

The Ne'er-Do-Well

Literary Magazine

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The contributors (for their sexy buns); Rusty (for the viking that launched a lit mag); Trish (for her boundless energy); Rico (for sounding-board services); Kevin (for free-lunch consulting); Dan (for general awesomeness); Liz (for her can-do spirit); Charles (for the break); my former writing teachers, especially E.J. Levy, Richard McCann & Denise Orenstein (for the inspiration and the good example); my family (for putting up with my “iconoclastic disposition”); Portland (for being a city where dreams and leg warmers come true); random email writers (for their kind words); various friends & comrades who I’ve forgotten to mention (for forgiving the slight); and, of course, Ryan Wisnor (for being proud of me before I even accomplished anything).

—Sheila

Letter from the Editor

I hate telling people I'm a writer. They always ask two questions: (1) *what do you write about*, which I can't answer without coming across as a pretentious a-hole; and (2) *have you been published*. Until recently, I *hadn't* been published, so after saying "no," an awkward, cricket-filled silence would ensue, oftentimes broken by a platitude along the lines of "Well, I'm sure you'll write a best-selling great American novel some day!!!"

I'm sure I'm not the only unpublished writer (or "pre-published," as a grad school friend liked to say) who has endured a version of this conversation. And I'm sure that the platitudes are meant with the best intentions. But nevertheless, it betrays a weird all-or-nothing attitude: best-selling author of great American novels... or pretentious a-hole ne'er-do-well.

So I've titled this magazine *The Ne'er-Do-Well* as a way to embrace the disgrace. Because most of the work that any writer produces is going straight to the circular file, it takes a certain defiance of convention and unabashed love of writing to keep producing that work. It requires a high threshold for psychic pain and awkward conversation. It requires, in my case, the ability to keep going even when your mother disparages you as "a waitress with a hundred thousand dollars worth of education" when she thinks you're out of earshot.

So I want to celebrate my fellow writers for their perseverance—help them put a notch on their belt. Because whether or not you're the type who thinks that publication is a necessary part of a "successful" writing life, it sure can be encouraging to have an editor pick your piece out of the crowd. For me, publishing this magazine is simply my way of saying, "Hey, thanks for writing. Please don't stop."

EL NIÑO WALKS INTO A BAR

Ryan Davidson

7

Alright, have you heard this one?

El Niño walks into a bar and orders a scotch and soda. The bar is mostly empty. A priest, a nun, and a rabbi are sitting at a table near the back. The priest is counting in a low voice, “seven-hundred-and-seventeen... seven-hundred-and-eighteen...”

Above the bar, an old TV is tuned to the Weather Channel. A lady reporter with high cheekbones is indicating that El Niño is likely to cause a slight, almost imperceptible shift in ocean temperatures between San Diego and Fresno.

The time in the corner: 11:46 AM.

El Niño is developing a nasty habit of getting drunk before noon.

The bartender picks up the TV remote. He has an eye patch and a nametag that reads: Louis. The remote makes a sticky sound as it tears free from the dark walnut bar. The priest is still counting. Louis changes the channel from weather to football.

“Wait,” says El Niño. “That was the good part.”

“The good part of the weather?”

El Niño feels a little embarrassed. “El Niño is much more dramatic in the Southern hemisphere,” he explains.

Louis looks unconvinced.

“El Niño is not even real,” says a man with a parrot on

his shoulder and a Chihuahua dog sitting further down the bar. "Al Gore made it up."

El Niño takes a long swill of his scotch, cradles his chin in his hands, and stares miserably at himself in the mirror behind the bar.

"Eight-hundred-and-thirty-two...eight-hundred-and-thirty-three..."

"What's *his* story?" El Niño asks, gesturing to the counting priest.

Without turning from the game, Louis says, "He comes in every Sunday. I think he's searching for God in prime numbers."

"Has he ever found him?"

Louis nods. "Twice."

"What happens then?"

"Mostly high-fives," Louis says.

"That's a fellow with concrete goals," says the man down the bar.

"Must be nice," El Niño says, and then he orders another drink. He is waiting for weather news at halftime. He is waiting for someone to notice him. He is waiting to be appreciated.

Unfortunately, that's the joke.

LodeStar

Jon Lasser

11

Miles needed money. He'd blown his budget every month since he gave up consulting in favor of the bank job two years earlier. He'd loved the challenge, the travel, the long, tax-deductible lunches. He'd adored writing the financial advice column for the quarterly newsletter he sent his clients. But the hours had been killing him; the doctor said as much. Working for the bank was less stressful than managing his own business, but now his reserve fund was running low. He needed to find another source of income, soon.

His dentist talked him into dealing cocaine, but his barber talked him out of it again: "You're just not so smooth, Mister Farmer," Ricardo murmured, shaking his head sadly. "You're a nice man. You should find a boarder. A nice widow to grow gray with." Miles wondered if he should start dying his hair.

But perhaps Ricardo was right: he didn't need a study anymore. The room had its own toilet, a full bath actually, and some company might not be so bad. Maybe an attractive woman would rent it, he considered. Miles hadn't dated since his wife left, not out of fear, so he told himself, only out of uncertainty as how to begin. A young and attractive tenant might be just the ticket. If not, perhaps she would bring friends over.

And so Miles decided to empty the room, make it suitable for rental. He walked across the imitation-Persian carpet and took volume seven, issue six of the *Journal of Applied Automation in Accounting and Associated Arts* (the “Five A’s”) off of its shelf. He threw it onto the floor, kicked it once. The black plastic trashbag whispered humiliating insults as Miles fumbled to unfurl it, though eventually he managed. He dumped the volume into the bag, then filled it with as many of its compatriots as it could fit.

Miles opened another bag, and another—he was beginning to get the hang of it. Then he took a speckled grey cardboard file box off the shelf. That, there: eight years of client newsletters. They were boring. He was boring. His personal journal went into trash bag number five, which groaned as though it had just eaten a heavy, indigestible supper.

Miles had acquired several expensive habits and hobbies in his failed attempts to become “interesting.” Cognac was one, skydiving another. He and his wife Leslie ventured to swinger clubs, first tentatively, then reluctantly, and finally not at all. Miles lent out his parachute to a friend, then sold it. The cognac bottles collected dust in the cellar next to the kayak. If his new tenant needed the storage space, Miles figured that he could probably clear that stuff out, too, and not feel the loss.

On their annual pilgrimage to Florida three years ago, Leslie had finally broken the news: she was leaving him. For Ricardo. Yes, the barber. Miles didn’t understand; he filed Ricardo’s Schedule C. The man was no great shakes.

He’d begun watching television in the evening after his long days at work, sometimes falling asleep only to wake with vacant test patterns staring at him. Other nights he’d woken surprised not to feel Leslie next to him in bed, but then he would remember that chilly January morning in Florida and fall back to sleep essentially unperturbed.

It wasn’t that Miles hadn’t loved her, or didn’t miss her; it was only that he was essentially unchanged by the experience, as by all life. He had grieved, privately and for only a few weeks, before resuming his regular orbit. If someone turned his story into a movie, Miles thought, it would be called *The Miles Farmer Story: Life Passes Overhead*. That would just about capture the gist.

Painting the room took quite a bit of effort. After his first two days, he knew he was beat, so he hung around outside the hardware store until he found somebody to finish the job. “What happened

here?" asked one strapping young fellow. "Looks like a murder scene," said the other, scratching his belly. They both turned to look at Miles, who shrugged and raised his palms in a gesture of helplessness and defeat. Boring *and* incompetent, he thought to himself.

Nicole seemed the ideal boarder: she had purple hair and a nose ring, a combination Miles considered the *ne plus ultra* of contemporary glamour. She was young, skinny, and asked if it would be all right if she brought friends over. "It's fine with me," Miles replied. "You can have full use of the house, excepting my bedroom." Nicole looked faintly amused by this proviso, as though the thought hadn't occurred to her. Blushing, Miles realized that it probably had not. He resolved to ask Ricardo about dying his hair.

Nicole had lots of friends: Alice, with her dark curly hair and soft brown eyes; Diane, whose coffee-colored flesh always seemed ripe to bursting beneath her modest outfits; and tall, imperious Janice, whom Miles never once saw smile. Slowly it dawned on him that neither Nicole nor her friends would ever betray the interest in him for which he had fervently, though secretly, hoped.

Despite that, Miles enjoyed Nicole's company and found her to be an excellent tenant. She kept her music down, and he pretended not to smell the sweet smoke that seeped from beneath her door whenever Alice visited. He even grew to anticipate Nicole's tendency to wander the house in a loose bathrobe after her inhibitions had been thereby lowered. After smoking, she also tended to moan more loudly during sex, another consequence that never escaped Miles' attention.

One such Sunday afternoon, Miles found himself nearly hovering outside Nicole's door, taking in each cry of passion and reconstructing the scenario in his mind. Despite this extensive contemplation, or perhaps because of it, he was knocked to the floor when Alice suddenly opened the door.

"Oof!" Miles grunted as the door caught him in the forehead, filling his visual field with stars. Alice gasped, giggled, and apologized before helping Miles steady himself. Nicole's door stood open, tantalizing him but blocking his view at the same time.

Still dizzy, Miles sat on the floor. He couldn't tell why he sat then: shock? A none-too-subtle bid for attention from his boarder and her guest? The opportunity to see, finally, what went

on in Nicole's room? (The door still stood open, beckoning.) No, that was too pathetic. He just needed a moment to regain equilibrium, that was all.

Alice returned with ice for Miles and a glass of water for herself. As she shut the door behind her, a moment passed when he could see Nicole illuminated between its squeaky hinges.

It was nothing like he had imagined: Nicole's body was arched backward. Her small breasts strained heavenward, while her wrists and ankles were bound to the bed by violently magenta rope. It was only the most momentary glimpse, but Miles could swear that Nicole had seen him looking—and had smiled back at him!

Miles walked down to the kitchen and poured himself a portion and then some of Lormin XO, the cognac he'd once described as his favorite. He sat down to watch the seniors golf tournament and thought no more about what had just happened, other than the shocking purple rope looped around Nicole's lithe limbs, her firm breasts framed with its color, that smile—that smile! Golf was a fascinating sport; Miles had always planned to take lessons in Florida, perhaps during the afternoons, and to have ballroom dancing lessons with Leslie in the evening. She never tired of reminding him how, at the wedding, he had mashed her foot so hard during their first dance that her little toe was swollen for a week. Perhaps with lessons he would improve.

Miles awoke with a slight headache. The VCR read quarter past five, and the Creamsicle-orange sun sank behind the bare forsythia bushes that stood guard at the edge of his lawn, their wiry branches black in silhouette, like a puppet show. Miles felt like a puppet himself, his head stuffed with cotton, his limbs heavy and immobile. He smelled potatoes and onions frying in the kitchen, the sizzling sounds interrupted suddenly by a wet splat.

"Shit," Alice growled, several octaves lower than Miles could have imagined. There was quite a bit about Alice, Miles decided, that he could never have imagined. He didn't think he liked being taken by surprise like that.

"Save that one for Lumpy," he heard Nicole say. Miles wondered what poor bastard earned a nickname like that, who would deserve that soiled food.

"He'll be out for hours. Did you see that drink he poured himself?" Alice laughed. Miles looked down at his tumbler—a tumbler! Was he some kind of animal?—still half-full of cognac, transfixed by the conversation: it was like reading his own obituary.

"The poor guy. What did you do to his head?"

"I? I was fully dressed. Besides, I should have made you fetch my water."

Nicole giggled. "That might've killed him."

"So? Would you have to move out?"

"Oh, hush. He's nice. I like him."

"That's why you call him 'Lumpy,' right?" Alice sounded different now: angry, maybe, or merely grim and sincere. Her voice dropped to its lowest octave. "Why are you doing this?"

"I'm not doing anything," Nicole sounded very far away; Miles could hardly make out her words.

"Yes. Yes, you are. You did it to me before. You did it to Diane. You did it to Janice. And now me, again. I thought it would be different this time. I'm such an idiot." Miles didn't want to listen anymore. This wasn't about him. This was private. He slurped some cognac, closed his eyes, pretended that he was asleep. "You were just waiting, weren't you?" Alice hissed. "Looking for something more to hurt me, something more—more disgusting. It's never enough, just to—"

"Shut up!" Miles heard something clatter as it hit the floor. He heard Nicole sob. He pretended that none of this was happening, and gulped down some more cognac. Someone was fussing with the back door, which had a tendency to stick. Miles kept meaning to oil it.

"Shit, honey," Alice said, "I don't care that he's a guy. I mean, fuck it, whatever. But he's *vanilla*." She spat the word out like it was a disease, and slammed the door behind her.

Miles woke early the next morning, before dawn, and wondered whether he was still dreaming. Nicole lay next to him, still asleep, breathing slowly. Miles felt oddly at peace. Although he wanted to lie there with his arm draped over her, he rolled out of bed and put on his walking slippers. Yesterday had been a long and unprecedented day, and Miles wanted some time alone to unspool the thoughts in his head before he headed into the office.

Stars were still visible in the clear and icy sky; Miles remembered enough from his stargazing phase to recognize the Dipper, Orion, and Cassiopeia, who reclined on her starry divan like Nicole in his bed, propped halfway up, knees bent. Miles tried to imagine the vain and icy queen, but he still saw Nicole in his bed, that purple rope looped around. He wondered whether she and Alice ever switched places or if their relationship was as fixed as the constellations.

Miles followed the two stars at the end of the Big Dipper out to Polaris, the linchpin around which the heavens revolved. A shiver passed through his body, and Miles had the distinct impression of millions more stars waiting, hiding behind the city lights, stars that would cross the threshold of the night and pass into the liminal if only he could reach out, twist a dimmer knob, and bring real darkness to the sky. Miles imagined doing just that and seeing the sky's uncountable stars ignite. The sensation of those subliminal stars' presence was intense, palpable.

16 Miles started a second circuit of his block, thoroughly consumed by this feeling. Soon he also began to sense that, if only he could extinguish the background light of the universe, as it might be in the emptiest reaches of deep space where time itself was still new, that his very soul might shine with the intensity of those now-cloaked stars. Miles hurried back to the house before any more wild flights of fancy could captivate him.

He unlocked the door and set his dew-smearred shoes on their mat in the vestibule. He padded across the plush living-room carpet and nearly slid as his sweat-slicked socks met the kitchen linoleum. But he recovered his confident stride, plucked the cold and empty kettle from the stovetop, and filled it at the sink.

The secret of his moderate disposition, Miles had long believed, lay in his intuitive understanding that his emotional life followed Newton's laws of motion: When at rest, he tended to stay at rest; when in motion, he tended to keep moving (this was the secret of his restless searches, his avid pursuit of arid avocations); and, most crucially, every emotion would soon provoke an equal and opposite reaction. Other people acted as friction within this physics: they slowed him down, universally encouraged rest, and braked the deep troughs that would otherwise follow from his peaks.

And yet, as he set his teakettle upon the stove, Miles could not dim the feeling that he was on the edge of some sort of personal revelation, some sign of a deeper meaning, a lodestar tumbling

into view as though it had burst into being through a slow-motion supernova, altering the tides with its gravitational field. Miles was so captivated by this last image that he poured the steaming water right over the brim of his mug, all over the counter and onto the floor.

“Some guidance,” he muttered blackly as he sopped up the mess with a wad of napkins from the takeout joint. He looked up to see Nicole slink into the kitchen, wearing his bathrobe. The robe wrapped around her nearly twice and pooled around her on the floor. Her bony shoulders lifted the terrycloth into tall cathedral arches; she looked like a cathedral spire wrapped in blue tarps for restoration.

She didn’t look like the lost kitten who’d wandered into his bedroom last night, or the tortured lover he’d tried not to hear earlier that evening. She looked haughty and remote, regal and unapproachable. Miles wondered how she could be so many people in such quick succession, and which one was the real Nicole.

Miles smiled at her, trying to focus on her eyes, hazel, shiny and translucent like stained glass windows. He tried to play it cool, tried not to ogle as though he hadn’t seen her without the robe already. He knew he should say something—but what could he say?

“You’re awake already. You look... relaxed.” He hoped it sounded casual.

“Like I’d been tied down and fucked silly?” she said. Miles grimaced; it wasn’t how he imagined her talking, how anyone should talk. He suspected that she’d said it for that reason, to take control of the situation, to throw him off balance. “It’ll be my turn tonight. You promised,” Nicole added. She had a glimmer in her eye, a touch of starlight through the windows.

That evening, Nicole closed her bedroom door behind them. Even when this was his study, Miles never shut the door; Leslie had learned to leave him alone when he was engaged. The room looked nothing like it used to: Nicole’s four-poster bed was in the center of the room. Her dresser, crammed into one corner, was topped with her boom box (*Did people still use that term?* Miles wondered) and CDs by half a dozen bands that Miles had never heard of: Type O Negative, Abstraction Warehouse, The Understudies, and several others. He’d heard of The Velvet Underground and The Smiths, at least, even if he’d never heard them. Miles began to feel his age.

Nicole looked him in the eye. "Are you ready to give me my due?" she asked. That seemed to Miles a rather abstract, to say nothing of mercenary, spin on the situation.

She pressed play. A low, slow, throbbing drumbeat began, sounding like the beating of his heart. Dirge-like keyboards joined in as Nicole sat Miles on her bed. She covered his eyes first with her hand and then a dark, soft piece of cloth. Silk? Satin? What Miles knew about fabric could fit through the eye of a needle.

The music picked up, became more insistent. More drums entered in, and a harp, and a woman's voice, though Miles couldn't make out any words. Miles heard Nicole strike a match; he could smell a whiff of sulphur quickly overcome by the scent of roses and sandalwood, like a cognac, maybe Gautier XO. Nicole pressed Miles' head to the pillow and whispered "relax" in his ear. He could feel her soft warm breath play across his earlobe, something he remembered more from reading than his own life. Surely he was dreaming!—or, or maybe the background had faded away and he was alight, like the stars without the city's glow.

18 Miles felt a stirring; he had never liked the word *cock*, which sounded rough and half-formed, Anglo-Saxon even, despite its probable Latin origin. But as he thought this, the entire universe caught fire, once again drowning Miles out just when he wanted to see the stars. He remembered the weekend meditation retreat that he had once attended, tried to remember those breathing exercises, tried to silence the thoughts that were taking him away from what was happening here and now.

Nicole gently grabbed his hands and brought them to rest on the pillow behind his head. He exhaled and the world receded, slowly. It vanished in a snap when he felt her loop the soft rope around his wrists. Miles prepared to protest, but felt the world's embers begin to glow, so he silenced those objections and stilled himself, listening to the harp and a voice wordlessly singing of the empty space. For once, Miles was speechless.

Nicole didn't just tie him up. She beat him savagely, Miles thought, as though he were responsible for her betrayal of Alice, as though tormenting him would redeem her. But the pain that licked his back and shoulders became something else, a fire burning not from the outside, but from the inside. Every sharp stroke of the cane raised something else with each welt, some sense of shape—his own shape—which had heretofore eluded Miles.

Nicole moved in with Alice a few weeks later without treating Miles to a repeat performance. She never spoke of it, leading Miles to wonder if he possessed previously unsuspected reserves of imagination capable of manufacturing such happenings. In truth, he doubted it, choosing instead to believe in his experiences with Nicole. At the same time, Miles also refrained from mentioning it to her, just in case he *had* made the whole thing up. Once or twice he began driving the conversation in that direction before he swerved and pointed the discussion elsewhere.

Something had happened to him that night. He might be the same man now who punched clock every morning at First National Bank, but he had also been someone else. Miles began to read, rapidly and voraciously, about the S&M “scene.” He was rapidly picking up a new argot, as when in high school he read every account of drug addiction that he could wrest from the school library, then the public library, and finally every bookstore this side of the river.

Like the addicts in those tales, Miles felt driven, constantly looking not for his next fix but that first fix, looking to create that one pure, true experience of which all others are poor copies. In this case, at least, there was no chemical cap, no biological bar, standing between him and another perfect high. The pain triggered his brain to release endorphins into his bloodstream. Those ameliorated the pain, got him high, and gave him an expansive, pacific feeling, the sensation that the entire world was a soft velvet couch on which he could recline, sipping at his tea.

Tuesday and Thursday nights, the same forlorn warehouse that hosted the swinger club to which he and Leslie had once ventured became The Manacle, a “dungeon” full of rough furniture painted flat black and studded with steel eyebolts useful as tie-points. Most of the crosses, benches, and bondage chairs seemed to be built of two-by-sixes barely finished by enthusiastic amateurs. Miles had seen beautifully made bondage furniture, both in catalogs and in an article about a trade show he had once read in the local alternative paper, but this wasn’t it. If he hadn’t seen Grizzly (all six-foot-eight and 250 pounds of him) strain fruitlessly against a cross, he might not have trusted any of it to bear his weight.

As it was, he allowed Mistress Olympia to tie him to the X-shaped Saint Andrew's Cross in the far back corner of the dusty room. Mistress Olympia made him strip to nothing but the thong that he had bought specially for the occasion. He felt a draft tickle the wiry hair that sprouted from his chest. Miles looked around the dim room for Nicole. He didn't expect that she was even at The Manacle, but he half-hoped that she would see him, recognize what she had brought forth, what was now flowering in him.

Mistress Olympia tenderly placed a soft leather hood over Miles' head and aligned the air holes so that he could breathe easily. Miles stood there, smelling the rich garment leather, his arms stretched overhead and beginning to ache. She beat him with a wooden paddle until his screams echoed off the walls, the bare concrete floor, and the leaky corrugated-metal roof far overhead.

All the while, Miles considered: Mistress Olympia (real name: Olivia Herbert) was not a conventionally attractive woman. She was not merely heavyset but downright fat, as mountainous and craggy as her assumed name. At first, Miles thought that the S&M scene somehow attracted an unusual number of very large women. Now, he believed that he only noticed because the scene made these women desirable in a way that the vanilla world did not: how many Venus of Willendorfs could Miles find in the mall on a Saturday afternoon, were he so inclined? But he was not so inclined—and yet, in the crucible of this filthy warehouse, these same women became objects of lust on par with the leather-clad anorexic types whose handsome boyfriends led them around on leashes all evening.

Even Miles, nearly fifty and never a looker, could be attractive: trim, though hardly athletic, his capacity for pain, his willingness to try almost anything, and his easily bruised flesh would make him an interesting play partner. While The Manacle would never revolve around him, he felt certain that he would soon find a number of people willing to beat him regularly.

Mistress Olympia switched to her cat-of-nine-tails. Each tail was tightly braided leather with knots spaced evenly along its length. With every stroke, all nine tails would raise welts. The knots could do more damage; Miles assumed that, should she desire, Mistress Olympia could draw blood with her braided cat, but he also assumed that she would rather not. At the least, she would then be obliged to reserve that instrument for Miles, who was for now only a casual play partner.

The first stroke reminded Miles of his body; the second brought him crashing into it; the third returned him to the dark and silent source of his purest bliss. Innumerable strokes later, when she was finished, Miles fell to his knees before Mistress Olympia and nearly kissed her boots until he regained the power of speech.

Though at work Miles wisely refrained from discussing his new hobby (certainly a first for him), he nevertheless felt a shift in how his colleagues perceived him. He no longer felt like a joke, nor did anyone else treat him as one. Though they would be shocked to see the bruised flesh beneath his button-down shirts—shocked, but perhaps titillated as well—those lacerations lent Miles a dignity, a seriousness of purpose, that he had not heretofore possessed.

Perhaps it was only the preservation of his secret, or perhaps it was also his quest, seeking a lodestar in the mortification of his flesh, like some Medieval mystic. Nicole could be Guinevere; he would be Lancelot, still proving himself worthy even after Camelot had fallen and he'd become a hermit. He would keep a candle lit in his heart. Miles suspected that, without her light, he would drift as aimlessly as he had for the last several years.

21

Miles never saw Nicole at any scene events; he assumed that she was an independent, what he'd come to think of as a rogue player, one with no connections to the larger community beyond her bedroom adventures and perhaps a couple of books. But he once saw Diane and Janice at a private party: Janice had placed perhaps five hundred needles in a vast spiral around the other woman's body, across her shoulders, down her back, between her voluptuous breasts, over the small of her back, around the waist, across her ass, finally wrapping around each leg separately. Miles guessed that the only reason Janice placed no needles between Diane's toes was so that she could stand upright. It must have been incredibly painful, Miles thought, though Diane's eyes were as soft and distant as another world. When the needles were pulled, blood oozed out, wrapping her body in crimson ribbons, like a mocha candy cane, or a deeply tanned barber's pole.

Half of the room stared, transfixed; Miles felt ill yet unable to look away. *Why should I feel ill?* Miles wondered. *She's off in deep space and seems to be having a good enough time. Anyway,*

it's true: leatherdykes play harder than the rest of us. Blood was not his thing, Miles decided. Still, he walked over.

Janice had always intimidated him. It wasn't simply that she was taller than he was by three or four inches, though that certainly didn't help. It wasn't her all-black wardrobe, her unshakeable gaze, her brisk yet unhurried stroll, nor the echo of her high, polished boots over the dungeon's noise. It was a feeling that emanated from her, like a pheromone—that she was royalty, an empress or a queen. She knew it; she didn't care who didn't; she was neither merciful nor fair.

Miles knew that this was an image, one intended to arouse rather than intimidate. He'd asked around, listened to gossip, learned to distinguish people from their scene personas. The real Janice worked downtown, managing the check-in desk for one of those big conference hotels. She lived in a townhouse with two roommates, where the sink was full of dishes and the television always on. That was the real Janice, and this was her superhero alter-ego, the adult equivalent of a sheet safety-pinned around her neck, fluttering behind as she ran through the backyard. Or perhaps *this* was the real Janice, this dark empress, and that daytime woman existed only to feed and clothe this higher self; maybe that was what frightened him. But though she was a queen, she was not *his* queen; that much he knew.

"Great scene," Miles said.

"Thanks!" For once, Janice smiled at him. Miles smiled back, but he felt as though his grin was pasted on, pulled too tight at the corners.

"How're you doing? It's been a long time since I've seen you." Miles made small talk, trying to figure out how he could turn the conversation to Nicole. He had to see her again. She'd led him here. He'd followed her. But now she was nowhere to be found. "So... have you, ah, talked to Nicole lately?"

"Nicole? I see her around, you know, but we don't talk much." Janice puckered her lips. "You heard that she and Alice are through? Alice is real broken-up about it. They're still living together, but they're not seeing each other exclusively any more. Maybe not at all."

"Oh." Miles didn't know what to say. The lesbian scene was adjacent to and rarely intersected with the heterosexual scene; even when all of the people were in one room, they might as well have been in separate dungeons.

"Have you rented out that room again?" Janice asked. Miles wondered if Nicole was thinking about moving back in, or if Janice was just making small talk.

"The room's still empty. Do you know someone looking for a room?" An awkward pause hovered between them.

"I should go check on Diane," Janice said. "See you around?"

"Sure!" They embraced awkwardly, and Janice strode into the darkness.

A few weeks later, Mistress Olympia asked if she could do a cutting. Despite his misgivings, despite the tugging in his stomach that told him *no*, Miles said yes. Mistress Olympia had been among the first to reach out to him, and the letting of his blood might take them beyond casual friendship. Mistress Olympia had beaten him on a dozen occasions by now, and what had she to show for it other than a sore arm?

Miles wanted to do this because she wanted to do this: He would suffer, but he would suffer for her. This thought became his mantra, focusing his mind, crowding out his inhibitions and his terror: He would sacrifice himself for her, she who could guide him in the darkest hour of night. Only in his most secret thoughts would he admit that he wasn't thinking about Mistress Olympia. Surely one guide was as good as another.

Preparations for blood play, Miles had noticed, were particularly elaborate: Fear necessitated caution, and the more involved the ritual, the safer the players felt, regardless of any medical advantage thereby given. It was a primitive magic, applied within an advanced and decadent culture. But what of it? People built lives upon the invisible, the absent, the unattainable.

Mistress Olympia donned her latex gloves and wiped Miles' back with an antiseptic towelette, starting in the center and spiraling out. She pulled apart the plastic bag that encased the disposable scalpel and removed the hard plastic sheath from the blade. It didn't hurt as much as Miles thought it would: it burned, more than anything else, like a long deep paper cut. When she was done, Mistress Olympia put a large piece of Tegaderm over the cutting. Blood continued to ooze, but was trapped beneath the clear plastic membrane. The design seemed vaguely tribal: red arcs and curlicues built atop a scaffolding of straight lines.

“What do you think?”

“Wow,” Miles said. “It looks great.” It did, and he tried to sound at least moderately enthusiastic, even if the experience wasn’t such a big deal. He was almost disappointed, having failed in his quest to suffer. He’d thought it would hurt more, much more, that he’d be taking his experience to another level. Miles wondered if the slight endorphin buzz was the motivation for all those kids getting tattoos and piercings, to wash away their pain on this chemical tide, no different from any other drug.

“Wasn’t that intense?” Miles sighed happily and smiled as the hulking woman engulfed him in an embrace. “Anyway, I have a play-date with Grizzly now. If you’re all right, I’ll catch up with you later.” Miles assented, not without relief.

On his drive home, Miles began to feel strange: he hadn’t risen very high, and so the deep trough he was experiencing was definitely non-Newtonian. Some heavy players who had integrated S&M into their spiritual practices claimed that cuttings were special, that they involved the release of energy heretofore suppressed, trapped within the body. They said that the shallowest cuttings made at times of great emotional release would never fully disappear, but even the deepest cuttings made with no emotional investment would just as inevitably fall out.

Miles wondered which this was, and whether Newton’s Laws were just another mechanism of denial and repression. The sky swung about crazily, stars and planets cut loose from their moorings; Miles was lost, alone, in the primal chaos of a universe without law. He thought that he might never again find himself, that he might wander forever through this swirling void bereft of order or meaning.

That night, suffused with an indulgent self-pity, Miles slept on a blanket on the floor of Nicole’s now-empty room.

Next morning, Miles awoke both sore and disgusted with himself. While in the shower, he resolved to rent out the room again, and soon. He would not allow a repeat of last night to occur. Should he play with Mistress Olympia again, which he doubted, he would firmly resist another cutting. He would henceforth consider all blood play a hard limit, not subject to negotiation. Unless She—but no, that was just a fantasy.

At work, Ted noticed a spot of blood on the back of Miles' shirt, where some had crept out from under one edge of the Tegaderm. Miles grimly thanked him, and willed his boss to not ask how he had cut himself. That night, Miles peeled off the bandage and showered. The cutting was no more than a light tracing of lines, as insubstantial as a spider's web. *Strange that such light marks could cause so much distress*, Miles thought. Over the last several months, he had come to expect, almost subconsciously, a link between the severity of any set of marks and the magnitude of the emotional response their creation had produced. These nearly-invisible marks were nothing compared to some of the batterings that had left his back and thighs saturated with purple bruises and fiery red welts.

The next night was Thursday, another night down at The Manacle. Miles considered remaining at home, but he went there every Tuesday and Thursday, and inertia won out. Mistress Olympia greeted Miles effusively, but Miles only smiled quietly.

"What's going on, honey?" she asked. Miles wondered if she called everybody "honey." She sat the two of them down on an aging velvet couch along one wall of the dungeon. Miles knew how that couch was used on the weekend—he remembered the Halloween party when the club was full of orange construction-paper pumpkins and blacklights—but swallowed his disgust and sat down next to Mistress Olympia. "You didn't have a good time on Tuesday, did you?" she asked gently. "Tell me. I won't be mad or nothing."

"I think it did more for you than me, but that's fine. I didn't feel so well when I went home, though."

"Damn it! I knew I shouldn't have run off so fast. Sorry, honey." Miles shrugged.

"You were mooning over that Nicole again, weren't you?"

How had she guessed? Was it that obvious? Miles didn't answer. He'd had this talk with Mistress Olympia before; she didn't see Nicole like he did, like she really was.

"You get her out of your head. She's been a real shit to you—pardon my French—like she was to Alice, and the others. You just don't treat people like that."

"If she hadn't done what she did, I wouldn't be here." Miles shrugged. He didn't want to run through this again.

"Nonsense, honey. You would have come eventually. You've always been kinky, even if you weren't quite aware—you were never vanilla. If you had been, you wouldn't be here now. Water seeks

its own level, you know.” Miles shrugged, wondering how many people’s lives were tidepools, how many were rain-filled ponds high in the mountains, scraped out by gravel-bottomed glaciers whose countless fingers dug into the soft earth. He wondered how many people died every day without ever seeing the world with the lights turned out, how many people died without a single moment when their lives were illuminated, by their own soul or somebody else’s. He wondered how many people had these trite thoughts every day, believing that their own lives were special, that they were sensitive souls with some knowledge of the world denied to other, shallower, people, and felt disgusted with himself for being so self-indulgent.

Halfway across the room, he saw her walk in.

She looked nearly the same, though her hair was now maraschino cherry rather than atomic plum. Miles liked the purple better: purple was regal, red just whorish. She was above that. She didn’t need to entice; people saw who she was and gravitated to her. She hadn’t burned Miles, Alice, Janice, or Diane; they’d fallen into her and burned themselves.

26 Miles left the couch and stood on the balls of his feet. He tilted toward Nicole as she began a slow revolution around the room—No, Miles realized, the room began to orbit her. The former was the geocentric approach, the latter heliocentric. He waited patiently for that moment of eclipse when everything else would be blotted out by her nearness to him.

His wait was rewarded: Nicole approached, then passed by, brushing Miles’ shoulder as she did so. He wasn’t sure she’d recognized him, known he was there. But it didn’t matter: when they touched, all of his tension, stress, and uncertainty passed from him into her and dissipated. Miles had always felt drawn to her, even obsessed by her, and now he knew that he could steer by her when he had nothing else to go by, for she could not be moved, and everything revolved around her. In her presence, Miles knew that he could never be entirely lost.

She did not need him, Miles knew, though he prayed that she would accept him as an offering—she was Tara, Cynosura, Stella Maris. He was a wanderer guided by her light.

The SEDUCTION of Lobster Boy

Laura Bogart

Simon hates summer because his hands are always itchy and raw whenever he takes his mittens off. After finishing his last show for the night, he skulks the midway, hoping not to be seen. The show is going dark; whack-a-mole games, dart booths, and jewelry kiosks are silhouettes under the bannerline. The card games continue, though, since they recoup the hush money paid to the sheriff.

He passes Madame Olenska as she turns the “closed” sign on her mitt-reading booth. She nods at him before wearily tugging off her white wig. Olenska is really Ellen, a Marylander with a knack for accents. He nods back, recognizing her post-performance face as his own: tired eyes and dry, swollen mouth. Only, in his case, the stage lights dry his skin; after a double, his face feels like it could splinter. His hands are blistered and numb from juggling.

His red velour suit has a ruffled collar that clings to his throat. As soon as he leaves the stage each night, he always tears the collar open. Then he knocks that ridiculous plastic crown off his head, kicking it all the way back to his trailer, scattering rhinestones through the dust.

Simon is only with the carnival because no place else will take him, not with *his* hands. On each, the bones of the middle, ring, and pinkie fingers fuse together in a solid triangle of knotty flesh, topped with a single jagged nail. His index fingers are horribly

emaciated, yet the knuckles are elephantine. His thumbs bend inward, twisting scythe-like toward their palms.

Pincers, as Silas took to calling them.

When Simon is onstage looking into the audience, he stares into the yellow-toothed caverns of laughing mouths. The crowd's eyes consume those snarls of bone. Swallow the length of them, strip back the skin to imagine how the bones fit together, how the flesh stretches tight to cover them.

Onstage, Simon is the King of Crustecia. In his act, he is the ruler of an undersea realm of Lobster Men, come to the landlubbers' realm in search of a bride. He wears the velour suit while juggling giant sea shells.

As soon as Simon reaches his trailer, he kicks off his heavy boots. He trips over his own socks, tumbling to his mattress, which sits on a floor scarred from boot heels and broken glass. An air-conditioner sputters in the window. He eases back on his sheets, letting the cool air flow between his toes. Simon's trailer is sparse; he doesn't see the point in holding onto anything when he never gets to stay anywhere. There are a few photos of his dead father tacked to the wall, above the crate with a radio on top. After pulling off his shirt, he unzips his pants—zippers are so much easier than buttons.

He doesn't have a closet, just a chest of drawers. Inside this chest, he has a few tee-shirts and some jeans. Simon doesn't know what he's supposed to wear; he doesn't have any *nice* shirts, shirts he could wear on a *date*. But then again, this isn't really a date. Lucia the Snake Queen performs as the snakecharmer, but for a few more dollars, she'll entertain a different kind of snake. He's been told redheads looked good in green, so he searches for the least wrinkled of all his green tees.

Simon shakes his head, wondering why he's nervous. Lucia is a sure thing. He'll be able to nod confidently at the rousties. He'll have the same knowledge they do. He's gotten close before, but never close enough, and he wonders what this will feel like, being held tight and warm. A small tremor of excitement surprises him; Silas practically forced him to say yes, he'd meet with Lucia. But, now, he feels a full-body hiccup as he pats his armpits with baby powder.

Simon wonders if he should try a dry-shave, but decides against that. His skin would erupt in red bumps, and he'd probably chafe Lucia's face. There is a knock at the door. It's Silas McGee, manager of the show and the Mayor in the Lilliputian act.

"You better not be wearing those mittens, boy."

Simon shakes his head. He doesn't like to stay bare-handed when he's not onstage. Can't bear the staring in his off-hours. He even keeps his hands covered when ascending the stage. But Silas loves *that*. "It's brilliant, kid," he laughed. "Like how a Koochie girl starts the dance off with all her clothes on."

Still in his black pinstriped suit and twirling his cane, Silas maneuvers down the steps. Simon stares at the dwarf's hands. Such small hands, and yet, they are oddly masculine, thickly callused and ribbed with vein. Simon always studies other people's hands.

Silas digs into his pocket, tossing Simon a rubber. Simon stares at it helplessly.

"Don't worry, you just tear the wrapper with your teeth," Silas says. "As for the rest, just trust Lucia. I mean, when Sugar left me, Lucia helped me feel *good* again."

Simon's trailer had been next to Silas' and he'd hear Silas and Sugar. Her laughing cries of "Oops, baby-boy, don't fall in!" had rattled Simon's tiny window. To distract himself, Simon had tried humming.

Sugar had only been banging Silas for three weeks before she'd left. Nothing like what Simon went through after his girlfriend Jane had set herself on fire along the main stage.

She was only sixteen when she'd learned to eat fire. That was also the summer she had kissed him on the mouth.

Victoria and Viola, Siamese twins connected through the backs of their skulls, shuffle past, walking cautiously so as not to step on each other's heels. Their high, cone-shaped heads make their faces stretch, eyes and mouths slanting as though drawn on in charcoal and then carelessly smudged. Each one is clad in a purple kimono, but their black hair is bound in a single plait. The girls blow kisses at them, and Silas pauses to blow one back. "Vickie and Vi," he said, were next on his "to do" list.

As they walk, the midway snakes along behind them. Screams shoot through the hot air. The scent of popcorn and sawdust still mingles above them. They pass the cookshack, where a few roughies gather around the wooden plank of a table. Their lit cigarettes glow through the tarp, a cluster of fireflies. Simon glances inside, and one man lets out a long wolf whistle.

"See, everybody's rooting for you," Silas says, clapping him on the back of the knee.

"Nobody's business," Simon retorts. "I only agreed to this because you promised me that you'd keep it quiet."

Simon is one of the last real freaks working, save for Silas' Lilliputians and Viola and Victoria, the Siamese twins. Even the crew, many of whom have been with Silas McGee's Traveling Roadshow for longer than the seventeen years that Simon has been alive, eye him protectively, as if he might slip inside that hot air rippling along the midway and vanish. Then, there'd be only geek boys and blockheads to replace him, and a man snapping chicken necks or chomping on light bulbs is hardly a big draw.

The show gets smaller with each town. Three jointees have already pulled up stake, and with them the show lost its Tilt-a-Whirl, ring toss, and High Striker. All that is left now is a sideshow, a girlie show, one roller coaster, a jewelry joint, and several hanky panks. Simon has heard rumors that Silas can't even afford to hire a new fire eater since Jane died.

Simon and Silas stop in front of a trailer with red curtains over the door. The oval-shaped window is open; red curtains that don't quite match the ones on the door flap softly in the breeze. The heavily wheat-ish scent of beer fills the air, tinged with lavender. Simon's face puckers in confusion. Air rolls through the creases in his palms. The coolness feels soothing. Silas opens the door, gently ushering him inside.

Simon has never known his grandmother, but he feels as though this is the sort of room a grandmother would inhabit; or, rather, the kind of grandmother who tries to pass herself off as her grandson's mother. The beige wallpaper creases and sags with damp splotches that recall a crying face. Ground-in ash scars the carpet. Lucia's voice, softly humming, drifts from behind a tattered Chinese screen. Simon sits down. The bed is hard.

Lucia emerges from behind the screen, her tattooed flesh swathed in a thin silk robe. Oriental dragons surge over every inch of her, bodies arched in battle. They swirl down her arms, their tongues lashing at her wrists. When she winks, a slender dragon writhes over her right eyebrow.

Simon has never seen so much of her before. He's only caught glimpses of dragon tails peeking from under her shirtsleeves, or their jaws clicking through her carelessly buttoned blouse. Usually, even when he's passed her along the Back End, he's just nodded. The drugged python still coiled around her neck would hiss softly, lifting his head as if nodding back.

To Simon she's never been Lucia the Snake Queen; she's been Jane's aunt.

When she sits down, Simon sees freckles peeking through faded swatches of tattoo. He wonders if, under all that ink, there are as many freckles as Jane had. As Lucia taps a path across his knuckles, Simon sucks in his breath. Her touch feels heavier than Jane's. She presses down too hard. Jane never pressed that hard. She treated his hands reverently, like the bones were made of china.

The heels of Lucia's palms are wide, giving them a wedge-like look. Jane's hands had a similar shape; stubby-fingered and fleshy, they were oddly thick for the rest of her lank frame. There was always grit under her nails. Her fingertips were lightly stained with ash.

When Jane had held his pincers, he'd study her knuckles. They would flatten into soft little pits when she stretched her fingers together and held them straight. Jane laughed whenever he asked her to do this. She always said she never understood why he found her so interesting.

Jane came to their carnival from Baron Von Bistle's Traveling Odditorium, a smaller outfit with only sideshow and burlesque. When he first met her, Simon was leaving the cookshack. He watched the dust roll over her red pickup. A girl emerged from the driver's side. Her overalls billowed around her hipless body. The oversized cuffs swallowed her shoes, trailing in the dirt behind her.

Lucia had been talking about her niece's arrival the whole week before. Jane's father had been Pyro: Master of the Flame. He left his daughter in the lurch when he took up with that sword swallower.

Simon saw this new girl trip on a dragging cuff. He ran over to help. The girl sat crumpled in the dust. Wincing, she set her hands on the gravel to push herself up. Simon stared helplessly at his own hands for a moment; he should help her up, but what if her past outfit didn't have freaks. Would she scream? She was already halfway up before he decided to try. He slipped his bare pincers under her arms to slowly lift her up. Her skin felt warm and slightly damp. She didn't seem to need his help, but she still let him hold her. Jane didn't sigh with agitation or fidget free; she stared at his hands as though she were seeing the sphinx. She mouthed the word wow. He'd heard that word before, but never with such sweetness. Like his hands were an accomplishment, and not a horror. None of the laughter his pincers attracted had ever been so joyful. She ran her thumbs along his palms. Simon laughed at the ticklish pleasure of her touch. Nobody had ever touched him in such a sweet way.

Silas militantly insisted that touching was for backstage and even escorted paying rubes to the back of the tent. Simon offered his limp pincers for the rubes to stroke. His mind would fuzz over as the rubes began to knead his pincers. Detachedly, he watched as a greasy thumbnail poked between his bones. He only felt the fingers when someone pressed too hard or squeezed his knuckles. The rubes had no shame in the things they wanted to touch.

This girl in the overalls, her touch was so kind. He was used to curious, but not kind. Gently, she tapped a path along his palms. Circling her fingertips, she massaged the callused spots. Every so often she'd lift her fingers as if to ask "is this okay?" Nobody had ever asked him that before. He imagined the rubes' fingerprints still covering his hands, and imagined that her every touch lifted their marks off his skin before he even knew her name.

"Hi," he said sheepishly. "I'm Simon."

Clasping his wrist firmly, she moved his arm up and down. This was as much of a handshake as he could ever manage. She shook his hand matter-of-factly, as though this was how everyone shook hands. "I'm Jane."

She asked him where she could get a shot of good tequila that didn't taste like "somebody was pissing in the bottle, trying to drown the worm." He joked that maybe she'd be lucky to find it five towns over. But Simon had never tried tequila. She would get him his first shot that night; she would laugh and cup his hot face in her hands after he spat it out on the gravel. Through the next four towns and five months, they spent every night together.

Jane took him into town for the Saturday late-late shows. She rolled up to get him in her father's truck. The sight of her, a freckled wisp with a lit cigar clenched between her teeth, her calves swallowed by filthy combat boots, would make him smile so wide his face ached. They waited in line with her arm through his, her head resting on his shoulder.

They could've been townie kids in Omaha except for the stares Jane's spiked hair and combat boots drew. She talked about the proper amount of fuel for dipping the torch and how long to space one's breaths between swallows. Standing beside her, he was simply a boy with his hands in his pockets

One night, she simply stopped herself mid-sentence and kissed him. That kiss, quick yet soft, was his first.

Lucia's fingers drop along his forearm as she lets out a yawn. Simon watches as she arches her back, the doughy flesh of her belly stretching flat. Two black dragons clash above her navel.

"So, what do you take?" Lucia asks him.

Simon realizes that she has Jane's exact mouth. He flushes, wondering if Lucia's kiss would feel the same.

"Jack and coke," he replies, trying not to pause too long.

This was the drink he always heard Jane order. Lucia's mouth twitches into a sad half-grin. She pours more coke into his glass than whiskey.

"My Janie always took her liquor like a proper fucking lady," Lucia says.

She takes four shots before twisting the cap on, and then stops to take one more. His eyes bob over her before finally settling on her hips. The softness of her body pleases him. Simon recalls Jane's reedy thinness, how her ribs had bored into his, even through their clothes. He flushes shamefully. His belly shrivels to a hard little pit. *What kind of an asshole are you?* Jane probably wasn't cold in the ground yet. Cold. Simon thinks of all the jokes Jane could've made about her body being cold, and he feels pinched with anger. He *told* her not to go on until she was *really* ready. Why should he be deprived now?

All they'd done, really, was heavy petting. Jane would always mumble something about needing to practice. Simon wanted to know who the hell practiced at midnight. She shivered when he lay his pincers against her belly. Her eyes would flutter shut and she'd bite her lips as though she were in pain. He supposed he couldn't blame her. His pincers were such thick, clumsy things. She winced when his nails rasped against her skin. He could do nothing but circle a path around her navel. His forefingers would tap aimlessly against her skin.

"Cut it out," she giggled once. "That feels weird, almost like there are ants on me."

His pincers were fine to kiss and cuddle with—she treated them like a kind-hearted girl favors her ugliest doll. But perhaps she still needed to feel fingers sink into her hips, to feel fingers tighten around her waist—to feel the strength in a man's hands. If he had fingers, he would have been able to please her. He wished he had fingers to feel the heat off her body glide between them.

But now, as Lucia lowers beside him, he flushes with guilt watching her thick breasts bounce up and then slowly descend inside her scarlet bra.

"So, kiddo," she asks. "How you holding up?"

Simon exhales slowly. He listens to the carnival rolling around them; a wave of sounds breaking upon the trailer, the barkers' cries overlapping, the shrill guitars melding into women's laughter, the rumbling of trucks. He mouths the word "okay."

Lucia leans into him, her breast grazing his forearm. Simon shivers. The whiskey sets a spark inside his skull. His puckered mouth stings, forcing back the memory of Jane's lips, blistered and scorched.

After the show went dark each night, Jane used empty stages in the ten-in-one tent for practice. Her red combat boots sent a dust storm across the stage as she paced. She'd had to skimp on the kerosene, though. She should have used clear kerosene, stuff that wouldn't clot in her lungs. Instead, she used the same cheap shit the rousties used to light the tents. Didn't matter, she said, since she learned all she needed to from her dad. Her dad had been the best.

Jane planned to end with the "human volcano" bit her father had perfected, the one where she spit out a flame that rose above her head like a mushroom cloud. For a moment, she'd be a thin silhouette below a plume of fire. "My daddy could make the rubes faint. He was better than the movies," she said. Jane bragged that her father's banner had been almost as large as his, and Simon's banner was by far the largest in Silas McGee's Traveling Roadshow. Simon always cringed at that image of himself with the giant shock of red hair and those oversized pincers.

Jane could've found a normal life in any town they passed through, yet all she aspired to was her image between those four corners of fabric that boxed him in place forever.

Simon remembers the two of them sitting along the edge of the stage; he'd eyed that constellation of freckles along her knee. When she raised his pincer to her lips, he'd lowered his face toward hers. He waited for her to kiss him. But she never let go of his pincer. A strand of her hair had swept over his thumb.

"I wish I'd been born with something special," she murmured. "You're kinda lucky."

Simon almost laughed. *Lucky*, he thought. Lucky to be alone—nothing but rubes' laughter rolling in his head as he walked back to the trailer every night. No matter where the show set up, the walk back never changed. At dusk, a cobalt sky would darken under pale clouds. Sid the Knife Thrower and Lela the Sword Swallower would flirt. Their flirting damn near had a script. Lela was as long

and thin as the sword she would trail in the dust, drawing figure-eights for Sid, who would stroke his handlebar mustache. Sparks from the knife-thrower's sharpening wheel were white confetti.

Lucky, he thought, to have his mother vomit at the sight of him after he'd been born. He never learned his mother's face. Silas read about the "lobster baby" in a newspaper. For fifty dollars, he walked away with Simon. For Simon's care, he played upon the longing and guilt of middle-aged Koochies who'd left their kids with their rat-bastard husbands back in podunk towns.

"Okay, honey, time to get to business," Lucia sighs.

Despite himself, he laughs. Her touch is ticklish and slimy. Lucia takes both pincers and holds them against her breasts. She gently presses him to his back. As her hips roll over his, Simon's eyes flutter shut. He feels her lift his shirt, her fingernails razing his skin. The flesh of her belly sags against his.

Lucia's hips careen into his. He squirms, trying to push against her. But he can't move. Her face rolls along his neck. Her breasts are hot and slick. His heart thumps with dread as music from the Ferris wheel enters the room.

Simon watched Jane practice the night before her debut. He tried to hold her hand as best he could, wrapping his triangle and thumb around her thin wrist. He hoped she might come home with him, but she said that she needed to rest. Simon kicked at the gravel, expecting only a kiss on the cheek. Then Jane stopped. There was a necktie around their doorknob, a sign that Lucia was entertaining. Jane pounded on her hips, cursing.

"Well, I guess I'm locked out," she fumed.

They went back to his trailer. It was bare: a mattress, dresser, and a cooler of piss-warm beer. A porcelain lamp shaped like a pink hippo in a tutu sat on the dresser. When he was still a toddler, a Koochie had given this to him—he couldn't remember her name, only her long, pale hands. Her pink-painted nails were always chipped. As she'd tucked him in, he'd traced out little shapes between the dots.

If that is all he can remember about a woman who'd fed him soggy carrots from the cookshack, who'd struggled to get a shirt over his wiggling arms, who'd carried him to his bed and danced a teddy bear across his chest, then what would he remember about Jane? Would she be just a girl in combat boots who'd had freckles along her knees?

He sauntered over to the cooler. There were Irish reds inside, since he was planning to celebrate Jane's debut that next evening. He figured this was as good as champagne. Jane winced at the sound of his teeth cracking against the caps.

Simon stared at the foam along her lips. He leaned in to kiss her. Her damp mouth was ticklish and soft. Simon stared helplessly at the buttons on her dress; he'd never mastered buttons. He fumbled valiantly—twisting between his forefinger and thumb until her top button had come off. As it rolled down his palm, Simon flushed. He looked away—Jane didn't have many clothes. But she didn't seem pissed. She just smiled and shook her head. Jane undid each one herself. His eyes roamed those familiar breasts and pale belly, venturing downward to spot her dark hair curling out from under white cotton.

He hesitated. Simon cautiously lowered his pincer, waiting for her to guide him. Coarse yet silken, her hair lapped at his palm. His forefinger sunk inside of her, and she bucked awkwardly against his pincer. He feared she might break his wrist. He wondered if this was even pleasing her. Simon closed his eyes. Looking, he thought, might make him too nervous; he should just follow her body. He heard a tug on his zipper. Then, suddenly, he heard catcalls and whistles coming from outside the trailer.

Jane bolted upward, striking his chin with hers. Simon stormed toward the window. A crowd of roughies and Lilliputians hooted at him. Some of the dwarves had even mounted the roughies' shoulders, leveling their faces with the window.

"Oh, no, don't stop on our behalf," a saggy-eyed dwarf said.

Simon quaked with rage. Jane's eyes were glossy with tears. She arched her back, arm locked over her breasts. He picked up the trash bin, holding it across his chest with his forearms, and dumped his garbage on the crowd. They scattered. The saggy-eyed Lilliputian tumbled from his roughie's shoulders. Simon grinned at the sound of his skull striking the dirt.

When he turned around, Jane had already buttoned her dress. Her knees were tucked under her chin. He caught a flash of

dark hair curling over her panties. She sniffled. Simon sat at her feet, stroking her calf. Her skin rippled with gooseflesh.

“Just as well,” she murmured. “I need my rest.”

“Yeah. There will be other times,” he said. He traced half of a heart shape over the freckles on her knee.

Her face crinkled as she grinned. She nodded. Yes, there would be other times.

The tears trickle through his shivering lips. He fixes on the rearing head of a blue dragon along Lucia’s shoulder. Smoke erupts from its thick nostrils, billows between its long teeth. Even the eyes are clouded with smoke. He taps his forefinger against the flames, mournfully rubbing her skin.

Lucia fishes the condom out of his pocket, ripping the plastic with her teeth. Simon flinches as she reaches for his fly. Her callused fingers scratch him, and he winces. He hears the rubber crinkle over him, feels a dull tingling, and then just numb.

He was back in his trailer, hurriedly undressing as Jane began her set. The air throbbed with electric guitars and the barker’s call for Pyra: Mistress of the Flame. He heard her boot soles falling upon the wooden planks. Simon imagined her eyes—rimmed crimson to match her mouth—scouting the crowd for him. He expected to hear the sizzle of flame.

Simon was pleased he hadn’t missed anything yet. He sprinted toward the ten-in-one.

Just in time to see her act go wrong.

The torches were waiting for her in a coffee can filled with kerosene, too much kerosene. She should’ve taken only a mouthful, but her cheeks bulged with kerosene. She swallowed too much dirty fuel. This would make too great a flame. Slowly, she rolled her head back, bared her pale throat to the rubes. Her nose crinkled at the gas smell as she raised the torch over her mouth.

Simon could never move past that striking of the match. He couldn’t bear the image of her flesh blistering and swelling from the fire she inhaled. Her cheeks stretched so far they became transparent, glowing like jack-o-lanterns. The smoke forced her mouth open. She belched flame. Gas leaked from the corners of her mouth, catching fire as it tumbled to her dress. A black matchstick of a body, she flailed inside the blaze.

Simon sags against Lucia, letting his mouth rest along her collarbone. As she kisses his neck, he hears nothing but the slow throb of his heart. Simon feels each breath leave his chest as if Lucia's steady hands are pressing them out.

Simon shudders, and slowly, she eases off his limp body. She stands up, wriggles back into her panties. Lucia keeps her head turned. Seems like she can't look at him. Rubbing his eyes, he blinks at the smudges along the mirror, fingerprints dancing around each other.

Simon raises his pincer. When Jane kissed them, he felt as though he were seeing his own hands for the first time. Now, staring at the black ribbons of vein that circle his knuckles and wind through the tiny pocks and valleys of that fat triangle to end at the chipped opal of a nail, Simon feels a surge of pity, almost affection, for his pincers.

He hears the roller coaster tear through the air with a thick sound like a beating bird's wing. The barker's cries are swallowed by the screams.

Gunned

in San Antonio, TX

Ricardo Perin

43

I wanted to walk into the gun show with a bullwhip coiled on my hip. Opportunities to sport a bullwhip are rare, and if there's a crowd other than a lion-tamers' convention where they are not only accepted but admired, it's at a gun show. Leather craft is popular in gun circles, especially amongst hunters who have a keen appreciation for skills that utilize all parts of the kill. With a whip, I would fit in with the crowd at the show and maybe earn a few quiet nods of acknowledgment.

I didn't think it was too weird of a fashion statement, mainly because the San Antonio gun show was scheduled at a Shriners temple—a pairing so offbeat that my appearance with a bullwhip was impish in comparison. I'm no Shriner expert; I don't know much about their society. I only ever see them at festivals, old guys wearing fez hats, driving miniature cars down a parade route. Adding guns to that mix only added to the Shriner mystique.

And if mystique was on order, a bullwhip was a perfect accoutrement. The first time I saw a bullwhip in action was in the fourth grade. The students were marched into the quadrangle where the father of classmate Lionel Bruce gave a bullwhip exhibition. The first crack of the whip got our attention, the slashing of air, the snap reverberating around the school yard, stinging our eardrums and reddening our souls. We stood in awe. For a finale, Mr. Bruce lit a cigarette, handed it

to Lionel, told him to hold the cigarette at arms length and “don’t you dare inhale it.” Mr. Bruce then went back to his mark, lined himself up and moved the whip back and forth as if he were fly-fishing. “Steady,” he said to his son, then, “okay, be very still....” Crack! The cigarette cut in half, extinguished, with Lionel untouched.

I managed to convince local San Antonio poet Chris the Haiku Bike Guy to drive me to the gun convention. We took a detour to the Fredericksburg Road flea market because I didn’t own a bullwhip and I figured a flea market was the best place to get one on the cheap. It wasn’t until we were walking down the third row of junk that Chris thought to ask, “Why do you want a bullwhip?” I told him it was for home security, and he laughed, saying that there wasn’t enough room in my house to swing a whip. We searched for half an hour but didn’t find one, although Chris did find a riding crop. He held it up for me to see, smirked, and said, “Maybe you could use this.” On its handle, there were several strands of leather tassels dyed pink and purple. It looked like a riding crop for bratty girls who ride ponies. I briefly considered buying it to spite Chris’ sarcasm but I pictured myself strolling around a gun show with a tasseled riding crop tucked under my arm and knew it wasn’t the striking image I was seeking.

Chris, on the other hand, didn’t give a shit what he projected. He was wearing a Cheech and Chong *Up in Smoke* shirt, a baseball cap covering his shoulder-length hair, shorts, and a pair of worn sandals. He looked like Dude Lebowski’s brother. I didn’t know how the gun crowd would take to him. Despite his quasi-hippie look, Chris is familiar with weaponry. During his years of military service, he attained expert marksmanship with rifle and pistol. I figured his gun expertise might come in handy sooner or later.

Once we arrived at the gun show, however, all apprehension about appearance faded. The Shriner temple was near capacity with seller tables and long lines of people slowly filing past them. We fell into the great anonymity of a crowd—Chris and I were just two more gun enthusiasts. Even if I’d had a bullwhip, there were folk far more startling in dress. A few were in full body-length camouflage, mirrored sunglasses covering their eyes, with a rifle slung over a shoulder. There were others dressed in period clothing, western wear from the 1850s: belt, buckles, chaps, and cowboy hat.

The far majority of the crowd, however, did not wear attire identifying them as gun owners. Ordinary, hard-working folk. Gun

appeal spans across the social spectrum in America. It's the real big tent where everyone is welcome under its marquee. Gun shows are a family event, not a place where militia boys hang out and devise plans to overthrow the government. For millions, it's wholesome fun; a great way to spend time with the kids after church.

There was plenty of firepower to admire. Armies of handguns, from one-shots small enough to hide in a boot to audacious Dirty Harry .44 magnums, all available to pick up, hold, and peer down the barrel. Muskets, rifles, shotguns, semi-automatics with hearty clips, the entire arsenal of legal firearms was for sale. There were tables devoted to knives and swords, a few crossbows mingled around, axes were on offer, and I ran across a mace. There were defensive weapons as well, like telescopic batons and stun guns of various volts. A sales representative put a Taser in my hand and told me to hold it away from the body and let a charge fly between the electrodes. ZAP! ZAP! ZAP! 50,000 volts flaring, eager to bite and incapacitate attackers into submission. The modern bullwhip, I thought.

If the merchandise wasn't a weapon or projectile, then it was an accessory, like a holster, laser sight, or one of the myriad doohickeys and gadgets that aid the modern hunting experience. And my suspicion that a bullwhip would find praise in these climes was confirmed when I walked into the leather-craft section, where all manner of tanned hide was gussied-up into fashion items.

The centerpiece, however, was on stage in the main auditorium. A U.S. Army recruitment drive occupied the space, and it featured a three-projection screen panorama video game, a first person shooter, in surround sound, the joystick replaced by plastic guns with laser sights. They had enough guns wired up for six people to play at once. Four kids and their grandpa grabbed the plastic machine guns and assault rifles, leaving only a handgun that Chris the Haiku Bike Guy Poet claimed. It was a dopey squad—grandpa wore thick glasses and was too tired to stand, so he asked for a chair to sit on while he played, while the kids were deep in a sugar kick, giggling and prancing in all directions. The game scenario called for the squad to patrol a section of an occupied Middle-Eastern city crawling with Islamic militants dedicated to killing the liberators. The enemy besieged the squad with small arms fire and grenades, shooting from roofs, windows, piles of rubble, even audacious waves of frontal attack. Their numbers were limitless. The terrorists also

had the wisdom to lace the squad's route with improvised explosive devices, so every ten seconds or so the speakers would rumble and the view shake to signify a close explosion.

But luck wasn't on the militants' side, and their aim was lousy. Despite their overwhelming numbers and sustained firepower, the terrorists didn't even graze one squad member. The liberators were invincible and they never ran out of ammo. The kids and grandpa were shooting all over the place—sometimes the laser sight would beam onto the heads of their teammates, but those shots never registered. Chris, with his 9mm revolver, busily shot militant after militant in the forehead. After collapsing, the fallen enemy simply dissolved. The recruiting officer who was admiring Chris' crack shooting admitted that the game was set in PG mode—blood, decapitation, and disembowelment turned off. "We show 'em the full version after they sign up," he joked.

After the victory, while Chris and I were examining recruitment leaflets and forms, two teenage boys stepped up to the stage and asked the recruiters if they could play. "Sure," said an enthusiastic recruiter, "but before you guys play you just need to provide your name, address, phone number, and the school that you attend." The boys did so, eager to have a crack at the terrorists.

Near the foot of the stage was a cowboy selling a small collection of handguns. A few of the six-shooters looked like the shiny toy cap guns I played with when I was a kid, but these guns were real; much heavier and solid. As I held one of the pistols, Chris mentioned to the cowboy that I was born in Australia. "I heard it's a beautiful place," the cowboy replied. "But, hell, I'm never going down there because of their gun laws. What if I get in trouble and I need to defend myself?"

I never needed a gun when I got in trouble during my twenty years in Australia, but then again I never walked down the streets of Sydney dressed as a cowboy and I could imagine the dangerous ridicule that might invite. I was going to ask him what kind of dangers he expected in Australia... was it the crocodiles that gave him the heebie-jeebies... would he feel better in the Outback with a Colt so he could protect his baby from a dingo? But I was on his turf, I was in the thick of it; this was no place for smart-aleck remarks. I was acutely aware that people who had a very different perception of reality surrounded me. To millions, the gun is salvation, interwoven in the country's history, perhaps the reason why America is of great strength and prosperity, second to none. A

gun is freedom, without it, disorder. It is empowerment, reassurance against feeling vulnerable. I am never sure of my footing around people whose sense of distrust is strong enough for them to hide a pistol under their bed or concealed on their body. They are secretly waiting for something to befall them.

And I didn't want them to think it was me. After buying some of the finest sticks of peppered venison jerky I have ever gnawed, Chris and I retreated back to his truck. We drove into the San Antonio sunset unarmed and ready, fully aware that possible evils may be around the corner but choosing not to let that chance control our lives.

Time Curves Off the Limbs

Keith Rosson

1. Elisabetha says, “These are dangerous times for you,” and the boy *laughs*, turning his face away from her as she holds his upturned hands in her own. She lets go and leans back in her chair.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “Seriously. It’s just that...”

She lays an elbow on the table and points a ringed finger like it is a gun. She shakes it at him as if she is admonishing a child.

“Listen,” she says, her anger sharpening her accent. “Listen, I have not lived this long to have someone as young as you laugh in my face. Get out of here. Get out before I make your pecker fall off.”

Carissa says, “But Elisabetha, please—” and Elisabetha, furious, turns the finger on her.

“And you. You should be ashamed. I’ve told you once or a hundred times: You may ignore, but *do not mock*. Not in *front* of me.” She turns back to the boy, who has stopped laughing, who is staring dumbly at the tabletop. “I tell you you’re in danger, you laugh at me like I’m the village idiot? Do you laugh in your father’s face, too? Such disrespect?”

He is about to say something, probably something *stupid*, when a pale girl in a coat too large for her steps through the beaded curtain, sees them all there and says, “Sorry.”

Without turning, Elisabetha says, “I’ll be with you in a moment, Kalen. Please wait in the other room.”

The boy has his wallet out, is leafing through the bills. Elisabeta snorts, her earrings tinkling. It is her turn to laugh. "No charge. I don't charge fools for their ignorance."

Carissa says, "Elisabeta, please. That's why we came here; he *is* in trouble—"

Elisabeta looks at them both, shakes her head. "He's in trouble, yes, but can obviously handle it himself. He obviously doesn't need any *help*."

The boy, who probably frightened most people with his size, his tattoos, says, "Hey, I'm sorry, it's just that—"

She shakes her head again, faces her palm toward him. She says, "No more." She says, "Carissa, you may come back and see me." She looks at the boy, who does not return her stare. "You, young man, I don't want ever to see again. Step down that road alone for all I care."

2. She was born in Munich in 1933, one of only a few thousand full-blooded Roma that had escaped sterilization (she was too young) and expatriation to Siberia as part of Goebbels's Gypsy Removal Act. Legislation passed a month after her eighth birthday. Dachau, a hell of snow and hunger, would come later.

She's seventy-four years old and so, so deathly tired of her own stories.

She rises slowly, a body that's aged hard and lean over the years. She sets the kettle on the hotplate. There will be tea before she calls Kalen in. Kalen, severe and pretty and so obviously damaged, who hangs on her words like the prophecy. Deathly serious Kalen, who stole one of Elisabeta's necklaces after her first visit. Elisabeta (too trusting even as an old woman, even in the winter of her life and all she's been through) had gone to the bathroom, foolishly left the girl alone. The girl and (she realized later) the pendant had been gone when she'd returned to the sitting room. It was a metal bird on a chain; the wings could be pulled apart and when they were, the bird's breast was exposed, showing a sepia-toned photograph of her mother, taken in 1930. It was one of the few valuables and heirlooms that'd been sent away to distant family, long before their internment, before the full-fledged Nazi occupation. Her father (a temperamental and savagely alcoholic man, but one with *foresight*) had seen early on which way the German wind would blow.

She'd traveled to France to retrieve it, finally, from a second cousin in 1956. Had held onto it since with an ever-fading mix of

awe (that horror can, over the years, yellow and age to nothing more than a vague distaste, bad dreams, the smell of ash, the remembrance of brittle snow against her soles) and a longing for a life, somehow, not forged in the shadow of war. And the necklace had, of course, been that last tangible vestige of her mother, her life, her memory.

In 1956 (Christ, she'd been so young then, young and brave and angry and somehow *hopeful!*), she traveled to Ste. Mère Eglise. Her second cousin (she'd been older, a *housewife*, a housewife with a *French accent* for God's sake, no trace of Romanian blood left in her, it seemed) had told her, "The Germans came here, too. There was a fierce battle," and handed her the brooch. As if she were saying they were on equal footing. As if a Romanian refugee in a French village and a girl who'd survived the death camps were on level ground with each other. They were strangers. Elisabeta had stood in that sunlit cottage, smoked as many of the woman's cigarettes as she could, left without thanks.

The necklace had seemed important back then. Some kind of totem. A history of relentlessly interwoven lives encapsulated in the breast of a rusted talisman. Elisabeta has never said anything to Kalen about it; her mother's image is still etched clear enough behind her eyes. And now, what, fifty years later? More? There are other things in this life to regret than a missing necklace.

But stealing from a gypsy, she thinks now, placing saucers on plates. *That's a laugh*. She speaks only English now, sometimes hears German commands, short and clipped, in her dreams. No longer considers herself Roma, or anything else. No longer *considers*.

As she lights incense and adjusts the scarf covering her hair (they expect the imagery, they do) she thinks back to Carissa and the foolish boy, knowing that if she stepped out of the sitting room and left the apartment, went outside, they would not be there. That people like the two of them do not, can not, stay still for long.

She had been rash with the boy—the danger to him had been obvious to her quickly—but she is too old and has seen too much misplaced bravado to suffer it now. Like she said, he could go the road alone for all she cared.

When the tea is ready and she has filled the cups, she calls Kalen in. The girl walks quietly, seats herself across from Elisabeta without a word, knits her hands together. Some of them are nervous, while others act as if they have bought *her* as well as the right to sit across from her. Almost all of them asking questions no one except a vengeful God would answer: *When will I die? Will there be love*

for me? Is my husband faithful? Will he be waiting for me in heaven? Will I always be poor?

Diluted and distilled, every question says: *Tell me, tell. Is this all there is?*

She sees what she sees; she stopped questioning the cards or her own intuition as a child. She knows now that time carves the limbs off everything, curiosity and wonderment included. There are large, scientific words for what she sees with the cards, sees at her table. She has heard them; she doesn't remember what they are. There are also words like *faker, hoax, charlatan*: words that she *does* know, that she's heard many times. But time carves the limbs off the need for validation as well.

Kalen's hands are long and thin, even the palms cool to the touch. Elisabeta touches her wrists, those long tapered fingers, concentrating, a small smile playing across her face. After a while she says, "Dear, is there a paramour?"

"A what?"

"A boy? A boyfriend?"

Kalen's eyes crinkle as she smiles. The girl would be striking were she not so deathly pale, if she didn't carry such an air of seriousness about her. "I met someone," she manages. Her eyes go back to her hands as she says, flatly, "He's okay."

"Is that what you'd like to talk about today, Kalen?"

She ducks her head, runs her hand under her nose. "No, I..." She looks up at Elisabeta, straightens her shoulders, exhales. "Yes. Yeah, I'd like to talk about it. I don't know what I'm doing, I guess. Not really."

"You're confused," Elisabeta says simply, taking a sip of her tea.

Kalen laughs derisively (at which one of them, Elisabeta couldn't say). "Fuck yeah, I'm confused."

She has various decks of cards, uses each depending on the client and her moods. She takes one from a drawer under the table where they sit and removes the deck from its box. She finds the Lovers, places it face up between them, and says, "This covers you, dear." She hands the rest to Kalen, who shuffles them wordlessly, quickly—she has done this before—and hands them back.

Incense clouds the small room in the scent of African violets. The flickering candles and small lamps do battle with the shadows. Elisabeta places the deck facedown on the table. She says, "This crosses you," and pulls the Devil, puts it down.

“Great,” Kalen says.

Elisabeta, still looking at the cards, smiles again. “Don’t get overwhelmed. There are more cards to see.”

She says, “This crowns you,” and draws the Three of Swords. “What does that mean?”

Elisabeta taps the card with a ringed finger. “This is your intention towards the matter at hand.”

“So what’s my intention?”

Kalen does not usually ask questions. “Three of Swords means heartache, dear. There’s a division within you.” She pulls the next card, the Eight of Cups, and says, “This is beneath you. It represents your inner feelings—you are trying to put the past behind you. A brave thing to do, and very difficult.”

When Elisabeta looks at her, Kalen’s breath hitches in; she scrubs her paper-white hands across her face once, puts them back in her lap.

Elisabeta continues to draw the cards, mentioning what each illustrates in the matter of Kalen and her romantic troubles (and the deeper, more cutting thing that, Elisabeta knows, connects to it.) The Nine of Wands is drawn, the Five of Swords, the Hermit, the Tower, the Queen of Cups.

“This,” Elisabeta says, “is the outcome. The *potential* outcome, if trends and, dear, your decisions continue as they have been.”

And it is, of course, the Death card.

Kalen throws her hands up (her bracelets clicking in the shadowed room) and says, “Terrific. Look, I’m gonna need at least one more cigarette before I fuckin croak, okay?”

Elisabeta frowns, shakes her head. “It’s not an actual death, dear. Would I do that to you? The Death card doesn’t mean that. It means that there will be major changes in your life, yes, and probably some of them *will* be beyond your control.” She locks eyes with the girl, reaches for Kalen’s hand. “Now, ask yourself: would that necessarily be a bad thing? An awful thing? Would change be bad for you?”

“I don’t know,” Kalen says quietly, looking at Elisabeta’s hand laced over hers. “Even if the known sucks, at least it’s *known*, right?”

Elisabeta says, “And there lies the difficulty for all of us,” trying hard not to smile. To be so young again is something she wouldn’t wish on an enemy, much less herself. Kalen leaves soon after, and it is only later that afternoon that Elisabeta realizes a book of prayers has been taken from the front room.

3. It is a full day, a busy day. Mrs. Meade wants the cards read regarding Mr. Meade and his intentions toward keeping their marriage vows intact. This is Mr. Meade who died in the Korean War. Jeannette Deauchamp, with her toy poodle in her lap, wants to know about the jars of silver dollars she believes her son is burying under the foundation of the house she owns and *he still lives in, at thirty-five*. Rhonda James wants to know if the cancer will stay gone for good this time, and Elisabeta reads her cards for nothing, afterwards gives her a tin of teas and a small glass cross from her shelf. She finds herself thinking of the boy throughout her day, the big boy with the tattoos, and Kalen.

4. She is twelve and it is April and there is still snow on the ground. She is twelve and her mother is dead now, surely; three days ago she'd been pulled by the wrist by the grinning and frightened soldier with the hook nose (she does not know his name, of course) who is a Death's Head, who is SS, who leers at Elisabeta and has dirty fingernails. Her mother is dead, her father was put on another train months ago, she doesn't know where her sisters are. They are all probably dead, she thinks. It is April and she is twelve and the hook-nosed man has gone, fled with the other officers, leaving the camp to the German soldiers. (She will hear of the term *skeleton crew* decades later and shudder almost to the point of sickness.)

The camp is massive. There are thousands and thousands of bodies in striped uniforms here, so many of them dead, sprawled like sticks on the ground, and she stands in the snow, unmoving. Yesterday and today she has heard no trains over the walls.

There are other pockets of prisoners standing together, milling around, stepping wordlessly over the frozen bodies. Nobody speaks. She sees a guard in one of the towers, one of the few with a rifle slung over his shoulder. He is a gray silhouette against the sky. The wind howls and flattens her uniform against the fenceposts of her legs.

She knows no one, at times can't remember her name. The world is gray and white and green. She is twelve and will find out later it is the last day of April.

5. (She will go through a period when she is in her fifties where she reads military histories, biographies, books about the war. The period will be short, less than six months: Elisabeta will be unable to reconcile the words she reads—those listings of troop movements

and tactics and governmental decisions—with the irrefutable fact that the sky over Dachau was sometimes almost impossibly, wondrously blue, as if it were painted. As if it were something manmade.)

6. The next afternoon the boy comes to her shop, alone this time. It is snowing again, covering the gray-brown slush outside in a new blanket of white. She has another hour before her next appointment, but walk-ins happen sometimes, and she begins rinsing out the kettle for tea when she hears the bell above the front door. He steps through the beaded curtain with snow in his hair.

“I told you to leave,” she says, surprising herself with the anger in her voice. “To not come back here.”

He is breathing hard. “Please,” he says. “Please. I’m sorry.”

It is his *assumption*, she realizes (and why has she never, in all of her history with men, realized this before?), that angers her. His size, his forthrightness, and his assumption that he can return, that he can return here unannounced and unwanted. As if it’s his birthright, by simply being a man (and yes, a frightening one) he can come into her home.

Elisabeta holds the teapot in her bony fists, laced together in front of her belly as if it were a shield. Something that could deflect the stare he’s giving her.

He says, “I’m sorry about yesterday. I need—”

“What do you want here? Why—”

“I—”

“—*why* did you come back here?”

He stands there while the curtain’s beads whisper quietly behind him. He holds his hands out, the palms up. His mouth wavers, as if he were about to scream or begin to weep. There is something, a cardinal or a devil, tattooed on his throat. “*I need help*,” he says, and it is not fear that makes her jut her chin towards the table, just once, signaling him to sit down. It’s not fear. It’s not because he is a man who needs something from a woman. It’s not compassion or empathy like it was with Rhonda James earlier today, it is not anger. It’s not for money. She does not direct him to sit because she is lonely. Elisabeta is not lonely, not exactly.

She does it because it should be done. Because, even while the relentlessness of evil can take on a kind of metronomic precision, horrific in its mundanity, and though she has long quit believing in evil having a Doppler, something as lofty and idiotic as Good or Justice, the world is still a simple place. The look this boy

has carved into his face, this dread, is not come by easily. There is a reason for it, and she has a place for him to sit, and it is snowing out there and warm in here. She does it because some things should simply be done. As old as she is, she still does things, sometimes, in spite of herself.

"I have tea," she says. "I won't give you another reading."

He sits at the table. He puts his hands on the table, then folds them in his lap. "I don't want one," he says, almost a whisper.

"No? You don't?"

"I know what my problem is. I know what my danger is."

She fills the kettle. "And what is your danger?" She resists the urge to address him as *boy*. (There is still a vestige of resentment there, in spite of her decision to allow him to stay.) She asks, although she already knows the reason, at least vaguely; he is still breathing hard, as if he'd been running.

"People are after me," he says simply.

"And you need a place to hide."

He looks up at her then, that same desperateness drawn across his mouth, his eyes. She sees the tattoo on his throat is not a devil but a flower, a red rose. He says, "Just for a minute, okay?"

He sits. Elisabeta stands at the burner, and when the tea is done and has steeped in their cracked cups, the two drink at the table. She has not said anything to him when he begins speaking, starts telling her his story. She listens, she sips her tea. His breathing calms, he relaxes, asks if he can take his jacket off. She nods her assent. In the middle of his story, he says, "My name's Theo. Theo or Teddy, either one. They call me Shark sometimes." He smiles into his tea, shrugs, is embarrassed. "It's just a nickname." He tells her about the men that are after him and his father—people have always told her their stories—and this story is no different; it is about money, money owed. Always money or sex or what passes for love but is almost always really greed. Almost always about what people feel they are *owed*.

He finishes his story and his tea at the same time. "So they're after us," he tells her, "because of that. And they were chasing me and I remembered this place and came in here after I'd been able to ditch them. Thank you for not, you know, kicking me out."

She sees that a skull is tattooed on the inside of one wrist, a coffin on the other. She wants to ask him about the rose on his throat, this blending of icons—life and death, etched forever on a body with what is probably nothing more than the impetuosity of the young—and instead finds herself speaking, speaking about herself.

7. Dachau, the camp on the outskirts of the city, is sprawling and massive and gray all the time. She is twelve years old. It is the last day of April and all of the officers have fled. Bodies, carved down to bone and tightened skin, litter the ground like trash. Possibly thousands of them—the eyes and heart eventually, awfully, grow numb to it. The wind curls over the wall, howling, and a guard walks along the tower's rim like a toy, back and forth. Elisabeta stands still, does not move from her snow-flecked patch of earth to another spot, to hard-packed ground. The pain in her feet is distant, belongs to someone else. She sees a man's hand on the ground, curled and frozen into a claw; it's connected to an arm that's connected to one of those bodies she hardly really sees anymore. But today, now, she finds herself staring at it, this carved-skin hand and its wrist traveling down into a dirty striped uniform. They have done no labor for days, have been merely taken from their bunker (their *pens*, her mother had called them before the Death's Head had pulled her away) to walk aimlessly on the grounds.

She hears the muffled chatter of machine gun fire off in the distance, the sound traveling low and humble across the wall, and the guard in the tower unslings his rifle, takes the binoculars from his chest, looks through them. Some of the prisoners begin to stir; for the first time that day she hears the murmur of human voices. Other guards appear from bunkers, walking quickly, but not many, not nearly as many as usual. They have been abandoned here. She asks herself again, *Why did we stay? Why didn't we leave when we could, rather than send our trinkets away?* Her father drank kerosene once, after the rationing of alcohol and cigarettes and food became normal, when he could no longer buy or steal wine. He had turned blue, vomited for hours, Elisabeta thinking he would die. Wishes now that he had, that she had run away long before she found herself here.

There is an explosion, closer than the gunfire, and she knows that something is happening. Understands it clinically, distantly, like the crunch of snow under her feet. Guards form a loose line around the prisoners in her area and she understands they will all be shot, all be murdered. That the American soldiers are coming, that the war is over, that they have been left here and the German soldiers will shoot them all and fight the Americans to the death over the *place* and the *idea*, over these ugly, low-slung concrete buildings, the tired stands of spruce and pine scattered throughout, over the towers and the walls. Over the *principle of no surrender, ever*. This idea that death is finally walking towards her warms Elisabeta—is

met with something that could nearly be relief. She is twelve and finds herself smiling with what may be gratitude.

But they do not stand the prisoners in a firing line, do not begin shooting and bayoneting them like hogs. The soldiers push them into groups, rough pockets of people. One prisoner tries to push a soldier and is hit in the back of the neck by another soldier. He stumbles, falls to his knees, his hands covering his head. His face is a death mask, pulled tight over bones. She looks, tries to find the man's hand lying in the snow, can't; there are too many bodies. Too many people are moving. A woman who could be thirty or seventy steps on a man's face, slips, falls to her knees in the crust of snow.

The guard steps into the tower, disappears.

More and more soldiers are arriving, quickly. Some of them hobble, sick or wounded, from the infirmary—some with rifles slung over their shoulders or carrying pistols, most unarmed. They herd the inmates into small groups against the wall. The camp is huge, and the idea of this happening all over it is something she cannot imagine, cannot picture. Elisabeta stands where she has been put, stiffens as if shocked when a guard shoots a fallen inmate in the face twice with a pistol. The guard's ears jut from beneath his helmet; there are two red blooms of color under his eyes. The inmate's hand, two small holes in the palm, does not fall from his face. She sees no blood. Elisabeta looks up, sees the gray wall, the off-white sky against the guard tower the color of wet cotton. The guard has now gathered other men up there, each of them looking through binoculars. All of them, perhaps half a dozen, run back into the tower, again disappear from sight.

She stands in the snow. The guards, milling and frantic, will not look the prisoners in the eye—they keep looking among each other, looking to each other for instruction. Their orders are clipped and contradictory. Stay here. Move there. Lie down, goddammit. Stand up, you piece of shit. Elisabeta knows this is happening all over the rest of the camp as well—the barracks and infirmaries emptied of wounded and sick, inmate and Nazi alike—and still feels nothing; a fatigue, a yearning to simply lay down and sleep forever. Her gratitude dissipates now that she knows this will not be the end.

Some fifty yards down the wall (past two of the towers—this is how Elisabeta measures space and distance in Dachau), past one of the squat cement infirmary buildings, the gates are opened (living prisoners stacked and smashed on each side of the wall, loose strings of soldiers keeping them packed tight) and she hears a volley of gunfire before she sees them, before she sees the men.

Sixty, seventy, a hundred Americans step through the gates and enter the compound.

And there is nothing like singing inside of her, nothing that comes close to joy, a sense of retribution.

Rifles and machine guns whirling from one German soldier to another, the men fanning out in a wedge, the Americans keep coming in, barking words in English—she spoke only German and Romanian then—their pale faces sick and bright with horror.

They are just *boys*. The Germans seem older to her—these boys seem as if they could almost be her age, boys she would court in a few years, in a different life. One boy—saying “Jesus Christ” over and over again, she knows that word—leans over, presses his rifle across his knees, and vomits in the snow. It lands on a body and Elisabeta turns away. She sees the men from the guard tower exit the doorway at the tower’s base, the six of them stepping in rigid formation. She peers over another inmate’s shoulder and sees five of the six men stop and salute, palms outward. One of them is shivering.

The sixth man (is it the one who walked relentlessly her section of the wall’s perimeter? It’s impossible to tell) approaches a cluster of Americans, stops and salutes. He attempts to hand a sheaf of papers to one of the soldiers. The American looks down at the clutch of papers as if he doesn’t know what it could possibly be, as if it’s a winged snake or a man’s head. His hands are flexing maniacally at his sides. Then he reaches out—the knuckles of his hands are red and chapped—as if he is going to take the papers from the soldier’s hand. Instead he surges forward, grips the German soldier’s throat while the other hand tries to unbuckle the pistol at his side.

“*Scheissehunde!*” the American screams, spit falling in a string from his teeth, cords rigid in his neck as he shoves the man away. The papers fall to the frosted ground—*like snowflakes, they fall like snowflakes*, she thinks—and the American shoots the soldier twice in the stomach. The man stumbles to the ground, lands on his ass with his hands crisscrossed over his guts, his eyes are looking nowhere, and the American steps on the sheaf of papers, leaves a footprint, and presses the pistol against the man’s eye, firing, firing.

Hours later, an American soldier gives her an orange and a piece of chocolate. She eats them both at the same time, and the tastes flare in her mouth like stars. “Lee,” he says, touching his heart, unable to look her in the eye, to stop looking at the sticks of her legs, the jutting wedges of her wrists. His eyes are red from weeping. Her mouth is full. She tells him her name.

8. "Elisabeta?" the boy in her apartment says after a long time. "That's a pretty name."

"It means 'God is my oath,'" she says, and aches for a cigarette for the first time in decades. Her tea is cold.

He says nothing—he is trying to be kind to her. And he is thinking, probably, about God, the impossible juxtaposition of God and a place and time like Dachau and 1945. She no longer considers.

"It's foolish," she says. "A foolish meaning—I would've liked another name, Flower or Sunshine or, ha, *Rock*—something that you knew what it was from the beginning, as soon as it was said." She smiles, embarrassed now that she has told him about herself. Wishes he was gone now that she's allowed herself to say this.

"Like mine," he says. "Like my nickname."

"Yes."

What she hasn't told him! This boy with a *skull* drawn on his wrist—has he ever seen an actual skull before? A *body*? Bodies dead and stacked and mounded thirty deep in a traincar? The things she could say to this boy who has marked himself as if he's been through unimaginable wars.

It was seconds after the American had shot the German soldier in the eye that the massacre had started. (She would later find out that the German was merely a lieutenant, that the camp was down to a staff of less than 600 men. That the papers he'd attempted to hand over to the American, despite what she'd thought, were papers of official surrender.) The lieutenant had rocked back into the snow—and there was blood *now*, yes—and somewhere to her right, behind her, someone opened fire on the other five soldiers. Four of them sagged, crumpled. One ran.

It was thirty, forty minutes of slaughter. She does not understand why the Germans did not fight back. Few of them had rifles, per orders, but still. It was pandemonium. Gunfire filled the world—she saw two inmates club a man to death with a rock, three more exchange a bullwhip and whip a naked soldier until he no longer moved. One inmate, singing and crazed, had taken a German rifle from the ground and shot a corpse over and over again until an American placed a hand on his shoulder, gently took the weapon from him. The man had fallen to the ground, covered his face and lay weeping in the mud and snow. She had found a spot against the wall, the concrete cool and dark and pocked against her cheek, and curled herself around her legs. Vehicles arrived, tanks and hulking

green things carrying more soldiers. The treads of these things threw dark mud in fans and strings.

It was after various men argued (she could see that they were all high-ranking officers—they arrived in jeeps, their shoulders and lapels had been sheared in color) and one had left, angry, that they lined up the remaining German soldiers against the wall and two Americans, lying down behind machineguns, killed them all, hundreds of them. She could not see the Germans, but she could see, from her spot against the wall, one of the machinegunners shifting his weapon back and forth, back and forth, hot shells jumping and arcing to the ground. The roar of the guns lasted for minutes. After that there was the sporadic *pop!* as Americans went through the bodies, shooting the moving or blinking ones to make sure.

She was twelve and it resolved nothing at all.

Outside, the snow has stopped coming down. Elisabeta looks out the window, one hand gathered like a brooch at her throat.

“Are you safe now? Is it safe for you to go outside? I have clients.”

He nods quickly, shy and awkward now, rising from his chair and gathering his coat, as if they were lovers.

It is only when his hand has parted the beaded curtain that he turns and thanks her. He says, “I don’t know what I would have done,” and she does not know if he means if he had been in the camp or today, had she not let him in.

“I’m sorry,” he says, and Elisabeta turns to the wall and rolls her eyes. Would be thrilled if someone told her she would never, ever have to hear those two words again.

“Thank you,” she says. “Please be careful.” It has become impossible to hate him—his ignorance coupled with his earnestness carves the hate out of her like a seed. He leaves, and she stands at the window as the curtain whispers and eventually grows quiet.

She knows nothing except that she will never see him again, and that sometimes things are taken and not given back.

9. It is during the next spring that she dies. Elisabeta goes painlessly, in her sleep, in a chair in the sitting room; she would have been delighted, had she known—she had always pictured something that took months, that took every breath and inch and dignity away from her. It is spring and colors run riot in the parks; chrome and glass wink in the heat; the flowers on her sill stretch and bend towards the sun.

It is Rhonda James who finds her. Rhonda has gotten her hair done to celebrate meeting with the doctors, who told her what Elisabeta had implied earlier that winter—the tumor had been successfully removed, the cancer was gone. The angel food cake she's brought is set carelessly on Elisabeta's reading table; Rhonda weeps like a child as she calls the paramedics, as she realizes Elisabeta will not be waking up. She adjusts Elisabeta's scarf, tucking a curl of gray hair behind her ear. She folds her hands in her lap.

There is nothing as literal or lofty as a *community* that surrounds this woman in her death, no—Jeannette Deauchamp's son does not unearth jars of rare coins from the house's foundation to pay for a casket and a service, Kalen never returns the items she has taken—but Elisabeta is still remembered. There are those who remember her insights, her intuitions—there are scientific names for these things—or how her fingers would trace lightly over theirs as she searched for whatever it was she searched for when reading. There are those who remember her as the bitter and slightly crazed “fortune teller” who lived in the apartment at the corner of the building, of course, but there *are* some who know her name, who spoke to her and received words returned in kind, people who remember how this woman's mouth curled in a small smile, remember how light her eyes became when she stepped in front of an open window, into a swath of sunlight. To whatever minute degree, there are people, themselves still upright and walking and talking for a time, who remember her.

And it was while she slept, during that last sleep before her death, that she had the most wonderful dream, maybe the loveliest dream of her life. She had snuffed the flames on all the candles in the room, placed a small blanket over her lap as she sat in a chair in the corner—it was spring, there was life outside that was in bloom, but bodies as old as hers ran hot or cold at their own whims, it seemed. She was so tired; her chin gently fell to her breastbone.

This dream, in this dream she is so young, she is a child with unmarked arms and long, copper-shot hair, with strong and straight-lined limbs, and she is standing in an endless field of grass so green that it cannot be real, cannot—the color is so good and right it nearly hurts her eyes to look at. The green grass reaches Elisabeta's waist and is met at the horizon with a shimmering gold sky, expansive and warm, the sun up there like an eye or a coin. The wind blows her hair back from her brow and runs a hand over the grass that makes a sound like *shhh, shhh*.

And ahead of her, turned away and in a dress more beautiful than she ever owned in life, stands Elisabeta's mother. She stands toward the sun and runs her hands over the impossible grass that says *shhh, shhh*.

Oh her legs are strong as she runs to her mother through the grass.

Her mother's face is the same face from the photograph, the photograph inside the metal bird's chest—unlined and beautiful and unworried. Her hair is gathered in a braid that coils down her back. She smiles at Elisabeta, who wraps her arms around her mother's waist, rests her face against her belly, feels the fabric against her cheek, hears the *shhh, shhh* of the sky's hands running over the grass.

I missed you so much, Elisabeta says. There is no sadness here, no regret, not in the green grass under a sky like this.

Her mother pulls her to her, holds her. *I'm so glad you came, copila. I don't want to be alone here. Do you?*

Oh no! No! Elisabeta says, and she is crying now against her mother's belly because she is so happy, because they are together and it has been such a long and wearisome life sometimes.

And her mother begins singing then, her mother's voice blends into the sounds of the wind running soft hands over the emerald grass, *shhh, shhh*, she says, and it is the loveliest lullaby Elisabeta has ever heard.

Practical Mechanics of Reverberation: *How Jacob Met Daphne*

Allan Shapiro

65

The sound of the water dripping in the bathroom can be heard from the bed. The television is on, but the sound is off. What are you watching, Jacob?

"It's the story of a man who is all alone on Thanksgiving, so he kidnaps an old lady to make him a turkey even though he hates turkey. The woman turns out to be Ms. O'Brien, his second grade elementary-school teacher, the only person who's ever really understood him, and then they fall in love and live happily ever after. It's not a comedy."

Sounds interesting. Jacob is sitting on his bed with his back to the wall, holding his knees tight to his chest. You have only to glance at him to realize that he is not blinking. Are you all alone on this Thanksgiving, Jacob?

"Well, not really. I do have the water dripping after all."

Yes, you do, but why is the water dripping, Jacob?

"I kind of like it. Kind of hate it. Think it's what time would sound like if there were nothing else to listen to."

Jacob considers what he just said. He bites his lip. He lights a cigarette. "I'm not scared though, if that's what you're thinking. I'm not though."

Why would I think that, Jacob? Is that the fire alarm?

"Yeah, it's been going off for like a half an hour now. It's really annoying."

And would that be the sound of sirens outside?

"Probably."

What do you think it all means, Jacob?

"That we should be thankful for closed windows. It is Thanksgiving after all."

Yes, it is. Jacob can be stubborn sometimes.

"And simple."

Jacob can be stubborn and simple sometimes. For example, if he weren't smoking so much, he would be able to smell the smoke seeping in from beneath the door. Isn't that right, Jacob?

"Yep."

But he wasn't always like this. What happened? Did she leave you?

"They all left me."

Or did you leave them?

"Well, I did let them go."

Yes, you did. Maybe it would be a good idea for you to go, too.

"The thought has crossed my mind."

Go outside, Jacob.

"Okay."

Jacob has blue eyes, bright blue eyes that never dull even on a night like this.

Mrs. Feldman was responsible for the fire on the second floor. Burnt the turkey so bad it caught fire, along with the oil-soaked towel she tried to extinguish it with, along with the yellow canary curtains on the kitchen window, and the framed picture of her and Harry in front of the Eiffel Tower, and her pack of Benson & Hedges 100s hidden in her purse. Even the bowl of butterscotch on the coffee table. Didn't take long to burn either. Apparently Mrs. Feldman leads a very flammable life.

You see, Harry died last year, as Harrys tend to do, and ever since then, Mrs. Feldman has never been quite sure what to do with herself. How does this happen, that the end of your life would really seem like the end of your life? How do you do it, Mrs. Feldman?

"I took up knitting."

Of course you did.

So Mrs. Feldman is the one to blame for the misanthropic mob that now overwhelms the street at 8:00 on Thanksgiving Thursday. All the uninvited souls, all the insatiable appetites, the necromancers, and the cross-dressers, in their robes and slippers, impatiently puffing away with crooked arms and elbows at the insolence of having to admit to the world this very sorry state of affairs: hairnets and curlers and hastily smeared lipstick and chest hair curiously curling out of the collars of the t-shirts of old, hairy, gluttonous men. This conglomeration of living souls scattering like insects from the withered roots of civilization's efforts, this monument to misuse, all scraps of soft paper held together by a fistful of faith and Elmer's glue.

And Jacob is their leader.

"A prophet, really."

Of course, Jacob. No one would ever question your ability to seem more pathetic than everybody else.

"It's a gift."

So why not tell us who we have here. How about this rather tall gentleman with the overbite, clutching his vinyl copy of *Zeppelin IV*? Suppose that would be as good a choice as any if you only had time to take one thing with you. What did you take, Jacob?

"My toothbrush."

That's very responsible of you, Jacob. I'm sure your mother would be very proud. But you know that you can buy a toothbrush anywhere, right?

"I know, but I really like this one."

Good enough. So, back to Frankenstein here; what's his name anyway?

"That would be Gould. None of us are sure if that's his first name or his last. We just all call him Gould. Usually it's "Oh God, Gould" because he'll come out of his apartment to throw away his trash or something, with these gigantic erections—" indicated by the space between Jacob's hands "—gigantic. Start questioning your existence after you see something like that. Anyway, some time back, Gould got knocked on the head with some bar grating when he was the foreman of a construction company. Now he sits at home and collects disability. Isn't that right, Gould?"

"You could see inside my head," he says pointing to his head.

"Thank you, Gould. Wonderful imagery. Tell the people what you do with your time, Gould."

"I have cats."

There we go. That's the money shot right there. Shall we move on?

"Why not. Here we have Nancy and Greta, who are neighbors on the fourth floor. Nancy used to sell real estate. Now she drinks. Greta is fresh from an abusive relationship with Tony, and now she finds solace in the fact that she doesn't drink as much as Nancy. Who else? Oh, Frank! Frank is a fucking asshole! He once took my clothes out of the washing machine while they were still wet and left them in a pile on the ground in front of the dryers. He said I left them in there too long. What kind of an asshole would do a thing like that?"

"They were in there for, like, 6 hours."

"That's bullshit, Frank. You expect me to believe that you're sitting in the laundry room all day timing people? Am I really to believe that, Frank? We're moving on from Frank. Fuck Frank. You already know Mrs. Feldman. Then you have the donkey twins, Julius and Jules. They do this grunting thing. Never get stuck in the elevator with them. Dr. Brown, who is not a doctor at all, but gets really good weed. And then Laszlo, the fox hound of an apartment manager. Notice the exaggerated distance between his nose and his upper lip, makes it look like he's smelling everything. Oh, and Johnny, of course, the security guard. Hey, Johnny. Johnny weighs about 120 pounds and couldn't guard a hamster, but he is quite adept at making small talk when you come home drunk and are waiting for the elevator. Isn't that right, Johnny? Tell me more about the robots, Johnny, at one o'clock in the morning, gulping down my own vomit. Voodoo monkey robots from Tokyo, that's the ticket, right Johnny."

"They're not really robots. They're monkeys with robot powers."

"Of course they are, Johnny. And then there's me."

And who are you, Jacob?

Jacob starts to speak and then stops. Jacob opens his mouth and then closes it. Jacob realizes what he is doing and smiles. Then he shakes his head. Then he asks Mrs. Feldman for a cigarette.

Jacob is his blue eyes and the way he looks at things. You would see Jacob as a child staring at a door before he opened it. You would see Jacob staring at a plate of food before he was told to eat it. You would see Jacob in his bed, staring at the ceiling; and

you would hear Jacob whispering, softly, almost lyrically; and then you would hear Jacob laughing, if he ever laughed, and crying, if he would ever cry; and you would know that when he was quiet, he was not sleeping. What were you waiting for, Jacob?

"I was waiting for you to answer me."

And did I?

Jacob would laugh and Jacob would cry, but instead he just smiles and looks up with his blue eyes that have, by now, defined him. Bright blue eyes even on a night like this. Isn't that right, Jacob?

"Yep. Like clarity in a fog."

That's our Jacob.

Jacob came to San Francisco two years ago to kill himself, but liked the place so much he decided to stay. Meeting Daphne also affected his decision.

"Do we really have to talk about her? I'd really prefer just to leave her out of this whole thing."

No, I think it's important to discuss it. If you didn't relive all your past relationships, there'd be no reason to have another one. So how did you two meet?

Jacob is obviously disgusted by the subject and looks away while smoking. His eyes settle on something, perhaps a puddle of water in the gutter, perhaps the reflection of street lights on the puddle. Then he smiles.

"It was my brother. Fucking Esau. Said he found her naked in a scallop shell. Said she was a gift from God."

Jacob is still smiling. And was she, Jacob? Was she a gift from God?

Jacob is not smiling. Jacob is nodding his head. Jacob is saying "Fuck you."

That's our Jacob.

To properly explain the entity known as Jacob and Daphne, we must go back to the beginning. Jacob was living with Esau and his wife, Eleanor. Jacob had dropped out of school that spring for the fourth time in what was a long string of epiphanies, failures, and what Jacob would refer to as masturbatory decision making.

So Jacob was home most of the time, resigned to watching the kids since Eleanor went back to work. The voices in his head

were words within his journal, and he wandered the nights with a restless itch to breed. It was mundane, and Jacob grew weary.

Esau, at this time, was working in the county jail. He helped people get out. And that was how he met Daphne.

She sat in an office in front of a holding cell, the dull orange of her sweatshirt dulling the paleness of her skin and darkening her eyes. Daphne swore it was the first time she had ever done anything like this.

"Like what?" Esau asked, knowing what but asking anyway.

"You know." How coy she became when she lowered her eyes. "You know."

"I know."

And thus, in the world of Jacob and Esau, Daphne was created.

Daphne is Persian and likes to roll her Rs. She wears black leather at night and black eyeliner. She walks with her shoulders back. Her eyes move slowly over what she sees, and when she's finished, she will slowly lick her lips and turn away. Something like that is not likely to go unnoticed.

She is very small, but her voice belies her size, perhaps because some of her is hollow, or rather, some of her is missing. Part of her stomach had to be removed after her ex-boyfriend put a knife through it. Nearly hit her spine. Now they're all ex-boyfriends. Now they're all just actors in a play.

Daphne always wanted to be an actress. At thirteen, she performed strip shows for her neighbors. At fifteen, she charged seniors for hand jobs. It came easy for Daphne, and she enjoyed her work. For all the men in the world, and for all the time it took to please them, Daphne found a certain strength, a certain power, and an odd sense of isolation that she considered quite satisfying, a tease of the tongue, so to speak, since Daphne is rarely alone.

She won't look at her watch while he is inside of her, but she will face the nightstand that has the clock. She won't say things like "It's taking too long," but she will turn and twist her hips with his thrust, thus bestowing unknown pleasure upon the unsuspecting gentleman. Usually this does the trick. She won't complain, but she also won't pretend she is enjoying herself.

Daphne drinks a dry red wine at the bar and fingers the stem of the glass while she moves her eyes around the room. They

settle on someone settling on her. This is easy enough, and when they unfold their bodies upon the bed, she only has to close her eyes to know that she's alive.

So what is it, Daphne? Is it the loneliness? The boredom? The heartache? Why do you do it, Daphne?

"It's the money, you putz."

The man currently on top of her echoes this sentiment. "Yeah, it's the money."

That can't be all of it, can it? There has to be a reason why you do the things you do besides the reason you give yourself. You, Sir, What do you do?

"I'm a tax attorney, and I do that for the money, too."

Okay, so he's a bad example, but you, Daphne, you're different. The lifestyle of a tax attorney is not exactly conducive to higher thought. No offense. But you, Daphne, you weren't born, you were created. You're not like them. You transcend all good sense. So is there anything about it that you like?

"Well, this is a little embarrassing—" Daphne winces, pats the man on the elbow and says, "A little lower, baby."

"Sorry."

"That's okay, baby," as she repositions the tax attorney the way he should have done the first time she asked. "So yeah, there are some things about it that I like."

Not the sex, though.

"Oh, no! Not the sex. The way these guys fuck me, it's like they're fucking their own mothers or something. Not you though, Ira. You're a tiger."

Ira's glasses are all steamed up, and he doesn't have the strength to hold himself up by one arm, so he has to tilt his head all the way back to see if she's joking.

Daphne rolls her eyes and continues: "It's okay some of the time. How would I describe it? You know when you have a loose tooth and you move it back and forth with your tongue. You know that feeling? That's kind of like what the sex is like. It's like tonguing a loose tooth. Does that make any sense?"

Not at all, but I am fascinated nonetheless. How about you, Ira?

Ira is about one pump short of an aneurysm and can only nod his head and grunt.

So tell us everything, Daphne. We are breathless with anticipation.

"Well, it's not such a big deal." Daphne looks good in the spotlight and laughs while running her tongue along the front of her

top teeth. Daphne is wondering how much she should say.

"Okay. So," she begins, "I do like the pressure right here on my abdomen." Daphne points to the flat part between her stomach and Ira. "I like the heaviness, you know, the weight, right here but just a little bit. And," as she looks up and to the side, smiling like a child teasing a cat from behind a screen door, "I like watching his face as he firsts puts it in. And then... and then I like to pretend like it's so good and so big, all surprised, you know, like it was the first time I ever tasted chocolate or something." Daphne is laughing, running a finger along her lips and thinking about the first time she ever tasted chocolate. Daphne collects herself with a cough and says, "Yeah," and then continues.

"What else?" she says. "Well, sometimes, I like to put my arms around his shoulders and let him hold me up, but only when I know that he'll put his arms around me, too. Some of them don't like that, you know, especially the ones who are scared of me. They're the worst." She waves the thought away with her hand. "All they want to do is punish me, like it was my fault or something, like all they want to do is ruin everything. But, whatever." Daphne rolls her eyes and shrugs her shoulders. "I guess what I really like is just to be touched, you know, to be acknowledged. I guess I just like to know that I'm here. Does that make any sense?"

It's important to know where you are.

"*I know.* It is important. Most guys just put their heads down and grunt. What's the point of fucking me if you're not even going to look at me?" She quietly nods her head at the balding, grunting man currently fucking her. Daphne shakes the thought away and then brings a finger to her lips. Then Daphne alights an unstoppable smile. "But most of all," she says, leaning forward, looking up and then at the clock. "I like the way I look when it's over. Isn't that terrible?" A twist, a turn, and the tax attorney's done.

"Oh, praise Jesus!"

And with that, Ira is up and in the bathroom, washing off all evidence of what he just experienced.

"Four minutes," Daphne says, leaning on her elbow and holding out four fingers on her other hand.

That is the time it takes for Ira, tax attorney for all the world, to wash himself off, to straighten himself out, to check to make sure she hasn't stolen his wallet or his watch, and to fish out four dirty, crumpled bills, which he leaves flat upon her chest.

"Thanks, baby. And don't tell mommy on me," she says.

Ira turns and smiles, and then, without another word, he

is out the door.

"Guys love when I say shit like that. Why are they so fixated with mothers? But anyway," she says as she shakes her hair and thins her eyes. "Don't I look good?"

And that is our Daphne.

"You did what?"

Poor Esau. He has just told his wife, Eleanor, that he set his suicidal brother up with a prostitute. Now he is sitting up in bed and rubbing the bridge of his nose. In the time it takes him to put his glasses back on, he concludes that it was not such a good idea to tell his wife what he has done.

Understand that Esau is the hero, and therefore, everything he does is a measure of his heroism.

When Eleanor gets angry, her accent comes out, that Russian tut-tut. "Do you have a brain in your head?" she asks, pacing in front of the bed, hands on her hips holding closed her white robe. "Do you think?"

"Yes, I *do* think." Which is true to a certain extent. Well, to the extent that he thinks pleasure is the prescient part of the process and contentment the final form of its decay. "Can you just come back to bed?"

She ignores him. "You call that thinking? Oh yeah, Mr. Genius here with the brilliant thoughts." She shakes her head. Her agitation is expressed by the size of her hair, and at the moment it is set to full fro. "And what happens when he falls in love with her, Esau? It's Jacob, Esau. You *know* him. Oh, Esau! He's going to try and kill himself again, I know it."

"Everything will be fine. It's not such a big deal. Will you just calm down!"

Poor, Poor Esau, you never tell her to calm down.

"Calm down? CALM DOWN!" She hurls the closest thing she can find—which happens to be a copy of *The Stranger*—with a surprising amount of force, aiming directly at his balls.

"Ow!"

"Okay, what can we do? Have they met yet? They haven't met yet, have they? Get dressed. I'll call my mother to watch the kids." She's already getting dressed.

"Eleanor—" He almost said 'calm down' again. "Eleanor, can I just explain please? Can you just give me a second to tell you

what I was thinking?"

"You are not to speak to me now. I married a moron. Did you flush your brain down the toilet again? Should I call a plumber?" She stops dressing so she can look at him and shake her head. He hasn't told her about her hair yet so it creates quite an interesting image: Little Orphan Annie thirty years later, after the money's run out.

Esau is trying not to smile. "Well, we were out of toilet paper and I had nothing else to wipe with."

"Don't try to be funny now. You're not that funny." She returns to her dressing, almost complete except for the flip-flops. It's while she's sitting on the edge of the bed, putting them on that it hits her. She turns around, and the way she's looking at him tells him that something is terribly wrong. "Wasn't that, like, a year ago?"

It's like getting hit by a bat, and he reacts by leaning forward and squinting. "Wasn't *what* like a year ago?"

You know what.

"Daphne."

"Daphne?" He coughs. He is still squinting.

"Yeah, Daphne!" Eleanor turns until her knee is upon the bed. Otherwise her head may have done a full rotation around her body. "Wasn't that like a year ago that she got arrested?"

He is still coughing. Stops squinting. Pretends to think. "Yeah, it's been like a year..."

Say something else. You should definitely, probably, say something else.

Still coughing.

"So..." Eleanor stands, beginning her final summation. "You've been talking to her for a year?" This is a rhetorical question. "You've been talking to her for a year." Not a question at all. "Are you sleeping with her?" Also, rhetorical. "You're fucking her, aren't you?"

This all happens very quickly, and Esau finds himself over the edge without ever being aware of the approach, and now it's too late to know any better. "Honey! My God! No, of course not. Never... Never... Never..."

Keep saying "never." That'll work.

"Never... Never... Ever... Ever..."

"But you've been hiding the fact that you've been talking to her for a year now! A whole year, Esau. Do you *want* to fuck her?"

"What?"

"Well, you say you haven't fucked her, but do you want to?"

"Do I want to fuck her?" It's a half-cough now as if he just

ate something really spicy.

“Yeah! Do you want to fuck her? Not a hard question.”

Esau is well aware that this is a timed response. To be honest and say “yes” would confirm that he’d been honest when he previously stated that he didn’t sleep with her, which he hasn’t. But it also would confirm the fact that he’s been secretly talking to a woman who he wants to sleep with. On the other hand, to lie and say “no” would only confirm her belief that he was lying about sleeping with her in the first place, because he knows that she knows that if he says “no,” he’ll be lying. Think, Esau, Think! You can do it. But say something quick because *Crime and Punishment* is next and it’s a lot heavier than *The Stranger*.

“So do you, Esau?”

A cough, a smirk. “Well, not anymore.”

Oh, Esau. Poor, poor Esau.

“It was supposed to be a joke.”

No, I know, and it was very funny, clever even, but perhaps not the best time for a joke.

“Look, I’m not an idiot.”

You’re not?

“No, I’m not, and what the fuck is that supposed to mean, anyway? There was nothing I could have said in that situation to extricate myself from that situation. So I make a joke. She’ll be mad at me for a couple of weeks, and then it’ll be over.”

Why are you going to the car? Are you leaving?

“There’s a blanket in there that we use for the kids. I’ve been banned from the second floor.”

Esau slams the car door closed, not out of anger, but just a reminder that he is still there. And to plant the thought in Eleanor’s head, if only for a moment, that he might leave. It is childish, yes, confirmed by the way he carries the blanket back to the house. All he would have to do is start sucking his thumb and he’d be Linus. This is also for effect, just in case she’s watching.

He doesn’t slam the house door because that would wake the kids. He drops the blanket on the couch and heads for the kitchen to make some coffee. Not going to sleep tonight, Esau?

Esau shakes his head. “It’s better this way,” he says, waiting

for the coffee to brew. "So when she wakes up in the morning, she'll see me looking like shit and think I've been up the whole night wracked with guilt."

Looks like you've done this before.

"Oh, yeah. I've come up with a system. Every six months, I tend to... um, tend to... not think, is the best way of putting it."

Like the time you left your children at the video store?

Esau laughs as he pours soy milk into his coffee. "Yeah, that was fucked up. But they were fine. They didn't even notice."

Or the time you taped over Ramona's birth to record you and Eleanor role playing sex? Who were you again?

"I was the President and she was the Ukrainian Ambassador to the U.N."

Sounds sexy. And how exactly did you find out about the tape?

Esau coughs again. "Oh, that part. It was at Ramona's first birthday party. Think I literally tackled my mother-in-law to get the remote." Esau squints again. "Do you see what I mean? I've come up with a scale, you know, to make it easier for me."

And this ranks where on your scale of stupidity?

"This is definitely gonzo territory we're in now. We're naked in the Badlands here."

Esau has brought his coffee outside to the back porch so he can sit and have a cigarette; smokes while nodding his head as if someone had just said something terribly profound that can be applied to his current situation. What would that profound thing be, Esau?

"That I'm a schmuck." Esau affirms this by continuing to nod his head. "I don't think he's going to try and kill himself again, though. Well, at least, not over her. I never thought Jacob was long for this world. I can't see him aging for some reason. I just can't picture it."

You love your brother.

"Oh, of course. Very much. I mean, he's my little brother. He's Jacob."

He repeats his name, this time with tears in his eyes.

Why are you crying?

"I'm not crying! It's just the thought of him not being here anymore, of not being able to think about him anymore, well, not in any kind of real sense."

So you've already accepted the fact that he is going to die?

"Pretty much." Tears in his eyes, on his cheeks, and in his mouth. Jacob at the top of the stairs, crying, as Esau leaves the house for his first day of school.

Does it help?

Jacob in the bathtub with the blood on the floor. "Not at all." Esau wipes his face, takes a sip of coffee, a long, hard drag of a cigarette. "I don't blame him though. I really don't. I mean it's not his fault. He never asked for any of this... this nonsense... this bullshit. It's not his fault at all."

Whose fault is it then, Esau?

"Well, we both know the answer to that. Don't we?"

I suppose we do.

"Anyway, I think Daphne will be good for him. I have never met two people more ill-suited for the world, and I think they're perfect for each other. Eleanor doesn't know what she's talking about."

And who was it that found Jacob's body the last time?

"Well, that would be Eleanor..."

Jacob is the way he looks at himself in the bathroom mirror. A collection of thoughts to keep him himself, a collection of expressions of everyday of how he must have felt. In the bathroom of a diner, and on a night like this and a morning after, with only a dull yellow light with which to illuminate the damage, Jacob inspects the damage. And how damaging! How deep a debt we pay. Water will help.

"It always does."

Jacob watches the way it pools in his hands. Watches the way it runs down his wrists. Look up, Jacob. Remember how you look, and then close your eyes and let the water wash everything away. Rub it into the sockets if you have to. It's the only way to know for sure.

"I know."

Jacob knows that any night like this may be his last. You remember, don't you?

"How could I forget? It smelled like lavender."

Jacob remembers the last time it smelled like lavender: he lay in the water with his head back hard upon the ceramic and watched the shadows gather above him. Jacob remembers that, after he closed his eyes, he remembered that he was supposed to keep them open.

The memory brings a smile to Jacob's face, and he smiles to himself in the dirty bathroom mirror. "We are nothing if not ourselves," he says.

That's our Jacob. Now check your fly and get the hell out of the bathroom. Don't look at yourself ever again, though.

"I won't."

The walk back to the table goes slowly, as if it were somebody else walking. Jacob has his head down. He is transcendent now. Nothing is real. No one is who they are. And anywhere is everywhere. Ain't that right, Jacob?

"Yep."

This is how Jacob is when he is not himself, and he seats himself in a booth in the back of the diner. Slumps down as low as he can go and stares out the window. What are you looking for, Jacob?

Jacob doesn't answer, but there are tears in his eyes. His mouth opens and closes. Not yet, Jacob.

"I know."

Jacob is here to meet Daphne for the first time. He came to this diner the last time he came to San Francisco, which was the last time he tried to kill himself. He would be the only one to know that, though. There was no Daphne to meet that time. There was only time that time, licking granules of sugar from the palm of his hand and counting each granule with his tongue.

"Can I get you some coffee, Dear?"

Pam was with him the last time, too. She even let him order breakfast even though he didn't have enough money. Must have been obvious. You should ask her if she is surprised to see you, Jacob.

"Yes, I would very much like some coffee. Thank you, Pam. And thank you for the breakfast you gave me that day. I don't remember if I ever thanked you for that, but it is something I will remember forever." Jacob smiles at the word "forever." "It was a long time ago and you've probably already forgotten, but it was very kind of you." You never wiped the tears from your eyes, did you, Jacob?

Pam smiles like only a grandmother could. "I remember," she says. "You were crying then, too, and not many people cry in diners. Are you okay, Dear?"

"I don't know the answer to that, Pam. But I guess if I don't know then the answer would be 'no.'" Tell her about the smell of lavender, Jacob. "But thank you for asking. Nobody asks me that anymore." Smile at the significance of that, Jacob. "But I'll be fine." Sure you will, Jacob.

"Sure you will, Dear. You should get yourself a nice girl. A handsome boy like you shouldn't be all alone."

"Well, that's the plan, Pam." Tell her about your disintegrating notions of your connection to your self and how it affects your relationship with others. Tell her about the end of the world, Jacob. Tell her how the first kiss feels like a prick.

"Well, I'll keep my fingers crossed for you." She rubs his shoulder and then the back of his head. "Let me know if you need anything else."

Like a tourniquet?

"Thanks, Pam."

A lingering look and then she's gone. Look around, Jacob. There's more to the body than the space it inhabits, the words and the thought of words and thinking of something to say and faint eyes in the dark and fingers in the dark and fingertips and something fragile enough to be broken by your touch. There's more to these people than just their bodies, Jacob. Stop crying, Jacob. Eleanor's here.

"Eleanor?"

"Yeah. Hello," she says while waving her hand in front of his face. "I've been here for, like, five minutes." She is taking her glasses out of her purse, then her lip gloss, then her Visine, and finally, her keys. Eleanor has a habit of taking random things out of her purse and setting them on the table when she sits down somewhere. It comforts her, for some reason, as well as increases the odds that she will forget something when she leaves. The glasses, however, she does need, and she takes them out of the case while asking Jacob if he's been taking his medication.

"Yes, Eleanor, I have been! But what the hell are you doing here?" Jacob is trying to keep his voice down, made all the more difficult by the menu which she has opened between them.

"God, I'm starving," she says from behind it.

"Eleanor!" And then he remembers why he's here. "No, it couldn't be," he says, looking into what would have been her eyes were there not a menu between them. "Could it?"

Eleanor lowers the menu with a snarl. "No, Jacob. I am not here to fuck you. Believe me, sleeping with one lunatic is enough." In mid eye-rolling, Eleanor notices the young woman now standing next to their table, not bothering to also notice the young woman's black leather jacket or the shock of pale skin between her short black skirt and her long black boots or the smile on her face or her

face. Eleanor says, "Oh, good! The waitress," and then buries her head back into the menu. "I'll have the meatloaf with the—"

"Um, I'm not the waitress." She sounds like lavender smells, if lavender smoked too much. "Are you Jacob?"

Jacob is still stuck on the implications of having sex with his sister-in-law. He moves his eyes around the words and says "Am I Jacob?" and then looks up and is soon stuck on something else. Her name is Daphne, Jacob.

"Hi, I'm Daphne." Daphne says her name with a little bounce and holds out her hand. Her smile. The way her eyes look when she smiles. The way her hand feels in yours. These are the things you will remember, Jacob.

But it's Eleanor who beats him to the punch. "Hi, Daphne. Would you be a dear and get the waitress for me. I am just ravenous."

"Eleanor!"

"What, Jacob? I'm hungry. The schmuck has camped himself out in the kitchen." She shakes her head at the thought of him. "His stupid fucking system isn't going to work this time."

"Wait... You know about that? Does he know that you know that? Oh, that's rich! I can't wait to tell him."

Poor Daphne. She is still standing beside the table, clutching her purse in front of her with both hands. "Um, am I interrupting? I... um... thought we were supposed to meet? Maybe I should go."

"Yes, that might be a good idea, but can you just call over the waitress as you do?"

"Eleanor! What the fuck is wrong with you! No, of course not, don't go. Eleanor is the one who is leaving. Right, Eleanor?" Jacob is standing now, having given in to the desperation of not wanting to be alone on a night like this, and is holding out his hand to Daphne. It is the first time he looks into her eyes without looking away; a moment Jacob will later remember as the first time he looked into the eyes of someone he would later love. Remembering that moment, Jacob will close his eyes and feel like falling backward, and will forget how much it felt like dying on the inside.

But not now. Now Daphne is like a daffodil, all black and white like a promise of the morning after, all shivering in the wind of the loneliness of a dark night, all simple and soluble when bared and bathed in nothing but the full moon's light. Little Daphne, like an angel, betrayed only by the look on her face. "No, I think I should go," she says, while at the same time Eleanor says, "I'm not going anywhere."

"Wait, Daphne, let me just explain." Jacob is losing his calm, so he tries to regain it by pretending he is calm. He begins by pointing at Eleanor. "This is Eleanor. Say 'Hi,' Eleanor."

Eleanor smirks at Daphne and says, "Hi, Eleanor."

Jacob returns the smirk. "Very funny. Eleanor is my psychotic sister-in-law. Absolutely no relation to me otherwise. She grew up in the Ukraine on rotten potato soup, and it is clearly affecting her judgment now. Right, Eleanor?"

"Soup? I didn't even think of that," she says, her head down, peering at the selection of soups on the menu. With a high-pitched squeak, she says, "Look! They have matzah ball!"

"See what I mean? She's crazy. Total nut-job." Jacob leans in to Daphne and whispers, "She is a lawyer after all," and then leans back so he can shrug his shoulders.

Daphne says, "Oh," and nods her head in all seriousness, as if that explains everything. Then she looks back at Jacob and hides a laugh with a cough.

Jacob is trying to hide something else. "So please, Daphne, just sit down. We'll survive the craziness. We'll feed her, gag her, whatever. But just don't leave."

Daphne pretends to be convinced. "Why not?" she says, and puts her hand in his as she sits down next to Eleanor.

Jacob sits across from them. Jacob has forgotten to let go of her hand. He apologizes and they both laugh.

"That's okay," she says. She is smiling, the one that comes while lifting up her eyes, the one that is only meant for him. She nods her head at Eleanor. "What is she doing here anyway? That's Esau's wife, right?"

The mention of his name results in the smack of the menu hitting the table. "Speaking of him," Eleanor says to Daphne. "Are you fucking him? Are you fucking my husband?"

Daphne holds back her laugh with her hand. "Oh, my God, no! Esau? Are you kidding?" Now her hand can't hold it back anymore, and she looks up and revels at the thought of it. "Sex with Esau," she says.

Eleanor is confused by this reaction and looks at Jacob.

Jacob is laughing, too.

"What's so fucking funny about that?"

"Eleanor..." Jacob tries to think of the best way of putting it. "Eleanor, it's like you have a remote control to his cock, Eleanor."

Pam arrives at this point, and upon hearing the word “cock,” decides it’s not the best time to ask what they want to eat. Jacob continues. “Do you remember *The Manchurian Candidate*?” Eleanor snarls again. “Well, it’s like that but you’ve brainwashed his balls.”

Eleanor’s mouth hangs open, and she shakes her head. “Yeah, it’s called love, you asshole!”

“Is that what it’s called?”

“Yeah, and you know what? I’m leaving. I’m so furious, I’m not even hungry anymore.” At which point, Pam re-emerges. “Oh, perfect—can I get the meatloaf with mashed potatoes, but the gravy on the side?” Eleanor says this with her hands out and then repeats herself, slowly: “On... the... side. Also a side order of pancakes... um... an order of French fries. Oh, and just a big plate of bacon. Can I get that first? I am starving. Do you have any wine?”

This is Pam’s first exposure to Eleanor, and she blinks uncontrollably. She looks imploringly at Jacob and says, “Did she ask if we have any wine?”

“Yes, she did.” Jacob feels like he should stand up and give Pam a hug. “A beer will be fine.”

“Fine. Just a *beer*, I guess. Do you two want anything? It’s Esau’s credit card.”

“I’ll just have some coffee,” Daphne says.

“I’ll take a fill-up too, Pam. Thank you.”

“Of course, Dear. And I’ll be right back with your plate of bacon.” A lingering look at Eleanor and then Pam covers away.

“A whole plate? Really, Eleanor?” Jacob rubs his eyes and then removes the flask from his jacket pocket. He motions at Daphne, who happily nods her head, and he pours bourbon in both their coffees.

Eleanor takes off her glasses and rubs her own eyes. “What? I’m hungry.” Eleanor has always appreciated her appetite, and anyone lucky enough to witness the act of consumption is left wondering how she stays so thin. They would ask, of course, if they weren’t rendered speechless.

The first wave rolls back, and the strange circumstance that finds these three sitting together in a booth in the back of an all-night diner dulls the senses until there is silence, a quiet affirmation of their time together. Jacob and Daphne sit with their shoulders back and their feet touching. Eleanor has her elbow on the table and is resting her chin in her hand. When she looks out the window, Jacob sneaks a swig of bourbon and then sticks his tongue out at Daphne.

Daphne slumps lower as her foot climbs higher up Jacob's legs. They have yet to say more than "hello" to each other, and yet they already seem to know when not to say a thing. It's only inevitable once it's over, Jacob.

Jacob sneaks another swig and then clears his throat. "On my way over here," he begins quietly, "at the farmer's market, I saw a picture of Jesus that winks as you walk by it. Crown of thorns and all." Jacob demonstrates the winking and Daphne laughs. "You should have bought it," she says. "You could have given it to me as a present." She bites her lip and then winks back.

"Well, I thought of that but I didn't want to give you the wrong impression."

Slumping, smiling, her foot, among other things, rising, "What? That you're religious?"

"No, that I have good taste."

Daphne isn't laughing, but the look on her face makes her look like she could. "I think I like you," she says.

Before Jacob can say the same, and just as the plate of bacon arrives, Eleanor awakens from her slumber. "Holy Motherfucking Shit!" she says, then "Thank you, Pam" as she takes the plate from her. "Are you both fucking crazy? Am I the only sane one here?" She's stuffing pieces of bacon in her mouth two at a time with both hands. "I mean, honestly," she says, spitting out bits of bacon fat. "Have either of you thought about this at all? I mean, just think about how ridiculous this whole thing is. Really! Do it now while I finish my bacon. I'll be quiet. I mean it." No she doesn't. "And don't think I don't know about you, honey."

"Oh, yeah?" Daphne says without looking at her, concentrating on her foot, which has by now made it to the other side. "What do you know about me?" She laughs as she says it.

"Oh! Don't think I don't know that you're a *hooker*, my dear."

Pam arrives mid hooker debate with a plate of pancakes, which she presents to Eleanor with a lowered head and a measured smile, an offering in deference to the solemnity of the feeding, as if a plate of pancakes can satiate an appetite such as Eleanor's.

"Oh, yeah! We'll, I'm not a hooker," Daphne says shaking her head and pretending to care.

"You're not!"

"No, I'm not," and just like an innocent little angel, "I'm a call girl."

"Call girl, pfft! Can you pass the syrup, honey?"

"Sure."

"Call girl!" With wads of maple-syrup-laden pancakes in her mouth, she says, "And you, Jacob. Does she know about you, Jacob? Jacob! Does she?"

Jacob has been pulling on Daphne's toes as if he were playing "This Little Piggy." Jacob is not smiling, but the look on his face makes it seem like he could. He looks up at Eleanor. He smiles. "I'm sorry, Eleanor," he says.

Eleanor is not Eleanor. She shakes her head. She was not expecting an apology, and her tone changes from one of self-righteous vehemence to curiosity. "For what, Jacob?"

Jacob has a hold of Daphne's big toe. Daphne likes to call her feet her "little monsters." Her toes are short and stubby and resemble the heads of Pez dispensers. Jacob is appreciating this instead of answering Eleanor.

Eleanor throws a piece of bacon at him. She hits him in the cheek, and he turns to her, this time with tears in his eyes. Come towards the body, Jacob. "I forgot that you were coming over that day. I really did."

It is a strange mix of emotions for Eleanor. It is a strange mixture of things to remember. His blue lips, for example. Holding up his head with both hands and kissing his blue lips, for example. Dropping her phone in the water while frantically trying to call 9-1-1. Eleanor has nothing to say, and she turns to Daphne. Daphne already knows, and the tears in her eyes wet her mascara, and when she blinks, form black watercolor lines down her cheeks.

Eleanor uses a napkin to dry her eyes. Then she blows her nose. "Jacob," while still working on the snot, "I'm worried about you. Do you hear me, Jacob?"

"I hear you." Jacob is looking at Daphne, and he feels bad for making her cry.

"I think you should come home, Jacob."

Jacob takes a deep, cleansing breath. Then he looks down at Daphne's foot, which is now resting on his thigh. Little monsters lying to their prey. "I'm gonna go have a cigarette," he says. Jacob is standing before he realizes he is leaving, and is already leaving before he realizes that he should have turned around before the door was open, but since the door is already open, Jacob is walking out the door and he does not see Daphne turn to watch him leave, nor

does he hear Eleanor say, "I said *on the side*, not slopped over the whole fucking plate." As if either thing mattered on a night like this.

Jacob makes more sense when he is outside smoking, slow-strewn puffs of smoke to lighten the night sky, turn it blue if he has to. Jacob leans against the wall and crosses his arms and holds them tight to his chest. He considers leaving. He considers never coming back. He considers being someone famous enough to be assassinated by a lunatic while smoking outside a diner one night.

Where are we, Jacob?

There are tears in his eyes again, small inconsequential tears that make his eyes look like the surface of a sea of dying light. He is staring down the length of the street. He sees streetlights and storefronts and fire escapes. He sees the souls of those who have come before alight the darkness with something sinister, something unseen beneath the streetlights, the doorways, the bundles of bodies in overcoats. They are the spirits of our saviors, Jacob. They are shadows, Jacob. Where are we, Jacob?

Jacob swallows hard and clenches his jaw. Muscles twitch beneath the flesh of his cheeks. His eyes. Jacob can't help himself when he's angry. Isn't that right, Jacob?

"I'm not angry."

You're not? Come closer, Jacob. This is what it feels like to be everywhere at once.

"Well, I don't like it."

You're not supposed to like it, Jacob.

Jacob is looking down. Tears speck the sidewalk and splatter, seeping saltwater into the cement. There is no going back now. Lived and loved like rose petals pressed between the pages of a book of blank paper. Look up, Jacob. Be loved, Jacob.

When Jacob looks up, it is Daphne he sees. She is standing in front of him. She is looking at him from beneath him, but somehow Jacob is still looking up.

Daphne does not say his name, but it seems like she did. It seems as if something whispered is the only thing between them now. She is looking at her hands as he looks at her hands, and as they open and reach forward, as she takes a step towards him, he has only to look into her eyes to know that he's alive. And when his hand is in hers, and he can feel all of her fingers in his and all of

his hand in hers, he feels like dying, and all he can do is say "I'm sorry." Unlived and unloved, an impression of the rose petals lifted from the pale and turning red and itching like a rash. Daphne says, "I know." Daphne says, "Let's go home."

This is not what would have happened. The mechanics of the moment, remembered after, echo promise and retribution, indicate living and dying, qualify love and pain. And how Jacob remembers these things, how these things manifest themselves once they get under the skin, is how Jacob remembers that night not so long ago when he was slumped against his apartment door. The door was closed, and Jacob did not know when he was supposed to open it, and if he opened it, when he was supposed to close it, and if, after he closed it, what he would do if the bathroom door were closed too, and, what's worse, what he would do if it were open.

Jacob can only think of a night like that on a night like this, even as he watches Daphne open her apartment door, even after she looks into his eyes from the doorway and smiles, even after he's followed her inside. Jacob is the way he looks at things, after all, and he is looking around like he is somewhere else. What was the last thing you said that night, Jacob?

Jacob falls into an armchair in the living room as Daphne heads for the bathroom. The lights are off but the walls are blue. There is an aquarium, and the tiny light above it reflects off its sides and its surface until the whole room seems to float, and those within it, submerged. What does it remind you of, Jacob?

Jacob has tears in his eyes again; pure, unstoppable tears. Jacob tries to smile but can only open and close his mouth. Say it again, Jacob. You remember, don't you?

"How could I forget?"

You asked a question.

"I asked if you loved me."

It's important to be loved. Isn't it, Jacob?

"It is."

And did I answer you? Do I love you, Jacob?

Jacob is not listening. Water drips and toilets flush, and when Jacob looks up, Daphne is standing in the doorway of the hallway in front of him. She has changed into a large gray t-shirt and white cotton socks. Her legs are small and bruised, her arms thin from the

oversized sleeves, ending in slender, harmless fingers, and she smiles the way that she smiles in blue when she is trying not to smile.

Jacob would know these things, and how he looks at these things, after he has wiped the tears from his eyes, is how he would know. And whatever words he would have said are swallowed, like how the dry mechanics of sound reverberate and produce a hole, and at the same time, a finger to fill it. Jacob feels indebted to these things, and when he looks up at Daphne, he has enough time to look into her eyes as she makes her way into the kitchen, and then nothing is the same ever again.

Milk is poured into a bowl for the cat, and the cat jumps into Jacob's lap. Daphne apologizes, but Jacob does not hear her. His hand is on its head, and when he pets the soft silk-thread hair between its ears and down its back, the cat closes its eyes and purrs and curls up beneath his touch. Daphne is standing in front of them and smiling and saying something about how love is like a purring cat and how instead of saying "I love you," people should just purr into each other's ears. Daphne is smiling while she says this, and when Jacob finally looks up at her, Daphne stops smiling. And when he stands up, the cat lands between them, looks up, and then lingers into the kitchen to lap milk from a bowl.

It is not the way they first kiss, or how the lips first touch, or how tongues move, or hands. It is not the way they feel inside each other as they make their way to the bedroom. And when they unfold their bodies upon the bed, it is not the way their bodies are unfolding, or how hard they are holding onto each other, or how they look at each other, or how they look. It is not how it happens when nothing happens or everything, or why it happens that everything happens or nothing. It is not simple. It is not better. It is not real. It is not any of this.

It's how they look when it's over.

Jacob lies on his back and looks up, not blinking. Daphne looks up, too, from the comfort of the crook of his arm. Sometimes she looks at him. Sometimes she closes her eyes. Sometimes she loves him.

Jacob is a boy again. "When I was a kid, I liked to let balloons go and watch them until I couldn't see them anymore."

Daphne is a girl again. "I liked to tease my cat."

And that is Jacob and Daphne.

By now, everything has happened. The fire trucks have come and gone. The smoke turned black, turned white, and then was gone. The indebted, the unintended, and the unintentional have made their way back to their holes to hide their heads beneath their unconcern. Like this it happens. Like this Jacob says "goodnight" to those who have come before and slowly makes his way back to his apartment. Jacob walks up the stairs while watching each step.

Jacob makes it back to his bed and leans back against the wall. The window, the tremor of light between the blinds, the promise and the lie of the words "once upon a time." Jacob is unresponsive. These things, they do abide. Don't they, Jacob?

"They certainly seem to."

So what was the last thing she said to you, Jacob?

"The last thing she said?" The sound of the water dripping in the bathroom could be heard from the bed. Imagining the shape of things to come as a reflection on the surface of water, perfected by a drop of water and the sound of rippling. "The last thing she said..."

Daphne is standing beside the bed. Jacob is sitting with his back against the wall. Daphne has tears in her eyes. Jacob is smoking a cigarette. And then what did she say, Jacob?

"She said I was already dead." Jacob laughs at the significance of that. "But I'm not, though."

Of course you're not.

"I'm not, though."

Jacob smiles. Jacob lights a cigarette, proving the fact that he is not already dead by smoking while not blinking. Jacob is thinking of the morning after, proving the fact that he was not already dead by dying. And what now, Jacob?

"Well, I wonder what I look like in a bathroom mirror."

Contributors

Sheila Ashdown has an MFA in creative writing and, in related news, has shitloads of student loan debt. She's been published in *Monkeybicycle* magazine and works for Powell's Books in Portland, Oregon.

Laura Bogart is a recently minted MFA (MothaFucking Artist, that is) who is now professing college-level English, which involves minimizing her penchant for peppering her conversation with Italian curse words (*affanculo! testa di merde! fotterme dodolando!*). When she is not teaching, writing, or creating new stations on Pandora, she is usually at the park with her trusty sidekick, Tova the Wonder Dog. All kidding aside, she would like to dedicate this, her first publication, to her belated, beloved aunt Angela.

90 **Ryan Davidson** believes that people who write overly clever bios are probably compensating. He is currently a PhD candidate at Stony Brook University, and he asks that you don't judge him too harshly for his attempt to be clever in the previous sentence.

Jon Lasser reigns from his golden throne in Seattle, Washington, from which he blogs, launches thundering critiques of popular culture, and sometimes just makes stuff up. In his copious free time, Jon and his wife Laura cook local food, throw spectacular if infrequent parties, and survey the bottom of the Puget Sound, preparing to build a massive underwater fortress.

Dan Miller exceeds in awesome and attempts wholeheartedly to be the best mammal he can be. He attends art school, which should get no credit whatsoever for developing his talent. He's also a ruthless marketing whore and sells everything he's ever created, because sentimentality is for jerks. He could easily prattle on about his art using large, multisyllabic words, but he feels he will come off as a pretentious crap-neck, and therefore chooses to let his art speak for itself. He currently resides in the burnt-out carcass that was once Cleveland, Ohio, which he soon hopes to depart for any kind of pasture that's not currently burning.

Contributors

Ricardo Perin, a relic from the 1960s San Francisco scene who has been living in a New Mexico commune for the last three decades, recently washed ashore in Portland and decided to plant some roots, hopefully not to become a weed but what Allen Ginsberg referred to as a sunflower. Although now well into his 60s, commune living has treated Ricardo well, and he says he's fighting fit but amazed how fast time flies. Ricardo likes to play bocce and enjoys burning his face off with wasabi. Visit him at damnintellectuals.com

Keith Rosson has published the literary/memoir zine *Avow* since 1995. He is a freelance designer and illustrator, having created posters, shirts, and album covers for bands such as Against Me!, Interpol, Amanda Woodward, Glass and Ashes, Submission, and even Velvet Revolver, for which he is surely going to hell. He also writes for *Razorcake* and *Give Me Back* and generally checks out about ten books at a time from the library. Visit him at keithrosson.com or email keithrosson@gmail.com

Allan Shapiro would have much rather been an astronaut, as there is no truer form of nothing than nothingness. But since Allan Shapiro does not fly well, he chose to become a writer and has discovered a better sense of nothing within his own soul. And now, he would much rather be an architect. Further reverberations by Allan Shapiro can be found in the next issue of the *Greatest Uncommon Denominator*, except Allan Shapiro will be referred to as Allan Richard Shapiro and he'll be wearing a different pair of pants, even though they'll look exactly like the ones he's wearing now.