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¶ The odds are against it. And yet here we are.

Cover, *Poetic Language*, by Leonard Kogan.

THE STORY OF THE SECOND HUSBAND

J o h n C o l b u r n

P A R T O N E

Suddenly there are two husbands. A situation arises.

The Second Husband lives in a tiny house. It has one room, devoted completely to Our Wife. It contains their hands, their voices, their flowers, their pen and paper, ready to go. The room is lit by light from beating wings. Once it was lit by electricity but that was before they began saying magic words.

In the Other House, the Second Couple stares longingly at each other. Or they say magic words. What is their pleasure made of? Apples? Each pleasure becomes a new wing, and there is more light but never too bright. Our Wife brings the

Second Husband a basket filled with gold. Sometimes they watch a movie, projected onto the wall. It is a movie of them kissing. It gets rave reviews.

The Other House has a couch. The woods fill with shadows.

Our Wife writes long letters to the Second Husband and at these times I am also called the Second Husband. It is confusing for everyone involved. Our house is filled with eyes and bombs and cat vomit, steamed up mirrors and treetops and hairpins, which we sweep away and it all reappears.

One reason the other house is perfect is that Our Wife never has to clean it. Also, she is four or five years younger in the other house, due to blind forces. Years pass only an hour at a time there. The Other House grows inside their bodies, too, and after they eat the apples they don't have to wear leaves.

For the trip back through the woods, Our Wife covers herself. Her path is slow; she drags her feet. I am happy she returns. In the dark winter night, in our cold rooms, our breathing slows and slows until we are almost dead.

P A R T T W O

When Our Wife goes on a long trip she writes home to Second Husband, who is not home. But he is faithful in his way. He replies. Our wife doesn't write to me because we don't have magic words. I am afraid of the Second Husband, who does everything right to win Our Wife's heart. He talks like a husband, but doesn't have to do the dishes. Also Our Wife and I were not able to make a baby, and the

Second Husband has one already made. It is pink. She would like to walk the baby through the dangerous woods. She is trying to find out if all husbands are wolves.

P A R T T H R E E

Our Wife sparkles in the deep of her deep green body. She follows a path through The Woods and arrives at his door. I am not allowed in the other house. For a time I am not even allowed to see the face of Our Wife. It is covered by a shadow, and we have no wings to make light.

One day I decide to follow her through the woods. I stumble through the sudden frequency of this prehistoric dark. She has gone far ahead. I choose the wrong path, away from her. It is a mistake or a trick or it is part of a larger plan.

When I lose sight of her, I think it may be forever. I am lost in the woods. I keep coming across small piles of ashes and they may be other second husbands.

In the woods shadows are important. I follow the shadows I think are Our Wife, but they always turn out to be a trick of light. I stumble forward like this for hours until I see a clearing. Finally I will catch up to her and see the Second Husband and I will see her face.

It's strange how much his house looks like my house, from the outside. I creep forward as quietly as I can. The door creaks so I move slowly through. I walk into the house and there is my teacup on the table. There is no one else in the house. It is my own house and I am alone.

P A R T F O U R

The Second Husband drives a car exactly like my car, but without the bumper sticker. He has another wife—so at least two wives, maybe more. We all wear rings. I wonder about the Other Bathroom.

Of course the Second Husband is younger. Of course.

On many afternoons I wander in the shadows of the woods but no path appears to me.

Someday I will slit the belly of the Second Husband, and My Wife will come walking out. Or will my wife slit me open in sleep and pour the Second Husband into me? Someday I will be left to wander in the woods. There will be no mushrooms left. The Second Husband will have picked them all.

P A R T F I V E

In Our House the rooms are lit by plain money. Years pass every year here. We have a snake garden and a rock garden and a garden for asphalt shingles. We have our own forest of eight trees only.

I am learning how to be married to a married woman. Twice a week I walk through a doorway and become ashes. Am I for scattering? I go out to find my wife with the Second Husband and always I find myself, alone.

Once I also find a trail of pebbles that leads in a circle. Once I find a forest but no flowers. Once I find a creek but no duck.

Our wife labors in need, traipses in the joy and gloom of the woods. Her work calls to her from the other house, but her work is also an echo.

Am I the First Husband or the Second Husband? I sleep in my shadow. The Second Husband waxes and wanes.

There is only one room.

Suddenly, a situation arises.

THE MOODY PENCIL

R a c h e l B . G l a s e r

Denise's mood pencil turned dark blue and black. It had a soft, working eraser. Sometimes it was brown or yellow. Her father got it at a science museum gift shop. She had seen it and needed it. When it was green, she knew it was happy. All her other pencils were boring. They were the yellow ones mostly, or pencils from local businesses. Tiny, mini golf pencils. Boring, hard-to-write-with golf pencils. Her hand hurt from golf pencils.

Denise had some pens actually, secretly. Third graders weren't allowed. Like they might swallow the ink. Like the pens would definitely explode. Denise had erasers shaped like clowns that smelled a little like muffins but erased pencil poorly. She had a mechanical pencil—one of her only machines. When her mood pencil was stolen, the mechanical pencil was only a small comfort.

Millie sat on her bed, keeping the pencil warm and black. She let the pencil turn *rust orange*, which took a very long time, it took seven minutes, then softly

ran her finger over to turn it blue. The mood pencil was slightly alive. Millie wondered how many other mood pencils existed. How many people were warming their mood pencils different colors. How many mood pencils were cold and yellow in a drawer. Millie was alone in her bedroom with her rabbit Benjamin. It was after dinner. The students in Ms. Monica's third grade class were with their families.

Steven watched his brother.

Adam played with his plant.

Susan swallowed an ice cube and panicked.

The next day, Ms. Monica's class did current events, then gym, then fashion show. Fashion show was Ms. Monica's invention. They put their heads on their cool desks and did a blind vote for best outfit. Their classroom was covered in gaudy autumn decorations. There were nineteen leaves poorly cut from construction paper, with painfully straight adult handwriting spelling out the students' names.

Ms. Monica was dreaming of her future engagement to her boyfriend Benjamin. She wanted to linger on his question before she accepted. She craved this dramatic limbo. Should she cry when she accepted?

"Has he asked yet?" Julie asked from her desk.

"When he asks, I will display my hand like this, so everyone notices."

"Can we try on the ring when you get it? Can we pass it around?"

Ms. Monica slowly swayed at the front of the class. She had forgotten what she had been teaching, but it didn't matter. She could see Julie and Millie were absorbed in her favorite subject.

“Tell us again,” Dirk said. Ms. Monica paused carefully. She sat in her teacher’s chair, which had wheels on the bottom and a scratchy upholstery. She told again of meeting Benjamin, and this time gave the story a historic feel, telling the history of his family and hers, and the history of the big state school where they met. It calmed her to retell this. After, she had them each write one paragraph in summary. She collected these and read them, laughing at a Panera Bread during her lunch break, far from the wretched teachers of the school that made teaching look so unglamorous.

During recess, the girls in Ms. Monica’s class mingled in the field.

“We are at a bar!” They danced.

“Julie, you are bartender!” Julie stopped dancing. She put her hair behind her ears, being older.

“What will it be?” Julie asked.

Millie collapsed laughing.

Dirk wandered over.

“Dirt! You are in a bar! You are already drunk!”

Dirk swayed in place.

“I am?”

“Yes!! You are sooo drunk you are arrested!”

“You are so drunk!”

“You are so drunk you might die.”

“I’d like to order please,” said Millie.

“What type?”

“Tons of ice please.”

Julie ripped out a handful of grass and handed it to Millie.

Everyone got a drink. They threw the grass at their faces.

Cheers from kids playing dodgeball distracted the girls. The girls wondered briefly if they should be playing dodgeball. Denise watched them from the swings, where she sat very still, not swinging.

“I am so drunk,” said Millie.

“I am so drunk too,” said Ariel, “which is bad because I’m pregnant.”

Ariel stuck out her stomach and Millie burst out laughing.

“I’m pregnant too!” Millie screamed.

Everybody was pregnant.

They puffed out their stomachs and rubbed them and patted them.

“Let’s have our babies in the field!” Millie cried.

Katie and Anjali crouched down.

“I’m giving my baby up for adoption,” Ariel said slowly.

“Why?”

The girls all looked at Ariel with their stomachs out. Dirk stood, still holding his grass.

“Because the baby is going to be ugly, and I don’t want it.”

The sky made the plane sound. The girls looked at Millie.

“Okay. I will give mine up too!”

“Me too!” screamed Anjali.

They ripped up grass until they had huge handfuls.

“Don’t watch me have a baby, Dirt!”

Dirk didn’t budge.

“I’m drunk still!” yelled Ariel.

“Me too!”

“Me too!”

“Where am I?” Ariel asked, looking confused.

“In the hospital,” said Millie, “remember?”

All at once they had their babies. They threw the grass in the air.

“Dirt! Adopt our babies!”

Dirk slowly collected the grass.

Millie kept the pencil concealed in her sweatshirt pocket. Maybe she would return it. Maybe she was *renting* it, she thought. When they left, she got on bus 4. The number 4 reminded Millie of a kite, sort of. The number 2 was a boat or a bird. The number 1 was like a part of a fence.

On the bus, Millie looked dreamily to Susan and said, “I am in love with Adam.” Susan laughed. *Millie is sooo crazy!* Susan thought. Adam was blond and hyperactive. Susan had dark, thick, wavy hair that she kept in a perpetual ponytail. She had full bangs that covered her eyebrows. She was the only intellectual in her family. Millie said it again. She would marry Adam and love him forever. Susan pulled the silver sticky tape that covered the rips in the bus seats. It was terrible under the tape.

“What if he moves away?”

“I will move with him.”

“What if he gets sick and dies?”

“I will die too.”

Millie imagined dying and it seemed fun, like being asleep in a car.

At Susan’s house, they put the pencil in the microwave. When it was finished, the pencil was black. They recorded a radio show on Susan’s tape deck, but Susan wasn’t all the way into it. She didn’t use accents. She just talked like her. Bored, Millie brought up Adam. The pencil was still black and Millie repeatedly hit herself in the head with it. Susan asked Millie, “What if he is already married?”

“Then I will convince him to get divorced.”

“What if he is gay?”

“Then I will wait.”

Cross-legged on the carpet, they gripped Barbie dolls by their rubbery legs. The Barbies made out for hours. They changed outfits. One Barbie was Millie, another Susan controlled. The third Barbie they'd given a bad haircut, and lay in the ocean of carpet, never getting to kiss. Millie's Barbie was placed naked next to a naked Ken and Susan put a clean tissue over them. “Next he can date your Barbie,” Millie said. Each mindless Barbie had a head that rotated inquisitively on a ball joint.

Tucked in her bed, Millie imagined marrying Adam. If he was in the army would he get mean? Every day they'd have to kiss. Some days the kisses would last five minutes. She would wear her bathing suit.

Since Millie was in love, she reminded herself to do the signs. In the shower, she reminded herself to sing. If she ever wore a skirt, she twirled! twirled! Sometimes she forgot she was in love. She dragged her feet over to the pencil sharpener. She saw Susan and Susan smiled and Millie remembered: she, Millie, was the only girl in the grade to be in love. She was early! Not even Adam was in love. Just her and her teacher. And her teacher's boyfriend, Benjamin, who Millie renamed her rabbit after. Love! Love made her continually forget to feed Benjamin or clean his cage.

On the weekend, Millie tried to unstick a sticker (a shiny) from her mirror. Her French manicure suffered. She tried to remember which of her friends' refrigerators had built-in ice-making machines. Then, a dark mistake. She allowed a Barbie doll to date a Lego man. The tiny Lego man had just a yellow face, no hair or hat. Millie didn't know what she was doing. The Lego man hopped all over the big Barbie body. The Lego was grotesquely small and the Barbie wrongly big. The situation embarrassed and disgusted

her. She canceled her play date with Susan. The moody pencil was still black, and of little consolation.

During the softball game, Denise was a Center Outfielder thinking about her mood pencil. No balls flew near her. Then they switched and she sat on the cold silver bench. Her teammates sang their cheer. Up at bat, some girls froze, didn't swing, and got a walk. They stood surprised on first base, staring at the first basewoman's bad hair. Denise watched her parents sit motionless in the stands. She played the game with Anjali and the other outfielders, the game of who could stand longest like a flamingo. Denise won as a flamingo and didn't notice. She was remembering her pencil. How her handwriting was best with that pencil, her only special pencil.

Millie called Susan to play, but Susan was out dating the Russian.

Ms. Monica's class was creating a temporary restaurant for their parents. A fundraiser. They brainstormed and drew idea webs for their ideas. Some ideas were disqualified. Then, they spent a very long time voting, their favorite class activity. How cool the desk felt on their faces while they closed their eyes and like one brain, voted. "Here are our choices for the name of our restaurant—'Adam's,' 'The School Diner,' 'Have a Rest At Our Restaurant' or 'Plates' with an exclamation point."

Their votes determined that the restaurant would be called "Plates!" The class imagined themselves as waiters and waitresses, having just showered, feeling proud. Millie imagined eating at "Plates!" with Ms. Monica, Benjamin, and rabbit

Benjamin. The menu would be pasta with meatballs, pasta without. Who will make the food? everyone wondered. Can we serve wine? Ms. Monica wondered. “Plates!” would be a Thursday. It would be the gym. It would be overpriced. There was a sheet for parents about “Plates!” and everyone showed their parents and made them say yes. Millie’s mom said no, and Millie stormed into her room, insulted.

She carefully cleaned her carpet then dramatically threw herself on the carpet. Benjamin had grown skinny in his cage. Sexy, Millie thought. She wished her carpet were *forest green*, not *olive green*. The fake leather of the bus seats was *forest green*. *Forest green* meant more than just green. *Forest green* was when a forest was magical. It was very bluish and bright and seldom occurred in nature. *Forest green* was when a dress was unbearably fancy. It was for a queen’s living room wallpaper. It was a romance of its own. Millie’s *forest green* was just a stub. Most girls she knew had stubs of *forest green*.

What else is good like this, like *forest green*? Millie thought. Fancy bird names like *toucan*, *pelican*, *parakeet*, *cockatoo*. Field trips, teenagers, trophies, sundaes, marrying, gardens in books, sticker collections, best friends, new dogs. Millie imagined herself an orphan at the opening of “Plates!” Orphans were cool and wore dirt as make-up. At the opening of “Plates!” Benjamin would stroke rabbit Benjamin.

Millie had a boring birthday party at the arcade and Susan didn’t show up. Inexplicably, Susan was dating the Russian. Everyone had noticed him, coughing smoke clouds, walking an obese dog, loitering in the town library to use the Internet.

On the bus to school, Millie thought of a million more restaurant names, though “Plates!” had been her suggestion. What about a restaurant called “Bad” or one called “No Way, José!” or “The Oldest Restaurant in the World,” or “One Night Restaurant,” or “Restaurant on Fire” or “Pretty girls and Handsome boys” or “Puppy Central,” or “Outerspace Café,” or “Food From Other Countries”?

Denise got on the bus.

“Hi Denise,” Millie said brightly like a cartoon sun.

In Ms. Monica’s class there was extra time after Math. “Tell us!” said Ariel. Ms. Monica adjusted her brassiere.

“I was taking an impossible class about psychology, and there was a very handsome guy in the class. I saw him around campus and I asked all my friends about him. He was dating a boring girl named Cindy, with big, wild hair. I was dating a boring guy named Paul, who played on the lacrosse team. Lacrosse is little poles with nets. I waited for the handsome guy to ask me out, but months went by. I became very good friends with Paul’s friend, and Paul got mad at me. We couldn’t all be friends. My hair was long then. I made pasta almost every night and me and my girlfriends waited by our phone for boys to call.”

During class, Denise watched the hands of her classmates, looking for the moody pencil. After class, she took everything from her desk—her secret journal for when they had to write and Ms. Monica read it later like a special god who got to see, a little oriental pouch with a tiny plastic sword inside, scraps from ripped-out spiral-bound paper. Her pencils were in a clear, matte pouch. One pencil was bendy and its point was painted grey. It was a novelty pencil and did not write.

Millie saw Susan smoking on someone's balcony downtown. Millie gawked. Susan had a new shape. Susan's dress was like a curvy road hugging Susan. Susan laughed and the laugh's voice made Millie feel like Susan had mutated.

At home, Millie drew poodles shopping. Which poodle was the wiggliest, curliest, girliest one? The big one. Her parents watched a movie about love. Millie scratched hearts around her leg freckles. A light white heart faded to pink then faded to skin. Millie's brother played a loud handheld video game. Time was drippy and lasted all night. She lay awake in her silk Chinese dragon pajamas, picking her adult career. Ice Cream Designer.

The Russian was so different from the boys Susan had dated in college. He wore old, worn corduroys and was terrible with animals. He had straight, stressed dark hair. His cheeks had a blush. He wore a faux fur coat. His front tooth had been broken and reassembled with glue. They lived in an attic apartment over a convenience store in the small suburban town where Susan had grown up. Susan hung tapestries and sheets to make it cozy. She had never met someone so antisocial.

The kids had a day where they were not supposed to bring lunches. Before lunch they were all led into the cafeteria and given little slips of paper. The papers said #1, #2, or #3. All the #1s went to one area of the room, all the #2s to another area, and then the #3s, of which there were the most, went to a third area. The kids in group #1 were allowed all the ziti and salad they pleased. They ate voraciously like it was their birthday. The ziti was soft and cheesy and warm. The salad had intoxicating dressing that all of group #1 was enjoying, even those who normally refused salad.

The kids in group #2 got a little ziti and salad. The kids in group #3 got no food and miserably wandered around the cafeteria asking the #1s and #2s for food. Some #1s shared food, but braggingly. Ziti became an amazing thing in everyone's mind. This was a social experiment meant to teach the kids about third-world countries. A teacher hushed everyone and tried to explain. It sounded to Millie like there were three worlds, and one world was a world with no food, and another was a world with some food, and the last world was all food. Then everyone ate food. The #1s had big stomachaches. The #3s had their feelings hurt.

Benjamin Rabbit looked so thin and bored in his cage. "Third world rabbit!" Millie sang. "Third Wor-ld Rabbit!" She sang again, "Why are You so Dead?!" "Third World Rabbit! Third Wor-ld Rabbit! Why Your Shrunken Head!?"

Millie looked for a new best friend. By third grade most of the girls had favorites. They wore friendship rings and forced their moms to be friends. They manufactured secrets. Millie was choosing mainly between Ariel and Anjali. Anjali was good at gym and spoke very clearly. There would never be a problem understanding her. Her outfits were okay. Good at jacks. Ariel looked like a horse, but in a way where Millie knew it would be fun to brush her hair.

Millie flushed her mother's casserole down the toilet and it left an oily layer on the water's surface.

Millie deleted a huge chunk of her computer's documents inadvertently.

At the zoo, Millie felt superior to the other animals.

She licked her ice cream haphazardly.

Her rabbit Benjamin cried to her and she turned up her music.

Millie bitterly crossed out all the holidays in her calendar.

Millie peed in the shower and felt guilty.

Millie wondered if she was religious.

Millie was alone in the house and excited.

At the field trip, Millie wandered away from the group.

On her dresser, Millie placed an ugly rock from the outdoors.

Denise asked the D.A.R.E. officer about her pencil (to the hilarity of her classmates).

Millie got a part in the school play and then quit.

At the dentist, Millie had a spiritual moment.

The Russian met with other Russians to bicker and play chess. They saw who could smoke the most. They froze around lakes of ice, fishing illegally. They traded each other their old used cars. They told long, unfunny jokes.

The Russian was quiet and brooding, but it calmed Susan to be near him. They went to the cinema. In front of the fireplace he allowed himself to be seduced. Susan cooked for the Russian, but used too much intuition and added cinnamon. The salt fell like hail, a cheese announced itself too strongly. In an effort to be gourmet, she sprinkled crushed cereal over the fish. She ate as she worked, to check, to double check and soon she was full from undercooked pasta, full in a matrimonious way. Like because she had cooked—they were married.

What would become of her ailing pet rabbit? Millie wondered in bed. She imagined herself holding his limp paw in an animal hospital where the animals wore long white robes. She imagined Benjamin's white fur turning black, from

the toes to the face, slowly like an hourglass filling with death. Millie got out of bed and walked to the kitchen. She took a handful of Chex cereal to give to her rabbit, but ate most of it as she walked up the stairs.

Susan and Ms. Monica tried on lingerie at the discount place in town and did not recognize each other. Ms. Monica looked at Susan and only felt jealous of her figure. Susan thought Ms. Monica looked familiar, like someone she'd known in high school, but the recognition cooled and Ms. Monica became another nobody in town, a woman who ate all her meals at Panera Bread.

The night of "Plates!", Benjamin was unresponsive in his cage. Millie laid her sundress over his cage so she could stop thinking about him. She was quiet on the ride to "Plates!" She imagined a double wedding where she married Adam and Ms. Monica married human Benjamin. Then they would switch and Millie would marry Benjamin and Ms. Monica would marry Adam.

"Plates!" was exciting. The gym was untransformed. Millie and her classmates were real waiters and waitresses. Whenever Benjamin (the rabbit) visited her thoughts, she looked at Benjamin the human (who was handsome with bad skin). Millie had an urge to dance around him. He wore cargo pants and a plaid shirt. Millie and Anjali danced around him.

Because the Russian was opinionated, there were fewer choices for Susan to make. They would not move to California. They would not sponsor an African child. There was no translation for "window treatment." He spoke Russian over the phone and his voice went mushy and precise. Susan didn't call her parents because they were divorced.

Once in the supermarket, she saw young Millie. Susan stared. She couldn't believe Millie was still in the third grade. Millie wore a slinky on her forearm. She stared back at Susan.

"Our friendship is over," Millie said.

"Why?" asked Susan.

"You missed my birthday party."

Susan remembered the little parties. Everyone's name all over everything. The way the children taunted the balloons. The Russian returned with the cart.

"I'm checking out," he said. Millie snickered at him. Susan tried to see what Millie saw. Was the Russian the most interesting man in town or just a misplaced person? With all the other boys she'd dated had come a packaged idea of what her life would be like with them. The Russian was baffling. The more she dated him, the less she knew herself. Millie spotted her mom's cart and left. Susan watched her go. The Russian enjoyed messing up words. Was she pretentious to think that love was the ultimate mistranslation? What did that mean even? It had been a mistake to return to her hometown. Her face was numb from her new medicine. She could have learned about Russia, but she resisted. She had no friend to compare lovers with.

ON ONE CAPABILITY OF YOUR MOUTH

T y l e r G o b b l e

It is a good thing for you to say to people good job and nice shirt and you are real and I love you. I don't care who they are, the highly educated like it, as do short people and shy people, especially the shy ones, and teachers and your dad. Go up to him and say Dad, you are nice. Thanks. Watch him turn to a piece of pie, mushy and great, because of you. Good job, I'd say if you did this and we could eat him together.

ON THE WAY THINGS ARE DONE AROUND HERE

T y l e r G o b b l e

What did you name her, I ask as Sam jumps from the open hole in the top of his car. THE BOOYEAH MOBILE, he says. If I were caught in a vortex, it'd be Jeff's sunglasses. A tint I've never seen, sparks as much as it reflects, like the whole of his essence, green eyes I've seen once hide behind ten-dollar shades. I want to breath a small sigh and remove them from his face. I step to touch his cheek, but he is gone. I'm standing in dust.

ON DATING

T y l e r G o b b l e

General question: Is there such a thing as a non-sexual sleepover? Her legs clap-clap on my coffee table, the one my neighbor put out by the dumpster with a sign, FREE I GUESS. It reminds me of how I wanna get my boogie on, but she'd rather sit in the living room. It reminds me of why I stopped wearing jogging suits. Now, I stick to V-necks because I hear that's what the girls like. I thought ladies loved disco balls, our smooshed-together faces, and in the morning a fresh donut, like YUM THIS IS THE BEST THING EVER. She fell asleep on the couch just now. Tonight is better than my first date though: my best friend and a moped, 15 bucks allowance spent on pepperoni, riding to the only drive-thru pizza shack in the county, no helmets, not because we wanted people to see us, but because no one told us about the importance of protection.

MY BROTHER CAME

J . A . T y l e r

My brother handed me a note. The note did not have words. The note did not love. The note was a shape. The shape was a circle. The circle was black. This was a dot on paper. This was how my brother, in his handing me a note, told me that I was dying.

I was in these woods, hiding, or trying to get out. I don't know how he found me. I found in these woods two foxes. One I burned, one I skinned to wear his forest as a fur on my back. To bristle, I shaved him clean and took a fox upon myself. Then there was the bear, the bear I burned up. And there was the deer that was my brother, running us near each other, the act of chasing when we were young, when forests weren't cities and we were only gamboling hooves.

My brother stood next to me. His deer face breathing. The twitch of his eye, and then his brother hand handing me a death note, a dead dying, the message that

said I was no longer. I said No, I don't want this but his deer-head shook a silent deer-whinny and the forest opened in front of me. One step and his buck-white tail was all I saw, then it too disappeared. That was these woods, where I would never end. That was my brother cleaning me out of being. That was the last memory of having been, before having not, and how the running in the woods felt, the two of us boys as deer, and the river alongside us, running.

MUD

S h o m e D a s g u p t a

Thunder, thunder, thunder, went the field. Crash, crash, crash, went the hay, and lightning, lightning, lightning went the bolts, and Pepper, Pepper, Pepper went the jumps. She stood on top of a cylinder of hay, in the middle of the rain, with her arms across her breasts, and her legs covered in mud, and jumped off and ran and jumped on another bale. She did this over and over again, after every lightning strike, trying to reach the next one before the thunder struck.

Pepper said, Let the lightning crash.

Clash.

The thunder struck and Pepper fell to the ground. I ran to her. She made mud angels. I jumped on top of her and made the same motions. She pushed her tongue against my eyes, and then she pushed me away and turned around, with

her belly facing the ground. She stuck her tongue into the mud and moved it around. She stuck her fingers into the mud and moved them around. She moved her body up and down like she was fucking the earth.

Jealous, she said.

I did the same thing.

I said, Jealous.

Yes, Pepper said.

She slid over and grabbed me with one arm. With her other, she continued to finger the earth. I stuck my fingers into her with one hand, and the other twirled inside the mud.

Your first threesome, Pepper said.

I said, I don't know.

It's your first one with me, she said. She said, With us.

She licked the earth and then she licked me, and I closed my eyes and fucked everything around me. The lightning roared. The thunder was a whip, and when it lashed, Pepper would press down on me harder.

I said, You're scared.

Only when the rain stops, Pepper said.

We climbed on top of a bale of hay and continued. My semen was disguised in the rain, and Pepper looked at me.

Who are you, she said.

I said, Pretend I am someone you like.

PARTIAL HISTORY OF A PARALLEL WORLD

R a c h e l Y o d e r

Rothshelle was the one who told us these stories. She told very many stories in very many rooms all over the city and sometimes was projected as a simulacrum on screens and monitors, yet oddly we were not satisfied by her mere projection or prerecorded words. Instead, we roamed the streets in search of her body. We stopped at windows fogged by smoke and entered therein. We found others like her but they were not the one for whom we longed. We heard she would be at the tavern in midtown on the Saturday after next and so we waited and then we went. She did not resemble any kind of mother but instead a long-haired creature rumored to roam at the edges of civilization.

We collected her stories as we would facsimile data, except her stories we held in our minds for long spans of time, so long they began to seem like our own. The rooms inside her slowly constructed themselves in each of us. Her true history seeped into our true histories until we grew into shared memories which were once only Rothshelle's: an upbringing among evangelicals, the restraint of

a childhood religion, eventual diaspora, love and its disappearance, the haunted decade after, feelings of entrapment, the need to emancipate the body, hermitage in the desert, a second baptism in a church of one's own creation, the shrink into a hard-eyed beauty, a resistance to proselytizing, a commitment only to the worship of holy things and places, a prosaic longing for meaning, a perplexing longing for the Middle West, the contemplation of children, the coming into a womanhood.

We all felt as though we were coming into our womanhoods, even those of us who weren't. Children worried over the elasticity of their skin and men feared the loss of viability. Whole towns affected by her stories softened. It felt as though we all were waiting for something and that this something was not exactly the apocalypse. We walked around with an amorphous sense that a burning white everythingness was bearing down on us. While we waited for it, we remained quiet. We had no idea what to say.

THE LONELY ROOM

A cylindrical glass tube full of water rises from floor to ceiling at the center of The Lonely Room. A dozen goldfish swim inside, all shades of electric orange that iridesces into gold, into flame red. A young woman with skin the color of pale sushi floats in the tube dressed in a midnight blue dress. Her skirts, as they float, appear as the night sky folded in on itself. Pearl-sized bubbles slip from her nose. Her hair, a watered-down red, flows in every direction. The ends graze the inside of the glass tube and tendrils pass in front of her face like stratus clouds. Stray wisps float like dark smoke. Her blank eyes do not focus on any of the people mingling and sipping drinks in the shadows and syncopated rhythms of The Lonely Room, but her lips turn a bit at the ends. She is pleasing to view.

One night, a drunk man placed each of his fingertips on the curve of her glass.

“Hey you,” he slurred. “Come here, you.” The young woman floated to him, and he tapped right in front of her face. Her blank eyes flared. She tried to talk, muffled sounds from her mouth which were lost in the water between her and the man. He backed away.

Some say her lips formed the words “Help me.” Others think she tried to say, “I love you.” One woman insisted she had mouthed, “My children.” Whatever it was, she was desperate to tell the man, first through her waterlogged cries, then with the enigmatic motions of her hands. She swam to the top of the tube where she met an impediment, then sunk back to the man and pounded on the glass with fists. Her mouth was wide, her hair in snakes. She thrashed until her eyes become blank again. She stilled, then sank. Her feet disappeared below the floor as the night sky of her dress floated up and covered her face. Her pale hand waved gracefully as a queen’s as it descended into the champagne-lit hole in the floor.

Meanwhile, another young woman dressed in a midnight dress with the same sushi skin and red hair descended from the top of the tube. The man who tapped the glass barked with relief. See! She’s just fine. But was this the same woman, the regulars wondered. Of course she’s the same woman, she just re-circulated. It’s simple: the woman is a hologram. The tube is full of clones. Very quickly, the debate wore on them. Soon, they began to discuss sports.

Since then the floating woman has simply been decoration, just as she was before the incident. The only difference now is a small, neatly-printed sign which sits at the base of the tube, penned by the owner: Please do not tap on glass.

At night the owner of The Lonely Room, a gnarled, fat nut of a man, turns off all the lights save for the champagne-colored light somewhere deep below the tube. He likes the way the room looks with just that one light. Such a lovely light,

his patrons always say. Such a beautiful light. With only the champagne-colored light shining from below, the young woman's skirts glow like the early-morning sky and her unlit face becomes a shadow of itself. The owner prefers to consider her with just this light on, with her open eyes obscured.

But even if the owner had wanted to turn off that light, he did not know how. The tube and the light had come with the place, and he had never been able to find a switch anywhere. He also had never been able to find the beginning or end of the tube, did not understand exactly how or why it worked, the water source, the filtration system, food for the fish, the how or why of the woman.

Now, as the owner stands at the door of The Lonely Room ready to exit and lock up for the night, he pauses with the velvet curtains covering the door in his hand. He turns to look at the young woman one last time, her hands floating at her sides with her palms facing him, as if to say stop or wait or please don't go. The owner knows it is silly to think her outstretched palms mean something. The goldfish swim in and out of her hair, dark spots moving through dark clouds, and just as the owner lets the curtain drop, in the moment from when he lets it drop to the moment it swishes closed, he allows himself to wonder where the woman had sunk to that night when the man tapped on her glass, and from where she then returned. The owner allows himself to wonder that night, for just one moment before the heavy cloth falls, what horrible god makes the champagne-colored light glow.

It was a quiet time.

And during this era that would come to be known by future generations as A Quiet Time, the question Why? was not so important as Things? or, moreover, Where? And instead of lying on couches and sitting on couches and in uncomfortable or comfortable chairs, instead of staring at stained glass or kneeling or speaking in tongues, we instead went to those who could describe

the rooms inside themselves, places in which they expressed their electrical impulses and the problems these created (though they were not problems—we were beyond conceiving of experience in such limited terms, “problem” was such a moral word and perhaps we were beyond “morals.” We were moving toward a conception of ourselves as advanced and dangerous robots with inherent systemic flaws, with anomalies, our electrical impulses could be so random, we short circuited and then sometimes beeped quietly in shady corners or else drank great quantities of watered-down poison and roamed the streets as mad automatons, our faces cooked red from the sun, we turned our faces to the sun and did not look away . . .).

When the storytellers spoke of these imaginary rooms inside themselves, they were usually sitting or standing in real rooms, coffee houses with labyrinthine brass pipes releasing steam or in tents laid with great, paisleyed carpets or under leaves beside a river that had reversed its flow. And mothers grieving their infants told stories of rooms full of dirt and hair and many many shelves of homegrown peaches in glass jars. And the newly married related tales of a massive white ark moored within the largest room of the largest convention center and spoke of its black canons and blue flags and white netting. And old men had many stories of many rooms, a room carpeted in white where twenty head of cattle dropped piles in the shag and a warped wooden room with a single black stocking laid out in the middle of the warped wooden floor. A bare white lady with one leg played ragtime on an upright, they said, and we listened, we listened, we listened.

And we believed them, because their stories answered our questions, our Wheres, and beyond that their stories were rooms in which our feelings could be born and then mature, where they could throw themselves on couches in disarray, where they could meet and pair with other feelings, where they could stagnate, where they could then rejuvenate after much soul-searching, where they would age and then hunch. These rooms are where we lived for all those

years. Each morning, those of us concerned with bravery awoke and molted our Russian dolls, one by one. The flesh underneath tasted like the satin of our mothers' skirts. We were pale to the point of blue. It was almost too raw to touch.

THE ASTRONAUT NURSERY

The baby astronauts, clothed in smart silver jumpsuits and oversized bubble helmets, tend to jostle and trip en masse. They collect in the corners of The Astronaut Nursery, their helmets banging against one another as they turn their faces to the sun, unblinking beneath their UV visors. Ever since they can remember, they've all wanted to surge toward the burning orb, everyone, that is, except Octavio. Octavio, smallest of the baby astronauts, nose moist beneath his helmet, suit ill-fitting and saggy in the butt, claims The Astronaut Nursery is built on a place that used to be called Missouri, which he would very much like to see if it still exists.

"Stupid," Gary says when Octavio brings up Missouri. He is a large, sweaty baby astronaut whose suit pulls at the seams. "The Astronaut Nursery is all that's ever been here. We are the most important baby astronauts to ever exist," he says. The other baby astronauts' helmets bob up and down. They do not like to imagine something real and important came before them and since has been obliterated. This means they too could be completely forgotten. All day they gaze at the sky, imagining the day when they will finally lift from earth and become immortal.

Octavio, though, considers his feet. He wonders why the feet of their suits are built with weight balls and why, contradictorily, they are taught to long for flight. Why should they want to go to the sun? What will this accomplish? Why?

Why. Why. Why. The word repeats in his head like a distant alarm. Everything is supposed to make sense in this post-labyrinthian era, after the Structuring and the Squaring, during a time when Order is both form and dogma. The baby astronauts have only ever been informed with a post-historical understanding, but Octavio has learned a new vocabulary through the keyhole of the one white door of The Astronaut Nursery.

He has learned that the keyhole is called *keyhole* from the whispering voice on the other side. He had learned about the concept of a *door*, that it can *open* and *close*, that it can be *locked* and *unlocked*, that one can pass from room to room and thereby that there are *other rooms*. Octavio has learned about *Missouri* from the whisper on the other side of the door. He has learned about teeming green wildernesses, real gravity.

“Inverse gravity, why did that happen?” Octavio asks.

“Why,” Gary parrots, making fun of the nonsensical word. “Why, why, why, stinky pants.” He runs around in a circle and flaps his arms and the baby astronauts laugh until Gary begins rising, the tips of his toes dragging across the white rubber floor. The Astronaut Nursery is silent.

“It’s happening,” a small girl with pigtails breathes beneath her helmet. Soon Gary hovers a few inches from the floor.

At Feeling Time, Gary sucks mashed potatoes and liquid turkey through his feeling tube for forty minutes straight hoping to increase his mass and overcome the weight balls on his feet. “I feel so stuffing,” he says, stuffing stuffing in his mouth. “I feel turkey.” At bedtime, he is nearly ten feet from the ground and by morning is gone altogether. Others begin to hover, too, the bigger ones first. There is a great chorus of feeling. They feel cherries and feel sweet cream.

“I love feeling,” one baby astronaut says with his mouth full.

“I love feeling grapes in purple gel!” another astronaut baby screams. She begins to convulse, throwing her arms in the air, her arms shaking, her head

bucking, her legs lifting and dropping heavily on the nursery floor. She rises into the air like this, as if an electrical current were run straight through her. “I feel grapes!” she yells again, and some of the baby astronauts begin to cry with the feeling of grapes. The baby astronaut flutters up toward the burning sun.

Octavio has stopped eating. Ever since Gary floated away, he’s been squatting in the center of the room as the rest of the baby astronauts station themselves around the walls at their tubes and do not move for hours, sucking into themselves quantities of yellow cakes and sweet cream, yellow puddings, gelatinous meat stews, dark soft peas delivered in buttered water, discolored fruits suspended in peach-color gel, potatoes mashed together with ground meat then followed by gray gravy. They feel and feel and feel. For three days they feel until all that remains are Octavio and the girl with the pigtails, sucking down cherries in cherry red goo.

Octavio stands in the corner and watches as the girl with the pigtails finally rises, a gelatinous smile smeared up her cheeks. A piece of her hair is stuck there, on her cheek, in the goo. She hovers above the room, turning in a slow circle like a clock arm, her eyes glazed over with weightless, post-sugar euphoria. She floats away, a black dot against the hot sun. He is alone now. He walks to the white door on the white wall, the white knob, the white keyhole to which he puts his ear.

“Help,” he whispers through the keyhole as his feet begin to lighten. He grips the handle with his two hands as his weight balls become useless, his feet floating up to the sky. “Help,” he whispers again to the keyhole. He wants to believe in *door* and in *open*. He has dreamt for so many nights of *other rooms*. And for *Missouri* he has held out hope, against Gary’s taunts and the other astronaut babies’ disbelief, held out hope against the ever-night night sky and ever-fiery fire sun. “Please,” he says to the keyhole, upside down now, his toes pointing toward his destiny.

But then the something creaks and whispers back. It moves. This must be *door*. This must be *open*. And as he slides his body through the opened space like a diver falling into a still body of water, as his head meets a different air, as he is blinded by a dark, sweet greenness and his body gains a weight, a word he does not know he knew, both new and old, terrifying and warm, pushes itself out of him and blooms there in the air before his mouth. It folds in and over itself, an incandescent moving spot of reds that grows and deepens and turns into a red forest of red trees and maroon crevasses and dark chestnut muds. And he dives and dives and dives through the door and watches the muds and leaves and crevasses swirl into one another and form the rose of *mother* right there, it is inches from his face, a word now just beyond his lips, and he falls and falls until he is there, lying in the grass. This is Missouri.

It's not so impossible to believe: the masses wanted input. We did not talk so much as listen. Whole terminals heaved with great silence. We moved but did not speak. Some stared at flashing screens or else wore dark lenses over their eyes. Others jammed their sensing organs, plugging up orifices with prerecorded terminal noise and slathering appendages with protective and numbing gels. Food was not for tasting but rather for consuming. We purchased "clean-burning fuel" packaged with "slice of lemon."

We walked through towns listening to voices from other places. (These voices we carried in the warmth of our pockets or in pouches near our umbilici.) We drove across vast countries watching passion plays on built-in monitors. We did not care about windows unless what we saw through them was simulacra, something like what was real but also something fake. The landscape considered us as we moved over it, oblivious.

We took pills to feel and pills to not. The groundwater swam with these chemicals and soon we were all taking all sorts of pills whether we were or

not. We were all feeling something although what, few could articulate. We felt furry or were buzzing like hives. Our nerve endings had dulled, yet multiplied infinitesimally. We thought we might be becoming new gods or, at the very least, incredible machines.

THE STUDIO

There was a rug, and it was Oriental. She didn't call it Oriental because she wasn't sure if this was politically correct. Instead she called it "the Bangladeshi rug" even though she was not certain it was from Bangladesh or if Bangladesh was considered part of The Orient or if The Orient was even a thing that was said anymore.

There was a chair on the Bangladeshi rug. It had carved arms and was upholstered purple in the manner of the queens. She enjoyed sitting in the chair and admiring the white walls of the room. She had hung on them many canvases of painted pastel doors in many stages of opening.

The woman spent her day admiring the paintings from her purple chair with carved arms. She sat and smiled and breathed deeply and looked at the pastel doors and especially at the whiteness in the open spaces of the open doors. Occasionally, she rose from her chair and walked to the real door on the wall, framed by pictures of doors, and opened and shut it a number of times. The noise it made upon shutting was very satisfactory. She enjoyed slamming it and making the canvases hiccup against the wall like an assortment of hanging hearts jolted back to life by electrified paddles.

After she opened and shut the door, she liked to slide her hands into the pockets of the apron. She walked the perimeter of the room like this, examining the paintings in detail. She did not know how to paint. She had found the paintings under her bed, which was in another room, though she could not

remember ever having placed them there. She decided to hang them and look at them so as to try and remember from where they came but, once hung, they were so lovely and so she just looked at them and did not try to remember from where they had come but only to where they led, the white space, she wondered about the white space, and more and more she opened and shut the door to the room, open and shut and open and shut, and then sat in her chair and stared at the paintings and then got up and slammed the door, she loved slamming it as she looked at the paintings, then she put her hands in her apron pockets and breathed deeply, there was a deep breathing, and eventually she laid herself down on the Bangladeshi carpet and stared at the white ceiling—she had never done this before, laid on the Bangladeshi carpet, she rather liked it, it was so soft—and on the ceiling there was a door, a door almost as large as the ceiling itself, and she could not believe she had never before seen this door, it was so handsome, the paneling was exquisite she thought, and the knob was brass and dented and nearly big as her head.

She had to get up there. She stepped up on the chair but still the door on the ceiling was so high above her, and she could hear the doors in the paintings begin to chatter like tiny, rectangular children with metal teeth, she was sure of it, and she started hopping on the cushion of the chair, it was so very bouncy, and it became like a trampoline, launching her higher and higher, her skirt billowing around her as she fell back to the chair then wrapping round her legs as she rose up, and up, and up again until her milky hands clutched the handle and she dangled there from the ceiling in her stocking feet, her heels two discarded commas on the floor.

She flung her hips and wrenched the handle. It turned. The door hinged open ever so slightly with her slight weight and she could see beyond (it was white!) and oh how she wanted the whiteness and the slamming and she fought her way up there, wriggled up into the space opened by the great door in the

ceiling and stood there, up in the whiteness, and then grabbed the handle and slammed the big ceiling door closed, then opened it and slammed it again. The paintings on the walls burped as she slammed the great door and kept it shut.

The room was silent. The purple chair sat on the Bangladeshi rug and the pictures of the doors hung on the white walls and sooner than you would ever imagine the woman, or something like the woman, walked through the pastel door on the canvas next to the real door, looked around at the room, then slammed the pastel door shut behind her. On the opposite wall she appeared from another pastel door and then slammed it. And this occurred over and over again, on every door of every painting, the woman slammed them all. And now the woman who was not quite the real woman lived inside of a great whiteness with many doors.

And she was not like she was before. She was not even the same woman because that woman had been composed of defined lines and blood and so forth and now she was just an approximation of that woman made with graphite, and the graphite woman living in the whiteness left smudges on everything but this didn't bother her too much because she would just go slam a door and then feel better, or open a door and look out on the room where she, or someone like her, used to sit in the purple chair. The Bangladeshi rug was so nice. That was the only thing she missed, the rug and also perhaps her color, she missed her color, graphite was so monochromatic, and she thought of the days when she used to sit in the purple chair and imagine what was in the giant whiteness. Where had that woman gone, the full-color one who used to sit there? Surely it was not who she was anymore.

The truth was that a full-color woman very much like the one who used to sit in the upholstered chair was at work in her studio, just as she had always been. (Perhaps the actual woman had somehow disappeared altogether. The complete disappearance of a woman is not only possible but a real, everyday

phenomenon.) She had finished her open door series ages ago and placed it under the bed, then moved on to other obsessions: a gray figure silently threading her way through a stand of tidal mangroves. An elephant. An un-faced woman with a hive of diaphanous scarves buzzing round her head. The colors thickened on the white canvases. She saturated one on another until the smells of a new country bled out of the oils. The scenes teemed with foliage so thick and dense a person would have to erase herself and start all over in order to get through.

We had a sense of who we were yet felt the need to keep reproducing ourselves via various electrical expressions. We became preoccupied with copies of things we liked such as images and vibrations and sent them to each other, or to copies of each other. All of this was facilitated by a massive interweaving system of networks and hubs, a vast synthetic brain which laced the planet. No one thought to interrogate the brain. It was so invisible and innocuous. It never surprised us. We treated it as we would a domesticated dog.

Despite everything, there were still those inspired to anxiety. Almost everyone, in fact. And some too devoted themselves to philosophical ramblings: what if the room contains everything? That is, what if the room actually bounds the known and unknown universe? What if the room is so large we don't even know there's a room? Or what if we just think the room is so very large when, in actuality, it is quite small and can fit easily in the palm of an average-sized hand? What if the room contains everything and yet is still so small it can fit inside a water molecule, or better, a nano-sub-nanoparticle, and inside this room is where we all live, all the known things that the known things have ever known? But then what if this is not the case and the room, as first posited, is indeed larger than anything anyone has ever comprehended? What if it has walls? What if it has a door? What if you open the door? And the point is that you cannot open

the door because there is nothing on the other side, and there isn't even a door. But what if there were something on the other side? What would that be? We cannot ask what is outside the universe because the universe does not have an outside. But we still can wonder: what is outside the room?

THE TRADITIONAL ROOM

The double skirt began as a regular, single, knee-length skirt, worn in the traditional manner in a traditional sort of room. However, there were those who came to object to such a skirt and the type of women who wore it. "They routinely hitch it up and pin the cloth to form abbreviated skirts," the newspapers quoted. "It is waved to and fro in the manner of can-can dancers. See how the women flit on stage or sidewalk in their skirts with all parts of their bodies showing: their shins and the fleshy parts above their kneecaps. Elbows. Their necks." There was a great exodus of women to another room in which skirts were actually banned and alternative modes of clothing supported. There such things as parachutes, umbrellas, kites, flags, and sails flourished as forms of fashion.

However, back in The Traditional Room, the regular, single, knee-length skirt was legislated into a double skirt, two knee-length skirts worn at the same time, the outer skirt meant for the lifting and the covering of the face in moments of great blushing or fear or what have you. Some also viewed this as a gesture of piety or modesty, or pious modesty, and thus it became a religious act. Sects grew up in which the double skirt was worn continuously, pulled up round the faces of shy, pretty women. The act itself, however, of raising one's double skirt was viewed by believers as overtly pornographic and so the upper skirt was raised privately before a pious woman went out, in

her bedroom or perhaps even in the closet of her bedroom or even in the far recess of her long closet: this is where she took the hem between her fingers and floated it to her face and, in some cases, up over her head and down her back in a long veil. The double skirts grew.

Whole schools of women walked the streets dragging miles of cloth in their wake. On hot days, those prone to asthma or panic suffocated from the fabric pulling against their faces and then fell. Others crouched at their sides and felt for the heads of the fallen. The pious women could not see while wearing the double skirts but this, they felt, was a perfect sort of holiness. They pulled at the double skirts covering the faces of the women lying on the sidewalks until they could stand and breathe.

The double skirt swept up with it dead leaves and grass clippings, glinting shards of glass and lost earrings. Sometimes even small animals such as lice, flies, frogs, or grasshoppers were taken into the double skirts and at night, when the women pulled the skirts from their faces, the plagues were invoked in their bedrooms. Swarms ate holes through their wardrobes. They could not go out for fear of being seen. Others were left empty-eyed on their beds, a barrage of flattened and rotting frogs at their feet. The walls moved with flies. Lice hid in their hair. Some had caught up the carcasses of birds and left streaks of brown blood in their sheets.

The schools of women on the streets thinned. Those who remained refused to remove the double skirts from their heads. Great sores formed on their faces and bodies from the rubbing. Others, on seeing the thinning of the schools, insisted on cladding their pets in double skirts, and soon dead dogs and horses wrapped in lengths of fabric dotted the countryside. Pious hysteria became a diagnosable condition and various women were sent away to other rooms wherein they might receive treatments of moist, diaphanous cloths.

A rogue band of women became possessed of incomprehensible urges. They felt the times were slipping from them and, in an effort to regain control, crafted vast insurgent skirts which they used to control the weather, flying them from massive poles. Prevailing winds no longer prevailed. Great clouds formed and moved over land masses then dropped ice on the land. In a final statement, the rogue women launched skirts to space stations and deployed them over huge swaths of Earth.

Monstrous shadows which conjured monstrous mothers blinded The Traditional Room and other rooms both like and unlike it in darkness. De-greened wastelands spread. The Earth wore skirts of dust for many years, and the pious women migrated to these deserts. There, after many centuries, they discarded their double skirts and became naked, having forgotten their origins. They were not ashamed.

None of this, not a single word, had actually happened but still, all the time, we felt as though it had. The simulacra of the stories had become more real than our real lives, but the stories were not ours. We had forgotten how to imagine and instead had cultivated a capacity for hoarding information and a lack of talent for doing anything with it. We depended on the storytellers to imagine for us, and they did so beautifully. We wanted to not ever have to think. We wanted only to feel but had faded from this, too.

At night, after we had listened to them speak, we walked the abandoned golf course. You have to understand just how distant things were then. Over across the black glass of pond there was a dark house with golden windows stacked like boxes. The faraway place warmed the open night. We liked so very much to look at it. It was an image from the future.

We understand the stars are not real. Their light beams from long ago. We stand on a blank plain and our heads fall back. As we stare at the sky, one person

imagines God, another a simple absence. We will not know where we've been living until the light reaches us, or doesn't, in millions of years.

THE TWO WITCHES

J o h n C o l b u r n

Once I dreamt two women were hiding in my house. They had no house of their own. They pushed shopping carts up the street and left them on the lawn.

Sometimes in a dream what we call a house can be a wooden structure or just some branches or a warm spot in the river or a story or even another dream.

But this was a real dream house and the two women were hiding somewhere inside. I wanted to kiss them.

I knew they could make little figures move and even walk; they could manipulate dolls and so they were called witches. I wasn't sure if I was dreaming. There are a lot of houseless women here, and there are also women who carry their houses. And maybe people think some women here are houses.

Inside my house I have a dream house and inside that house I have a sacred house and inside that there's a house I don't know about, except when I poke my finger through the holes in the sacred house I can feel something fleshy.

First I looked under the sink. I found only a cockroach house. I looked on the main floor, in all the closets, and I looked under the rugs for trap doors and I even looked under the couch and even inside the piano.

I began to get angry at them. I began to think that they might have to die, that if I found them and looked at them a certain way, they would die, and it would be better than kissing.

I walked up the stairs, whistling, as if I wasn't looking at all, when in fact I knew I was going to look at them to death. I casually searched the bedrooms upstairs, even under the beds, then the crawlspaces and closets. I even climbed up to look into the attic and looked down the laundry chute. Those witches!

When I looked out the window I saw the carts still carelessly left in the yard. Those witches must be in the basement, I thought. I also noticed baskets hanging from the trees, and the baskets seemed to be full of peaches but I wasn't sure. I was afraid of the peaches—sometimes, at the right touch, a peach can turn into a baby boy. A peachling.

I walked downstairs and looked in the refrigerator. Nothing. No food, no witches.

I walked outside to get a peach from one of the baskets. I couldn't help myself. It was tender and fuzzy and flush. I took a bite. The peach began crying and grew arms and legs and eyes and a fat little baby boy tummy but I kept eating.

Those witches will sometimes make you eat children and this child tasted wonderful.

I finished eating the whole baby. I ate his spleen and his brains and his eyebrows and his little penis and all his fingers. They tasted like peach jelly. I thought he was still crying in my stomach, but that was impossible. What a day.

I walked into the house. It was warm inside and I grew very sleepy. I knew this was the work of the two witches in the basement. I began to sweat and I slapped myself to stay awake and the slapping felt good. But maybe the witches were trying to boil me.

I couldn't find the basement door. I walked all around in the house. Then I got out a big screwdriver. There was no basement to the house. The witches must have gotten in my stomach with the little jelly boy. It was all a trick to get inside me.

It's very hard to stab yourself in the stomach. You get afraid. I tried to think of something else but there was nothing else to think of.

Then I imagined where the two witches lived in my abdomen. I placed the screwdriver over one of them. I started to sweat more—the witches were trying to stop me.

A house can be hidden in any of thousands of apertures. A house can be made into a brother or sister. Some houses dream their occupants and that's called an origin story. Is your house a male or female house? Do you have witches? Do

they have wombs? A house can be delivered into the world by a witch's dream.

Birtherd. Surely you've heard of these dream houses?

At first the screwdriver just dented my skin but I kept pushing until it punctured through and I twisted the handle and really messed up those two little witch bodies in my abdomen, and all kinds of goo and blood and pus and secretions leaked out my belly onto the floor because I was a champion, and cockroaches began to crawl out of the walls (from their cockroach house after all) and into my stomach to eat the terrible witches, and I heard them singing and I closed my eyes.

Certainly earth is just a fleeting moment surrounded by eternity, and dreams don't happen on earth. Maybe there was a basement. The cockroaches are still eating, it takes so long.

THE ONE ABOUT STAR FORMING REGIONS

K a t h l e e n R o o n e y
& E l i s a G a b b e r t

A nebula walks into a bar. The ceiling consists of a star-kissed canopy, and there are no clocks, because this is astronomical time. Nobody here seems to recognize him. Nobody here seems very reflective at all. Like art, the nebula holds a mirror up to life. Like art, the nebula is boring. The human eye prefigures the camera, but the nebula hasn't got eyes, *per se*. But the nebula has a camera, and an intense desire to be the one behind it. This bar has no fourth wall. The nebula emits a tiny *whoa* as he notices, but as soon as he notices, it springs into existence.

THE ONE ABOUT OPENING WIDE

K a t h l e e n R o o n e y
& E l i s a G a b b e r t

A dentist walks into a bar. No one is particularly happy about this. Least of all the dentist. He orders a sugary drink. He is growing to hate the smell of mouths. He is growing to hate being hated. Do the bargoers recognize him, or is he inherently contemptible? Someday he hopes to have the means to become eccentric. He'd like to own a mynah bird or a parrotlet. He would also like to be more "erotic." This, of course, is different from being sexual.

THE ONE ABOUT SPARING THE ROD

K a t h l e e n R o o n e y
& E l i s a G a b b e r t

A spoiled child walks into a bar. He's got spaghetti stains all down his front. He is unprepossessing physically, yet used to winning through intimidation. He'd rather be feared than loved. But he too is struggling to remain relevant in our youth-obsessed culture. It's hard to style a bib as "sexy." His favorite things to make are noise and a mess. Don't call him "bright"; he has an IQ of 148. He's been reading *Phenomenology of Perception* by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Don't get him started on historical materialism. His misery memoir is already outlined. Don't call him "precocious"; he longs to be "of age." Rock becomes classic more quickly than other things, or so the jukebox here leads him to believe. Already last year's singles seem impossibly precious. Which isn't to say that nobody has their life ahead of them, it's just that that "whole life" might not be very long.

THE WORDS

A . D . J a m e s o n

When we went into the woods, many things happened.

The trees stood straight, en garde like artists' models. The sunlight, caught in their curled-up cedar leaves, could not have looked a mote more dapper.

"This will be grand—an eloquent sylvan adventure," we prodded one another. Everyone stepped with the same abandon. Everyone sucked in the same long breath.

The wind forged a path across our aching earlobes. "You are nowhere near your homes," it idly implied.

We'd fled to the woods with one clear impression, obsessed with a single abandon: to have done with the new. And to start anew.

Still, it all went wrong, and almost right from the start.

Eleonora stepped briskly but slipped on a root, or the back of a hidden rat. Her sure buttocks quivered, her gait uncertain.

Emil's muscular right hand, skilled at grasping, encircled her staggering waist.

That opened my eyes to the dangers that lay in wait.

Later that night, we all wanted to eat, but no one among us was all that eager to hunt.

We wanted our meat without merit. (That's one way to mean it.) (And one way to want one's meat.)

So we foraged, like good forest critters. We scavenged the landscape, leaving no earthworm unturned. We sucked up any insect left uncovered, bugs out sunning their shells.

Come morning, the woods had gone silent; its mating screeches and warning clicks had diminished. Heard now only was our sucking, searching, and crunching—simple sounds that dissolved in the sunlight and caught in the tremulous spiral leaves.

A weird week ensued. The ecosystem teetered, wobbled, then rebalanced.

Parched and crouched in our dugouts, we all of us wanted to eat steamed Chinese barbecue red pork buns. But no one jumped up to be the steamed barbecue pork bun vendor.

“In a pig's eye,” Emil complained—and all agreed.

In a porker's cleft trotter.

When the insects were all gone, gone extinct, we subsisted on boots boiled rare; we made meals of stewable leather. We sucked and chewed at the lifeless strips, chunks of footwear that had outlived their useful purpose.

Our dreams inflated with scented steam, filled up with billowing clouds of moisture. Behind them loomed plumpy, barbecue-swollen shadows, tumescent, looming and mocking. They made somnambulists of us all; they enticed us to stagger, our arms outstretched, through the humid fog.

Fingers spread for a bun, yearned to press against pastries. We stumbled, haggard, pasty.

In this phantasmal, mist-ridden middle of night, no presence or purchase of pleasure seemed certain. The plump buns withdrew, retreating, eerie, before us, drawn back through the gauze as though dragged by strings through the sodden, hole-ridden streets. Our bare feet thumped across the cobblestones, despairing.

Eleonora, herself as intangible as the miasma, ducked out, darting all of a sudden down a crooked narrow side-street in mid-thump.

Being half-insomniac, my dimmer eye slit open, I watched as Emil croaked “no” and chokingly reawakened, his strapping hands clutching after his lover’s instant absence.

He spent the rest of the restless night bereft, relentlessly popping his knuckles.

Come the morning, a pale spread, Eleonora had returned, her pockets stuffed with wild mushrooms, with stolen tubers and caps and stems. Some of the fungi she carried were surely poison, but others were doubtlessly good.

She wouldn’t tell us which were which, or how she’d managed to tease out that crucial information. Even when made to run the gauntlet, she withheld every tattered edge of her knowledge of treasured mushrooms.

Laughing and shrugging off our weakened attempts at whipping, dancing and darting with ease between the gaps we left in our limpid flogging.

Our sad shrunken stomachs diminished to rumbles, encouraging hurried rummaging through any unfastened rucksacks. Shaky hands rubbed leather, caressing dead skins still entrusted with nutrition.

Some took to taking their subsistence from the sunlight—they stared at the boiling star for as long as their feeding thinkers could grit and bear it. Their eyes turned to goo, dribbled out, dried out and, empty sockets, leathered over.

We licked at their lids.

Some succumbed amidst hunger. Caught in the grips of a rabbit starvation, Emil skedaddled straight out of his skull. He crawled sideways, crabwise, into mad realms, “from whose gloomy slums and dumb galleries no good man can ever return undamaged.”

We had to restrain him for his own good. We bound the sneaking, foaming struggler, our former acquaintance, with leather strips to his unmade cot.

His eyes, blind and feverish, rolled about and buggered out. He sucked at his suede restraints, his custom-made set of shackles.

A bell tolled low and hollow and haunting for balmy Emil.

Eleonora rang it without fail come every evening. At twilight, routinely, its grief-laden rings lolled and flattened in the leafy Eden.

Then wintertime, up until now shy, withholding its wetter, slushier elements, came upon us.

With the first snows came the fauna, ice-craving packs of marauding mammals, fang-bristled buggers, tough and vicious.

Between the tree trunks hunkered lionels (husky lions with five long limbs)—hungry-looking but—when it came down to it—rather pathetically awkward.

Nevertheless, we feared them at first and avoided returning their salacious stares. Still, in ensuing days, their drooling jaws didn’t lurch any nearer, and after a week they became mere background; they ceased to concern us.

And then there were elves: the woods were home to lots of elves. Though insignificant by themselves, they could clasp their hands and press in to pack together tightly.

That bunched them up. They could gather momentum, becoming a nonstop fleshy bundle. They rolled there and here, willy-nilly, taking mean pokes at our eyes when we peered out of windows, presenting attractive blue-eyed targets.

Still, they, too, did not concern us overmuch, didn't cause us to do more than to shiver in our britches.

What rather concerned us instead were the mutant, oversized foxes, mangy bald carnivores much bigger-shaped than normal. Those rippling muscles stalked us at windspeed, outstripping the sharpened breeze that made mincemeat of our earlobes.

"You are not supposed to be here, so head home," the wind dogmatically insisted.

That loose-lipped, never-ending woosher, dramatic thunder-front and aimless dead-leaf bearer! We didn't listen.

"Why, go to hell, you ever-shifting result of a marginal dip in air pressure!" was what we shouted.

Right proud of ourselves. Feeling fat and accomplished, *fait accompli*.

Come the gloaming, the sky had clouded over, traumatic.

The dream buns returned, gliding puffy and overstuffed before our failing eyesight. They were filled this time with minced horseflesh, the tender horseflesh of our youth, lukewarm and filling.

On frosted evenings, we'd eaten it fresh from the hands of nomadic priests, special men entrusted with flaying our extra, unwanted foals and geldings.

We yelped. Nipped by hunger, we jumped into hasty bouts of devouring. We whittled our one horse down to its skeletal structure, a calcified equine specimen, skinny and gleaming.

For all the good that it in the end did us. Something about the boiled horsemeat was in fact bad, had gone bad and rancid, spoiled and sickened. Now its sickness entered us. It spread among us.

Our vision clouded. Cataracts long-evaded caught up with us and extracted procrastinated vengeance. The pale opaque discs contracted the dyes of our faded irises. (Clearly, the virus's *funktionlust* was to pull its dark veil across our eyeses.)

What had once been a featurefull world now collapsed in an endless, crushing whiteness. No better than snow-dazzled zephyrs, we bumped and jostled; we bumbled about without any depth perception.

Lost in the grips of this sudden and healthless saddle blindness, we put our occluded peepers out. We poked them out of their mistery, put them out to pasture.

We were glad to have finally done it—eyes being suspected hangouts for most infections, the body's bacterial havens.

But I digest.

I, for one, couldn't stay confined to my house, despite my newfound lack of sight. Disguised as recyclables, I smuggled myself out nightly.

Limping along in my own silly manner, I stumbled into a trove of chocolate-covered roots, an underground cellar stocked with fudge-coated garlic, ginger, and miniature scallions.

I crammed my cheeks until they cramped. I gobbled tubers until I threw up marvy, and then some.

(It felt good to have a few dining options—albeit gross-outs.)

Still more occurred; the woords weren't finished with us yet. One of the foxes snuck in the nighttime and bit Emil, left its left incisors' long curved impression inside the boy's restrained right forearm.

Right away, Emil, still mad, became more like a fox. Coarse hair came to cover the pie of his pate; long tangled fur besmudged the cakey pudge of his brow.

His hands lay still. His knuckles abandoned their furious, forlorn popping and bending. (Before that, he'd studied the ways that hands can be folded over, the proper finger positions ensuring efficient prayer.)

Without Emil, we could have no assurance that our pleas for pleasures would properly enter the Æther, would ever be answered.

I hobbled about, protected from harm by my newest doodad, a licorice root necklace, a hand-fashioned charm. Its melting chocolate coating kept rubbing off, rudely smearing and badly staining my vintage rune-encarved cashmere tunic. Eleonora, gone rustic, mystic, mushroom-addled, ran about on her wily, dark errands, her pockets bulging. She'd sewn extra pockets into the denim pleats of her unwashed, unironed skirts, sewn extra denim.

I kept an eye on her; I kept an alert eye out for her. (I had not successfully blinded one of my two matching eyeballs.) (Which one had I spared? Can you hazard a guess?)

(It was the brighter.)

One of my eyes, I whispered sullenly, is just for you, Eleonora.

The brighter eye.

I called her Helen, or Healey on most days (when I got around to it, which wasn't that often).

Emil, cot-bound, hairlessly foaming, kept an eye out for Healey, too—a giant eye, and foxes see much better than most.

He observed her from La-La Land.

The atrophied hooks that were once his promising hands now lay clenched in hollow husks, unable to find release or purchase, hopelessly grasping . . .

Since Healey had always loved Emil the best, I kept my options open—and kept my opinions closeted, close to myself. To my little old lonesome.

I might have guessed . . . or I might have died . . . Who knows what happened in that slight time?

(Have you guessed who I am yet?)

Spring arrived, and with it the time of the migration.

The foxes and lionels and li'l elves lumbered north, lured away by the lengthening days, lusting after retreating glaciers.

They craved something glazed. They refused the glistening, defrosting forest.

Emil howled and raged and made one hell of a ruckus. Late one evening, at vespers, he broke his bounds and bounded off, fangs gnashing, after the pack.

“Well, that was bound to happen,” we one and all agreed. “It was a priori.”

But our factual attitude didn’t squelch the push-off. More things, dearer treasures, picked up their spot in the exodus, and abandoned us.

The steamed Chinese barbecue red pork buns stepped away as well, slid away on their harpsichord strings for good. They’d given up the ghoul, given up and gone to heavier environs, choosing to snub us, never to glide through our visions again.

We acted indifferent. “Begone, bad taste!” we chanted, all ballyhoo and bluster, belying our baby-faced, breathless bawling.

(We believed, albeit mistakenly, we’d benefit in the end—gain strength by means of bald-faced lying.)

Besides us settlers, only one animal now remained, and it wasn’t even really a real one: the ghost of the horse whose flesh we’d earlier eaten enthusiastically.

At some unspecified point it had shown up, spooky—a spectral stallion, a ghostly, gooey gelding. A dripping donkey, terrifying and transmogrifying.

(Shadeshifting, that is.)

It tiptoed among us, evading the trunks, an ectoplasmic skeleton equipped with sad, soft eyes and a wandering tongue.

Along its spine ran its ethereal, flaming mane.

Our Nightmare. Named Nemesis.

Eleonora woke up and wept and wept and wept.

“Emil, Emil,” she wantonly whispered.

(She wanted Emil.)

“But Emil has been transformed into a monstrous fox, and he’s scampered north, enamored by lost ice, and in any case he’s long gone and forgotten.” We tried to fill her in, to clarify. We used our flashcards and far-fetched acrostic mnemonics. “E’s Moved It, Lady!”

“Emil, Emil, Emil,” Eleonora whistled, her eyeteeth gritted and carelessly, sleeplessly, ceaselessly grinding. She cried and cried and cried. Her deeply racoonly-eyeshadowed eyes gave out like rusty waterspouts. (She could yelp, but she couldn’t help it.)

Her much chased-after chest heaved. Her deliriously hefty ass cheeks quivered. Mascara, muddied, a much-made up river, stained her cheeks. Gobs of mucus collected on her lips and in between her double chins.

She lost a lot of cellular water and wouldn’t take sips from the garden hose to put it back.

Her womanhood withered. Her skin stretched tight across her increasingly juiceless, joyless, calcified frame.

Her buttocks, once lovely, amazingly beautiful, once full and very bulbous, a doubly-precious pair of well-formed fleshy bubbles, wasted away, emaciated, irreplaceable.

“Eat, Eleonora, eat,” we tried to entice her. We left out for her offerings of the one last jerky-leather sliver we had left.

She sniffed at the bait but didn’t bite. Disinterested, sniffing, lacking incentives, she paid it her smallest disregards.

Her internal salt reserve, her interior holding, leaked out and went to be out all over her outside, encrusting her denim dress’s folds.

(In other parlance, her sodium, soluble, sold out.)

She crunched whenever and wherever she walked after that, when she restlessly moved from place to place, wobbling here and there, unsteady, whenever her skirt sashayed.

*

The newbie Nightmare stalked us while we fitfully slumbered, while we made our fumblingly crude attempts at something we tried to call slumber. (Who can grab shut-eye when a ghostly tongue might slobber after midnight over one's shoulder?)

We shuddered and shouldered our sleepless burden, scrunching up nonetheless beneath our woolen comforters. (Small comfort!)

At last the Nemesis moseyed by Eleonora's bunk. Thereafter, the Nightmare approached her routinely each night, when she wetly dropped off, when she sobbingly slept. It outstretched its tongue to lick her salty, curtained pleats.

"Too gross," we all agreed, feeling nauseated as one. "But at least she keeps the nasty thing sated."

When salted, the beast did not annoy us. It lounged on its haunches, tongue lolling, appeased.

Therefore we as a group collectively refused Eleonora's movements toward her bureau, her motions to change. (Not that we thought she wanted to.)

A newly-empowered bureaucracy, we thought this development Q.E.D. That is, unquestionable, and correct, and matter of course.

In time, Eleonora cried and cried her blinded eyes out. Worn out, unable to cry any more, she collapsed into sleep.

Wrapped up in her sheets, she formed a portrait: "The Greasy Sod, Turned Erratic by Eros, and Therefore Gone Errant." She demonstrated a dorky insouciance.

(It wasn't her own fault, probably. Nevertheless, we one and all blamed her.)

Another week passed, and then Eleonora passed from our presence.

She rode off bareback, legs squeezed tightly against the bumpy, saddle-less knobbed back of the Nightmare.

“That, too, was bound to happen,” we all once again unanimously announced (albeit anonymously).

Having found peace in total agreement—harmony, even. “All along, it was obvious to me. It was a pre-ordained happenstance, an event a priori.”

That said, we put little stock in the plot point as a portent.

Rather, reality preoccupied us. Our highest priority remained finding sources of food, without which we’d soon enough come to naught.

Sans daily ingestibles, we’d get up to naughty business, like touching our hands to our mouths out of habit, and lipping our nails, and licking our lifelines—even though our upturned, cupped palms held nothing palatable.

Intolerable!

Buds had erupted all over the branches, seemingly overnight. The corkscrew leaves spiraled outward, counterclockwise, unfurling from trees.

Released, they returned to us every word they’d collected last autumn. For over one week, the woords were alive with the pitch-perfect repetition of our harvested conversations.

The branches rang out, verso and recto, with spot-on mimicry of our voices. They barked out our small talk, sweet nothings, our phobias and fears, our interjections and conjunctions, half-recalled, half-forgotten arguments, each syllable sounding uncanny, impeccably formed and correct.

We wandered about and within an arboreal babble wonderland, a prerecorded verisimilitude of all our syntax.

Which more than impressed us. And did far more than to impress us.

The trees’ verbal nectar attracted new insects—beetles and worms that thirsted after the spoken word. Mute grubs and cicadas wanting their say. Larvae hankering after a turn of phrase.

This time, we refrained from sampling from the creepy-crawlies; we didn't devour them. Perhaps because they were busy ingesting our voices, we found ourselves wanting not to want them.

Furthermore, our stomachs had changed. We could eat a lot more; we could stomach more fodder than ever before.

For our long, grim stretch of hibernal suffering, the woords had modified us, had reworded us. We hungered, like the bugs, for the fibery plant stuff—nothing more.

Grass and ferns would from now on feed us; all sorts of succulents kept us content. We were able to ruminate on them, and they sustained us.

Above us, the insects and grubs, untroubled, nipped away at the whispery foliage. Day by day, the din decreased, ensuring the onset of a hush.

Then, one day, the summer sun arrived, boiling hot through the skeletal, stripped-bare branches.

It found us its scholars, it having schooled us the last summer. We now knew better than to look at it directly.

Still, it could kill us. It bleached us, or tried to. It tanned our skins. It turned us darker. It took out its fury on our hides.

We had to grow thicker fur to protect our delicate, overburdened sweat glands. And so our secretions stuck in our fur.

We turned into smelly-bellied wonders—moping along on worn hands and kneecaps, emitting strong odors, chomping fitfully at bunches of roots and of shoots.

Our glands rebelled. “We'll grow dirty this way,” we shouted, complaining, bellyaching. Hands numb, knees numb, most of our senses dusty and dumb, and drunkenly dangling. Next to useless.

We longed for a rest.

*

In the dismal midst of this, Miss Eleonora returned.

She loomed above us, mocking and distant, yet somehow concerned. We knew she was watching us from five paces; we heard her chuckling under her breath when we tried to face her. She danced away easily from our scrambling after her skirt.

“She can see us,” we grumbled, and knew without consultation that this was true. She had new eyes now, somehow. Through some method, she’d obtained ownership of new ocular apparatuses.

“I see you with adult eyes,” she asserted, smarmy and smug. “I found them waiting underneath my childhood eyes when I wept them out, when I let out my old ones, the trainer eyes that had witnessed my done-with childhood. What a great relief it was to at last have done with them! What an ecstatic revelation!”

We heard what she said, and we took her suggestion deep inside our innards. We dwelt on the passive piece of advice that was on offer.

Stretched out before us, insinuating, a sensuous promise.

Our interests piqued, we rejoined hands; we reconvened for another ballot. Some were quite taken with her proposal, their hands up already. Only one man stood in objection, but he was swiftly given a new set of marching orders. (It wasn’t me.)

We quickly agreed: we had no more real use for our useless eyeballs, whether we’d heard the lady rightly, whether the newly come-back Eleonora was conversing with us sincerely, whether the look-spheres in our foreheads were our childhood eyes or were not.

So we pried and so we pulled. We tugged at the formerly-prized little suckers. We wrenched them out. (It wasn’t horrendous.)

When we’d finished, we held globes of marble-sized gel in our hands. Minor bubbles of formerly functional substance. Goopy doodads, deadened gizmos. Ghastly as maggot-ridden remnants of cherry tomatoes.

Grouply groping, hastily guiding each other's matches, we dropped in cinders and cautiously cauterized the sockets. Then we dropped the defunct orbs into a gully, and merrily stomped them.

When we came to, Eleonora had already left, or was just about to. The last time I saw her, a fleeting glimpse, she was heading north, briskly stepping, sure-footed.

I waved her farewell as her presence faded. I gave voice to wishes of gentle wellbeing for her mature nature, her constantly fair and very ladylike, feminine virtues.

Thanks solely to her, I could see a lot better. My new adult eye could distinguish far more than I could ever have managed before, while an unripe kiddo.

So I poked that one remaining child's eye out, awaiting eventual transformation.

Perhaps a season or more might have passed while I lay there, writhing.

I might have died...or I might have been damned....

(Have you managed to guess yet who I am?)

That night, I dreamt I was a songbird perched high on a tree,
a plump high chickadee.

Wat hiney karee!

And each spring I fetched the fresh wattle to wing to my nest,
clutched it tight in my beak—

Wat caw hiney karee!

(At least, I had thought so.)

The autumn returned, triumphant, moonlit and frosty.

The leaves, dried-up, drained of small-talk and local color, hung dead on their branches. (Some had survived the insect populace's munches.)

The wind picked up where their whispering left off. It rustled through corpses. "You're somewhere else now, and homeless," it spitefully sussurrated.

A scythe-shaped moon loomed overhead, an unpleasant crescent. The Crossword of Damocles, somebody somewhere once called it, "The Harvest Star," a loony Promissar of damage. Cratered and cutting. Sickled and sickly.

For one whole month, not one feature of our sad environs changed. The woods didn't mutate or move a muscle. The bugs didn't pupate. The forest's minutiae remained immutable, down to the merest, nearest atom.

It dangled and balanced, delicate, breath held, swollen-cheeked, blue-faced, every nerve ending in an exertion, in a trembling.

Then everything fell in a loud exhalation, as though the whole world had given up on all its strength, had shuddered and let go all at once, had disintegrated.

We felt forlorn. We felt the very things we'd wanted to forget. Annoyed at this brand-new state of affairs, we crept through the wreckage, our funny bones broken, our grim smiles nothing other than grimaces and forced grins.

Bereft of our friends, our food stock, our foliage recorders, we took a vote. We vetoed the forest; we chose to a man to leave the nude, broken trees behind us. And to have done with the old.

We chewed on our souvenir strips of bark, our birch maple jerkies. We pulled on our trousers, our dirty jerseys. We packed up our meager private possessions. Property-laden, we hushed and meandered away from the tall plants, by now looking more than half-half-haggard and very barren.

Just shriveled matchsticks.

We walked with some arrogance and confidence and impromptu bouts of dance at the front of the wind, which hissed as always, cruelly insistent at our backs.

“We’re going home!” we pronounced, proleptically. Not wanting to suffer through its pessimistic pronouncements again.

We passed through small clearings, diminutive empty clefts where no proud trees had ever posed.

We crossed a stream, “The Serpentine,” whose stirring liquids didn’t interest. We weren’t into washing; we didn’t linger.

Ahead of us lay the edge of the forest, the woods’ outer limit, a signposted borderline: an odd land, an outpost only, an uncanny outlying, occluded margin.

A vast living silence lay beyond that, a kind of rapt stillness made manifest. A man could make his fortune there if he minded his trap. And didn’t gush.

We stared out into the mundane meadow, an undulating, patient pasture. Flies buzzed about and above our foreheads, going on about their business. *Huh*, we wondered. We’d all be dunked if this wasn’t a place with some potential.

We thought aloud, “This need not be so bad—an elegant pastoral pastime.”

Which made it sound fine. With the same grand stride, we hauled in our knees; we raised high our high-heeled heels and reared. Arms interlocked, ambulating in lockstep, walking as one, we stepped out into the waiting weards.

Many things happened.

GONE WENT THE R A B B I T

S h o m e D a s g u p t a

Me and Pepper went off into the night, to the field. She held my hand and we hunched against the tractor listening to the bugs again and looking at the stars.

I said, Let's go riding around.

We got into the tractor and bumped along the field. The quietness of the place was broken with the rattling of the engine and the sound of diesel. We breathed in hard.

Pepper said, Let's get out.

I turned off the engine.

Pepper said, Leave the headlights on.

I switched them on.

Pepper said, I want to be able to see you.

She took her dress off and put it on the hood of the tractor. In the headlights, she was surrounded by mosquitoes but they looked like fireflies, and Pepper looked like she was glowing. Her body curved in the dark and in the light.

She took off her bra and put it on the hood of the tractor. Her nipples poked out into the light. Her breasts were up and they looked gentle. She took off her underwear and folded it and put it on the hood of the tractor, and Pepper was naked in the dark and in the light, and her skin blended with the air, and I could see her with my eyes closed.

She came up to me and took off my shirt. She unbuckled my belt and unzipped my jeans. I lifted one leg and then the other. She pulled down my underwear and I stepped over it. She took my clothes and put them on the hood of the tractor.

Pepper said, I want to be able to see you.

There was a rabbit.

We licked each other's scabs and felt each other's bruises and pushed on these points to make us hold our breaths. Pepper's hands were searching my skin, and my tongue looked for teeth.

Pepper held me and moved me up and down. With my eyes closed, I could see her. There was a soft moan from Pepper. She put my hands on her chest and told me to pet her heart.

Our ribs pressed in and out—they wore so sore and in need of pillows, and we lay in the grass and rubbed ourselves in the blades. The headlights shined on as we rolled around trying to get hold of each other. Pepper's nose. Pepper's thighs. Pepper's fingers and toes. They were all in my mouth. We scratched the back of each other's necks and arms, and Pepper was quiet.

I couldn't see her eyes but I knew they were there. Pepper was there, and there were glimpses of the rabbit. It sat there, and it was just us.

There was a slit. It was open and wet and I went in. It was familiar and strange—a feeling of being home after being away for so long. When she was on top of me, I put my hands on her hips and pinched her skin. Her hands ran through her own hair, and there was a shadow of two being one.

When I was on top of her, I was close to her breath and licked her chin, and she stayed still and kept her legs wide, and her hands were around me, digging deep into my spine.

Sometimes I was behind her, and she looked back at me, and I looked at her, and our eyes were closed. And when we were done, she ran her hands across my chest, and I held her close so I could smell her mud and soil and grass. And she looked at me.

Who are you, Pepper said.

I said, Pepper.

I am Mutty, Pepper said.

I said, We know each other.

Don't leave, Pepper said.

I said, We are Pepper and Mutty.

And the rabbit left.

THE IMPROBABILITY OF BEING HERE NOW

René Georg Vasicek

Midnight. I fire up the Super Beetle and rocket though the Queens-Midtown Tunnel onto the L.I.E. I tilt the rearview mirror and watch the spires of Manhattan shrink . . . the Empire State Building, The Chrysler Building. It frightens me to leave the city. There's always the chance I'll never return.

I pump gas in Hicksville, Exit 41.

Long Island is a terminal moraine, the glacial debris left behind some twenty thousand years ago. In Suffolk County, darkness is real darkness. The pines grow shorter, more crooked. The air smells like salt and gasoline.

I know my father is around here somewhere, hiding in the pine barrens of east-central Long Island. One day he went hunting for wild mushrooms and disappeared. The police found his Toyota Land Cruiser (vintage 1976, pumpkin orange) in the woods behind the power plant. My mother was going to make her special "atomic soup."

I left Long Island to escape his absence.

*

My name is Ziggy Hrbaty and I am a Buddhist psychotherapist. My office is a lime-green Volkswagen Super Beetle convertible, vintage 1974. My dog Shep and I travel the country offering the “talking cure” to anyone willing to listen. Shep and I wear aviator goggles, which get so thick with splattered insects I can’t see a thing. The roadkill thus far: a rooster, a garden snake, a wild boar.

The Super Beetle’s vinyl rooftop protects us from the desert sun. At high noon in a cactus gulch on Interstate 25 near Elephant Butte, New Mexico, a state trooper pulled us over. Shep, a black German shepherd, doesn’t like it when strangers get too close to the car. So when the highway patrolman suddenly appeared at my window, Shep went berserk. Before I had a chance to say anything, the officer drew his revolver and aimed it at Shep’s head. That was a big mistake. I rolled up my window real fast, squeezing the patrolman’s hand. The gun dropped in my lap. I popped the clutch and sped off.

But the state trooper was persistent. He held on, standing on the running board as I accelerated: 5, 10, 15 mph! 25, 35, 45 mph! 55, 65, 75 mph! 79, 80, 81 mph! He was yelling something at me, but I couldn’t understand a word. So I rolled down my window to better hear him, and that’s when he lost his balance. In the rearview mirror the officer lay spread-eagle on the asphalt. He looked all right—perhaps slightly unconscious. I kept driving.

Two days later at a gas station I bought a newspaper with the headline:

STATE TROOPER FOUND WANDERING DESERT IN STATE OF AMNESIA.

The police officer couldn’t remember a thing. That was great news for Shep and me. But I was sad to learn the trooper lost his memory. He had no idea who he was. His wife Hilda was devastated. As were the couple’s two small children, Jake and Paulina. I also learned the officer’s name: Blake Pollock, age thirty-nine.

“O, Shep!” I cried. “What have we done?”

*

A few days later, Shep and I almost died on a dangerous S-curve right outside a town called Truth or Consequences, New Mexico. We narrowly avoided a head-on collision with a 1974 VW Karmann Ghia convertible, with a Saturn Yellow factory paint job. Behind the wheel was a pretty (and deadly) brunette. Karma, I thought. And she was headed the other way! I slammed on the brakes and made a sharp U-turn. Shep and I chased Karma as if our lives depended on it. She led us straight back to Elephant Butte.

We caught up with Karma in the parking lot of a Denny's Restaurant. She looked mighty hungry. I followed her inside. Poor Shep had to wait in the Super Beetle. "I won't be long," I promised. "I'll buy you a bacon cheddar burger, medium rare."

Shep wagged his tail.

I sat in a booth right behind Karma. Her back was to me. Delicate shoulders. Incredible posture. She ordered a Grand Slam breakfast. The plastic menu was the size of a door.

I ordered coffee.

Karma pulled a cell phone out of her purse. "Hello, Mama," she said. "It's Rebecca. I just got into town." I tried not to listen in. It was impossible. "How is he, Mama? Uh huh. Still no change? Uh huh. Yeah. I can't believe this. I really can't believe this." She hesitated. "Mama, I'll be there in a few minutes!"

I ordered a bacon cheddar burger.

Rebecca paid.

I paid.

Shep and I tailed Rebecca's VW to a house on Alhambra Street. The family name was painted on the mailbox in giant orange letters. She parked the Karmann Ghia in the gravel driveway. I glided the Super Beetle to a stop, shifted into neutral. The engine idled at 850 rpm. I sat there. Shep offered no advice.

I cut the ignition. Pulled up the emergency brake. Stepped out of the car.

Rebecca glared at me. "Are you following me?"

"I am. Are you Blake Pollock's sister?"

"Yeah. And who the fuck are you?"

"My name is Ziggy Hrbaty. I am a Buddhist psychotherapist who specializes in hypnosis. I think I can help your brother."

The Pollocks did not believe in Buddhist psychotherapy. Still, they had nothing to lose. Blake Pollock sat in the passenger seat of the Super Beetle. He was an empty cup. I almost envied him. Shep licked Blake's left ear.

"Okay Blake, I'm going to count backwards from sixty-eight. As I get closer to zero you will feel increasingly sleepy. Sixty-eight, sixty-seven, sixty-six."

I must have hypnotized myself. When I regained consciousness, Officer Blake Pollock was holding a pistol to my head. A Smith & Wesson .357 caliber pistol he had found in the Super Beetle's glove compartment. It was *his* pistol.

"I remember everything," he said. "You have the right to remain silent."

"O, the Miranda warning," I said. "Named for Ernesto Arturo Miranda, born in Mesa, Arizona in 1941."

Overwhelmed by a flood of memories, Blake broke down and cried for only the second time in his adult life. The Pollock family was ecstatic. His wife Hilda, the two kids, Rebecca, Blake's mother: now they all believed in *karma*. Even Blake, who decided to let Shep and me go free.

I always get excited when we arrive in a new town. "O, Shep! This might be the place." But whenever I get out of my Super Beetle I start to feel weird, like a tortoise stripped of its shell. In the small towns of America people stare. The town of Dinosaur, Colorado was no exception.

Population: 319.

After driving east on Brontosaurus Boulevard I made a hard right onto Stegosaurus Freeway, which is a sort of “main street” that runs through “downtown” Dinosaur: a gas station, a diner, a post office. It was perfect. The Super Beetle was thirsty; Shep and I were hungry; I needed postage stamps. When I pulled into the gasoline station, an elderly white-haired man in overalls approached the car. I jumped out real fast.

“Sir, I know you’re a full service station, but I’ve got this crazy dog. Mind if I pump myself?”

“Suit yourself,” he said, and smiled a gummy smile. “Is that a Super Beetle?”

“Yep, it sure is. Nineteen seventy-four.”

“You got a German dog and a German car.”

“Yeah, I guess I do. I never thought of it that way. And I’m not even German!”

“Passing through Dinosaur?”

“Not sure. Might see if I can drum up some business here.”

“In Dinosaur? Are you a salesman?”

“No, I’m a Buddhist psychotherapist.”

“Come again?”

“I’m a Buddhist psychotherapist.”

“Are you from California?”

“No,” I laughed.

“New York?”

“Yes.”

“That’s big there, ain’t it?”

“Yes and no.”

“And you’re taking it on the road?”

“Yep, the Super Beetle is my office.”

“You’re shitting me.”

“I am not.”

“People talk to you . . . in the car?”

“Yep, they sit in the passenger seat. Others prefer to lay down in the backseat, like a psychiatrist’s couch.”

“What about the dog?”

“He stays in the car. Shep knows the difference between a client and a stranger.”

“You really are shitting me.”

“I am not.”

“Dinosaur ain’t ready. Not for this.”

“Forget Dinosaur. Are *you* ready?”

I got a free tank of gas in Dinosaur. Can’t go into too much detail. Doctor-patient confidentiality. So I’m going to tell you anyway.

His name was Jasper Aaron Fink. Born 1929 in Thief River Falls, Minnesota. During the Great Depression, Jasper’s family moved to Washington State. His father worked as a machinist in the shipyards of Tacoma. His mother worked as a waitress at a luncheonette. An only child, Jasper invented two imaginary older brothers: Knut and Lars. He even set a place for them at the dinner table.

“As if I don’t have enough mouths to feed,” Jasper’s father joked at the dinner table.

“Yes, Papa, but soon Knut and Lars will be of age to work,” Jasper pleaded.

“And what about you, son? Will you work the steel?”

“Oh no, Papa. I don’t want to work the steel.”

“If you don’t work the steel, you’ll have to work with people. And let me tell you something, Son. Steel is predictable. People are not.”

“Let the boy be!” Jasper’s mother cried, “He’s eight years old for Christ’s sake!”

The next day Jasper's father was killed in a freak accident at the shipyard.

"Smells like urine back here," Jasper observed.

"Yes, I know," I said. "Shep leaks sometimes. He's getting older. But go on . . . tell me about the funeral."

"Don't remember much. I do remember Knut saying: 'Papa was a good man, a hard man. He worked the steel. But now he's gone.'"

I interrupted. "Wait, are you saying that Knut was at the funeral?"

"Of course he was."

"Tell me more."

"And then Lars put his hand on my shoulder: 'It's up to us now.'"

"How did that make you feel?" I asked.

"Knut and Lars spoke the truth."

"How old was Knut?"

"Fifteen."

"And Lars?"

"Thirteen."

"Earlier you told me that Knut and Lars were *imaginary*."

"They *were*," Jasper said. "But after Papa died, they became real. Lars still works at the post office. See for yourself."

"Nah, see Jasper's got it wrong," Lars told me through the Plexiglas window. "I'm as real as steel."

"Yes you are," I observed.

So back I went to the gas station.

"Jasper Aaron Fink, I think you've been pulling my leg."

"I thought you'd think that," Jasper replied. "Let's get back in the Beetle and I'll tell you more."

“You got Slurpees?” I asked thirstily.

“What do I look like, Seven-Eleven? I sell Coke bottles from a machine. Want one?”

“Coca-Cola. O, yeah!”

“Are you scared?” I asked Shep. We were chasing a tornado in Frogville, Oklahoma. He howled like a wolf as I steered the Super Beetle towards the black-purple twister. The devastation left in the tornado’s wake was straight out of Revelations: giant trees uprooted, mangled cars and overturned trucks, pulp-flattened houses. The twister fled, pausing for a brief moment (as if it might turn back on us), before disappearing over the lip of the prairie horizon.

Shep and I were delighted the Super Beetle hadn’t been devoured by the tornado. Driving through the ruins of Frogville, I realized this town was going to need a lot of Buddhist psychotherapy. We pulled into the parking lot of the only motel left standing. The Armadillo Motel. An electric sign read: VACANCY.

Inside I found a woman hiding beneath the reception desk. (Actually, Shep sniffed her out.) “The twister is gone,” I assured her. She was on her hands and knees.

“I know, I know,” she said. “I just dropped a Buffalo nickel on the carpet.”

Her name was Abigail. She was pretty in a weird way. Thirty-nine years old. Never married. A space between her two front teeth. “Screwed so many guests I lost count!” she snorted. Abigail inherited the motel from her parents. They were killed seven years earlier by a tornado while driving north on Interstate 35. Now she laughs about it, “Oklahoma is Oklahoma. If a twister doesn’t kill you, the boredom will!”

Abigail sat in the Super Beetle and talked to me for exactly fifty-five minutes. “Frogville is called Frogville because we got so many friggin’ frogs. Giant bullfrogs! Big enough to swallow a duckling! Seen it happen in Wilbur’s

pond. The poor mother duck was freaking out. If you ask me that's worse than a dingo stealin' your baby. 'A bullfrog stole my baby!'"

Abigail gave me the keys to Room 8, right next to a Pepsi Cola vending machine. Shep and I slept at the Armadillo Motel for three nights. I half expected Abigail to knock on my door. She never did.

Shep's long, black nose sniffed something peculiar in the black swamps of Arkansas. I pulled off Highway 60 to investigate. We drove through towering stands of cypress and tupelo. Sure enough, we found a real stinker, a dead body washed up on the banks of the Arkansas River. I called 9-1-1. The Sheriff showed up in a black Mustang police cruiser. Dark sunglasses. AR-15 assault rifle. He walked around the body. Crouched down. Dug his fingers into the mud. Mumbled something. His gaze shifted to Shep and me.

"Dog sniffed a weird odor. Is that right?"

"That's right, Sheriff."

"Mmmm."

"Mmmm?"

The Sheriff cracked a dry smile. "We got eight teenage girls missing since last April. And you show up in Toad Suck, Arkansas in a Volkswagen Beetle. New York plates. And your shepherd just happens to find one of the missing girls. Now that's a coincidence. Ain't it?"

"It's a Super Beetle," I corrected.

"Super Beetle! Super Dog!" he straightened and leveled the rifle. "Where are the other seven girls?"

Shep growled.

"Heel the dog! Or you're both dead!"

"Shep, get back in the car!" I snapped. He jumped into the backseat of the Super Beetle.

“Lucky dog. Unlucky man.”

“Sherriff, calm down,” I whispered, raising my hands, opening my palms. “I’m here to help the people of Toad Suck, Arkansas. I’m here to help you.”

“Is that right? You’re here to help *me*?” he mocked. “I got a friggin’ reasonable suspicion that you’re the Swamp Monster.”

“The Swamp Monster?”

“Don’t play dumb. That’s what the newspapers are calling him. You. Rapese and sodomizes teenage girls. Strangles ‘em with jumper cables. Dumps their bodies into the swamp. But I don’t need to tell you about the Swamp Monster, do I?”

“Sherriff, it sounds like you’re under incredible pressure to solve these murders. I think can help. I’m a Buddhist psychotherapist.”

He lowered the rifle. “You’re a Buddhist?”

“I am.”

“Now that’s really freaky. So am I.”

“Really?”

The Sheriff got defensive. “What . . . Mr. New Yorker doesn’t expect to find Buddhists in Toad Suck, Arkansas? Free your mind, son. Be here now.”

Shep and I drove the Volkswagen Super Beetle through the hills and hollows of West Virginia in search of coal miners in desperate need of Buddhist psychotherapy. Nerves shot from dynamite blasts (a million pounds of explosives!) and property lost to mountaintop removal. The villages of Mud and Big Ugly razed to make a road; the earth eviscerated to reveal the precious seam of coal beneath. The debris dumped into nearby valleys and creeks. Fish deformed by heavy metals.

I met A.J. Adkins outside a general store. He was seated on the porch drinking iced tea from a mason jar. Born in 1905, A.J. was sixteen years old when

union organizer Billy Blizzard led an army of ten thousand striking miners in the Battle of Blair Mountain in 1921. I offered A.J. a ride in the Super Beetle if he would tell me his story.

“Believe it or not, I never fired a pistol before August 1921. Winchester rifles, sure. I’d gone squirrel hunting a hundred times. But never a pistol, and not at a man.”

I shifted into first gear and the VW crawled up a steep mountain road.

“I shit my pants when Gatling machine guns opened fired on us. Steel rained down from the sky. Biplanes dropped World War One shrapnel bombs. I never imagined trench warfare in West Virginia, and yet there I was, fighting for a reasonable hourly wage. Nowadays that’s hard to explain to a sixteen-year-old kid working at Wal-Mart.”

Einstein says the faster I drive my VW Super Beetle through spacetime, the slower the clock ticks (for me.) At a top speed of 81 miles per hour, I probably can’t outrace death. I know that, but Shep doesn’t. He thinks we’ll live forever. (Thank God for dogs.)

We are caught in our moment. Thinkers. Loners. Wanderers. Buddhist monks without religion. And yet I wouldn’t trade this state of mind for anything. Scientists now believe that REM sleep can occur before birth, in utero. Dreaming as a sort of “practice” for human consciousness. Lately I’ve been thinking about the improbability of being here now. Shep, you, me. The odds are against it. And yet here we are.

AVONDALE MINING LIST

M i c h e l e H a r r i s

from New York Tribune, New York, NY 9 Sept, 1869

JONES, EDWIN D of Hanover. Head thrown back, and tea-can slung around his neck. Found among the sixty-seven. Wife.

HOWELL, Chern, name in illegible ink on arm; two fingers off. Lived at Walsh Hill, Plymouth. Wife and four children. Eyes closed, mouth open.

REESE, DAVID, Jr., Plymouth (Coal Street). Father and brother brought out dead. Mouth all bloody; tongue between teeth. Single.

HATTON, Willie, about 10 yrs old, Plymouth.

MORGAN, Samuel R., Plymouth, wife and four children, three of whom boys, were in the mine and brought out dead.

SMITH, Henry, Avondale. Wife and four children. Hands clenched as though guarding against a blow; shirt up around his neck; face quiet.

JONES, Thomas, Plymouth, wife and children. Buried one child last Sunday.

ALLEN, William, Hanover, leaves a wife, soon to be a mother.

HUGHES, Thomas, Walsh Hill, Plymouth; face very red; arms limp; fists clenched.

EDWARDS, W. Edwards, Plymouth (Coal Street); head horribly bloated; discolored and bloody; thirty years old. Wife and one child.

WILLIAMS, William, Hyde Park, 14 yrs of age, who had only worked there one day.

PYMATUNING SPILLWAY, PENNSYLVANIA

M i c h e l e H a r r i s

1.

Fifty cents will buy you a loaf of bread
to hock into this lake.

Green speckled slices fishtail
in the current, thousands of fat

carp muscling to the surface.
Air screams in their gills

as they open themselves
to thick scraps that bob,

bubble, and vanish.

2.

You spilled dozens of back roads
behind you so your children

could now lob rank bits
of bread into the spillway, watch carp

flap and writhe, slap against
their own bodies, make the green water boil.

3.

These fish know you:
thousands of widening mouths

gnawing air, only a few catching
the fistful of bread you toss.

They know your white-
knuckled drive home, your face cut

by headlights, your life, the same
possibility of bread.

BOX TRAP

J u s t i n D . A n d e r s o n

Ted and Lucy came out of the house. Neither immediately checked the box trap by the door to the basement. They sat down on the plastic chairs on the front porch next to each other and crossed their legs. They looked out past the railing in front of them at their wide yard that ended at the road. They watched two cars pass on the road. Then they looked at each other. Ted looked at Lucy from the tip of her toes to the top of her head. Lucy looked at Ted from the tip of his toes to the top of his head. They smoked cigarettes. Ted leafed through the newspapers that had accumulated on the porch. When he was done with one, he handed it to Lucy. As Lucy finished the newspapers, she folded them neatly in a stack beside her chair.

“Ought to check the trap,” Ted said.

Lucy looked through the last of the newspapers.

“Ought to check,” he said. Then, to himself, “Ought to.”

Lucy nodded her head slightly.

“May as well check the trap,” Ted said.

Lucy nodded.

“Wonder if the cat’s in there?” he said. “Won’t know until I check and see.”

Lucy flipped the page of the newspaper.

“I guess I can wonder if the cat’s in there,” Ted said. “I can see it in my head. I can see the cat circling tightly inside the trap. I can imagine the cat has eaten the can of tuna I set in there as bait. I can see the cat’s fur, the white stripes on the light brown. I also can imagine the cat as a calico. Or black. In each of these visions of the cat, the eyes are always the same. Sometimes the cat is fat. Other times, it is thin and malnourished. Sometimes the cat wears a collar with a little silver bell dangling off it. Other times, it is a glass pendant. Still other times, the cat wears no collar and is wild.”

Lucy finished the paper and folded it. She placed it on top of the stack.

“We’ll go together and see,” she said.

Negotiation ensued between the couple about this “going together” to check the box trap. Ted’s argument centered on responsibility; Lucy’s on their marriage and how they should be partners in even the most banal events of their life. Neither strayed far from their rhetoric. When each realized that absolute persuasion was impossible, Ted pulled a nickel out of his pocket and flipped it. The coin came down heads and they both stood and ventured off the porch and made their way around the house to the back, to the door to the basement.

They stood before the trap—a rectangular cube of thin-gauged metal caging. The metal was painted a light gray. On top of the trap was a metal handle. Beneath the handle was a solid plate of metal on which a red “3” was painted. The trap works thus: The animal, enticed by the food set at the rear of the cage, walks inside the open end and steps on a kind of metal plate. Once the animal steps on this plate a wire is tripped and a piece of cage on two swivel hinges releases and the piece of cage falls behind the animal on its way to the food. After

this, the animal cannot exit the cage. The mechanism is simple in its design. The mechanism had worked for Ted and Lucy.

“This was not a part of anything I had imagined,” Ted said as he looked into the trap.

Each stood with their arms hanging at their sides. Lucy stepped one foot onto the other and balanced her body.

I’ve dumped out the cage in the woods far from the house. The animals can have it. I have to mow this meadow soon. The grass is getting high. Lucy fears snakes and snakes proliferate in tall grass like this. I’ll have to find the time to mow. I’ll have to borrow the tractor from Mr. Hilbert. I’ll have to have him deliver the tractor here by way of his truck and trailer. Why don’t you just buy a tractor of your own? Then you wouldn’t have to deal with Mr. Hilbert, who is a nice enough old man, but sometimes I see it in his face that he’s fed up with helping you all the time to complete your chores on the property. He’s got property and chores of his own. More chores than *you*. I know he has cows and chickens. Not because I’ve been over there, but because he told me when he first stopped by here when we were moving our things in. He’s a nice enough old man. I think he misses his wife. I can’t think about going up to some hilltop cemetery to visit Lucy’s grave like he does his wife’s. Lucy will never die. Nor will I. That’s foolish, Ted, to think like that. Of course you will die. And you know you think about it always. You and Lucy both. That’s why you haven’t bought a tractor of your own. What’s the use? One day it will belong to a dead man and woman. This grass you wade through now will still be growing after your death. I know all this. I don’t know why you just don’t get it over with. You’re tired of thinking about the imminence. It wearies me, the thinking. Lucy, too. We’ve talked about it. We talk about it a lot. But Lucy holds on to life with a sentimentality I don’t understand. My pant legs are soaked from this grass. What kind of man am I to let this meadow get

like this? I'm a man who soon will be dead. That's what kind of man. I do like the sight of these little white flowers that sprout when I let this grass get high. I wonder what they are called? It doesn't matter. Look at that deer you just jumped. It will die, too. Someday. What's the lifespan of a deer? I don't know. You don't know anything. I know things. I know how to love my wife, for instance. I obviously know how to trap a cat and dispose of it. I know how to drive a car. I can recognize when my body is ill, hungry, thirsty, tired, horny, dying. I know things. Hilbert. He's a nice enough old man. Why doesn't he think about dying like I do? Why is he always keeping up with things? I can imagine him now, out on his tractor mowing or plowing, whatever he does. Throwing feed down for the chickens. Cleaning out their coops. Eating the eggs they lay for breakfast. Is he milking one of his cows? Are they even dairy cows? Is he slaughtering a cow? Seems pointless to raise one up from a calf only to kill it or have it killed. That's what he doesn't see. That it's pointless. Nobody seems to recognize this. That's why I see people driving along that road over there at all times of day. They don't recognize what I recognize. Or they do. Then why don't they—? I don't know. But they know. And they smile sometimes and do things with other people. Groups of people. I do things. For instance, Lucy and I went to the animal shelter to rent this box trap. That's something. I'll go alone to return the trap, though, so Lucy doesn't get upset. She got so upset when we picked it up because of that dog warden. Why are you narrating to yourself? I'm just thinking. Look at this cage. It's still stained with the fluids and hair of that cat. I'll have to wash it off before I take it back. What is that I just stepped on? Bend down and see. Just an imperfection of soil. A little hump. You see Lucy on the back porch? Why doesn't she wave to me? You wave. Oh, Lucy. You blow me a kiss. Why do you cling to this sentimentality? I know why you didn't want to walk out here with me. The snakes. I haven't seen any. But certainly they are slithering around beneath this grass. She is disturbed by the idea of snakes. Especially when she cannot see

them. I'm not bothered by this knowledge, even though I dislike snakes and am a little afraid of them.

"Get rid of it?" Lucy said, her palms on the railing of the porch.

Ted nodded.

"I have to clean out this cage before I take it back," Ted said.

"Why don't we go together?"

"I can't stand the smell any longer," Lucy says at the kitchen table. "You can smell the urine. How does it get in here?"

Ted drinks from his coffee.

"I need to fix the basement door," he says. "There's a hole in the bottom corner where the wood rotted."

"Think that's where they get in?"

"Almost certainly."

Lucy holds herself. "Just the thought that some filthy cat is infiltrating this house and befouling it."

"I've never seen it," Ted says. "Have you?"

"No."

"Then how do we know what it is?"

"I don't know."

"Why are you assuming it's a cat?"

"It's troubling to assume it's anything else."

"I need more coffee." Ted rises and refills his cup. "Maybe it's a raccoon," he says over his shoulder.

"Don't say that."

"What if it is?" Ted sits back down at the table.

"It's a cat."

"What if it's a rat?"

“It’s a cat.”

“What if it’s a dog?”

“It’s not a dog.”

“How do you know?”

“Because if it was a dog, it would probably want to come up here and live with us.”

“Not if it’s a wild dog. It’d be more interested in eating us.”

“It’s a cat.”

“What if it’s a human?”

“Same as with the dog.”

“Humans are secretive,” Ted says and drinks of coffee. “And prideful. They wouldn’t want fellow humans knowing that they’ve had to resort to sneaking into someone’s basement for shelter (Lord knows how they get the door unlocked) and finding no other option but to urinate in there.”

“It smells like cat urine.”

“How do you know?”

“My mother always had cats.”

“I can’t smell anything.”

“I can.”

“What do you want to do?”

Lucy sits back in her chair.

“I want to get rid of whatever’s getting in the basement,” she says. “Cat, rat, raccoon, dog, human.”

“What are our options?”

“We could get a gun.”

“Then what?”

“You could wait out on the back porch with the gun and shoot whatever’s getting in.”

“How long would I have to wait?”

Lucy throws up her arms. “As long as it takes.”

“I don’t want to kill anything, Lucy.”

“Okay, what about trapping it?”

“How?”

“I don’t know.”

“Like with a snare or something?”

“I don’t know. You’re a man, aren’t you? Why don’t you know how to do these things?”

“I know things.”

“What do you know?”

“I know a lot of things.”

“If I’d have known that I was marrying such an unknowledgeable and helpless man, well—”

“Then why did you marry me?”

Lucy reaches across the table and touches the back of her husband’s hand. She withdraws her hand.

“Who would know about trapping animals?” Ted says.

“A trapper.”

“I don’t know any.”

“What about the dog warden? Wouldn’t you think they would know?”

“Maybe.”

“Why don’t you call them?”

“Why don’t you?”

“You know how I get.”

“You know how *I* get.”

“One of us is going to have to get over it and call. You call Mr. Hilbert sometimes.”

“So?”

“Just imagine that the man who answers the phone at the dog warden office is Mr. Hilbert and you’re asking a favor.”

“How do you know it’s going to be a man who answers?”

“I don’t.”

“Then it might be nothing like calling Hilbert. What if there’s a confrontation between us?”

“We both need to learn how to anticipate that kind of thing,” Lucy says. “You could call on the kitchen line and I’ll go up to the bedroom and get on the phone there. We’ll talk to whoever answers together.”

“Okay.”

Ted and Lucy wake up and shower and dress. They get in the car. Ted is at the wheel. He tries to start the car, but the engine won’t turn over. He tries again, unsuccessfully. He looks over at his wife.

“Wonder what’s wrong?”

“Pop the hood and see.”

“What do I know about cars?”

“Just see. It might be apparent.”

Ted looks at his wife and sighs. He reaches down and pulls the lever to pop the hood. Then he gets out of the car and walks around to the front and lifts the hood up. Lucy gets out, too, because it’s hot in the car. They stand together, looking over the engine.

“Why is that wire hanging loose?” Lucy asks, pointing at the battery.

“I don’t know.” Ted reaches down and puts the wire on the battery terminal. They look at each other and Ted closes the hood. They get back in the car. It starts. Ted backs the car out of the drive and onto the road. They head in the direction of town. They see Hilbert, wearing overalls, on his knees planting

flowers near the road. Ted honks the horn. Hilbert looks up from his work and waves. Ted and Lucy wave back. They continue out the road. They move through deep shade and bright sunlight, depending on the thickness of the trees. They come to an intersection and Ted stops at a stop sign and then turns left. They pass houses, a gas station. The structures accumulate and the number of trees declines as they get nearer to town. They arrive at the animal shelter, where the dog warden keeps his office. They emerge from the animal shelter with Ted carrying the box trap by the handle. Lucy gets in the passenger seat and Ted sets the trap in the backseat. Then he gets in the driver's seat and starts the car. They travel the other direction on the roads that brought them to the animal shelter.

"My God," Lucy says as they get nearer their home. "That was uncomfortable."

"I know."

"I didn't know he'd already closed up for the day."

"Yes. He was quite rude about it."

"I didn't like that at all."

"Me neither."

"He acted like he didn't remember that we'd just called."

"That was strange," Ted says. "Look at my hand." He takes his hand off the wheel and holds it out to show Lucy how it trembles.

"Look at mine," she says and shows him both of hers.

"Let's just get home," Ted says.

Hilbert is still planting flowers as they pass, but this time Ted does not honk and Hilbert does not look up. Ted goes faster through the curves and straightaways until he curls into the drive. Lucy gets out of the car and flees inside the house. Ted pulls the trap out of the backseat and hurries with it around to the back of the house. He goes up on the back porch through to the kitchen and pulls a can of tuna out of the pantry. He works the can opener and bends off

the lid through torsion. Then he carries the can out back through the door to the back porch, down the steps and over to the box trap. He has to work to get the hatch up because of the fresh paint, but he does it and sets the can of tuna down on the bottom of the trap. He forces closed the back hatch and sets the trap. He goes inside.

We had a problem. A stray cat had been getting in through a broken corner of the door to the basement of our house. The house belongs to Ted's father. His father allowed us to live there for free. His father paid our bills. Set up all our utility accounts. He had groceries delivered to us. Imagine if you were the father of people like us.

Ted did not speak to his father, because he was ashamed of his circumstances. When the telephone rang, we didn't answer it. It was always Ted's father. No one else called, unless it was Mr. Hilbert up the road wanting to know if Ted was finished with the tractor, which Ted had been borrowing from Mr. Hilbert less and less. He used to borrow it once a week in the spring and summer. Ted used to ask Mr. Hilbert for all kinds of assistance when we were first setting up the house—to borrow paint brushes, paint, a sweeper, the tractor to mow, tools.

Ted's father had come out to the house on a few occasions, but we acted as if no one was home. Ted's father didn't have a key to the house, so he couldn't get in to check on us. Once, Ted was out on the front porch sitting when he saw his father pull into the drive. Ted ran inside. The father pounded on the front door and the back door to the kitchen and on all the windows he could reach from the ground around the house. "Come on, Ted!" he hollered. "I just want to make sure you're okay!" We got in the closet up in one of the spare bedrooms and closed the door. We held each other. I started to cry. Ted said "Shh!" Then we stayed silent until we heard his father's pickup start and its tires rumble over the gravel.

Anyway, like I said before, we had a stray cat getting into the basement. The cat pissed everywhere. Stunk up the whole place. It wasn't bad in the winter, but as summer approached, the smell of cat piss became unbearable. At least for me. My mother had cats and I hated them. I demanded that something be done about it. But Ted didn't know what. He refused to stalk and kill the animal, like I suggested. I wanted to buy a gun. I didn't know that Ted already had a handgun hid in the crawlspace in the basement. We ended up calling the dog warden, who told us we could rent a box trap for a \$50 deposit and catch the cat. "Just bring in whatever you catch and we'll take care of it," the dog warden said.

After that phone call, it was two weeks before we finally got out of bed and drove to rent the trap. It was almost seven in the evening by the time we got to the animal shelter. The dog warden had already closed the place, he said. When Ted told the dog warden about how we'd called about the trap, the dog warden, a hard man in a green uniform with filth under his fingernails and a scruff of uneven beard, bore down on Ted oppressively. He told us he was closed. But he would take our money and loan us a trap. He made us give him all our pertinent information—names, address, telephone number—just in case, the dog warden said, we were trapping someone's pet. Ted tried to explain that the cat could not be someone's pet, though he imagined it in many different forms. "I need the information anyway," the dog warden said, pushing the documents on the clipboard across the desk at Ted. "We got laws in this state." Ted filled out the information.

When we returned home, I went in the house and shut the curtains and Ted hurriedly set up the trap and came inside himself. And there we stayed. We slept a lot. We moved from room to room in the big house. Sitting for a while, days even, on the floor of rooms in which there was no furniture. We ate little. Drank a lot of coffee. Smoked. Fucked. We kept the curtains closed and disconnected the phone. We smelled something rotting, but neither of

us mentioned it. Hard to tell how long we stayed in there. I didn't count the days.

It was my suggestion that we see what the weather was like. Ted cried harder than me. He was inconsolable. When I said this, we were up in one of the spare bedrooms, lying on the floor on a blanket. We were naked, having just finished. Our skin was slick. The house was oppressively hot with all the windows shut up and it being summer. "Come on, honey," I said and rubbed Ted's back. His body heaved as he sobbed. "Honey, we have to pull out of this," I said. But I didn't mean it. I just wanted a breath of air.

We put on clothes and held hands as we descended the staircase. Ted pushed open the front door. On the other side, a heap of sixteen tightly rolled newspapers were piled. The subscription was another gift of Ted's father. We sat on the porch and read the papers, one by one. I'd forgotten about the box trap. But Ted remembered. We checked the trap.

Whatever we'd caught we couldn't identify. It was just some black hair and bones and muscle scattered on the floor of the trap. Something had gotten in there and torn up the carcass. Ted took the trap out through the wide meadow in the back and dumped it in the woods. I watched him as he came back through the high grass. I knew what he was thinking. I was thinking the same thing, though he thought that I didn't think about it like he did. He cleaned out the cage with a hose and set it in the backseat of the car.

I smiled at him when he came back. He smiled. We looked at each other and smiled. We went inside the house again. We held hands and swung our arms like children as we went up the staircase.

The child the mom the dad the girl

L i n d s a y H u n t e r

The child is like, diaper? The dad is like, remote. The mom wring wring wring.
The girl is like tooth, meet tooth. Grind grind grind rest. The TV You won't
believe Sources are saying The man was alive before the fire started Act now!
The mom mix. The mom salt. The mom hands under the water the mom swollen
burned hands What a beautiful day! The girl warm wet underwear. The girl shh,
shh, the girl these kinds of secrets. The child finger in nose. The child Oh inside
my nose got teeth too? The dad Stop that, you nasty the dad eeeeeeee goes his
back. The dad tooth to tooth the dad the tourniquet in his spine. The mom Sigh,
the mom waterfall of breaths. The meat in the pan the burned man. The magnet
on the fridge the number to call. The magnet Large Sausage! The girl Large
Sausage! these kinds of secrets the underwear goes stick. The child Now what's
in this here diaper the child behind the couch. The child penny at his toe the
child penny on his tongue. The girl diary the girl no more hearts. The girl diary
the girl Large Sausage! The child fingers in the diaper mush. The child Oh this

what it's like to work? The child finger on his tongue. The child the taste wrong
 all wrong the child mouth to scream. The child the penny sucked into the throat.
 The mom What a beautiful day! the mom wring wring wring the mom towel
 for neck. The dad Mmm-hmm. The dad no blink. The TV Aaah! Aaah! The TV
 We've got you the TV we've always had you. The dad Hmm? The mom The day!
 The towel gasp gasp. The child gasp gasp. The girl Dear Diary the girl Aching
 void the girl Oh, oh, oh. The mom the settled pan. The mom the phone in the
 bedroom. The mom A-ha, the phone! The child huc? Huc? The dad his mind
 going What was that girl's name her tiny hard breast I was so young so young
 The meat in the pan Again the meat in the pan My college math class! Another
 girl, *the* girl the dad thrust thrust thrust her jellied flesh beery breath her black
 hair! The dad And now? And now? The girl Diary, I'm going to. The dad And
 now. The dad What is this even? The TV going skssshhhh, the TV Tonight our
 top story. The child the penny! The child wring wring huc! The girl fingers in the
 panty mush. The girl Am I gross? Am I gross? The mom the woman's voice the
 mom hang up. The mom her heart going huc? Huc? The phone ring ring. The
 mom the whispered screaming Hello? The man's voice Hello, I'm in the laundry,
 quickly, what do you need? The mom Oh the mom Well the mom I. The girl
 Oh! The girl Oh, oh! The child the chubby feet planted! The child the mom? The
 child the dad? The child the girl, even? The dad And then there was the one with
 all that red hair yes yes. The dad I'm a man! The dad the Now? in his pants. The
 child the frightened barking fart. The dad Who did that? the dad No, not now.
 The girl everything bluish. The girl her head filled with bees. The girl Diary, I've
 been pollinated. The man I can't. The mom I understand. The man The dryer has
 stopped, so. The mom Yes of course, goodbye. The mom thinking how the man
 had said Your creamy breasts how the man's hair had been mussed like a boy's the
 mom Creamy! The mom the waterfall. The girl the new pair of underwear. The
 girl Diary, diaries are for girls the girl the diary tossed into the closet. The child

the chubby feet! The child one two! The child What's after two? The child one two! The mom the friend on the line. The friend I've got dinner going the mom Me, too. The friend Jakey's got thrush the mom Oh? The mom thinking So nice to have been properly fucked, excuse my French! The mom Talk to you later the friend Mm-hmm. The dad the Now? The dad Why not? The dad Maybe I've got an itch! The dad *thong* goes the recliner *eeeeeee* goes his back. The child one two! The child her door! The child Huc, huc! The girl Mom, the baby! The mom So bitchy! The mom She'll live. The dad I'm a prisoner! The child the chubby hands on the door. The girl Agggghhhh! The mom They ruined my breasts, the both of them. The dad Can't a man tend to an itch? The TV For just twenty-five cents a day. The mom My breasts! The child push! The child the faulty latch! The child blam! The girl Get up! The girl Get out! The mom Fucked! The dad Now, now! The girl Choking! The mom The dad? The dad Shut up! The meat in the pan Shh! The meat in the pan a burned man! The girl whap! The girl whap! The child blork, the glistening penny! The girl Ha! The mom Who? The child One the child Two the child *Three!* The dad Free? The dad Free?

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Mike Meginnis + Tracy Rae Bowling ¶ are the editors of *Uncanny Valley*. Visit them at uncannyvalleymag.com.

This has been Uncanny Valley : Issue 0002
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