard enough to make him fall off the stoop. The officers have her out of the trailer and in handcuffs with only a short scuffle.

Even the surgical mask over my mouth and nose can't kill the overwhelming stench of excrement, piles of old dog poo so close together I can't help but step through it to get to the cages. Wire cages are stacked on top of each other, making a jagged path through the trailer like a morbid maze. There's not much fresh poo because the poor creatures hadn't eaten enough in recent weeks to make elimination a necessity. A heap in the corner looks like old rags until an ear perks up as I approach. This one's uncaged, whether forgotten or a favorite is hard to say. Under all the matted fur my best guess is a cocker spaniel but it's really impossible to tell until we get it back to the center and shave the coat off, assess the severity of the physical injuries.

When I bring out the first dog the lady screams, "These are my pets. I love my pets. You got no right to come in here." I don't look at her as I carry the light weight in my arms, outstretched like an offering. The bulge of an organ presses against the skin of his severely curved-in abdomen, a spleen or some other necessary organ shutting down from malnutrition. I place him gently on one of the blanket-lined cages in the back of the van. His heart is beating in over-stressed staccato and I check that no one's at the door of the van before whispering, "settle down, go back to sleep."

An extremely low percentage of kidnapped victims are taken for their organs. They are harvested like so much wheat or barley. So, maybe there really was an exotic princess, small and about Piedra's size when she was taken, who was sickly and in need. And her father stole my sister in the early night to save his own diminutive daughter, which felt like saving an entire country, an empire, while his wife

wept for both another mother's sacrifice and her own precious one's rejuvenation.

I can't stop thinking we're losing time. I want to tell my mother that I have found Piedra, but it's like I am still six years old and I know she doesn't want to hear what I have to say.

Frank's standing in the middle of my apartment, his face beet-red. He's just told me he's retiring next month and I can keep his extra files. He's carried up three boxes of paperwork associated with Piedra's case and dumped them on my couch beside Devon, who throws a look that says *what the fuck* my way before getting up and heading into the bedroom. Frank's viewed the video I forwarded and determined it probably originated in Ecuador, but thinks the facial-recognition analysis is not clear enough to determine if it's Piedra.

My heart rages out of control. Tiny black flecks fade into my peripheral and I can, once again, focus on the man who's been my main contact at the missing persons department for two decades.

"Frank, you can't *quit*."

"I can. And I am."

I point a finger, which feels disconnected from me, like my head and body are no longer working together. "You told me you would *never* stop looking for my sister. That's what you said."

"*Christ*, Gilly, that was twenty years ago. We haven't had a legitimate lead in all that time."

"You *promised* me. You held my hand during Dad's funeral and *promised* me you would never give up."

"Shit, Gilly," Frank says in a softer tone and flips the flap of the cardboard box on top. "I'm an old man. I'm sorry, but I'm tired and your sister is gone."

I fight the urge to cross the room and give him a hug. Christ, *he's* the one letting *me* down. "The news said the little brother of that Dominican Republic girl described a woman in their room the night she was taken. Maybe that's a lead, if you don't believe me about Piedra being the one in the video."

"I just think you're looking for something that's no longer there."

I raise my voice, trying to convince somebody. "What do I have to do? Go down there by myself?"

"Don't you dare, Gilly. You'd be obstructing an open case, hurting that little girl's chances of ever being found."

"Oh, like my sister? What about my sister's chances, Frank?"

"For Christ sake, Gilly, your sister is thirty years old. If she's even alive, she's making her own choices now."

"Do you really believe that?" I ask, and I can't contain the disgust in my voice.

Frank flips the flap of the cardboard box back over and admits, "No," but his voice is so low, I'm not sure if he said it or if it's just my imagination.

Persephone was the prisoner of Hades in the underworld for a year before her mother's earthly destruction gained Zeus' attention and he demanded her release. In the tale, Hades tricks Persephone into eating the seeds of a pomegranate, thereby ensuring she must remain in his realm. Most versions of the myth claim she had no foreknowledge of her act's consequences. Regardless of her intentions, she escapes to the land of the living and normalcy for at least part of the year, keeping her in touch with her family and reality, and causing her mother to relent and bring spring and summer. An alternate version claims the young maiden willingly ate the seeds knowing that she would be forced to remain with her captor, because even though she was unhappy when he seized her, she had grown fond of her abductor. I like to think of Persephone not as the goddess of the underworld or Hades's wife, but as the first written case of Stockholm syndrome. Who knows? Maybe the pomegranate seeds are just a precautionary symbol for heroin, a more modern method of keeping the girls in line.

The South African civil-rights poet, Ingrid Jonker, walked into the South Atlantic waters of Three Anchor Bay and committed

suicide by drowning. When they discovered her body, her father, who was in charge of literature censorship for the conservative National Party, reportedly said, *They can throw her back into the sea for all I care*. She died at age thirty-one the greatest Afrikaans poet of her generation. Nelson Mandela read her poem, “The child (who was shot dead by soldiers at Nyanga),” at his inaugural State of the Nation address in parliament. The poem imagines the child in everything South African. In it, he did not die, but grew into a man and journeyed the world. It is hard to find any quotes from Jonker’s father that don’t pertain to his daughter. Maybe they have been censored from history.

Three years after Piedra got taken, my parents divorced. At the time it felt like my father had tossed me back into oblivion, too. As an adult I realize my parents hung in longer than most marriages with abducted or dead children between them. They survived the speculation that their daughter might be dead. It was the team of FBI agents calmly discussing alternate possibilities, the term *child pornography* repeated in hushed, almost revered tones, in our living room, and then screamed throughout the house after the three men left, that started my mother taking her five o’clock refreshments at noon and my dad wandering the halls all night. My father would stand up abruptly from the dinner table or the couch in a state of panic and rush out of the room like there was something he’d forgotten to do, until one day he walked out and kept walking all the way to the divorce attorney’s office on Second Street.

The day the papers were filed, he told me I could have anything I wanted. We drove to the electronics store, one town over, where I picked out the newest computer on the shelf and an internet modem. So, while the other kids in fourth grade were searching how to make paperclip bracelets, I was looking up the term *child pornography*. At nine years old in 1998, I started watching porn. By now I’ve seen it all. Nothing much surprises me. I’ve perused all the categories from agalmatophilia to zoophilia—although, I spend most of my time in the more humdrum category of *blondes*. This doesn’t really narrow

it down that much since it's the largest category by far on most sites. Honestly, after a while it all tends to blur. I daze out through most of it. The girl appears reluctant, which immediately turns to enthusiastic fellatio, then she's subjugated by whichever form of sexual intercourse the videographer decides will get the most views. Ninety-nine percent of the "endings" are close-ups of the girl's face being jacked off on.

Human trafficking is a growing trend for political discussion. Worldwide it's a thirty-two billion dollar industry and occurs in virtually every country. Typically, the richer countries have higher import rates while poorer countries have higher export rates. Overall, the largest percentage of human trafficking victims is for sexual exploitation. The second highest percent is forced labor. Although these vary by geographic location. Most victims are women or underage girls. Many are sold and then rented to customers for sex. In the low percentage that are taken for internet pornography, pale skin, blue eyes, and light hair are the most valuable—the snow bunnies. Since there's very low cost involved for the profit, it makes sense as a business plan. Think about it. You can sell a black-market gun only once, but a girl can be sold ten times a day.

In Greek mythology, Demeter was the goddess of many things, including agriculture, motherhood, and the blessed afterlife. She had a sacred grove of holy ancient trees, the epicenter of which was a massive oak. One day, despite many warnings, a mighty woodsman ravaged her forest and felled the trees, evoking the wish that they be the goddess herself. In Demeter's ire she punished the man with such a severe hunger that, like a burning fire, the more he consumed the more he craved. To the point where, with all provisions exhausted, he began to eat his own flesh and quite literally ate himself to death.

It's been a week and Frank's not returning my phone calls. It goes straight to voicemail. So when my cell vibrates on the nightstand at three in the morning with his number glowing, I'm surprised.

“Where you been, Frank? You get kidnapped?” I cringe at my own sick joke, but considering the time I won’t beat myself up too badly over it.

“Gilly.” Frank sounds muffled like he’s speaking into a wind tunnel. “Gilly. You’re not going to believe this.”

I sit up straight and throw the comforter off my legs, swivel and stand up beside the bed. Devon groans and pulls his pillow over his head.

I can barely get out, “What, Frank,” before he’s going on about Ecuador, foreign cops, and extradition. I rush to the bathroom and close the door. “Wait. What are you talking about?”

“I’ve found your sister.” There’s an edge to his voice that I haven’t heard since I was six years old, and I know I’m not going to want to hear his next words. “She took the missing Dominican Republic girl.”

It was not enough for the storytellers that poor Demeter suffer the abduction of her daughter. While she scoured the earth searching for her missing child she encountered Poseidon who desired to have sex with her against her wishes. Demeter escaped for a little while by changing into a mare and grazing among other horses. The forceful Poseidon, not to be beaten by the will of a woman, changed into a stallion and raped her—the same Poseidon who carved the mountains of Atlantis into a palace for his love with moats and walls to keep her safe from other men.

After Piedra was taken, the media had a field day with my parents. They described in intimate detail the lobster dinner they’d eaten at the cabana bar while a stranger entered our hotel room and snatched their oldest daughter out of our lives. A resort employee, who chose to remain anonymous, reported hearing my mother snap at us in the pool earlier that day. Another came forward to describe how our father spanked Piedra in the hallway outside our door. She claimed he’d tugged down her pajama pants, the ones with tiny green

turtles all over them that the police had found behind a bush near the parking lot.

Even after the police investigation cleared my father of all charges, the tabloids kept fresh rumors circulating. Theories, on why and how he could have molested her and thrown her body in the sea so close by, sold magazines.

When he killed himself six years later, the first responders thought it was only a car accident, a distracted or drunk driver who lost control and ran his car off the bridge and into the deepest part of the river. It wasn't until we discovered his suicide note stuck with a magnet to the front of his refrigerator like an innocent grocery list, that we knew for sure. All he'd written was one phrase—*I swear I never touched her with anything but love*—scrawled over and over, filling five pages. I wasn't yet a teenager, but I rimmed my eyes in black charcoal and weighed my grief against the guilt of my jealousy that he had not mentioned me, even once.

In 2004, the University of Connecticut's then-assistant basketball coach, Clyde Vaughan, told an undercover female cop posing as a prostitute that he knew how much she was worth and offered her ten bucks for oral sex. When he realized she was a policewoman he tried to bribe his way out of charges with basketball tickets and team paraphernalia. She wasn't a fan. He'd been arrested twice previously in Tampa and Long Beach.

When I enter the observation room at the Hartford correctional facility I know the partition is transparent only on my side. It's the same room they use for victims to observe their assailants, pick out a face to put with a crime. Years of imagining a tearful embrace at our reunion have dissolved into me behind glass.

Piedra sits at a metal table, handcuffed to the center. The investigators are placed so that they frame my sister and we have a dead-on view of her.

I thought my mother might show up today. We've been waiting

a long time for them to extradite Piedra back to the States, but Mother is absent. Frank stands behind me and squeezes my shoulder. I'd been right, he couldn't quit—at least not my sister's case with so many unraveled ends. He still retired, but not before following my lead one last time. There's still some good guys out there and, thank God, Frank's one of them.

The female investigator is asking Piedra questions that I'm sure she's answered many times before. This is the process, repetition to the point of apathy.

“Why did you take Missy Wilkerson?”

“They told me to.”

“What did you say to make her leave with you?”

“The same thing the woman who took me said—I'm gonna kill your family if you don't come with me.”

Sometimes I feel I lived it all with her, and other times, like the mythical Atlantis, it feels like we never really existed at all (except in some man's imagination). Plato knew thousands of years ago that mystical places are never meant to be found. How long do you go on searching once this realization sinks in?

My gaze is so intense, I feel like I could burn holes through the partition as I take in Piedra, willing her to notice me, to know that I am no longer gone. Piedra's face is impassible, lips pressed so tight that tiny grooves appear around her mouth like fault lines, a blank stare buries any expression. As the investigator swivels in her chair, motioning for the officer at the door to unlock Piedra's handcuffs, the stare hardens as impenetrable as Poseidon's walls for Cleito. Call me a fool, but I swear I see a fleck of recognition in those blue, blue eyes—right before the hardening swallows it up.

Three Poems

Maceo J. Whitaker

Ars Poetica w/ Ass Whipping

Q: When did you know poetry would be your form of expression?

A: As bullies in the alley
pummeled my forehead

with death-crunch
after death-crunch,

I babbled Baudelaire
+ bore a river of knuckles,

Ophelia of the extra-
curricular beat-down.

Now, as I bitch about my bill, I spit
couplets at the electric company hit men. Same.

I lack
the voice of Tom Waits, the prose of Teju Cole,

but a bibliophile I be, or at least
a half-assed hobo with a library card.

Visitation

“The mind is its own place and in itself, can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.”

—John Milton

“FUCK John Milton!”

—Satan

Satan appeared to me as a dead man. I checked to see if his shoes fit. They did not. I walked on.

Satan appeared to me as an issue of *Cosmopolitan*. His sex tips were so hot I’ll be telling all my friends about them.

Satan appeared to me as a maggot. I pressed him flat into the earth.

Satan appeared to me as do all vicissitudes.

Satan appeared to me as a hole in the earth. Not as some monstrous maw—Satan was microscopic. A mere fleapit. I folded myself again and again. I tore away my hair, my skin, my innards. I tore away my words. I tore away my breath. Finally, when I damn near tore away the entire cosmos, I collapsed into a thing tiny enough to squeeze into Satan. I now exist inside of Satan, and oh lord, I love the improvisation.

Ain't No Bread in the Breadbox

Today has passed with no gore.
No trauma, no triage. I tried

To juke away my pathos
Via pedals (to dizzying results).

Jerry's here. Wolf bounds
Around the keyboard. Happy

Hunter, uncut chemistry, armed
With chemical balance. Bread's

A memory, but we have enough:
Sickening funk. Dry, sticky floor.

I want to thank you, but I have
Always struggled with manners.

My double-tongue stammers, oral
Janus, praying for a new year.

ISO Cooling Blue

*Adventures of a competitive
blood pressure enthusiast*

Colin Fleming

I had some inkling that purchasing a home blood pressure kit might not be the best idea for me. There was a chance, I felt, that the entire endeavor could devolve into some horrible Poe-like misadventure, set in my bathroom with me clad in my nighttime uniform of blue Red Sox shorts and ripped black T-shirt from the Slaughtered Lamb pub in Greenwich Village.

I got used to taking my blood pressure back when I was married. We'd be out on Massachusetts' North Shore, having a Saturday jaunt around Cape Ann, as bucolic a place as I've ever been to. A Cape Ann town like Rockport, where I lived for a time, and where we had a house I am always trying to get back, consistently tops lists of the most scenic New England towns, with lobster traps stacked in the locals' front yards, and glens and meadows (once used for the drying out of fishing nets) and wild turkeys and that smell of salt and seaweed in the air like smelling salts for the soul, a commingling of iodine sourced from Mother Nature's own medicine cabinet, and that bravura robustness one imagines dominates the atmosphere of Neptune's very own man cave. (I don't know why I picture him having one, lined with harpoons on the wall, bottles on the shelves with messages in them, and various editions of *Moby-Dick*, but I do.)

I like the sea. It relaxes me, insofar as I can relax, which, I came to discover, I really can't, at least to date. But we'd do our drive, stop off at some cove to scramble over rocks and hunt for urchin skeletons and razor clam shells, and work in some errands, too. Like a trip to the CVS.

First, I'd wander the aisles—at Christmastime, check out the Rankin-Bass decorations. There would be Rudolph commiserating, in toy statue form, with Hermey the elf, and I'd stand alongside them, but I knew what I was up to.

I'm someone who is frequently up to something. Which isn't to say I'm dishonest. I don't know that someone can be more fulsomely committed to something they believe in, and doing what they think is

the right thing, even when it costs them money, say, or an opportunity, or adds loads more work to a quest in life whose specifics really don't matter here, but let's just say I do what I do twenty hours a day, seven days a week. It's a slog. It's also not working. But more on that later.

So when I'm doing one thing, I'm doing God knows how many others at once. Sometimes, there are good things. I can be talking to someone, be totally present, hell, I can be on NPR doing a segment that a million people will hear, and in my head I'm writing a story, planning a pitch, thinking about what I need to listen to, read, watch; how many miles I still have to walk that particular week to get up to my minimum goal of fifty. I'll crack the whip internally, thinking you need to work harder, you need to work longer, all of that. All of this is going on as I'm having a friendly chat over a beer watching the Patriots game, or sitting at the symphony counting out the measures of a Mozart piano sonata.

CVS-wise, the thing I was up to was trying to trick myself into some mental zone of ease, because I was eventually going to wend my way to the back, where the blood pressure machine was, sit in the chair, and try to get a bang-up score. I was in my mid-thirties when I started doing this. I hadn't been to a doctor since I was eighteen. Terrified. Like how people get terrified of Casper in those old cartoons.

I'd sit in the chair of the blood pressure machine, which I started to term "riding it," like it was a mechanical bull and I an urban cowboy or something, put my hand in the cuff, press the button, and good bloody fuck: some horrible, horrible number would come up. 180/120, say.

By then I'd be thinking everyone at the CVS is looking at me, the Reaper is fast advancing (this thought always seemed to produce a quick look towards the greetings card aisle, as if the Reaper would have need of a condolence card in the very act of taking you out; like he had a conscience, and felt bad about wielding the scythe on you), and I must try again. And, of course, my numbers would go up.

I could do this for a good twenty minutes. My wife would come over, she'd say, nah, it's fine, don't worry about it, and I'd be think-

ing, what the hell is up with her? This should trouble her somewhat. This ain't no 120/80. Which is where you want to be. There was never a word of "hmmm, we should get you looked at, honey." Just denial, I guess, which I helped along, by dint of being so scared I couldn't do what a normal person would do and handle the problem.

I didn't do anything. I just let my blood pressure issues ride. Tried to tell myself it was white coat syndrome, my terror of doctors, medical situations, all of that.

Life did some things, though. It fell apart. The specifics don't matter here. But eventually there was no wife, no house, no one, really, but me, a dude who really didn't want to live anymore, but wanted to overturn that feeling anyway. Call it the will to live paradox. So after my life fell apart, I found myself walking twenty miles a day, sometimes, and up to 100 a week, my way of trying to get back into the world of those who wished to live. I hadn't taken my blood pressure in the year since my life became a shadowbox of nightmares, but one day, on one of my epic ambles, I walked into a Rite Aid, thought, "screw this, I don't want to live anymore anyway. What you got for me, blood pressure machine?"

I am certain that victory yelps, peppered with expletives—I probably said something along the lines of "suck it bad blood pressure! Look at that score, motherfucker!"—are not commonplace in a Rite Aid, but what can I say, I was excited when I saw that 134/84. Not what you want, strictly speaking, but ballpark to where you'd like your blood pressure to be. The daily temptation to do myself in remained, but there was that pang, that life jolt, that brings with it feelings we all feel, but maybe don't articulate very often. That notion of, "this could be okay, this could be a start, you could look back on this later and be so grateful you got a little verve in your day to keep yourself going."

After that, every Sunday, before I went to Durgin Park, the Revolutionary War bar in Boston where I'd sit for a few hours as part of my weekly routine with the friends I had made there once my life had fallen apart, I'd go to the Rite Aid and ride the blood pressure

machine. I could be there an hour, until I got 120/80 or lower. Then I wanted something lower, still. For I was becoming, you might say, a competitive blood pressure enthusiast.

Sundays meant a clean start. New week. I'd write more than ever. Maybe get somewhere. I'd live the life, health-wise, of a monk. Not so much as a single beer. The past would leave me alone; or, that failing, I'd outrun it, kick through the scrim of time and explode into my future. Sunday meant the Rite Aid, too. I took photos of my best scores, in case I had to go to the doctor or a hospital, where my numbers would surely be astronomical, but then I could say, "fear not, I'm mostly just scared out of my mind, here's a score from yesterday, look at that, 110/73. Nice, right? One sexy ass systolic, eh, gang? Juice me!"

So it went, until one dire Sunday. I turned up at the Rite Aid as they were opening the doors, to the normal quizzical looks from the staff. I never bought anything there, save some Fisherman's Friend, a kind of lozenge, and that made me feel bad. Bought a lot of those lozenges, though. Was sucking on one when I discovered that the BP machine was gone. I hoped, for some weeks, it was being serviced, which also caused me to worry that my sterling scores were a result of miscalibration. But my ride returned no more. I had a friend call the pharmacy, even. She confirmed that Bettina—yes, I did name her—would not be back.

This took me on a tour of the pharmacies of the greater Boston area, as I searched for my next partner in BP bliss, but there was none to be found. I had a tip from a friend who was traveling that they had some at Logan airport, so I took a ride out there on the Blue Line, only to discover that the blood pressure machines were on the other side of the gate, and you needed a boarding pass to get to them, something maybe an eccentric millionaire might have considered, but as the highlight of my life at that point was a trip to the Coinstar at the supermarket, I merely laughed one of those "fucking hell"

cackles you do when you're laughing just to yourself, and resolved to do something I knew might have unfortunate consequences: I was going to buy a home blood pressure kit from the CVS. Sixty bucks.

Your arm had to be at a certain height to get a proper reading, and the only place in the cluttered box I live in where that was possible was in the bathroom, if I moved everything between the sink and the toilet and sort of wedged myself in and propped my arm up by the faucet. To my great relief, my initial scores were fine, and I didn't take my BP more than once a week, at most. Well, that's misleading. Every time I'd sit down to take it, my score would be high. But if I started at 160/92, say, I knew I was in good shape, and eventually I'd get the score I wanted from my blood pressure machine, which I named Circe (what can I say, life had gotten grim, and when life is grim if you don't find the occasional way to laugh, you're as done as done gets).

With each reading you'd get a number for your pulse and a color-coded grade. You want your pulse to be between 60 and 100. If you've just run, you can go up to 180 or whatever, but your resting pulse is what matters. When I was right, I was in the 70s, sometimes even the 60s. My stresses, though, were endless. I felt that feeling a lot that you used to get when the teacher was handing back the test which determined if you passed the class or not. Fifty times a day, I bet.

The color grade is where I'd sometimes look first. If your BP was confoundingly high, there would be this deep red atomic band, like some signal that the Martians were about to wage warfare. Get a high but not super screwed-up score and you got this somewhat acidic looking orange, like if the sun was dehydrated and took a piss. Below that was a warning yellow. Not too bad, this one. In fact, if you got 120/80, you got the yellow. That's what a hard grader Circe was! She'd give you the yellow even if you were 120/60. My goal was to sit in my bathroom until I got that most pleasing of BP machine color grades: the pooling, soothing waters of cooling blue, an aquamarine I imagined to be some coloristic play on the way the

sun would hit the water in Rockport on those July afternoons when I would stand on a cliff called the Headlands looking out over the town and the harbor, next stop England.

“Shall we go off in search of cooling blue,” I’d ask myself, trying to instill some jocularly into my lonely life, post-ten mile walk, before I began the next fifteen hours of formal work. I’d see online ads for romance that read “ISO smart Jewish guy,” and I learned that ISO was text shorthand for “in search of,” so “ISO Cooling Blue” became another refrain.

We went along through the rest of my thirties, Circe and myself, and we were more or less cool, until I turned forty, in September of 2015.

Shortly before Halloween, I gave up drinking entirely. For too many years I had drunk too much. I never became inebriated, I could simply put it away. Prodigiously. But it wasn’t good, and I stopped. A day or two after doing so, I felt a chill come over me. I took some Theraflu. I was worked up, worried, and, despite it being the middle of the week, I called upon Circe.

I’d never seen my blood pressure that high. It was so high I’ve since tried to repress the score in my mind. The top number might have been over 200. By now, my heart was out of the gate. Racing, pounding. For some time I had worried that I was going to die at forty. My life had just gone like that.

Earlier in 2015, I had been engaged. When I met this person, and she came to learn my history, with my singular divorce, she said, “I’m worried that if I hurt you I’ll kill you.”

This person I was engaged to was damaged. I tried to help. I was there for three o’clock in the morning phone conversations after three days of silence, when she was drunk again. I gave much, got little back, and tried to accept, for the time being, that depression can just waylay a person, and this person I loved deeply was waylaid in the extreme.

Still, I wasn’t counting on an exact reprise of what my ex-wife had done. But that happened. To the letter. I was thinking of Iago,

a lot, with what this entity did, and how Coleridge claimed he was a figure of “motiveless malignity.” That is, dude had no reason to do what he did, nothing to gain, personally. Just did it because he could. I was also thinking of that Dylan song, “She’s Your Lover Now,” with its simple inquiry, “Why didn’t you just leave me if you didn’t want to stay?” Just go, in other words. Don’t dance about in the broken bodies of the car crash, sticking around for a while imploring the bodies to reassemble themselves and get up and help you, and then vanish, sprite-style, the moment one does.

That night of my highest BP score ever, I thought would be my last. I had said to my friend John, my best mate of twenty years, “this makes sense, this is how it would go. I tried so hard for so long, I got nowhere, I had the divorce, now this other love-based disaster, and you know it’s true, John, you know it wouldn’t be shocking if I was dead one day at forty. It fits the narrative. I mean, who could be surprised?” My sister had died the year before. My father died when I was twenty-five. I regularly received death threats for work. There were people who hunted me down on the web and who threatened my family, too, for such is the age. And my heart, simply, was broken as well. I thought of Poe, Van Gogh, and their lives and how they died and when. Just made sense to me.

I felt like I was leaving my body. Like my skin could no longer contain the *me-ness* of me. I was popping out. Exploding out. I unlocked the door so people could get in and find me. When I told my friend the bartender at Durgin Park about this, he said, “what, so no one would have to break the door-jamb? You nut.”

I wrote the access code for the computer on a piece of paper in the hope that my friends and family would save my work, and try and get all of it out there if I wasn’t around. I wasn’t sanguine. I could see my computer on a curb, which would have been like I never existed, with my story—and it is some story, I’d say, if you’re up for reading a shitload of emails—lost for good. Then I got in my bed, its sheets stained with Popsicle juice because I had been sleep-walking and annihilating several each night, such that in the morn-

ing I could look on the floor of my rat's nest and count the sticks. I thought, well, I wasn't alive before I was born, and that was cool, that was better than this, I'll take that again.

And then one last thought, to whomever, or whatever, these things are directed, before I fell asleep.

Finish me.

Awaking the next day, I concluded that it was pretty stupid to have gone to bed in that situation. My less-than-brilliant next plan was to spend the day in bed, for the first time in decades, "relaxing," drinking lots of fluid. I took my BP, and was getting scores in the 140s/upper 80s. Better, anyway. The next day, I opted for a test run. I had on a T-shirt, long-sleeve shirt, and sweatshirt, thinking it was cold out, and barreled out the door for an especially brisk ten mile walk.

When I am really busting ass, I can walk ten miles in two hours. That's what I did, but I hadn't expected the weather to be so warm. I was sweating all over myself, way over-dressed. Got a coffee rather than a water. When I got home, I set off for a three mile run, but pulled up after only a mile. That's unusual for me, but if I'm too hot and under-hydrated, it can happen. I sat down for a while, then came home to check my BP.

Amazingly, I had the lowest score I'd ever gotten on a first read: 123/80. This made no sense to me. But my pulse. My God, my pulse. I'd never come close to anything like this. I was at 130. I looked this up on the computer, learning that when you hit 130, as a resting pulse, you have something called tachycardia going on. You don't want to have tachycardia going on. I hoped maybe it was Circe acting up, and I was sufficiently panicked that I went to the CVS and bought Circe II, who confirmed the metrics of her predecessor.

Now my BP was all over the place. 88/75, 119/63. My pulse would not come down. I told John. He is also scared of doctors. He told me it was time to go to the emergency room. I texted my mom to say I was heading over to Massachusetts General Hospital. It is a mile from here. I was going to walk over. Because walking is what

I do. And if I was having a heart attack, and wasn't coming home again, I was at least going to go out with what I knew, with my standby, and that was putting one foot in front of the other, on pavement.

I walked up to the woman who checks you in at the MGH ER and told her why I was there. She asked if I had chest pains. I said no. I felt, actually, like I usually felt.

A nurse came out and took me into a room for an EKG. I was sweating. The little patches of tape wouldn't adhere to my chest.

"They don't like hair or sweat," she said. "Are you nervous right now?"

I told her I was so scared. The results came out.

"You're not about to have a heart attack. But your heart is going a little fast."

They sent me to the waiting room. I texted John, who had sent ten texts of his own. They all revolved around a theme.

"You are not going to die. You are fine. It is stress."

I was in the waiting room for forty-five minutes. I had brought a book, William Sloane's 1937 effort at cosmic horror, *To Walk the Night*. They called my name and a nurse walked with me down a corridor to the standard ER, depositing me in a room where two doctors, a man in his fifties and a woman in her early thirties, joined me fifteen minutes later. They told me they would run tests. For my thyroid, for starters. I asked if the Reaper was drawing near.

The woman doctor said that the wiring of my heart appeared fine. Something else was making it beat faster. After which the man chimed in by saying the Reaper wouldn't be pulling up for another thirty, forty, or fifty years. I responded with a "bloody hell man, this is your bedside manner?" They laughed. I'm generally good for one solid chuckle with each hospital visit.

The tests turned up nothing. An IV was stuck in my left arm, but wouldn't take on account of the blood vessels being constricted, so a vein was opened up in my right. Saline fluid dripped into me for quite a while. Then I had a phosphorus tablet. The doctors had

said that if you drank a lot, and then stopped, you could have these symptoms.

Six hours after I got there, they signed me out. I had been dehydrated, and I hoped it was a combo of that and the non-drinking thing. I stopped at the Whole Foods on the way home to pick up a little treat for actually having gone to the doctor. My hair was long, because I had grown it out, something I had taken to doing, almost as a ritual, after my life had fallen apart back in 2012. I had bandages on both arms, a medical bracelet on my wrist. The cashier asked me if all had gone well, I said, yes, I think so. I got my haircut the next day, completely shorn. Martinet. The holidays were approaching. Enough of this shit, I thought. Motherfuck, enough. I was going to break free of the past.

For five weeks, I went at it pretty good. I didn't run, because I was too scared. I walked, though. I visited with Circe, and I remained off the drink. Got me some nice BP scores. True, the doctors had told me the readings for your vitals weren't really called "scores," but they seemed more amenable when I told them the competitive blood pressure enthusiast bit.

I did most things right as the year approached its end. I went to a lot of events from Halloween through the opening of the Christmas season. Hockey games, football games. A BU student production of *A Taste of Honey*. A Chopin program. The first hurling match at Fenway since 1954. A high school Thanksgiving contest at the old ballpark. A showing of *Rudolph* at the Brattle in Cambridge. A screening of *Nosferatu* at Symphony Hall with live accompaniment from the Pops. A Handel and Haydn Society 200th anniversary concert at King's Chapel. A staging of *Trumpet of the Swan*. I hit up, even more than usual, the museums I'm a member at: The Museum of Fine Art in Boston, the Harvard Art Museums on the other side of the river, the Cape Ann Museum up in Gloucester, adjacent to Rockport, the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem.

I went to Concord and walked the woods where Thoreau once strode. The weather always seemed to be warm, warmer than it normally was in New England autumn. In those Concord woods I sat on the forest floor and watched the leaves fall as a hairy woodpecker went about its bug-procuring business, some leaves becoming festooned in my hair.

I still wasn't running. I set out one day to do some Christmas shopping for my two-year-old nephew. He lives in Chicago, where the surviving members of my immediate family are. I walked to the MFA, and looked at the Christmas tree, beneath the Sargent murals, a favorite sight of a season that is now exceedingly difficult for me.

I felt clammy, which I hoped was a result of the warmth and having just walked seven miles. Later, back in the North End, where I live, I sat in a café, drinking a hot chocolate. There was this fluttering that appeared to be happening around my heart. An extra beat, then a roll, then a tickle. Arriving home, I called upon Circe.

I had exploded again. The blood pressure was out of control. But it was the pulse that did my head in. It started at 115. By the third read, a minute later, I was at 143.

This time, at the Charles MGH ER, the woman who checks you in, whose duties I thought were mostly clerical, immediately grabbed my wrist after I told her what my pulse had been. EKG again. No waiting room this time. Instead, I hear someone call out the word "Acute." That can't be good, I think. A nurse comes bombing out of some corridor with a wheelchair. I've just walked eight miles. I could have cried when I saw the thing.

"Do I have to?"

"It's policy, sir."

"Please. Can't I just walk?"

"Sorry."

New territory this time. Everyone in beds. They gave me a bag, told me to get out of my clothes, put a johnny on me, stuck an IV in one arm and hooked me up to a heart monitor with the other. The same

verdict, mostly, came back as the first time. Electrically, my heart was fine. Something else was doing this. The physician's assistant said that stress alone couldn't get one's pulse up that high.

I told John this after. "It is stress," he insisted, "the thing is, when someone says the word stress in this situation, they think it's like the businessman who was in the other day. They don't understand your life, and that we're talking historic amounts of stress. Stress that induces stress in people who just hear about it."

My cousin, who had recently moved to Chicago for a new job and was staying with my mom, found me a cardiologist, one considered the best in Boston. I made an appointment for two days later.

I took a cab over, I was so freaked out, even though this particular hospital was just three miles away. A nurse recorded my vitals before I met with the doctor. My pulse was 112. The doctor came in. He had me breathe as he listened with his stethoscope, then felt around in various places, legs included. Told me to get dressed as he looked at my two EKG results from the hospital and the new one his nurse had just done.

"This is very reassuring, actually," he began. "Take a seat. Let's talk about your life."

We spoke for thirty minutes. He took notes, asked detailed questions. Then he put the pad down.

"Look, Colin, you have a lot of stressors, any one of which would be more than enough to grind a person down. But you have about a dozen. You have death, death again, your career, death threats, divorce, having to produce so much every day, having to be on every day and create, a broken engagement, what sounds like an absurdly difficult job, and now you've given up drinking on top of all of that. Among other things. With that kind of pressure, yes, you could boost your pulse to 150, and it could stay there. I want to schedule a stress test. For your peace of mind, mostly. I'll get you on the treadmill, and I bet with how active you are I can get your pulse up to 180, and you'll see that you're fine."

“And if I’m not, you can try and do something so that the Reaper won’t close in?”

“Yes, if there is something, we can do things to keep the Reaper away. But you need to get your stress under control.”

In the meanwhile, before my stress test visit for the next week, he told me to do whatever I wished. “Run a marathon if you want.”

Over four days I covered sixty miles. I walked, I ran. Granted, I did the latter with my license in my pocket, in case I keeled over and needed ID either at the hospital or the morgue.

Before a stress test, there is an ultrasound of your heart. This

involves you laying in a stretcher on your side, in a most precise manner—they reposition you often—and a tech swabbing this foam-topped stick thing coated with blue gel over your heart region.

We’re doing this for fifteen minutes. Guy has this quizzical look on his face. We are not talking. You want to hear the tech whistling, maybe, humming a little tune, perhaps, like we’re all hunky dory here.

Instead, silence, and what I regarded as a grave expression. We were also in this strange hospital half-light, like the generators were beginning to fade. Then the sound effects came in, like the tech had flipped a switch for audio and, suddenly, you could hear the wet swooshing of my heart, all gurgle and garble and sounding, to me, fast as fuck. I’m hooked up to machines on both sides of me, and another IV is in my arm, but I’m thinking about saying, basically, enough, I’m out, screw this.

Then he says, very seriously—well, to my thinking—he needs to check on something. I’m then alone in the room, holding that pose—which I thought was for the best—for twenty minutes. Clearly there is something dire going on, they are talking about surgery or something, and I’m about to rip everything out and do a legger. And wouldn’t you know, because I am logged on cranberry juice, hibiscus tea, fat-free milk—all off the stuff I drink for my blood pressure—and peppermint tea, green tea, and now coconut water—for my

electrolytes—I have to piss. Badly. So much so that I call out. This is not going well.

No one comes, so now I’m wondering if I should try and wheel myself over to the sink and improvise, like being in my own perverse Beckett play. I was thinking maybe my ex-wife or ex-fiancee would walk in, thus finishing me off, *Twilight Zone*-style, for good.

Eventually, it is neither of the nurses who had been present at various times, nor the tech, who comes in, but the cardiologist of all people, who I thought would not be there. He greets me, all serious, with a “Colin, buddy, what’s wrong,” at which point I lost it and responded with “motherfuck. This can’t be good.”

“Nice to see you too.”

“I’m sorry. I am not at my best.”

The concern was that the joint thing where my veins connect to my heart was too big. Even though this was unlikely. More of the sonar shit. Turns out this is fine. Now it is time for the treadmill, and I am ready for this. O boy, I am ready for this. Control. Something I can control.

They tell me to go as long as I can, and most people go for six minutes, and some up to twelve. Anyone who knows me will know that it was at that point that I decided there was no way I was getting off that thing of my own volition. I like to compete. And while I suck at many things, there aren’t many people better at walking.

So I’m up there, shirt off, defiantly refusing to breathe through my mouth, hands clasped behind my back because now I’m pretending I’m Horatio Hornblower pacing his quarterdeck as he looks through the fog for a French frigate. (The shade in front of me being down helped.)

After ten minutes, I asked when the incline starts, and the nurse said the grade had been going up every thirty seconds, and added that most people are usually running by this point and I was weirdly good at this. She didn’t know I had just nearly pissed in her sink, but we all have different strengths. It is like Mr. Toad’s Wild Ride when I go to the doctor. When someone came into the room, I

checked to see who it was and I nearly shot myself off the back of the machine, prompting a nurse to say, “look straight ahead, cowboy,” a line I resolved to use for something in future.

Eventually, they said that’s enough, despite my protest that that’s no twenty miles, and it was back into the stretcher for more ultrasounding. They want a before and an after. Then they said I could leave and left me alone in the room again. I walked to the museum. Heard from my NPR producer, while I gazed at the Christmas tree, saying we were on for the latest segment, one on really bad old Christmas movies. Afterwards, I finally made my way back to my sty. Wrote something on the Beatles for *Rolling Stone*, and something on a letter Keats wrote at Christmastime for someone else. After which I made a decision for how I would spend the holiday.

I thought of calling it Operation Carry-The-Fuck-On, but terms only take you so far. You can call anything whatever you want, but in the end—which is to say, really, *during the during*, as I think of it, of your life—there is only “is.” Not this, not that, simply is. Is is is. The “this” and “that” are you trying to codify reality. But you can’t. You can do what you can for your own situation. Most people don’t. I think they acquiesce, call things other things which they are not. But part of my present day reality was my past, and it was keeping me from my future. Granted, if that past did not exist, I still don’t think I could have the future I want. Too much is out of my control. John tells me that there is little I am wrong about, but I could not be more so here. But doing the right thing is in my control. And I was going to do what, for me, fit that particular bill in the latest strange time of my life.

The day I left for Cape Ann, to spend a few days, including Christmas, alone at an inn in Rockport, I called John on my walk.

I was sitting in the Public Garden on the bench that all Bostonians know as the *Good Will Hunting* bench, as it’s the one that was used in the movie when Matt Damon and Robin Williams have their big heart-to-heart. I don’t normally sit on it, but I had just gotten

a coffee at the Dunkin' and I needed to put my gloves back on, so I took a seat.

We only spoke for a couple minutes. I was supposed to be taking my blood pressure once a week, so that the cardiologist could get an idea of where I normally was, in terms of my scores. I hadn't done this. I was too scared. Whenever I thought about pulling out Circe, I'd feel my anxiety ramp up, and I saw no point in going back to the ER with a pulse of 150 just to be hooked up to an IV and sent home seven hours later.

"Look," he said, "all I care about is you breaking through. It's not the work that is ever going to be the issue, it is the naval blockade in the harbor. How to get to the open ocean. The open ocean is where you belong." He told me he loved me. I told him I loved him. He opined that the Patriots couldn't possibly win it all this year, I replied that I thought they would, we wished each other the best of the season, and with that I was off to a place I have always loved so much, where my life had fallen apart, and which I wish to return to so badly.

I took the train up at night. I liked looking out the window at the lighthouses off in the distance as other people dozed or read. Checking into the Linden Inn, I put my bag in my room, which had a stocking on the door. Solitary Christmases have been my norm since 2012. They are easier for me. Supremely hard, but easier than they would be otherwise. Just like going to the ER is hard, but I do better when I am there alone. I don't know why. Something in me—my survival skills—runs best when I must look solely within myself to pull through.

Ten minutes later I'm back on the train, having had a panic attack. I got off in Gloucester, the next town down the line, also on Cape Ann. Gloucester is far more urban, for all of its natural beauty, and hardscrabble. It's the town in *The Perfect Storm*. For a long time, when I could not return to Rockport because of the pain, Gloucester became my purgatory, a place I could go to that was close, but not too close, my holding pattern venue until, I figured, I

was able to return to what I viewed as Paradise. Mil-fucking-tonian.

I gathered myself for a few hours, reading in a bar on the water, then headed back to Rockport. I watched college football bowl games on TV and read some Dickens. The next morning, on December 24, I set out on a run. I went along the harbor, down a stretch called Bearskin Neck, around this old fishing shack known as Motif #1—supposedly the most painted structure in the country—and out onto the Headlands, the cliffs that overlook both the town and the harbor, and back again, running up a sandy hill on which is situated an eighteenth-century graveyard overhanging the sea where I had once stood with my ex-fiancee and she had extended her hand and taken a joint selfie of our beaming faces.

The day was gray, the air clotted with brine, mist from the clouds, mist from the sea. It all mixes with your sweat and you're several kinds of wet, but good wet.

Back in front of the inn, I stood and took off my long-sleeved shirt, steam coming off me in my T-shirt. Being a loser, I imagined I was an NFL player in a playoff game, when a woman called out to me.

"My hound dog has developed a fascination with you." She and the dog were on the other side of the road behind a hedge elevated a few feet above the street.

I replied that he probably didn't see many people outside at that time of the morning.

"It's not a running town," she said, and then told me a few things about it and her own life. She had two boys. One had special needs. They bought their house in 2011.

The dog—a rescue dog—was trying to figure out how to alight from the hedge. The woman started to tell me about places to visit. By now we had exchanged names. She asked if I was staying at the inn with my family.

Millbrook Pond, which has a streaming running from it, is down a short slope behind her house. I listened for a second to the rushing water. Then I told her I used to live here, and had also gotten a house in 2011. I had gone through a bad divorce, and other bad

things since, and because I was spending Christmas alone, for the time being, I had come here to face some things.

“You look like a man trying to put your soul back together,” she said. The hound finally broke through. Jumped down the ledge, and I held him—or rather he busied himself in much excited jumping against me—until she could come around and collect him.

We were both in the street now. “I don’t want to intrude,” she said, “because you’re here to do what you need to do, but when you see our tree in the window, lit up at night, know you’re not alone. Really, Colin, you’re not.”

And then we said goodbye.

A few minutes later I was back out on the Headlands. Not for some romantic reason—I had locked myself out of my room and the innkeepers weren’t up yet. I thought of how my friend the Durgin Park bartender had told me, recently, to give up, that I had had my chance and to keep trying would be a form of insanity. I thought of the Robert Mitchum film *Out of the Past*, and how he’s always going off to a café in Mexico called La Mar Azul, as his past, present, and future begin to blur together. I thought of the remarks that John and other friends had made. I heard the waves break, I watched the white water fly through the warm Christmas Eve air. I looked, as I always do, inside myself. I thought of next moves, the new year, doing what you know is right no matter what, and all manner of blue and blues. Blue. Blue some more. Blue, blue.

And blue.

The Things We Sleep On

Roanne O'Neil

“Camping?” said the Gunner’s wife. There, she’d said it. After all the fuss, it had come straight out, barely a cough of a word.

“No,” was all he said.

She looked down at the table: another night with the smell of hot soup and looking into the face of Fred.

“Back in Monte Cassino,” he began.

You pitched your tent.

“I pitched my tent.”

In a blizzard, the ground so hard it bent the tent pegs.

“In a blizzard,” he said and he talked of raw skin against the guide rope. His story started the tiny throb in that vein on his temple. “A dark night.”

Steam rose from his soup bowl.

Black as smoke.

“Black as smoke. What chance did we have? We couldn’t see what it was.” He let go of his spoon and looked up. “Right there, all night, and us, just sleeping. Stones. I thought it was stones iced-up beneath the groundsheet.”

The soup would be getting cold soon. And she’d still to hear of the cuff he saw first, *the fingers, and the fistful of earth, all frozen.*

“Only in the morning,” he said, “did I learn I’d slept on a German.”

Dead.

“Dead.” He tapped the table.

“Of course,” she said. She reached for the pot and topped up his cooling soup bowl. “We’ll go to Aunt Ida’s instead.”

“Camping,” he said and shook his head at his dinner.

That night, with Fred breathing a smoker’s snore upstairs, she took out her list, “Things I must not do”:

- Wake him when he sits up in his sleep

- Clean windows—never touch his traps on the catches
- Start the car without giving him notice
- Start the radio
- Use washing powder (looks like something used by the Germans)
- Comment on the whiskey

She added “Mention camping” and there was a sound. She looked up to the ceiling. The moan of their bed frame. It must be that time now. She twice-folded the note. Held it in her own thin hand. Then tucked it into her nightshirt, where it buttoned up at her breast and where she knew he would not look for it.

Head in the Sand

Justin Jannise

Tempting
to cling

to some certainty,
this memory,

that fact
about peaches and not retract

in the face of certain dirt.
Possible to remain inured

to the funneling away
of fuel, the always-nearly-empty gauge,

despite such frequent sojourns
to the pump. Tough to worship the book's closure

and remain readerly.
Tougher to hug the mystery

as close to the chest as a lung,
or to know how your tongue

tastes. Tougher still
to go through with the burial

when the coast
is eroding, and the forecasts

say
rain every day.

A Tale of Two Tallies

Brexit, the day after

Christopher Thornton

Outside Edinburgh Castle, William Wallace and Richard the

Bruce—the two greatest icons of Scottish nationalism—stand guard in bronze, larger than life, at the start of the city’s equally iconic Royal Mile. In their day—the thirteenth century—Scottish nationalism meant resistance to English domination, in particular the invasions of Edward I and his son and successor Edward II. After defeating the English forces in 1297 at the Battle of Stirling Bridge, Wallace became the Guardian of Scotland and leader of the Scottish War of Independence. Following Wallace’s defeat at the Battle of Falkirk, the baton was passed to Robert the Bruce, who continued to wage wars against the English invaders **until his death in 1329. Wallace paid heavily for his resistance.** He was hung, castrated, disemboweled while still alive, and then drawn and quartered. His limbs were displayed in four separate towns as a warning to future revolutionaries, his head dipped in tar and mounted on London Bridge.

Medieval wars between England and Scotland may be a thing of the past, but political antagonisms aren’t. Fast-forward almost a century to the vote over whether the United Kingdom should absolve its membership in the European Union, or “Brexit,” and stark divisions between the English and the Scots emerge again. In the June 23 referendum, England voted 53%-47% to leave, with only a few population centers in the Midlands and the south voicing a Remain majority. Meanwhile, every Scottish county voted Remain, and the 62% Remain vote countrywide was the highest among the four members of the United Kingdom. Northern Ireland **also** went Scotland’s way, voting 55% Remain, while Wales sided with England, with 52% voting Leave. The Scots still seem bent upon separating themselves, if not from English rule, than from the rule in the United Kingdom.

Nestled along the River Aire in central Yorkshire, the heart of Leave territory, Leeds was an English exception. The city’s Remain vote squeaked out a 50.3% majority, and a brief stroll through the

city center helps explain why. With its Indian takeaways, falafel stands, and Asian noodle bars standing alongside neighborhood pubs and casual dessert cafes, Leeds better resembles central London than the local towns and villages 10 or 15 miles away.

“There’s much more multiculturalism here, the atmosphere is much more international. More people see the benefit of connecting to the outside world,” Priscilla, manning the desk at the tourist information office, told me.

Leeds is also a student city, hosting students both British and international at several universities, another factor that may have pushed Leeds in the Remain direction. “Young people have grown up with the EU,” Priscilla went on, “it’s normal for them to consider studying in Germany or Italy or France, and then coming back to the U.K. or staying abroad, and they don’t want to give that up.”

When I first asked about the local reaction to the Brexit vote she warned me, “we aren’t allowed to discuss politics,” but after a little casual talk politics found its way into the conversation. What about the loss of local industries that had sustained a town like Leeds for generations?

Priscilla was upbeat, as any representative charged with putting a good face on the city would have to be: “We now have many legal firms and international call centers that have opened offices here, and then there’s the retail industry. Leeds has become a shopping hub for the region. It’s much easier to get around than central London. And there are many new malls opening up.”

To prove her point, she pointed to a shaded area on a map of the city that had been slated for retail development, in the same way that entire districts in previous times had been handed over to factory owners.

“We also rely a great deal on tourism,” Priscilla went on, “not only from the U.K. but all over the world.”

If her claim needed substantiation, the TV screen a few feet away was running a video promotion on the attractions of Leeds—in

Chinese. But I weighed Priscilla's claims of economic fruition for a city long dependent on well-paying industrial jobs with a bit of doubt. Leeds was a snapshot of many transitional economies across the United Kingdom that were trying to replace "old economy" union-driven jobs with service-oriented employment and the spillover benefits of the consumer culture—which mainly benefitted those with money to spend.

One afternoon I spent a couple hours touring the Leeds City Museum, just up the street from the information center and a few minutes walk from Leeds' pedestrian, retail-dominated center. Display after display touted the economic success that the industrial revolution had brought to the city, when companies like Watson's & Sons Ltd., a soap manufacturer, and the Burton's clothing company provided lifetime employment for generations of the working class. But that was Leeds' history, and worthy of a display in the city's history museum. It was now 2016, and many of the derelict mills and factories along the River Aire had been bought by real estate developers to be converted into upscale apartments and condominiums.

The odd juxtaposition of an "old" and "new" economy could be seen elsewhere in Leeds. Along the river, the historic locks that had guided boats up- and downstream for two hundred years, linchpins of the economy of another era, were now for the most part tourist sights to be marketed on the city's promotional brochures. The shopping arcades in the Victorian District, built in the late nineteenth century to satisfy the desires of an emerging consumer society, had been beautifully restored to attract the ready spenders of today. Most of the city center was lined with brand-name stores, British, European, international—it no longer made any difference, as all had melded together to forge the new retail economy. But like the Brexit vote, the Victorian District posed more questions than answers: By refurbishing its shopping arcades, was Leeds clinging to its Victorian past or using it as a stepping-stone to the future, though a future based on service-sector employment? In the early evening,

the running, walking, biking path along the river became a commuting corridor, as Leeds' new professional class commuted via foot and pedal power to their semi-rural digs.

"People are moving up here from London who are just tired of the living costs and long commutes. I used to live in London myself and decided to move up here," Priscilla told me. "In London you have to drive twenty miles to get to the countryside," she continued, "and spend an hour fighting the city traffic. Here, it is just a few minutes away." All well and good. And I could appreciate her efforts at civic boosterism. But what she didn't acknowledge was that villages less than 20 miles away were a world away from central Leeds—socially, economically, and culturally. The people of rural Yorkshire regarded deeply abstract concepts such as "globalization" and "the new economy" as forces that had upended their lives, and the European Union was the Trojan horse that had let them in.

The Brexit decision reverberated around the world because the questions surrounding it were not solely British. If one of the factors in the vote was globalization and the changes it had brought, then Brexit was a toe in the water, testing the temperature of the tender topics of immigration, economic growth, and nationalism worldwide. But Britain was not alone. By raising these issues, the Brexit vote invited questions that had been simmering far beyond the shores of the United Kingdom.

After the Brexit results, common perception said that most young Britons voted Remain while many of their parents' generation opted for Leave. But such generalities can only be carried so far. Ann Tobin's strands of curly white hair hint that she is not one of the millennials who backed the Remain vote in order to preserve employment and educational opportunities abroad. Originally from Derbyshire, in southern Yorkshire, she teaches in the media program at Leeds-Beckett University. If the poll results were at all accurate, her views were at odds with most of her neighbors and generation.

“The working class *has* been forgotten by the government,” Ann told me, standing in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows on the fifth floor of the Rose Bowl, the landmark conference center at the heart of the university. “It *hasn’t* done anything for them. It’s like what you have in the U.S., where Donald Trump has gotten support from the working class and unemployed, everyone who has been left behind by all the changes in the global economy that have taken place, and so quickly. The old jobs were in mining, steel and coal, but they are *gone*. As much as people would like to believe, they’re not coming back.”

There was an ironic point here—that this relentless force called globalization had spread beyond economic ties to shape international politics—and one only needed to read the daily headlines to see that its greatest critics had become its greatest advocates. At the height of the U.S. presidential convention season Nigel Farage, former leader of the anti-immigrant, Britain-first United Kingdom Independence Party, jetted across the Atlantic to boost Trump’s campaign. Again, political ties were forged across national boundaries to argue for just the opposite—the preservation of national boundaries and resistance to outside influence.

Further irony was on display on the road connecting Leeds to Bradford International Airport. A sign reminded arrivals that Leeds had been the site of the Grand Depart, or starting line, of the 2014 Tour de France, the **annual** cycling race that ended on Paris’ Champs-Élysées, to symbolize the concept of a united Europe. That year the course wound through Leave-dominant Yorkshire and then headed south through Sheffield, Cambridge, and London before crossing the English Channel. Prince Harry, Prince William, and his wife Kate were on hand to cut the ribbon for the Grand Sendoff.

“It was all emotion that drove the Brexit campaign,” Ann continued, “and as in America the vote brought out people who hadn’t been part of the political process. When my husband and I went to vote, there was a long queue all the way down the block, and we had

never seen anything like it before. Right then we knew that the Leave campaign had won. But people in this part of Britain don't see that the old jobs are not going to return, and without the eastern Europeans we would even have fewer jobs."

To illustrate her point, she told me about the Sports Direct controversy that had rocked Yorkshire. The national sportswear chain had bought land that was the former site of a Yorkshire mine to build a warehouse and distribution center. It would be staffed primarily by Lithuanians who, naturally, would be paid less than local residents, were the local residents ever to be offered the jobs. The symbolism of a retail distribution center being built on top of an abandoned mine could have only rankled local sentiment.

"Many people here say the Lithuanians are taking their jobs, but if it weren't for the Lithuanians there would be even fewer jobs. In this case, Sports Direct would have simply gone somewhere else, and the place will employ at least *some* Britons."

Even in Remain-leaning Leeds I knew there had to be some Leave voters ready to voice their views, and it didn't take long to find one. Stephen Curran is the mirror image of Ann Tobin—a Leave proponent from the largely Remain region of Dorset. He is neither a young millennial eyeing employment prospects in Germany or Italy, nor a near pensioner like Ann. As a university instructor at Brunel University London, he has no reason to fear Lithuanians taking his job.

"It's about sovereignty," he told me. "If the EU had stayed an economic bond tied to jobs and trade, people would have accepted it much better than they have. But when it exercised political control, that's when it went too far."

As with Ann, the United States became the point of comparison. "All this time we've had two governments," Stephen explained, "one in London and one in Brussels. Imagine something like this in the U.S., a Congress—Senate and House—and a president to decide American issues, but then there was another government somewhere else saying, 'No, you can't do that.' Would the American people put up with that?"

When the referendum was announced by former prime minister David Cameron, to be held on June 23, Brexit was expected to be defeated, but Conservative politicians, such as former London mayor Boris Johnson, became its cheerleaders. A wave of isolationist, nationalist frenzy was whipped up, and to almost everyone's surprise the proposal for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union, the multinational organization it had helped establish, had passed. This prompted a question that still hovered, unanswered: What drove the Leave voters to the polls? If there was a change in sentiment, what was the tipping point?

"When Obama came here to lecture the British on how they should vote, that really angered a lot of people. Imagine a British politician going to the U.S. to tell Americans how to vote on anything—that Mexicans should have free passage across the border. There was an enormous backlash. Many people came out to vote who might have stayed home."

"There will never be a United States of Europe," Stephen mused. "The countries are too culturally diverse. The U.S. is a large multicultural society made up of people from an enormous number of ethnic and racial backgrounds, but when they face the flag they are all Americans, and they know what that means."

Given the divisions the American election season dramatizes, along lines of gender, race, religion, ethnicity, economics, law and order, gun and birth control and just about every other demographic imaginable that, we like to believe, was once embraced by the concept of an overarching American identity, Stephen's vision of American unity seemed fanciful. And when the national anthem is played at sporting events, some players place their hands over their hearts, others kneel in protest. But rather than challenge him on this, I asked—What's next? When would Article 50 of the EU charter be initiated, triggering a final Brexit? Would there be a revote once the terms of Brexit were clear? Could a revote prompt a re-think, and could a re-think prompt a return to the EU? Consider the after-shocks. Such a political earthquake could hardly fail to roll through

the entire continent without rattling a few cupboards. Could other countries flirt with the prospect of abandoning the EU?

“France could be next,” Stephen speculated. “They might not vote to leave but they could also call for a referendum.”

If there is anything that Britons do agree on is that they are willing to embrace the benefits of a borderless Europe when the winds from the Mediterranean blow north across the Iberian Peninsula, cross the English Channel (without so much as a passport check), to bring warm, sunny weather to the streets of London, Birmingham, and points north. And so it was throughout my stay in Leeds, and so it continued when I boarded a British Rail train for the three-hour ride to Edinburgh, Scotland. Along the way, the fields of oats and barley glowed in late-summer light. Below Dumbarton, the rail line skirted the pearly blue waters of the North Sea, and passengers on station platforms lingered in T-shirts and shorts, enjoying this last gift of summer, eager to forget the Brexit vote, at least for the time being, or at least as long as the sun shone.

Central Edinburgh is also a snapshot, not only of the twenty-first-century United Kingdom but of its history over the last four hundred years. Edinburgh Castle, which dates to the twelfth century, still looms over the wynds and closes of the Old Town, now crammed with tourists from the castle all the way to Holyrood Palace, at the opposite end of the Royal Mile. Outside St. Giles Cathedral, larger-than-life replicas of the economist Adam Smith and philosopher David Hume stand in bronze castings, eyeing the tourists that pass under their gaze. On the other side of the Princes’ Gardens (formerly Loch Noch and for several hundred years the city’s notoriously fetid water supply), Edinburgh’s New Town spreads out in chessboard squares, a product of eighteenth-century urban planning that was designed to accommodate the growth of the city once the Old Town was filled to bursting. Georgian townhouses sprang up to house the expanding middle class, and today the streets are lined with international brand-name stores to satisfy the material appetites of a greatly

expanded consumer class.

But neither gentrification nor hyper-globalization have changed one thing: the Scots penchant for blunt talk. In the Stockbridge Pub, just outside the New Town, I asked Paul, sipping a happy-hour pint of beer, about local sentiment toward the Brexit vote.

“Well—,” and he paused, “there’s a wide range of views on this.”

And what were they?

“Well, they range from acceptance to, well—thinking it’s bloody fucking stupid.”

I asked him where he fell on the spectrum.

“Me?? I think it’s *beyond* bloody fucking stupid,” he shot back.

“The whole thing was pushed by politicians who used the issue for political gain. They never thought it would pass. They thought it would fail and they would be seen as standing up for the common man. Now they don’t know what to do. They’re totally lost. All the arguments they used had nothing to do with being a part of the European Union. Take immigration. ‘Control our borders?’ Leaving the EU isn’t going to stop that.”

A snapshot of Edinburgh 2016 suggested that the toothpaste could not be put back in the tube. Over 20 years of EU membership and open borders could not be reversed. The wait staff in pubs and restaurants hailed from Poland and Lithuania. Bus drivers spoke English with Italian accents. The late-hour convenience stores and grocery shops were operated by Indians and Pakistanis. The helpful attendant at the city’s tourist information center had migrated to Edinburgh not from Glasgow or Inverness but Salonika, Greece. Ironically, however, nothing had really changed. These were not the jobs “Scots didn’t want to do.” There were also Scottish wait staff and bus drivers. Fish and chips were still sold by the bucketful. Room-temperature beer was still drawn from pub taps. Letter drops and telephone boxes (wherever they could be found) **still glowed bright red**. Scotland had not become a borough of Europe. But more of Europe had come to Scotland.

During the industrial revolution, rural dwellers fallen on tough

times sought opportunities in cities. In the twenty-first century's "new economy," citizens of countries fallen on hard times are moving to where opportunities can be had, and this means migration to places that offer a hope of prosperity. Seen another way, the dynamics of the village economy have simply been stretched to the dimensions of a global village. Over the decades, the European Union has gradually but inevitably rewoven the social fabric of Scotland, bringing Europe to Scotland and Scotland closer to the rest of Europe. So it is not so much a babel of languages that one hears in twenty-first-century Edinburgh as a babel of accents. English is the common denominator, but the accents are no longer Welsh, Irish, English, or even Scottish.

At the Mitre pub along the Royal Mile one evening I met Jasmine, whose curly red hair and fair complexion marked her as quintessentially Scottish. Like most of the millennial generation, she had voted Remain, but I asked her if Scotland might mount another referendum to break from the United Kingdom—a replay of the 2014 vote.

"I'd hate to see that happen," she said. "They've been together for such a long time it would be a shame for the Brexit decision to lead to that."

I noted her use of "they" rather than "we" in referring to Scotland and England. As we talked, it emerged that Jasmine was French but had lived in Scotland for four years. In that time she had taken on the role of a concerned relative of a long-wed couple on the verge of divorce, hoping it wouldn't happen for the "good of the family." But now the "family" was all of Europe. Brexit, or a Scottish revote, wasn't only a British affair but a European one. National decisions had international impact, as an exploding volcano spews ash wherever the wind may carry it, ignoring national borders. "Internal affairs" were no longer internal.

The question still hovered, like an annoying mosquito: Would the Scots vote again on leaving the United Kingdom?

"Oh yes, they will," said Jack, tending the bar at the Mitre, with a bit of swagger. The ghost of Robert the Bruce still lived: The swashbuckling hero envisioned a pan-Scottish-Gaelic union discarding English

rule, and Scotland and Northern Ireland were united in voting to remain in the European Union.

Paul, at the Stockbridge Pub, was more circumspect, a spokesman for Scottish pragmatism who recognized that the heroic era of William Wallace and Robert the Bruce had passed: “We will have to see what the terms of Brexit will be,” he said. “But even if they aren’t good it would be hard for Scotland to leave the U.K. What’s our population, five million? As an independent country where does that put us? Maybe on par with Estonia or Slovenia? What’s our economic strength if we have to stand on our own? Oil from the North Sea isn’t going to last forever.”

For Scots, exit from the European Union on unfavorable terms on trade and other economic matters would present a Hobson’s choice: remain in the United Kingdom without Europe or reapply for E.U. membership without the economic might of the United Kingdom. Would there be a Scottish revote? The answer was as unpredictable as the Scottish weather.

And the weather had turned. After days of puffy clouds and sparkling sun, a northeast wind filled the streets of the Old Town with dense fog and mist. The spires of St. Giles Cathedral and the gothic spires of the monument to Sir Walter Scott along Princes Street were barely visible. On the Royal Mile, Hume and Smith became ghostly silhouettes. It was a good day to spend in the National Museum of Scotland to explore “The Scottish Story,” as the six floors of the modern wing are called. The displays trace the history of the rocky, windswept land from the time of the ancient Celts and the Roman occupation through the medieval era, the Scottish renaissance—which brought achievements in art, literature, architecture, and technology—and the post-world War II exodus of Scots seeking better opportunities in the English-speaking world outside the British Isles: the United States, Canada, and Australia.

I spent most of the day climbing the six floors, hoping to get a broader perspective on the recent crisis, or conundrum, in Scottish history. Brexit and the question of a Scottish revote were twenty-

first-century matters involving globalization and the increasing unification of a continent that had been torn by internal wars for at least a thousand years. Scottish history, as rich as complex as it was, offered little to help navigate this new era.

It was almost five o'clock when Laurinda, one of the security staff, appeared to tell me that my visit had come to an end. Her accent was distinctly British but not Scottish, and as we chatted she revealed that she had been born in Ireland, not the loyalist north but the republican south. Her parents had migrated to Scotland in the early 1990s, and it had been her home from the age of four months. As a naturalized Scot she, too, had voted Remain, for reasons similar to most of her generation: "It's so much easier to travel, find career opportunities."

Did the immigration question concern her? Did Britain need to secure its borders, to "take its country back?"

"It's a good thing, all these people from different parts of Europe and even the world coming here," she replied. "It brings more freedom and openness."

Then the shadow of history lengthened, and in this case the gloom covered decades and began before Laurinda had been born.

"In Ireland, I know what it was like back in the days of the borders. I hear the stories from the people who lived through it. I wouldn't want to go back to that."

Back out on the streets of the Old Town the fog and mist had grown thicker. The spires of St. Giles Cathedral had been absorbed by the evening damp. The Royal Mile ended in murky haze a hundred meters in either direction. This suggested not so much an ominous future as one that was, well—more than a little opaque. This was Scotland after all, where historical clarity has been as rare as the clarity of the ale drawn from pub taps.

The next morning the sunshine returned. The view from Arthur's Seat, the promontory that towers majestically over the eastern side of the Old Town, was an unbroken arc of sky all the way to Edinburgh Castle, at the western end of the Royal Mile. Shoppers

again strolled along Princes' Street and throughout the New Town grid, umbrellas and the nagging concerns of politics put away for the time being. Weather and politics are ever in flux in Scotland, and as every Scot knows, fair weather and a break from the storms has to be enjoyed whenever the opportunity arises.

But in Scotland political debates cannot be silenced for long. Sometime in the night, a prankster had fitted the head of the bronze David Hume with an orange and white traffic cone, and there it sat, a plastic dunce cap atop the head of the great philosopher, throughout the afternoon. As political commentary it was trenchant but perhaps not quite fair. **Scotland may have voted Remain, but no one knows in which direction the Scotsman skeptical of all habits of thought might have leaned.**

When Timbers Start

Lancelot Schaubert

“I like the other one,” she said.

“But it’s so heavy,” Remmy said.

“I know. I like a sturdy table,” she said.

“There’s kitchen tables and then there’s butcher’s blocks. I don’t plan on slaughtering a hog in my dining room.”

“I might,” she said. “I’m the cook.”

Remmy sighed. “Do you think it’s pretty?”

“I think it’s pretty.”

“Do you think anyone else will?”

“What do I care for what anyone else thinks?”

“I’m not going to answer that question, you’ll get me into trouble if I answer that question.”

“Wilson Remus Broganer, what’s that supposed to mean?”

Wilson Remus Broganer said nothing to his pregnant wife.

“Well in any case,” she said, “I like it and I think it matches everything else so this is what we’re getting.”

“Alright now, I didn’t mean to make you mad.”

“I’m not mad. I’m decisive.”

“And you won yourself a decisive victory. Okay now, let’s get it to the bag checker.”

“They don’t make bags big enough for this, honey.”

“You know what I mean.” He hefted the massive slab of wood.

“You know what I mean,” he muttered as he grunted and hefted it over to one of the counters with one of them Sears and Roebuck signs and they bought it and, with much struggle on Remmy’s part, took it home.

“Five dollars a month,” he kept mumbling as he drove. “Five dollars a month. I could buy a share of Texaco at the end of the year.”

“Well then let’s take it back.”

“You were listening to me?” he asked.

“You weren’t whispering, really, now were you?”

“I meant to be.”

“You didn’t mean very well.”

He harrumphed. “Well I’m glad you have your table.”

“Are you?”

“It’s just so big.”

“I think it’s pretty.”

And so they went until they got home. He set up the table and it filled that room as does the king’s table in a great hall. Except this was no castle. Not even castle law existed at this time. He was pleased enough with it.

“You’re smiling,” she said.

“It’s a pretty table set up like that.”

“I told you so.”

“You did.” He smiled bigger.

“What?”

“I just did a good job setting it up.”

She did not return the affirmation he’d afforded her.

He grimaced.

Two weeks later, the biggest and baddest tornado any of them could remember hit. It snapped hundred-year-old trees in two. It leveled some houses and frayed some power lines.

When it hit, Remmy was at home with Beth.

“It’s a semi-hurricane!” Beth screamed.

“Tornado.”

“We’re going to die!”

“We might,” Remmy said.

“Why would you say such a thing?”

“I mean I’m sure we’ll be fine honey. Let’s go to the storm shelter.”

Well they went outside and that wind blew everything. Tore at the trees. Tore at the roof he’d just fixed up. There were boards and water thrown every which way and they walked out. Beth waddled a

bit with her swollen body and the baby inside. They got to the storm shelter door that Remy had just dug and they opened it up and I'll be damned if there wasn't two feet of water down there.

"That's not a storm shelter," Beth said.

"Sure it is, get inside!"

"That's a pool! That's an underground lake like in the movies where the monsters hide, I'm not going down in there!"

They were shouting over the wind, mind you. Stuff still blowing all around them.

"You get in there or I'll get you in there," he said. "We're not going inside."

"You do whatever you want," she said, "but me and the baby are going inside."

He watched her go, holding that sheet metal door like he was. Then he groaned and let it slam and he barely heard it over the cry of the trainrumbling in the sky. He started following her inside and then he shouted to no one in particular, "Where the hell did my brand new lawn chairs go?" They'd been metal chairs, heavy chairs, sturdy chairs, and not a one of them was in the backyard.

Back in the house they looked around, Beth was pacing, slowly, off-kilter. "What do we do?"

"You vetoed my plan!"

"What do we do? What do we do?"

The house had been built just on concrete blocks. Well the wind got under there like two stock boys will get under a box and it lifted the whole house up about six inches and slammed it back down again.

Beth screamed.

Remmy, for once, had nothing to say.

"What do we do?" Beth begged him.

The house was lifted higher and slammed down on those concrete blocks again. Some plaster fell off the ceiling in the other room. The table.

Remmy went into action. “You get under there. It’s new but it’s the strongest thing we’ve got.”

She got under there, moving like a station wagon with two mis-sized wheels, like a wheel with a ten pound weight on one wall. Then she sat still and some plaster fell off the ceiling and onto that five-dollar a month Sears and Roebuck kitchen table.

Remmy didn’t bother to duck under anything but one of the open doorframes, leaning against it like some cowboy watching his horse from the porch of a saloon. “Five dollars a month,” he muttered. “Decent insurance policy, I guess, I don’t know.”

More plaster fell.

The house bounced once or twice more.

The wind died down.

And then a sound like what you’d expect if Chicken Little’d been right and the sky really did fall. Something like the crashing of the Tower of Babel. Something the fall of Troy or the breaching of Atlantis’s levy.

All was calm.

“The hell was that?” Remmy said.

“Oh, Remmy, do you have to cuss?”

“I only cuss at cursed things and whatever just happened wasn’t no blessing.”

“Is that why you’ve been cursing at me?”

He didn’t answer that. He walked outside instead.

There in his yard, discarded as if some god of greed had found no more fun in a playtoy, sat stretched a massive tower, a fallen piece of alien architecture, as if the angels had gotten bored with their scaffolding for building the pearly gates and had kicked it over the edge of heaven. He was shouting, “Bethy come look! Come look, it’s awful! It’s an awesome thing to look at.”

The neighbors were outside too on their front porches, looking at the mangled black thing spread across the yards, the rain still coming down and none of them caring, not even the prettier ones in their nightgowns a bit too early—maybe his neighbor Joe’d been

passing the time with a little bit of marital duty. How people do cling to one another in hard times.

They looked at one another.

Beth came out and looked with Remmy.

They all stared at the massive steel oil derrick, as long as a water tower is tall. His father'd told him about these things, about how they drilled with big old bits. And about the salt water tank at the top. He looked at the top. It had exploded and the great salt water tower bled out over all of their yards that, along with the rain, was turning the ditches and divots to estuaries. Some of the neighbor kids ran out and played in it.

But all Remmy could think about was that salt. All of that salt. He stared at it, his eyes staring at the eye in the tower where the ... well it might as well have been where the poison came out.

Beth cried out behind him and went into an early labor, the contractions scared into her from the crashing and banging about.

He swore.

"Don't swear! This is a blessing!"

"Not in the rain and the wet!" he said.

She screamed. Oh, how she cried out from the pain.

The neighbor ladies came. Beth went inside with them. Remmy fretted and occupied himself with the boys. They went over to the tower to try to stop the bleeding but the water kept on coming. Some of the younger men actually tried to put their hands on the thing, which was about like trying to stop Niagara with your shoulder or some such stupidity.

While they were working over in Joe's yard, they found those table and chairs in a hedgerow.

"New chairs!" said Joe.

"Like hell!"

"Oh come on, Remmy, finders keepers, those are nice lawn chairs."

"Well in that case," Remmy said, "I just found this house sitting out here after the storm." He pointed to Joe's house.

“Oh, I was only joking.”

“Well joke these over into my yard with me, will ya?”

They hauled them. “You know,” Joe said as they walked back into Remmy’s yard, “I heard they got the name *derrick* from a hangman in England.”

“Come on, now.”

“That’s what I heard. Cause they call cranes derricks too. Big towers to hang things from, you know, like a hangman and his noose. Sticking out over to stick something down into a hole like that.”

“I’ll be damned. A derrick. It makes sense, I guess.”

They never did get the hole plugged. Not with wood. Not with clay or plaster or the pig carcass one of the boys tried. Where he got it, nobody asked because some things just were. After several hours of this the women came back out and told him he had a son. He ran in to find Beth there, tired and smiling. And the blood there reminded him of a full bottle of ketchup he’d once accidentally shattered while flirting at a diner as a teenager, tomato blood scattering everywhere. But he smiled all the same because he had a son. He named him Tobias—Toby.

Three weeks later, Toby died of pneumonia. It must have been the rain and the wet.

That was the year the Army Corp of Engineers started damming the Kaskaskia River to make Carlyle Lake. Through eminent domain, the government bought out house after house of the townships in the river valley. They capped sixty-nine oil wells.

They exhumed some six hundred graves, some of them undoubtedly holding the remains of ancestors of Native Americans as well as the remains of babies.

Two Poems

Jessica Pierce

Ravenous

An ocean that she could cross.
Yeasty air fills

her lungs, transformed:
a king with dead wives

in the closet, a cursed
key covered in blood,

a sister pushes another
sister into the river

to drown, a heartbroken
beloved fiddles the wind

and the rain on
her bones. Some mornings

she wakes, and all she knows
is salt on her lips warding

off the serpent's tongue.
She sees how he stepped

back, grabbed at air
to balance himself. She

stepped forward, greened
and teeming, reached with her

strong, rough hands
up into shudder

of branches, wingbeats.
It wasn't, isn't for him

or at the insistence
of any dark force

but for her own damn
pleasure, to know for

herself the taste of
dirt, of seed.

Nine Months Pregnant on the #12 Bus

He storms the #12,
black bell bottoms held up
by a spangled belt,
two sets of glasses taped together,
proclaiming over and over,
My night's just beginning!
I retreat behind my twitching
eyelids, my twitching belly—
the baby? The bus lurches
to a stop. His proclamations
diminish as he steps out.
I open my eyes as we rear out
into traffic. A woman
with horns stuck to her forehead
greets the man, *Dante! Let's go!*
And they go.

My mother carries
the evenings when her mother
invited the priest over for dinner,
cooked fish with its head on,
put out the special china,
sat brittle and vivacious
at the head of the table,
until the priest—content
with the service of his flock—
left and the evenings ended
as they always ended—
this woman she could not
know sitting alone,

presiding over drink
after drink after drink,
as her children disappeared
upstairs.

The next stop is mine,
and I put my hands
to my spine, stand
as straight as I'm able.
I whisper to the child
within me, *there is enough
for both of us.*

Summer gardens collapse
in on themselves, leaves
yellowed, roots tapped out.
I made the same thing for breakfast
as I did yesterday.

I walk the same
uneven sidewalks,
count the same cracks, try not
to break my mother's back.
Streetlights blink on.
Step after step. Step
after step. Beginning,
begin, begun.

The Luberon

Too good to be true?

Robert Boucheron

The new health club is a sleek industrial loft fitted with exposed ducts, brilliant dome lights, spotless carpet, and rows of machines that suggest a factory, an ultra-clean assembly plant. What high-tech product is made here?

“In order to appeal to the non-exerciser, we had to reevaluate our services, facilities, and programming,” says club owner Phil Wendel. “We wanted to get away from the gym stereotype and reach out beyond the iron-pumping, string bikini crowd.”

Accordingly, the club appeals to the over-fifty set, gray-haired retirees, arthritis and chronic pain sufferers, and people with hip and knee replacements. Licensed physical therapists are on staff, and the club is accessible to the handicapped. I fit this demographic. I am ambulatory, not on regular medication, just trying to hold it together.

“Start with thirty minutes on the elliptical trainer,” says Daphne, the fitness consultant. “That’s your low-impact cardiovascular workout. Lots of heavy breathing, heart pumping, and sweat. Then move on to resistance training. Or free weights, if you know how to handle them. If not, grab one of us for instruction, or ask another club member. Work on all the muscle groups. We’re going for whole-body health, not beefcake cosmetics, right?”

“Right.” I stand beside a machine with two large vertical levers, oversize pedals, and a little box that displays electronic numbers. “Why is it called elliptical?”

“Good question. I’ll have to research that and get back to you.”

Precor is the trade name blazoned on the machine. The manufacturer likely had something else in mind, but the word *precor* in Latin means “I pray, beg or entreat.” It occurs in the *Odes* of Horace, Book 4, number 1, *Intermissa Venus diu*, in the second line:

Wars, Venus, long since done
will you incite again? Spare me, I pray.

I am no more the one
I was under the good Cinara's sway.

Mother of love and tears,
stay the almighty hand that seeks to bend
my brittle fifty years.
Go where the tempting prayers of youth ascend.

Gingerly, I mount the machine by placing my sneakers on the pedals. When I start to walk in place, the levers swing back and forth. I fumble until I find the pace, a rolling gait that engages arms and legs. Better than a treadmill, the machine carries me along for a while. But thirty minutes of this?

A row of silent television screens mounted high on the wall faces the row of elliptical trainers. The televisions are tuned to different stations and programs—a parade of old Hollywood movies, advertisements, news, and sports. By craning my neck, my eyes flit from screen to screen. I watch slack-jawed and pant from exertion. The lack of sound makes a game of it, to guess what the talking heads are saying. Other club members listen through earbuds, or they ignore the screens in favor of a book or magazine.

I become a regular at the health club. I do not lose weight or build muscle, but I enjoy a sense of well-being, a cardiovascular boost. Still, the elliptical trainer is tedious. I pedal and pedal and slip into a trance. Television programming is light on weekends. A long infomercial describes a miraculous skin care product. Subtitles and testimonials flash by, and close-ups of Cindy Crawford, the supermodel with the mole on her upper lip. The story draws me in. It features a skinny French doctor, an excited skin care customer, and a melon that resists decay. It is grown in a place called the Luberon.

What or where is the Luberon? Is it legendary, like the Land of Cockaigne or Shangri-La? Is it real but remote, like Timbuktu or

Patagonia? Is it a private preserve, a natural paradise, an agricultural experiment?

Meaningful Beauty is the name of the skin care product, a line of anti-aging creams, lotions, capsules, and serum, all of which contain the “super anti-oxidant SOD, extracted from a rare variety of French melon.” Dr. Jean-Louis Sebagh, a specialist located in Paris, discovered the secret of this melon. As a disinterested scientist, he decided to share this secret with the world. Cindy Crawford, one of Dr. Sebagh’s medical patients, agreed to help. For a surprisingly low price, you can buy and use Meaningful Beauty products, arrest and repair the ravages of age in your own face, and become as lovely as Cindy Crawford.

Meaningful Beauty is one of eight product lines sold by Guthy-Renker, a company based in Santa Monica, California. Created by Bill Guthy and Greg Renker, the company sells products to consumers through infomercials, television ads, direct mail, telemarketing, e-mail marketing, and the internet, with an emphasis on celebrity-endorsed beauty products, according to Pamela Danziger in her 2005 book *Let Them Eat Cake*. The celebrities include Victoria Principal, Leeza Gibbons, Heidi Klum, Susan Lucci, Jessica Simpson, Brooke Shields—and Cindy Crawford. The products include exercise equipment, cosmetics, hair care, and acne treatment.

Guthy-Renker probably invented Meaningful Beauty. Someone saw the flesh of the melon as a potent metaphor, roped Cindy Crawford and Dr. Jean-Louis Sebagh into the project, and wrote the story that ties them all together. As a man, I am not the target audience, but the infomercial touches me. Who does not wish to remain fresh and firm? Instead, we all grow stale and withered. Our skin wrinkles and droops. It becomes as thin as tissue paper, while the muscle underneath shrinks or turns to flab. Hair loses color and luster, or it slips away in the night. All flesh is grass, according to the prophet Isaiah.

At the same time, who can believe this fairy tale? The sales pitch is as obvious as snake oil or the elixir of love. Yet the infomercial spins on and on. It repeats the footage it showed minutes ago: Dr. Sebagh in his clinic, the pink faces of mature Caucasian women, the melon that never shrivels. Above all, the infomercial dwells on Cindy Crawford.

As she picks up the phone to tell a woman who uses Meaningful Beauty that she, yes she, has been chosen to spend a day in New York City, shopping and hanging out, Cindy Crawford is bored. Stripped of her soundtrack, the star shows she would rather be elsewhere. Has the glamorous life of a supermodel left her jaded? Has she grown indifferent to fame and fortune? The camera adores her, but she disdains the camera.

Cindy Crawford was born in 1966 in DeKalb, Illinois. She is five feet nine inches tall, with brown hair and eyes. She graduated from DeKalb High School in 1984, and she worked full-time in modeling from 1985 to 2000. In 1995, *Forbes* magazine declared her the highest paid model on the planet. She is one of the original five supermodels, featured on magazine covers worldwide. She was named one of the 100 Hottest Women of All-Time by *Men's Health*. Photos of her at age 28 and age 48 prove she is still beautiful.

The mole, which in the early years was airbrushed out of the photos, is also still there. Surely, with her wealth, access to plastic surgery, and professional image to uphold, she could have removed it. Keeping it was a stroke of genius. In eighteenth century Europe, courtesans and ladies of fashion applied an artificial blot—called a *mouche* in French, meaning a “fly,” and called a “patch” in English—to highlight the smoothness and whiteness of the face. Here the effect is reversed. Without this one imperfection, Cindy Crawford would be a goddess, unavailable. With it, she is human. She breaks the mold in other ways, too. Instead of being thin and blonde, she is curvaceous and brunette.

That face, however, has had work done. Cindy Crawford told Helen Kirwan-Taylor, for an article in the London *Evening Standard* in 2010: “I’m not going to lie to myself. Past a certain age, in order to restore elasticity, all I can count on is vitamin injections, Botox, and collagen.”

The infomercial omits this point. It implies that Cindy Crawford’s use of Meaningful Beauty products has prolonged her youth. If customers wish to mislead others about their age, do they deserve to be misled?

Dr. Jean-Louis Sebagh is the subject of that 2010 article by Helen Kirwan-Taylor. She calls him “the rejuvenator.” Born about 1955 in Algeria, Sebagh grew up in Paris, the son of a “tough businesswoman” and a man who ran a supermarket chain called Fanprix. Sebagh graduated from the University of Paris in 1979 as a doctor of medicine. From 1985 to 1988, he learned plastic surgery in Los Angeles. For some years, he was on staff at the Hôpital Foch in Paris, where he worked to rebuild cancer victims’ faces and heal burn victims’ scarring. About 1994, he began to travel to London to serve a wealthy female clientele with skin injections. He now runs clinics in London and Paris. Kirwan-Taylor says:

For all the hype, and there is plenty, Dr. Sebagh talks a straight game. He claims he doesn’t change faces but “restores what you lost five to ten years ago. I am like a painter. There are artistic skills. Some people are talented, some are not. You don’t learn how to do any of this in school.”

Plastic surgery, celebrities, the skin care industry, airbrushed photos in glossy magazines—this is a world in which truth and falsehood entwine. The Luberon, however, is a real place. It is located in the south of France, in the region of Provence, in the department of Vaucluse. The Luberon is geologically and biologically rich. It has long been a favorite vacation spot for the French, like the *Côte d’Azur* just

to the south, the Mediterranean seacoast we call the Riviera. Provence in general is scenic, historic, and gastronomic, a magnet in summer for international tourists. And the heart of Provence is the Luberon.

A broken ridge or mountain range runs generally east and west. Starting from the west, or left on the map, the range is called the *Petit Luberon*, the *Grand Luberon*, and the *Luberon Oriental*. The valleys that lie north and south of this range are filled with farms and about one hundred villages, some of them old and picturesque. Much of the area is in the *Parc naturel régional du Luberon*, an official designation that operates like a state or national park in the United States. Development is limited, flora and fauna are protected, and traditional agriculture is encouraged.

Among the cultural riches of Provence, the city of Avignon is just west of the Luberon, on the Rhône River. From 1309 to 1377, the popes lived in Avignon, not Rome. The presence of the papal court gave the city a prestige that lingers. The Papal Palace is a major tourist attraction today. So are the cities of Arles, Orange and Nîmes, with their Roman monuments, the natural slopes of Mont Ventoux, and more.

Still, the Luberon retains a legendary air, an aroma of fantasy. Like Tuscany, the Scottish Highlands, and the Vale of Kashmir, it is both a place one can visit and a land of desire. Age informs me in a querulous voice there are things I will never do and places I will never see. The Luberon may be one of them.

Cavaillon is a town in the Luberon toward the west, and Cavaillon is famous for melons. Legend says that they arrived with the pope from his summer residence at Cantalupo, near Perugia, Italy, another town famous for melons. In France, some melons are called *cavaillon* from the town, and some are called *charentais*. From the website Specialty Produce:

The charentais is a petite-sized melon with a smooth, hard, pistachio-grey colored skin and distinct green ribbing. Its flesh is deep orange, dense, smooth and sweet, similar to that of a cantaloupe. When ripe it is highly fragrant with tropical fruit and floral notes. Its delicious flavor and powerful aroma must be appreciated at its height of maturity, as it has a delicate and short shelf-life.

Evidently, this is not the melon shown in the infomercial, the one that keeps forever. The Healthy Living Blog of February 16, 2012 says:

Most distinctively, the cavaillon is a long-lasting melon . . . The melon is particularly rich in the provitamin A (beta-carotene) with all the great antioxidant properties that go along with it. The melons are also a great source of vitamin C necessary in the production of collagen and healing.

They also contain minerals. The nutrients are common to melons, and they are absorbed by eating, not by smearing on the skin. The same blog entry extols Dr. Jean-Louis Sebagh and Meaningful Beauty products. No author is stated. The blog seems to be produced by Max International Distribution Company, in which Bill Guthy and Greg Renker are investors. A disclaimer says: “Aside from guest posts, the content written by Healthy Living Blogs is not written by a medical or fitness professional.”

Provence has a literary past that dates to the Middle Ages, when *Provençal* was the language of the troubadours. Writers from the Marquis de Sade to Albert Camus have lived in Provence. The most famous, at least in France, is Alphonse Daudet, who was born in Nîmes in 1840 and went to Paris to seek his fortune. On visits home, the young Daudet wrote sketches on local life and sent them to Parisian newspapers. He then collected the sketches as a book called *Letters from My Windmill*, published in 1860.

Daudet weaves together fact and fiction, humor and pathos. He draws lively characters like the poet Mistral, and he reworks folktales like “The Pope’s Mule.” The book had a slow start, but it became a classic. The windmill where Daudet stayed but never actually lived is now a literary landmark. Daudet started a genre that might be called travel lit lite, a genre continued by writers such as Bruce Chatwin and Paul Theroux. Late in the twentieth century, Daudet’s brand and Provence itself got an update.

Peter Mayle was born in 1939 in Brighton, England. He worked in advertising in London and New York, was very successful, and quit the business in 1974. He then devoted himself to writing books on sex education, dogs, and self-help for children. In the early 1980s, he and his wife discovered Provence, and in 1986 they moved to the village of Ménerbes to live there year-round. Mayle wrote about their experience, and he published *A Year in Provence* in 1989.

Mayle sets the scene in the first pages: “It was a *mas*, or farmhouse, built of local stone which two hundred years of wind and sun had weathered to a color somewhere between pale honey and pale gray.” The property had six acres, mostly planted with vines, which a tenant farmer tended. Best of all:

it sat within the boundaries of a national park, sacred to the French heritage and out of bounds to concrete mixers.

The Luberon Mountains rise up immediately behind the house.... Cedars and pines and scrub oak keep them perpetually green and provide cover for boar, rabbits, and game birds. Wild flowers, thyme, lavender, and mushrooms grow between rocks and under the trees.... It is a 247,000-acre extension of the back garden.

The book rambles through daily life, with trips to the market, the purchase of a car, summer house guests, and two campaigns of home improvement. Mayle sketches his peasant neighbors—Antoine Massot, Faustin and Henriette, the plumber Menicucci, and a host of others. He reports anecdotes first-hand and amusing stories he

has heard. Weather figures largely, as it does in the country, with extremes of hot and cold, including a heavy snowfall. Food and wine are described in detail and consumed in quantity. Children and relatives are notably absent. Did the Mayles have none, or would family impinge on the lifestyle narrative?

Though it follows the calendar, with a chapter titled for each month of the year, the book probably combines events of two or three years. Its tone implies a certain license, a degree of exaggeration. Book reviews called it “delightful,” “delicious,” “engaging,” and “witty.” They may have been responding to Mayle’s facetious style, since the events he relates are ordinary enough. He is adept at dialogue and lavish with color. The whole book reads like advertising copy. It was, of course, a huge success.

Mayle followed it up with more memoirs, novels, mysteries, and tour guides, all about Provence. The mix of fact and fiction suggests a casual attitude, as though the author did not greatly care which is which. Complaining of fans and sightseers, Mayle sold his piece of paradise, moved to the Hamptons, then returned to the Luberon, where he lives today and continues to write books.

In 1989, when he is fifty, the age Horace considered “brittle,” even Mayle alludes to a decline in strength and stamina. He and his wife buy bicycles and go for a spin on May first, a sunny morning. “I could feel the muscles in my thighs complaining as the gradient became steeper, and my unseasoned backside was aching. By the time we reached the village it hurt to breathe.”

An aging body alters a person in ways no anti-oxidant can restore. In early retirement in the fabled Luberon, Mayle may have stumbled on this truth. Now that he is seventy-seven, it must have sunk in. If it all sounds too good to be true, then maybe it is.

Idle Hands

Julie C. Day

Sylvia: 1971

God or no God, Sylvia Vieira's special day was all wrong. No mother helped Sylvia fasten her dress for her First Communion. No little sister burst into her bedroom, upending her collection of pressed flowers and carefully preserved damselfly wings, then looking falsely outraged when Sylvia complained.

Grandma Vovó couldn't make it all right, no matter how many fresh flowers she wove into Sylvia's hair.

"They're so stupid. I hate them both." Sylvia's tone was fierce.

"Shh, Sylvia. You need to stop."

Over the last few weeks Sylvia had heard Vovó's explanation so often she could recite the words herself. It was Sylvia's choice to stay behind on Flores Island, just as it was her sister Olivia's and their mother's choice to leave. But Sylvia knew Vovó was lying. Mother and Olivia hadn't just left behind their home in the Azores. They'd left Sylvia, as well.

"You'll see them soon enough." Vovó fastened the last flower, an Azorean bellflower, in place. "That man, the one with the long gray hair?" She attempted a smile as she adjusted the collar of Sylvia's white dress. "You're a Vieira. He'll find you when the time is right."

"You didn't travel with him. And now you're really old."

"Old enough for him to leave me alone," Vovó agreed.

Olivia and Mother were selfish. That was the real truth.

"Trying out my wings," Sylvia's mother used to laugh whenever someone asked why the three of them, Mother, Sylvia, and little Olivia, had moved from Flores Island across the archipelago to the city of Ponta Delgada. Most Azoreans either stayed put or flew west to the Americas. For her first journey, Sylvia's mother had traveled just three hundred miles east on the Atlânticoline ferry with baby Olivia and four-year-old Sylvia firmly in tow.

Years later Sylvia still remembered fragments of the journey. The brilliant blue of the sky. The breeze that pushed against her hair. And the heated messages that leaked through her eyelids as she tilted her face up toward the sun.

Sylvia remembered the gray-haired man as well, the one Mother talked to while Sylvia practiced sun-speaking and baby Olivia slept in her pram.

“Beautiful day,” he said, or perhaps, “Beautiful woman.”

“Como?” Mother’s voice sounded uncertain, but in that way she had. Even with her eyes closed, Sylvia could sense her mother’s smile.

“Beautiful,” the man said again, or perhaps, “Beautiful world.”

“One of many,” her mother replied.

Sylvia felt her body begin to melt, puddly and soft, as the sunlight found its way beneath her skin. Why was Mother even talking to this person? The talking made it hard for Sylvia to hear the sunshine’s words.

“A good luck charm for you,” the man continued, interrupting the sunshine yet again. “From one traveler to another.”

“Obrigada.”

“Obrigado, Miss Vieira.”

How did he know Mother’s name? Sylvia opened her eyes, curious, but the man was already walking away. Even from the back, she could tell he didn’t fit. He was tall, too tall, his long gray hair tied in a knot at the base of his neck, and even though it was summer, he wore a high-collared shirt.

“O que um homem estranho,” Mother said. What an odd man. But she smiled as she looked down at the metal pendant in her hand, an insect with two sets of wings. One of Vovó’s special damselflies.

Sometimes men were friendly in the wrong sort of way; that’s what Vovó had explained before four-year-old Sylvia got on the ferry. No talking to strangers. And yet here was Mother accepting presents.

“No fair,” Sylvia cried, reaching for the pendant.

“Sylvia, no!”

As she finished fastening the buckles on her First Communion shoes, Sylvia remembered Mother holding her hand and the metal damselfly just out of reach, wearing her usual Mother frown. Sylvia felt the anger rising up. That’s what had made Mother look so wrong. Her mother’s happiness while she talked to that man.

“No and no again,” Sylvia had said when Mother suggested the flight to America, as though any parent would accept their nine-year-old daughter’s decision to stay behind. But both Mother and Vovó took her at her word. Vovó and Sylvia had accompanied the travelers to the airport, no suitcases in hand.

“Goodbye, sweetheart,” Mother said. She bent down to kiss Sylvia’s cheek. “Try and talk to the man, hmm? We Vieiras are meant to travel.”

“Talk to a stranger?” Mother’s face was only inches from Sylvia. Despite the carefully placed scarf, Sylvia could see the green marks pressing out from the base of her neck. To Sylvia they looked like the first ugly shoot of a sprouting plant.

“The man’s name is José, Joseph,” Mother said. “So now he’s not a stranger, yes?”

“Yes.” Sylvia replied. She could feel herself scowling.

“Final boarding call for flight 486 to Boston,” a voice declared over the airport’s intercom.

Olivia was the one who Sylvia felt sorry for. She look so sad as she clutched her Raggedy Anne doll.

“Stay with me,” Sylvia whispered as she wrapped her arms around her little sister, “You can share my room and Vovó’s damselfly collection.”

Olivia cried, but she walked onto the plane. Of course she did. At five, Livvy was still a baby. Sylvia watched the airplane launch itself into the sky, and then she and Vovó caught the ferry back to Flores Island and Vovó’s little house. For most of the trip, the two remaining Vieira women stood on the ferry’s top deck, ignoring the

pounding wind and the incoming storm. Sylvia didn't meet a single gray-haired man trying to offer her presents. For this one moment, the man with the gray hair had enough sense to keep away.

Vovó's cottage had red, tiled floors and thick stone walls. It sat halfway up the hill with a view of both Lajes das Flores harbor and the old whale-processing factory. One of Flores Island's eight sister islands, Corvo Island, was visible from the harbor, smaller even than Flores itself.

Sylvia started confirmation lessons with Father Corvas. She attended services at the parish church. And twice a day Sylvia shared a bench on the school bus with Lucia Almedia, the only other nine year old in the village.

By the second month of school, Lucia and Sylvia were tired of the same old topics, and of each other.

"You must have met your father," Lucia pressed. "Or at least know his name?"

"No."

"But how can you be sure you weren't born from an unconfessed mortal sin?" Lucia glanced around the bus before whispering the last three words: unconfessed mortal sin. For whatever reason, Father Corvas spent most confirmation classes focused on the three mortal sins: adultery, idolatry, and sorcery. "How can you not have a single photograph of him or your *grandfather*."

There was a something about the way Lucia emphasized the word grandfather that Sylvia didn't like. "Shut up, Lucia. Vovó's name is Mrs. Vieira. Misses. Of course she was married," Sylvia said, ignoring the strangeness of her mother's name also being Mrs. Vieira.

"There's no need to be so mean, Sylvia Vieira. Your whole family's going to be denied entrance into God's kingdom. That's what my mother says. She says you Vieras aren't fooling anyone."

Sylvia looked out the window. At the far end of a field, a woman stood in a cottage doorway. A few meters from the bus, a man,

gray-haired, walked alongside the road. He glanced up in Sylvia's direction. There was something familiar about his face. All that long hair and that funny smile, like he was laughing at her. Then the bus moved ahead, leaving behind the man and his unsettling lips.

Neither Lucia nor Sylvia spoke for the rest of the twenty minute bus ride to school. And for the first time, they didn't sit together on the bus ride home.

"Vovó, what's my father's name?"

"Hmm. I'm not exactly sure." Vovó didn't sound embarrassed. She almost seemed to be holding in a small smile.

"Vovó, it's not funny. Father Corvas—mortal sin."

"Ah," Vovó paused. "Sylvia, you are island born. One day you'll fly away—just like your mamãe and sister and all your aunties and cousins. Til then, pouco libélula, try and let things be."

"You know I don't like the gray-haired man." There was something terribly wrong with that old man, leaving her grandmother to live all alone. "I'm not traveling anywhere with him."

"I pray that is true." Vovó kissed Sylvia on the forehead with a loud smack. "You can stay with me then, yes? Just as long as there are no more island babies," Vovó added, which made completely no sense.

Sylvia wasn't so sure about sticking around. The rest of the Vieira women were onto something, flying away from this tiny island and Lucia Almedia and all the stupid neighbors. But Sylvia was onto something, too. She didn't need some old man's permission to leave. She just needed money. That's how everyone else did it.

Sylvia Vieira's Rules of Silence by Sylvia Vieira

1. No taking to Lucia Almedia on the bus.
2. No talking to Lucia Almedia at school (unless Mrs. Enos makes us work on a school project together).

- a. If working on a school project together, no smiling at Lucia Almedia.
3. No talking to Lucia Almedia on the walk to or from Father Corvas's rectory.
4. While in confirmation class, no smiling at Lucia.
5. While in confirmation class, no hateful thoughts about Lucia Almedia. God wouldn't like it.

Instead of walking toward the village center when she and Lucia got off the afternoon bus, Sylvia took to wandering in the opposite direction, down to the harbor.

The village harbor was bounded on one side by a cliff and on the other by a narrow spit of concrete and rocks. There was no marina. When the wind blew, the boats that did bother to drop anchor rocked back and forth as though there were being tossed by a blue-skied storm. Travelers. It was the perfect place to find the gray-haired man. Sylvia was going to corner that Joseph and make him fix all of it.

Sylvia knew her plan had one huge problem: her body felt weird, different, when Joseph was around. As Vovo kept explaining, Sylvia was an island-born Vieira, which really, when you thought about it, was no explanation at all.

The gray-haired man was always wandering about Flores Island, his back to Sylvia. Sometimes Sylvia caught a glimpse of him hiking inland to the old crater lakes. She could tell it was him from his long hair and that strange tingly feeling that rose up in her throat whenever he was near.

It made Sylvia furious. He'd visited with all those cousins and aunts, convincing them to fly. He'd talked to Mother not once but twice. If Sylvia didn't know better, she'd almost believe he was bidding his time, convinced she would talk with him. Green-marks-and-needles talk with him.

The day of the Divino Espirito Sãoto festival a short, gray-haired woman with one gold tooth led a nine-year-old girl in white lace up to the Nossa Senhora do Rosário Church. Child and woman were clearly related: both had the same dark brown eyes and firm chin, not that there was ever any doubt. As everyone on Flores Island knew, all Vieira women looked the same and none came with fathers.

After First Communion at the church and all that standing in front of the altar, the crown was placed on Lucia Almedia's head. Of the four girls who took communion, Lucia was the one who sat down on the altar steps, unworried, while Father Corvas droned on for too long. Sylvia didn't care. Not one little bit. Once she'd saved enough money, she would fly away from Flores Island and head west, never to see Lucia Almedia again. Never mind Joseph and his ink-stained fingers. Somehow, she would fix it all.

Olivia: 1985

Ever since Mother disappeared, Sylvia's raged-filled phone calls from California were on the upswing.

"Brane-travel is just a fancy term for suicide, Livvy. People aren't meant to travel across parallel universes. You know that, right?"

"Viera women aren't just people, Sylvia. Joseph helps us the only way he knows how. We're meant to be travelers."

"Oh, Jesus. Let *me* help you, Livvy. You're not a little kid anymore. You need to break free of that gray-haired bastard and his Vieira groupies."

"Sylvia, just because you're afraid to face him in person, doesn't mean he's—"

"Yes, Livvy, it does. Do you think I can't feel it when he's near? At least I'm in this universe. I'm alive. Come here, Livvy. Come stay with me. Please, honey."

Livvy's sister actually sounded tired.

But in the end it wasn't her big sister's phone calls that drove nineteen-year-old Olivia out of Boston. The thing that finally caused

Olivia Vieira to flee the family apartment was a noise.

At first Olivia barely noticed it. The sound was like the ticking of the kitchen clock or the water moving through the building's pipes, constant but easily ignored. And Olivia was busy. There was work and school and nights with Joseph in the apartment Olivia used to share with her mother, Regina. Joseph had been Mother's friend for as long as Olivia could remember, at least until Mother had disappeared on that cloudless day and never returned.

"She's traveled" was how Joseph put it. And somehow Olivia could never find the courage to ask him where. Olivia, like Mother, had always loved Joseph. And she could feel the Vieira need welling up inside, demanding her attention. Like Mother, she needed to fly. Somehow, Joseph was the key.

Joseph worked construction. After Olivia's classes were over or, more and more often, before they were done, Olivia would track Joseph down. On his working days, she'd find him walking along some length of plywood or pushing a wheelbarrow full of broken sheetrock and bits of lumber.

Charged ions, humidity, or perhaps the concentration of carbon monoxide lingering in the city: whatever the reason, some days were non-work days for Joseph. On those days, Joseph disappeared to his other unknown universes.

Joseph, Olivia's mother liked to say, was both good and solid, just not in this particular world. He had other qualities, though. All that long gray hair and the strange mix of features that everyone, all the Vieira aunties and cousins in Fall River anyway, seemed to find so fascinating. He understood the truth about being a Vieira in this universe. He offered them a path.

"What if she comes home?" Olivia had asked that first night Mother didn't return.

"She won't." Joseph's smile had been soft, his fingers gentle as they stroked Olivia's collarbone, moved up along her neck. "Skin just like your mother's," he'd murmured, making Olivia frown.

At least someone was touching Olivia. At least someone was

holding her as she fell asleep at night. These were the truths Olivia was afraid to tell Sylvia when she called and demanded Olivia move out. How did you tell the sister you left behind about your own loneliness? About all the nights and years no one noticed if you cried at night?

You didn't.

"Do you hear that noise?" Despite the belt Joseph was tightening around her arm, Olivia was distracted. The sound combined the dull pressure of a heartbeat with a rasp like air escaping from a constricted windpipe. Worse, it seemed to be coming from inside her own body. Each time the hiss crescendoed, Olivia swallowed, making sure she still could.

"Joseph?"

"Shh."

Olivia and Joseph sat in the middle of her mother's double bed. Joseph was bent over Olivia's arm, busy with his kit, while Olivia stared at the blue-flowered sheets. Olivia could remember the day Mother had bought the sheets.

"They remind me of home," she'd said. Mother's smile and the thick tendrils of green rising up her neck had made her face look so damn haggard. The vines looked thicker, stiffer, darker somehow, though perhaps Olivia had just stopped noticing the change.

Her name was Regina Vieira, Olivia thought. She was a real person, not just another dead traveler. Lost traveler, Olivia tried to correct herself, but the phrase seemed wrong even in her own head. Despite the family stories of parallel worlds and Joseph-mediated travel, she'd never met a Vieira from another universe. Brane-travel went in both directions, but in this universe, it seemed brane-travel was a one-way journey for everyone except Joseph.

Some things Olivia had known for what felt like her whole life. Despite his outward appearance, Joseph wasn't human, at least not in the normal non-Vieira way. And Joseph managed to do something not even a Vieira could do. He carried himself in two universes

at once. Strung across the multiverse, Joseph was what made flight, real Vieira flight, possible.

Other brane-travel facts. Aunt Izabel said that if Joseph ever traveled all the way through, he'd break the connection and wouldn't be able to come back. More than that, she'd whispered, he'd likely break apart. And Vieira women would never again be able to step across. Aunt Izabel had acted like that would be the worst possible outcome. Vieiras, no matter what Vovó and Sylvia might say, were born to travel.

"Joseph—" Olivia turned toward the older man just as he slipped the needle into her vein. God, she hated the stab of pain and the stomach churn that followed.

As Joseph pulled out the needle, Olivia felt the noise cut against her teeth. *Thrum, hiss*. The sound burrowed into the flesh of her gums. And then the wave of H flowed out from the crook of her arm—a chemical calm that crushed all other feelings.

"Damn it, Olivia! You need to pay attention." Joseph reached over and undid the belt buckle, then patted her arm. The sensation barely registered.

The noise was following her tongue muscle, undulating down her throat, past the beating heart in her chest. A bass-driven frenzy, it shook loose all of Olivia's pain.

And then, somehow, Olivia was lying on the flower-covered sheets, while Joseph sat nearby, watching.

The Dead Kennedys. Social Distortion. Black Flag. Olivia used to play their cassettes, headphones over her ears like some enraged airline pilot. It was the nineteen eighties. The record album had disappeared, but its ghost lingered in the words it left behind, like tracks.

Tracks of all kinds kept finding their way into her head: the needles Joseph brought home; the strange green tracks traveling up Mother's neck; and now the music hissing its way through her own blood.

"Tracks?" Joseph asked. She must have said the word out loud.

Tracks also meant traveling.

“Yes, making tracks,” Joseph replied, the fingers of his left hand pinching her bare nipple. Mother had made tracks, leaving first Sylvia and then little Olivia behind.

Branes: universes piled one atop the other. Once you wandered you could never come back, unless, of course, you were Joseph. No more Mother, in this world at least. Probably not in any other. Even Joseph knew brane travel was dangerous.

“Yes,” Joseph said. “Yes, I know. But you Vieira’s don’t give me any choice.” And then his hair fell across her belly, the thick green branch at the base of his neck clearly visible. The strange green growth carrying each brane traveler, even Joseph, across.

“Fucking Vieiras.” Joseph’s lips pulled hard against Olivia’s erect nipple, cupping her breast with one calloused hand.

Olivia avoided the apartment’s few mirrors. Dark-red scabs had spread across her arms and toes, while the growth imbedded with the needles in Joseph’s second kit had made its way up Olivia’s neck. She looked more and more like Mother. Just another Vieira getting ready for flight.

These days the noise never stopped.

“Cell integrity,” Joseph repeated as he plunged a needle under her big toenail. He gripped Olivia’s foot with one hand while the tremors shook her arms and hands. “The trick to traveling is to maintain your cell integrity while falling through.”

And then Olivia was floating away on another hit of Liquid Sky.

The aunties had stopped coming round. Olivia’s mind stuttered over the specifics. *Hiss* went the something inside her head and then came the choking sound. Joseph might have kicked the aunties out. Might have told them to “toss it” and “leave us the hell alone.” Then again the aunties might have disappeared just like Mother.

“Sundays are supposed to be with the aunties,” Olivia murmured from the tangle of graying sheets. Even Sylvia hadn’t called. Olivia could hear Saint Anthony’s church bells ringing out the end of

Easter Sunday Mass. “Thirsty.”

“Your aunts talk too much.” Joseph said, offering her his cup of coffee. “Anyway Easter is overrated. The resurrection of God’s tortured son? What kind of parent plans out his own child’s suffering?”

Olivia considered sitting up and taking the cup, but decided against it. “I thought you liked the aunts.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve got you to worry about right now. And me. Carrying a traveler— How do you think I started this journey?”

It was a non-working day. Joseph was out.

“What do you mean you didn’t go to Tia’s for Easter?” Sylvia said. “Of course, I called, but your phone just kept ringing. I bet it was turned off.” And then as though she couldn’t help herself, “Fucking Joseph.”

“It’s so loud, Sylvia” Olivia whispered into the phone’s receiver.

“What are you—”

“The song in my head.” Olivia cut in, then started to cough. Tears streamed down her face. Her chest felt like petrified stone, refusing to let her lungs expand.

“Olivia? Livvy, get a glass of water. Now.” Sylvia didn’t sound angry anymore. She sounded scared.

Olivia pressed her lips together, holding both the cough and her last gasp of air inside. Then she followed Sylvia’s instructions: she put the phone down, stumbled to the kitchen, and drank from a half-empty glass sitting on the counter.

Air. And tremors. She needed to lie down. Olivia wandered back to the bedroom.

“Olivia? Olivia?!”

The phone lay in the middle of the sheets. Olivia picked it up, leaned back against the headboard and closed her eyes. Now that the coughing had stopped, the sound was even louder than before. *Thrum. Hiss.* A storm of snake words and drums pummeling her brain. “Sylvia, the noise. It won’t stop.” Olivia swallowed, then regretted it. Her throat felt sandpaper-raw.

“Jesus, Livvy. You need to leave. I’m coming to get you.”

“You can’t. You know you can’t. When he’s near— And if I come to California, he’ll just follow. My neck is covered in green.”

“Livvy.” Sylvia paused and seemed to hold in a whole slew of words. “Okay. How about this? How about a visit to grandma Vovó?”

“Maybe.” Then Olivia was floating away. Sylvia’s words became a blur of “infected” “useless aunts and cousins” and “Vovó.” “Olivia, do you hear me? Vovó will know what to do. She’s seen plenty of Vieiras travel.”

“What?” Vieira’s were born on Flores Island, but no one ever returned once they flew west. And no one in their family ever left Joseph once the green needles began.

“Let me book the ticket.” Sylvia’s voice sounded desperate. “Look, this is what I think: back on the island that fucking gray-haired man never talked to you, right? Just to Mother. You weren’t supposed to leave, Livvy. That’s why he has to keep all the aunties out. He knows you’re not ready to even try. Please, Livvy.”

“Okay.” Somehow, Sylvia’s anger made the danger so much easier to see. Made it easier to feel Sylvia’s love, as well. Mother had never been this bad. Mother who had surely never crossed over no matter what Joseph said. Vieiras travel came like a storm. That’s what everyone said. There hadn’t even been a breeze that day. “Just make sure the flight’s on a Friday. Joseph likes to disappear on a Friday.” In a multiverse full of Olivias and Reginas and Aunt Izabels, he had a lot of people to visit.

Joseph could promise she would make it across the void all he wanted; the cacophony in her head told her a different story. It was time to go back to the island where all Vieiras were born.

A Friday morning in October. Olivia climbed onto a Green Line train. At Government Center she switched to the Blue line and headed out to Logan Airport. It was as simple as that. She wasn’t even shaking. Joseph had set her up before he’d headed out for his Friday wander.

The airport was full of all sorts of people, not just older men with tanned skin and lips like ripe berries. A coffee vendor smiled at Olivia. Olivia avoided his eyes as she stepped onto the electric walkway and headed out to terminal E. Of course Joseph was nowhere near. He was hanging with all those alternate-universe Vieiras. He was fucking some girl in a brane Olivia had never seen. She was getting as paranoid as Sylvia. The gray-haired, creased-and-sloping bodies that surrounded her were just men, human men, catching the SATA direct flight to the Azores.

Someone knocked Olivia from behind, Her legs tangled together as she fell onto the walkway's ribbed metal.

"Excuse me," one of the Not-Josephs said, before speeding ahead. Or perhaps he said "Eu sou pesaroso." I'm sorry. Either way, he didn't help her up.

The crush of people felt suffocating. Shoes and boots on both sides of her. Suitcases and her own backpack hemming her in. Olivia yearned for her bed's graying sheets, for the coffee Joseph brought her each afternoon. *Thrum, hiss*, went the sound, followed by the choking gasp. Surrounded by all the airport travelers, Olivia almost couldn't find enough air.

Eventually, Olivia stood. Eventually, she reached the departure gate. A gray-haired steward smiled as he handed Olivia her boarding pass. He didn't remind Olivia of Joseph, not one little bit.

Olivia stepped through the airport doors and into the mid-day glare of Ponta Delgada, clutching a Raggedy Anne doll. The doll contained a carefully sealed package of powder while the contents of Olivia's backpack included a lighter and a small roll of tinfoil. Chasing the dragon, people called it. She might not use needles, but if she was lucky, Olivia would be able to maintain her "cell integrity." No shakes until her "Joseph problem" as Sylvia termed it, was solved. That was the goal.

"Taxi?" a man asked, reaching for her elbow. He wore a windbreaker and aviator sunglasses. His short gray hair was nothing

like Joseph's. But his hands. The curve of his nails. Joseph's hands were the most honest part of his body; the nicked and wrinkled skin revealed exactly how long he'd been traveling.

"Sim. Yes, to the Ponta Delgada harbor," Olivia replied.

The Not-Joseph held the cab door open for her. "You need a boat?" he asked as he climbed into the driver's seat and started the car.

"I'm catching the ferry to Flores Island."

"Flores is beautiful, but so quiet. Pretty girl like yourself. You must be visiting family. Yes?"

"Yes." Help, thought Olivia as she stared out the taxi window at the passing city streets. Help, help, help.

Olivia set the doll and her backpack by her feet and knocked on the wooden door.

The door was attached to a single-story cottage with a red-tiled roof. It rested halfway up the curving road that led to the village square and the twin domes of Nossa Senhora do Rosário church.

Lajes das Flores should have been a fairytale town, a subtropical Brigadoon, frozen in time. That's what Olivia had expected. Not the overhead streetlights and the trash truck. Men in overalls and gloves were busy picking up the yellow and green plastic garbage cans waiting by the side of the road. One of the men glanced back at Olivia and then quickly looked away.

Scared hue mans. Hue. Hew. Hiss.

Olivia knocked a second time on Vovó's door, and then slipped her foot against the doll, trying to still the tremors. She could feel the hard-packed stuffing of the Raggedy Anne.

From inside the cottage came shuffling footsteps and then the click of a latch. A wrinkled hand with long fingers and paper-thin skin slipped into view. A head followed, peering around the half-open door.

"Olá?" the old woman said.

"Cómo está, Vovó?" Olivia said. She pressed her right foot down onto her left, holding it still.

The older woman tilted her head to one side. “Your name?” she prompted.

Despite her grandmother’s confusion, her expression was welcoming. Olivia had the same features and long, dark hair as all Vieira women.

“Olivia, Vovó.”

“Ah.” She pushed the door open all the way. “The last time—” Vovó held one hand below chest level and smiled, revealing whitish, uneven teeth along with a single gold one.

“Yes, I was much smaller,” Olivia smiled back.

The older woman guided Olivia off the step and into a house filled lace doilies, dark wood furniture, and photographs: baby Vieira women, middle aged Vieira women, angry and laughing and irritated Vieira women. A room full of faces just like Olivia’s stared back from the walls.

“You are all right, yes?” Vovó reached up with one frail hand and stroked Olivia’s cheek.

“Sim, I’m fine.” Olivia could feel her lips beginning to tremble. “Sylvia sent me.” *Thrum, hiss, thrum, hiss* went the tide inside her mind, and then came the choking, death rattle.

“Sylvia was wrong to leave, but I was wrong too. Not enough babies in this world.” Vovó patted Olivia’s shoulder. “It is good you should stay here for a tiny while.”

At twenty-two Olivia certainly didn’t feel like a baby, but she nodded all the same. *Hiss*, went the voice in her head. *Hiss*.

After two weeks of wandering, the island no longer felt quite so easy to quantify. Cattle shared the roadways with buses and cars. Away from the harbor, moss-covered walls and hidden, stone water spigots were everywhere. Almost daily Olivia came across mist roiling through yet another tiny valley.

The noise had changed, as well. Like late-night static on the radio, it was easily ignored. Most nights, as she lay in her sister Sylvia’s old bed, Olivia tumbled straight into sleep and dreamed: Not-Joseph

the sailor wandered up from the harbor in a yellow slicker and boots. Not-Joseph stood next to a windmill, one foot on a low stone wall, older this time with sparse white hair. For some reason, the actual Joseph, with his own vine-like tracks and long braid, never once visited her dreams. Olivia didn't need that Joseph, not as long as she had her Raggedy Anne. Managing the tremors just involved a bit of cooking with foil packets and a bubbling, warm brownish liquid.

Every morning before breakfast Olivia hiked just past the edge of town to the cliff-side park. Once the lighter had done its work, Olivia sucked up the vapor with a thin roll of tinfoil and then leaned against one of the park's tree. From her perch at the top of the cliff, she could see old men sitting on the benches down in Lajes harbor. Sometimes, one of them glanced her way. In the other direction, she often caught sight of a hiker in a cloth cap heading inland across the rolling hills. All of these men had gray hair.

Joseph, Olivia thought, or perhaps said out loud. She closed her eyes, letting Joseph's roughened hands stroke the nape of her neck. Soon his hands moved lower, finding their way between her thighs, and Olivia forgot about the sky, the nearby Not-men, and the look in Vovó's eyes as they sat together at night.

Come home, Joseph, her Joseph, murmured in Olivia's ear.

Olivia shivered against the heat of his breath as his voice replaced the thrum-hiss and the death rattle that always followed. And then a horn from one of the fishing boats called out. And just like that, Joseph was gone, jolted back across the ocean.

After two weeks of morning walks the Raggedy Anne stash
was almost gone.

"The gray-haired man, Vovó." Olivia paused, trying to keep the frustration out of her voice. "Sylvia said I needed to talk to him."

"Sylvia thinks in straight lines," Vovó said, "hiding or not hiding. As though those are the only choices."

It was dark. Olivia and Vovó sat at the table next to the wood-burning stove. An oversized wooden hutch loomed from the stone-

and-plaster wall surrounded by all those Vieira faces.

“Tomorrow you try a new trail.” Vovó handed Olivia a piece of paper with a hand-drawn map of the southern half of Flores. A wavy line led from the village inland to the north and west. On the path walked a little stick-person. Stick-Olivia was heading toward two small ponds. Waiting little stick-insects with double wings were inked along the water’s edge.

“Maybe,” Olivia said, irritated by Vovó’s refusal to help her with Joseph. “Obrigada.”

Vovó grabbed Olivia’s hand, removed the map, and spread it flat on the table. Her index finger tapped the smaller of the two blue circles. “Caldeira Rasa. You go, yes?”

“Ummm.”

“You go,” Vovó said her index finger still tap, tap, tapping against the small blue circle.

“Sure. Okay, I’ll go.” Olivia took another sip of her coffee.

Tap, tap went Vovó’s index finger. *Tap. Tap. Tap.*

And then Olivia’s foot moved—*tap, tap, tap*—as grandmother and granddaughter stared at the lake outlined on the coffee-stained piece of paper.

Olivia’s Only Question

1. In a family without men, where do babies come from?

“No men,” Vovó had said the night before, pointing to the damselfly sketches on her map, “just like us.”

“What?”

“The women damselflies. They make their babies without the men,” Vovó had said, smiling.

Of course there were Vieira men, fathers. They just didn’t stick around, Olivia thought, though she didn’t say it out loud.

Olivia had followed Vovó’s map west along ER1-2, before veering north and west: away from the road, through farmland, and up

toward the two lakes Vovó had marked on the map. She didn't see a single person. After less than an hour, Olivia reached the crater lake. Up close Caldeira Rasa seemed like a drop of inlaid blue sky covered by a single cloud. A dark swarm swirled and banked above the pond, a mass of circling damselflies.

One damselfly slipped from the mass and settled on a blade of grass next to Olivia. It look just like the ones in Vovó's collection. It held its double-set of wings upright above its body as though waiting for the next command.

A gust of wind rippled across the water. Olivia heard the rustle of nearby grasses. But it was another sound that held her attention: a lone bass note pushed inward against her body. Somehow, without making any conscious decision, she contracted the muscles deep in her abdomen, let go, then repeated the movement. Above the lake, the cloud of damselflies banked and swerved in a frenzied mass.

The nearby forktail launched itself from the blade of grass and out across the lake. Follow me, it cried. Follow me.

Olivia took a step forward.

The damselfly cloud had shifted, drawing stuttering figure eights above the volcanic basin.

Meanwhile, with each step toward the water, Olivia's pelvis tightened and released. Tightened and released. Sex with Joseph had been such a passive affair. Naked and stretched out on the bed seemed to be enough.

Up close Olivia could see that the Citrine Forktails weren't quite identical. Some were yellow and green, others orange. But all had the same dark eyes.

"Time to fly without Joseph," Olivia murmured. She kicked off her shoes and shrugged quickly out of her clothes. Standing naked next to a volcanic lake on the westernmost tip of Europe felt good. Standing naked alone with those dark, insectile eyes felt even better. Olivia's pelvis tightened, as though trying to pull the air or the water or the thrum-hiss sound back inside.

And then she let her body sink into the water.

Why had no one told her? Her lips parted. Her nipples hardened. The sex between her legs dripped.

Nearby, two female damselflies settled on a half-submerged reed. One arched into a C-shape as though in the throes of extreme pleasure or pain. The second damselfly hovered above, holding the breeding female's neck. Shiny, translucent spheres slipped from lower female's abdomen. Olivia watched as the eggs floated for a moment before sinking beneath the lake.

No males.

The sun's one burning eye forced its way beneath Olivia's skin. The forktails no longer spiraled in figure eights. A haze of wings and twig-like bodies surrounded her. Legs settled on Olivia's hair and ears, along the narrow ledge of her shoulders.

Sun, Olivia thought. *Sun. Son, Song. Thrum. Hisssssss*. Only her head remained above the water, while a swarm of forktails clung to her body, making sure she sank no further.

The water flowed upward. Olivia's pelvic muscles contracted. Her teeth came down against her lips. She bit hard. Gasping. And then it was done.

Olivia heard a noise from the nearby grasses. She turned, but the man was already walking away, his long, gray hair flowing behind him. Damselflies flew above the lake, far less of them than before. Meanwhile, the sky was filling with gray-weather clouds. It was time to get out.

Inside Olivia felt different. No thrum. No hiss. For this one moment all was beautiful silence. Only her heartbeat remained.

Vovó should have given Sylvia a map instead of letting her run off to California to try and fail. No one deserved how lonely this fucked-up world could make you feel.

Olivia sprinted down the road, shivering despite the rising heat in her pelvis. The noise, a hard electric snapping, had started somewhere west of Caldeira Rasa. Now it speeded south, and despite Olivia's running feet, it was getting louder. Joseph's choking traveler

static wanted back in.

“Just try it!” Olivia screamed, gasping, and then, unexpectedly, laughing, as well. It was glorious. No thrum. No hiss. Just burning lungs pushing too hard as she tried to outrun the storm.

Heel. Toe. Gasping breath. A Vieira baby was growing inside her, formed in the same way as all Vieira girls. Her baby had sent all those damselflies out across the brane into an entirely different universe. Her baby had stopped the hissing call. And Joseph hadn’t done a thing.

From somewhere behind came a new sound: *skreet*. And then the wind started in earnest, whip-edge sharp against her skin. Whatever power charged through Flores Island’s volcanic lakes and insect eyes, whatever charged through a multiverse of Flores Islands, it was way too close.

Olivia could see the village up ahead: the church with its two rounded domes and the smaller, plaster-white houses.

Push forward. Heel. Toe. Heel. Run.

Skreet.

A gust of wind struck Olivia to the ground. Grit stung her eyes. And still that steady, molten heat pressed up from deep inside. Babies without the men, Vovó had said.

Plastic garbage cans tumbled down the hill. A handful of tiles flew off a nearby roof and shattered on the street.

Olivia’s feet no longer needed instructions. They ran.

Olivia hands left bloody tracks on the doorknob when she finally tumbled into her grandmother’s cottage.

Vovó sat next to the stove. Despite the battering wind, her expression was calm.

“Vovó—the lake.”

“Filhinha.” The older woman stood and placed a frail hand over Olivia’s own blooded fingers, then pressed her hand against Olivia’s midriff. “So it is time for you to leave.” She smiled a tight, little smile. “The man will get over his anger. Babies are good.”

The rattling wind quieted. There was a knock at the door.

“Ah,” Vovó said, looking past Olivia to the window next to the front door. “Two of them, even.”

There was a second knock on the door, sharper this time. Impatient.

Olivia felt a strange jolt along her spine. The vines on her neck bit into her flesh like a chemical burn. The worst part: just like the warmth between her legs, it felt good. She turned and looked through the window. Two men stood outside: the hiker from the lake and a short-haired man, the taxi driver from Ponta Delgada. Not-Josephs

“Babies are welcome by everyone,” Vovó repeated, patting Olivia’s hand. “I will miss seeing her born. Still,” she continued in a no-nonsense voice, “time for you to go. The Josés will get you back to Ponta Delgada and the airport. I want no more babies born here.” For a moment, Vovó’s dark eyes held Olivia’s gaze. “Don’t forget, meu amorzinho: a Vieira is more than some José’s plaything.”

Vovó, it suddenly occurred to Olivia, had lived alone on Flores Island all these years with just her damselflies and her Not-Josephs. And now Vovó would be alone again.

Joseph had a lot to answer for. And, one day, someone would force him to pay.

A baby.

Better than Mother, that would be Olivia’s mantra. Far, far better than Mother.

Olivia might have already fallen with her the thickening tendrils on her neck, that vibration of Joseph flesh calling Vieira flesh that she felt even now, but her baby would be different. Not island born. Not Joseph thrall. Her baby girl would decide in which direction she would fly.

Laurinda: 2005

Laurinda Vieira’s Relationship Requirements

1. No drugs. no heroin, no X, no meth, nothing you can only purchase

with cash.

2. I like coffee.

3. And sleep.

4. Sex isn't a question. It's a necessity.

5. I get to play with needles, too.

Laurinda closed her eyes, soaking in the scraps of sunlight as the chill of the concrete stoop seeped through her jeans. Brainerd Road always felt like a wind tunnel, something about the air currents in this part of Boston.

"Help her," Evie had shrieked two days ago as the two of them stood at the ER's intake counter, cousin Evie trying to hold Laurinda upright.

The ER doctors had run CAT scans and MRIs. They'd pricked her flesh with needles. Finally after two days, they'd let her go. Psychosomatic, they suggested. Perhaps stress or grief? "Perhaps bullshit," Laurinda had snapped before she had a chance to rein in her words. What the fuck did she care what these doctors thought? She didn't. Not really.

The emergency room visit hadn't changed a thing. Laurinda's body still stuttered and trembled its way through their second floor apartment. Garbled words still kept Laurinda awake. Night and day, Joseph's expectant eyes followed her from room to room.

Only person Laurinda really wanted was her mother. But in spite of her clear-and-present love, green-veined Olivia had eventually gone the way of all island-born Vieiras. And now Laurinda was stuck with Evie and Joseph: one island-born cousin not-so-secretly swooning over one gray-haired asshole of a man.

Laurinda heard the building's front door creak open, followed by the metallic click of Joseph's lighter and a quick intake of breath.

“Soon,” Joseph murmured, settling next to her on the concrete step. His callused fingers slipped the freshly light cigarette between Laurinda’s lips.

“Sssoon,” Laurinda repeated, her eyes resolutely closed. All she needed was one single push through. Mother had loved Laurinda so much. She would never have left Laurinda behind, not if she’d had any choice.

If universes were soap-bubble-shaped membranes stacked one atop the other, Laurinda had never ventured beyond her own fragile film. Joseph assumed he knew exactly what all Vieras wanted: to move with him between worlds, extruding across the multiverse forever and ever, amen. Fucker couldn’t be more wrong. This Vieira just wanted her mother back. Not that Joseph gave a damn.

“Laurinda, you need anything?” A voice called from the apartment window above.

“E E Evie should go home,” Laurinda stuttered. Her tongue felt too heavy, as though the many Laurinda tongues from all those many Laurinda worlds were condensing together.

“Not yet, baby doll. We need the help. At least for a little while longer.”

Laurinda could feel Joseph’s denim-clad thigh pressing against her own trembling flesh. “Nnnot trying to fuck her too, are you?” Laurinda asked, already knowing the answer. He really was a shitty old man. One even she was not entirely immune to. Vieira blood would tell.

No heroin, Laurinda had proclaimed, that first night. No powders or smoke. As though words could shield her from the feel of his dick inside her and the heat after his needle sliced down into her neck. All so good.

Just like Mainland-born Vieira’s, universe-traveling devils played by their own rules.

Fucking her, Joseph said her first night back from the hospital, was like wrapping his flesh inside a barely covered skeleton. Each time he pressed, he could feel the bones a little more. Didn’t seem

to bother him. He'd even smiled as he came. Afterward, they'd each had a turn with his needles and vials, coloring each other's necks with thick vines of Azorean, damselfly green.

Out on the stoop, Laurinda tried to push away the memory of her mother stretched out on this same step, jaundiced and skinny. Joseph's needles were supposed to help with cell integrity, Mother and Joseph had explained one too many times.

And retaining your cell integrity was crucial if you were going to attempt inter-brane travel. Laurinda wasn't opening a connection to the Azores. She wasn't creating a path west to Sacramento and Tia Sylvia. Laurinda was smashing a hole in this universe and through to the next. Or, like Mother, she was dying in the attempt.

Despite the woody stalks twining up her mother's neck, it had been a blue-sky day when Olivia Vieira finally disappeared. Not a damselfly in sight.

"Laurinda?" Cousin Evie called down again.

"She's fine," Joseph replied. "I'm keeping an eye out."

"Course you are." No matter what Laurinda said, cousin Evie remained in her Aunt's old bedroom, terrified but resolute. She'd promised Aunt Olivia. Evie wasn't about to let her cousin wander away with "Mr. Neither-Here-Nor-There." *Island. Illness. Illicit. E E Evie.*

Laurinda opened her eyes and took a deep drag from her Newport Menthol Gold. The smoke's warmth scratched against the back of her throat, pushing down all those hissing voices. She held in the smoke for as long as her faltering body would allow.

"Used to be people hardly ever smoked," Joseph said as Laurinda eventually exhaled. "Shamans and priestesses wrapped ghee or dried snake skins round incense cones, smoking up their temples. That's about as far as it went."

"Huh." Laurinda took another careful drag. Her fingers were having trouble finding her lips. "Bbbet they hadn't th th th of menthol," Even with the shakes, her voice had that gravelly, Vieira quality that Joseph loved. Last night he'd grabbed her hair as they'd

fucked, tracing the thick green vines that ran in a sinewy line from her collarbone up along her neck.

“The throat is a sacred object,” he said now as he stroked her exposed neck.

Laurinda allowed herself a small smile. Her own vines lined Joseph’s neck, as well. “Viera rule number seven, remember?” she’d said all those months ago as she’d reached for his kit. And Joseph had laughed and acquiesced, as though indulging a lisping child. Careless old man.

“Done,” Joseph had whispered last night as he zipped closed his kit. “Just one final step,” he’d added, touching her trembling limbs.

Joseph’s own quotient of vines, just a few lines shy of complete, hadn’t even come up. After all Joseph’s limbs weren’t shaking.

Joseph pushed himself up from the stoop and smiled down at Laurinda. “Time for me to head back to work.”

Laurinda knew exactly what he was thinking: tonight, he would finish his latest Vieira transformation. And there was little Evie Vieira already waiting in the bedroom next door.

Joseph and Laurinda lay sprawled across the bed.

“My turn.” Laurinda reached for Joseph’s inoculation kit sitting on the bedside table, knocked it to the floor, and then spent long minutes aiming and re-aiming her hands until they were able to pick it back up. The noise inside her head felt like a countdown clock: a cycling rhythm of *thrum*, *hissssss* followed by that asthmatic choking sound.

“At least let me do it,” Joseph grumbled. “All that shaking. You could end up stabbing my face.”

As though the shaking was Laurinda’s fault. As though he would actually turn her down with her ripened and traveler-ready body. Stupid fucker.

“Don’t hhhave to draw straight.” Laurinda’s hands shook, but she managed to dip the needle tip into the vial. The thick liquid inside the glass container was an iridescent yellowish green. Joseph’s

own cultured bit of damselfly. Laurinda leaned toward Joseph, using both hands to try and control the tremors as he lay on his side facing her.

“I don’t think this is—” Joseph started, but Laurinda cut across his words.

“Rrru.” She might not be able to get the “ule” sound out, but her shaking head emphasized her meaning.

“Right. Rule number seven.”

Thrum. Hissss.

Laurinda’s eyes didn’t stray from the vine trailing up the living trellis of Joseph’s neck. Mother must have trembled in this exact same way on her last night. So many Vieras lost. And yet here Joseph lay with his old-man paunch and weathered flesh. No worry lines though. As far as Joseph was concerned, Viera-traveler was just another word for fool, all those women helping him remain the conduit between worlds. Mr. Neither-Here-Nor-There.

Perhaps some even made it through.

“I. I. I. knowwww you,” Laurinda said as she formed the final tendril. Joseph’s neck was fully inoculated with a mixed of iridescent green and his own red blood. For the first time, the vine reached along the entire length of Joseph’s neck, then curved around his ear. His head was tilted back slightly, so that he could watch her hands and her trembling lips. Such greedy eyes, waiting to hear that choking sound. Fuck him. Breathe. Finish the damn vine.

And then his smile was gone. “Hey!” Joseph reached for her waist as though considering pushing her away.

Laurinda continued to hold the needle aloft with both hands. “Joseph? You all right?” She saw what might be a tremor travel along his grasping arms. Her own *thrum hiss* made it hard to separate need from fact.

“Fine,” Joseph grunted, a look of confusion on his face that was quickly replace by a smile. Laurinda had started to cough.

Thrum, hisssss. Her throat squeezed against the noise, blocking out the air. Laurinda was gasping, flop sweat rising up across her

body. She swayed for a moment as a chill of goosebumps rose along her skin. Then a trickle of air, sucked in despite the barrage. Mother had gone through this. Mother who had loved Laurinda more than anything and yet still couldn't stay.

Joseph meanwhile was still lying on his side, the bedsheet tangled around his waist. But it was the expression on his face that gave Laurinda hope. He was staring down at his hands, his trembling damselfly-infected hands.

Not even bothering to aim, Laurinda plunged the needle down into the tender flesh at the base of Joseph's neck. There was no time left. Laurinda's peripheral vision was nothing but darkness. The bedroom was filled with the scent of ozone, and beyond the walls, Laurinda could hear the rumble of thunder.

"My mother is dead, old man. Dead," Laurinda whispered near Joseph's vine-encircled ear. Her hands shook, but differently than before. Rage. Such rage. Like nothing she'd felt before. Not even when she was fifteen and Mother and Joseph closed their bedroom door, Mother's laughter and Joseph's chuckle echoing through the thin apartment walls. Laurinda hadn't been nearly angry enough back then.

This morning Evie's gaze had followed Joseph's movements about the apartment, as though unable to keep away. Her expression reminded Laurinda of her own just before Mother disappeared: already half-enraptured.

And Laurinda had loved her mother. Hell, Evie loved Laurinda.

Laurinda lifted the needle with both shaking hands and plunged it once again into Joseph's neck, ignoring the choking sound of her own breath. More than Joseph's hands that were trembling. His entire body seemed to shimmer and pulse.

"Stop L. L. L. Laurindaaaa. Stop!"

One moment Joseph's left hand was pressing against her hip as her hand worked the needle, the next Laurinda was screaming, her head thrown back. Burning, acid-hot pain. The first tear had appeared in the universe's membrane. The pathway had its own needs. Energy,

Joseph and Vieira energy. So much pressure. Any moment now it would combust her into particulate matter. Laurinda raised the needle again. After all her careful planning she was slow. Too slow.

And then over the *thrum hiss* and Joseph's cry of "Llllaurinda," Laurinda heard another sound. *Skrreet*. Followed by a plasma-hot storm that shook the windows, tore against the walls. She could no longer feel Joseph's hands on her waist.

"Lllaurinda," Joseph repeated, followed by, "Ppplea—" and then nothing.

The mattress shifted along with the sheets. Only one body remained.

Joseph.

Laurinda felt a burning, savage grin rising across her face. It was Joseph who had traveled. Laurinda and the damselfly vine had done their job. Joseph, Joseph not Laurinda, had fallen through that hungry tear. She had managed to push him all the way through.

The storm seemed to be calming. There was a crashing sound like giant, rootless trees, and then silence. The tear had closed.

Traveler lost.

Laurinda took a long, slow breath and found only the scent of ozone and her tears remained.

For at least one Vieira family in one universe, the devil had disappeared and he was never coming back.

The Objective Is to Minimize the Maximum Regret

Bonnie Auslander

The caretaker tells us where we can go
and where we must not.
No, those doors stay locked.
He has the keys. We
will never have the keys.
It is unfortunate
that we can sense only the dimmest
of blankets in our assigned compartments
and barely make out
the sinks' wavering pedestals,
but he says in time we will adjust.
After all, the sea too has shelves
on which it sets its many fictions.
Stories of hearths and heroes.
We can't see the sea from here.
Only a distant sound, like scuffling.
He points to where we may walk
on the grass but not on the gravel
path itself, whereas over here
we're allowed to take the path,
but the lawn on either side
must remain untrammelled.
On specified days we may lie
prone under the clouds'
ruffed gloves, but we are never
to look straight at the unbuttoned sun.
Residents have been removed
for less. He promises certain hours
will be ours—for music
made with rubber bands
or, in time, for writing letters

with chalk made from bones
of last year's plankton.
There are worse homes
to come home to.
Above all, he says,
we must remain grateful,
even as our faces age
to the color of water
lightened by artificial tears.

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