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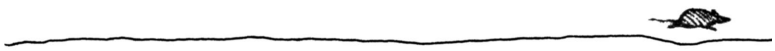

Fairy Tale Review

The Brown Issue

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Fairy Tale Review

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Fairy Tale Review is devoted to literary fairy tales and to contemporary writers working with the aesthetics and motifs of fairy tales. How can fairy tales help us to go where it is we are going, like Jean Cocteau's magical horse? We hope to learn. Fairy Tale Review also seeks to celebrate and preserve traditional fairy tales through its initiatives.

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Opening quote?

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Editor's Note

L. ANNETTE BINDER

Lay My Head

Babies weren't frightened of her face. They didn't yet know sickness. They saw only her eyes, how big they were. There was a baby girl before her in the aisle. A little round-faced girl, no older than two. Her ponytail went straight up like a paint brush, and her mother had tied a pink ribbon around it. The girl stood up on the seat while her mother read magazines. Angela smiled at her. She set aside her book and covered her eyes with her fingers and uncovered them again. The little girl giggled at that. She grabbed the fabric of the headrest and squealed. She reached for Angela and for the stewardess who was pushing the drinks cart up the aisle. Her mother patted her on the bottom. *Felícia Marie*, she said. *You better hush. People are trying to sleep.* The girl squealed again, and her cheeks were dimpled and shiny like apples. The mother looked between the seats then. Her face went dark when she saw Angela. *Get down here, young lady*, the mother said. *Get down here right now*, and she moved quickly. She pulled her little girl away from the headrest. She held her baby against her. She held her there and didn't let her squirm.

#

The roundness in Angela's cheeks went first. Her skin went from olive to yellow. She'd spent all those mornings on her deck, but the sun didn't warm her, not even in September when L.A. was hottest. She'd shivered and watched the neighbor kids splash around in the pool. They worked their squirt guns and wrestled in the water, and they were happy even when their parents fought. How little children need to be happy. How little it takes, and still things go wrong. She watched them all summer and into fall, and the roundness was gone and from one day to the next the veins popped out on her forearms. Her hands were spotted like her grandma's had been. Liver spots grandma called them, and Angela

had wondered why.

Her belly grew round like a pregnant lady's. Like Mr. Hogan from the old neighborhood who drank beer every morning and tossed the cans onto his wife's compost heap. In the last few weeks the bones in her throat had started to show. There was a hollow between them, and her mother would notice this right away. She'd see it and know. Thirty years married to a U.S. soldier, and her mother still thought like a German farm girl. She'd been right about Angela's father. She knew he was sick from the smell of his breath. *He's got the mark*, she'd said. She knew it months before the doctors did, and she'd see the mark on Angela now, too. Her girl who'd been pretty once. She should be a model, that's what all the people said. And what did it matter. Every day brought another loss, and her prettiness was the least of them. It fell away like the burden it was.

#

Her mother was waiting at the luggage carousel. She carried the same winter coat, the extra one she kept for guests because it was cold even in November. Angela didn't remember that old plaid coat until she saw her mother standing there in her winter boots. She'd brought it along every Christmas when Angela came home from college. *Look how you're dressed*, she'd say back then. *You're always in short sleeves. You need to cover up*. Angela would pretend she didn't feel the wind when they went through the sliding glass doors. She'd say she was warm in her sandals or those loafers she wore without socks. Anything was better than letting her mother be right.

The coat smelled like mothballs. It was years between visits now. Years when it used to be months. Her mother walked too quickly at first. Angela couldn't keep up, and the air outside was sharp in her throat. It squeezed her chest. She'd forgotten how thin the air could be up here. This was probably how fish felt when they were pulled from the water. She slowed and stopped and set her hand against the retaining wall where the juniper bushes grew. Her mother stopped, too. She came close and fixed the collar on the old plaid coat. She took her scarf off

and wrapped it around Angela's neck, and her eyes were black when she spoke. "You need to cover your mouth," she said. "The wind's picking up. All those years in California and you've forgotten how it blows." They walked slowly to the car. Her mother always parked in one of the farthest spots, out by the long-term lot. There were patches of ice in places. Angela slipped and caught herself, and the mountains were dark already against the sky.

#

Her bed was the same and the feather quilt, but her books were gone and most of her posters and ribbons. Her mother had packed these things in plastic boxes and set them in the closet. The bookshelves were full with her mother's art books now and porcelain figurines, and up at the top there was the yellow book of fairytales her mother had brought from Germany. She'd read it to Angela when she was little. She read to her in German, and Angela understood. Strubelpeter with his wild hair and Hans im Glück who was happiest when all his gold was lost. She knew the stories and her mother's voice, and that was the last thing she heard that night and the first thing in the morning.

#

Her body was healthy in every way but one. She wasn't even forty and her heart was healthy and her lungs were clear and everything was perfect except for the thing that wasn't.

#

She held a cup of tea in her lap. Whitethorn and lemon balm because they were good for the circulation, that's what her mother told her. Her mother had set the redwood chaise in the middle of the yard. She'd brought out blankets, too, and wrapped them around Angela's knees. It was almost forty degrees out, and it felt even warmer. The sun was shining on her head. It was bright as California outside, mountain

bright, and she should have worn her sunglasses. Two little girls played in the front yard at the old Meyer house. They tunneled into the melting snow. One of them was wearing a skirt without any tights, and even from across the street Angela could see the pink of her legs.

The Meyers had moved years before and who knew what happened to Patty, fat Patty who was round as a bowling ball but completely flat-chested. They called her Fatricia at school. Angela did, too. Only once but it was wrong and she knew it even then. She did things when she was young as if she had no choice. A couple of the girls painted Patty's face one day in gym class. *Close your eyes*, they'd told her. *Stand real still*, and Patty waited for them to make her pretty. Calm as a Buddha while she stood there by the mirror. She waited for them to melt the eye-liner. They used Bic lighters back then to get the flow just right, and Angela didn't want to look. She put her jeans back on, those extra-slim Jordache jeans that cut high across her waist. She combed her hair and waited by the lockers for the bell to ring. They were working on Patty's eyes. They nudged each other and laughed at the enormous arches they drew and the red circles they put across her cheeks, and Angela saw it all and she didn't stop them and she didn't say a thing, not even to Patty who stood there with a crooked dreamy smile. She left before Patty opened her eyes. She went out of the locker room and into the courtyard where the smokers waited between classes.

The little girls were running circles now. They shouted and poked their fingers through the links of the fence. Their mother was looking out the living room window. She held a baby against her shoulder. Angela waved to be neighborly. She raised her hand and the woman waved back without knowing who Angela was and then she called her girls inside. It was dinner time. It's getting colder, she told them. *Quit your running and come.* She hustled them in and shut the door.

Angela leaned back against the chair. The lights went on in all the houses and she should be getting inside, but she stayed because the night air smelled like winter. Like pine needles and chimney smoke. Somewhere a dog barked and another answered, and she held her cup and looked at the old Meyer house which hadn't been painted in years. The screens hung away from the windows in places. The house looked tired

and the street, too, and the sky was pink above them with fading traces of the sun.

#

Her mother talked about transplants in the evenings. This was their routine. They sat together in the kitchen, and her mother said Angela needed to get on the list. *It's time*, she said, and she touched Angela's wrist where it was swollen. *We've waited long enough.* Angela leaned back in her chair. Look how small her hands were, her mother's hands with their bent fingers. She talked about transplants every week and then every day, and now she was holding Angela by the wrist the way she did when Angela was little. She talked about alternative therapies, about a tree in Costa Rica with medicinal qualities in its bark, about Chinese herbs that stimulated the liver. There were mysteries in the world the doctors didn't know, and Angela said *yes, yes, that's true and you're right*, and her mother held her wrist. Her fingers left marks, indentations like dimples that took hours to fade.

#

They'd taken peginterferon together three times a week. Peginteferon via subcutaneous injection and ribivarin pills because the combination worked in fifty percent of people. They soaked the sheets with their sweat. They shivered and nothing warmed them and they were burning from inside. Forty-eight weeks of treatment and they lay together in bed unable to wash themselves or change the TV channel. Forty-eight weeks sicker than they'd ever been and none of it helped and none of it mattered and it felt so good to stop.

#

Thanksgiving weekend they went together to see her father. It was time to change his flowers. The sun had no mercy, her mother always said. Even in winter it faded their colors. Angela wore her coat in the

car. They drove out past the old high school and the Citadel Mall where she'd spent every Friday with her friends, and she'd stolen a radio there once. She'd walked right through the doors. Past the city park and those red rocks in the distance where the Indians saw spirits. Clouds were blowing in from the mountains. She shielded her eyes from the blue of the sky. Things were beautiful, and she hadn't known. She'd thought only of leaving when she was young. She'd marked off the days until graduation because the coast was waiting. She'd follow the sun west and watch it set over the water, and all she'd done was trade one sort of beauty for another.

Her mother patted the headstone the way she used to brush his jacket. She was smoothing down his shoulders and whispering in his ear. She was someplace else, and Angela watched her from the car. She didn't want to walk that cemetery path. She never got out, not even in high school when her father was freshly buried. The markers made her uneasy, and his section used to be so empty and now it was almost full. There were soldiers buried there who'd died in Vietnam and in the Gulf, and they looked so young in their pictures. Earnest and sweet-cheeked as high school boys. Her mother set silk poinsettias in the pots on either side of the stone. She arranged them, and her scarf blew around in the wind. It wasn't like the graveyards in Europe. She'd said this many times. People didn't tend to their dead. The city didn't let the families grow roses or plant tulips for the spring, and the silk flowers were pretty but they weren't the same. Graveyards need something living and not just plastic and silk.

The car was getting cold. Angela rubbed her hands together and looked along the rows. Other cars were driving through. People were bringing pinwheels and fresh flags, and one lady had a plastic Santa Claus sitting in a sleigh. They decorated the graves and swept the snow off the stones, and she should have visited Gary more often. She should be more like her mother and set flowers on his grave.

They'd been sick together for three years. He'd stopped working first and then she stopped, too, and they stayed inside the apartment. They watched Baywatch reruns and old cartoons and anything but the news or medical shows. They shared their medicine and their needles,

and none of it mattered. A hundred people had come to his memorial. They came from the studio and from his writers group, and his fraternity brothers came all the way from Ohio. Everyone came, it seemed like, everyone but her mother, and they waited in line to step up to the podium. They told stories about somebody she didn't know. She'd lived with him for almost ten years without ever learning he could juggle or that he'd played chess in high school. His brother told how Gary had stolen a scooter once from the college faculty lot. He drove it down the town hall steps and landed in the fountain. People laughed at that. They clapped their hands and shook their heads, and their stories made her lonely. Everything he'd seen and done, he took it with him. She'd already forgotten the sound of his voice.

Her mother stomped her boots before climbing back in. "Next time you'll come out," she said. She drove slowly to the gate. She always drove slowly, even on Powers where the traffic was heavy and people were rushing to make the light. *You can't see the flowers from the car. You can't even read his name.* She turned on the defrosters because the windows were all steamed. They went past the matching stone benches where the city founders were buried. The Madonna stood between them, and her arms were open wide.

#

They walked the block at three o'clock most afternoons, and then they watched Judge Judy. Angela shuffled along. Even on cold days it was better than staying inside. The mantel clock made her nervous how it chimed every quarter hour. They were coming around on Brentwood when her right leg buckled. She felt no pain as she went down. She landed in a mound of freshly shoveled snow. It was soft as powder and not gray yet from the cars. Not like that Sierra snow that came down like cement. She lay on her back with her mother leaning over her. *What's wrong with your leg*, her mother was saying. *Did you slip on a patch of ice?* But Angela just lay there and looked up at the sky and her mother's worried face. She wasn't cold, and she wasn't frightened. She wanted only to lie back against the snow, to close her eyes and sleep.

#

Her mother brought out the wheelchair the first week in December, the foldable one from when she'd sprained her ankle in Boulder. It hurt worse than a fracture, her mother had said at the time. Sometimes it's better when things break clean. She took out the chair and wiped it down, and Angela didn't complain. What use was it when anyone could see that she couldn't walk, not even to the mailbox out by the fence. They went together around the block when the weather was clear because it was better than medicine to breathe in the air. Her mother talked while she pushed the chair. *What a shame about the Gerbers*, she said. *They've really let things go. Every Sunday they go to Red Lobster but they've got no money for ice salt to keep folks from slipping.* Angela nodded while her mother talked. She held tight to the armrests.

The neighborhood had changed. Her mother was right about that. The Danzigs were gone and the Lucas boys, too, and not even the snow could hide how the new folks had neglected their yards. And still Angela recognized those houses and the bare elm trees. Her mother struggled a little where the Cleyman's maple had cracked the cement. She pushed hard on the chair, and together they went over the sidewalk where Angela used to ride her bike. More than thirty years later and Angela knew it better than the streets she walked every day back in L.A. She knew its cracks and how it curved and all the spots she'd fallen.

Five houses up another pair was approaching. A figure with someone else in a chair. As they came closer Angela recognized old Mrs. Needleman wrapped in a plaid blanket. Her granddaughter was pushing her along. *Look how nice they've got her covered*, her mother was saying. *Last March she was a hundred. They showed her picture on Good Morning America. The Governor sent her a card.*

Her mother waited in the Meyer driveway when Mrs. Needleman came close. "The sidewalk's too narrow for us both," she said in greeting. "Even when it's shoveled."

"Another day like this and the last of it will melt," the granddaughter said. She stopped the chair and stood on the sidewalk and looked up

and down the street. "It's warm as April today."

"How are you, Mrs. Needleman?" Her mother reached for the old lady's hand. "It's a nice day for a walk."

Mrs. Needleman looked at Angela and at her mother and back at Angela again. "I remember you," she said. "You always walk that little dog and never pick up the poop." Her eyes were sharp. "You listen to that strange music."

"Mrs. Needleman," her mother said. "Angela hasn't been here in years. Not even to visit. She's been in Los Angeles. She decorates sets for movies."

"I want to go home," the old woman said. "I've got people waiting. My husband's waiting for me on the bridge."

The granddaughter shrugged as if to apologize. She held out both her hands and smiled. She's stopped making sense, she seemed to say, but Angela understood.

#

Starlings flew in formation just outside her window. At ten thirty every morning they went over the house and back again, and the sky was black with their passing. They moved as if pulled by some hidden current, and she leaned against the window frame to see. She wanted to take a picture of them. She wanted to capture them just as they were. She had the camera ready. She steadied her hands as best she could, but the pictures were unfocused and smudged by the screen. She just watched them after that. She leaned close to the windowsill, and her breath steamed against the glass. They went over the tree tops. Toward the mountains and back and around again, and she tried to remember them as they went. She tried to remember the sky and the snow on the peaks and those black winter birds. She wanted to take them with her.

#

Dialysis with the angry nurse who rimmed her eyes in liner. She wasn't gentle with the line. Dialysis until the dialysis would stop work-

ing. This is how it would go. One thing fails and then another and another one after that and the sky outside the window was beautiful as any she'd ever seen. A blue so pure it would burn your eyes and the wind lifted the snow from the rooftops and bent the naked branches.

We're just leaves on a tree. That's what Gary told her once. They were rockhounding in the Mojave. Looking for crystals in the trailings of old borax mines and the hills were pink in the distance. *Leaves on a tree*, and their hike wasn't even half done yet, and he closed his eyes the way he did when he was happy.

#

Sleep all day. Sleep from noon into night and then lie awake and listen to the heater fire up in the basement. Listen to the wind as it blows. Sleep and more sleep and it was never enough. It was sweeter than food. Sweet as liquor and she wanted more. She slept when her mother pulled open the drapes. She slept when the vacuum cleaner ran or the doorbell chimed. She slept when her mother read from the book, and she didn't dream. No, she slept the way babies do. Like someone waiting to be born.

#

Once there was a boy who wanted only to go home. His boss wished him well and gave him a lump of gold as big as his head to thank him for his service. But the gold was heavy and when a rider came along the road, the boy gladly traded it for the horse. But the horse galloped and threw the boy and when a man came by with a cow, the boy traded in his horse because walking was better than riding. And the cow became a piglet because beef was stringy but the piglet had sweet juices. And the piglet became a goose because there was nothing better than crackling goose skin and the fat beneath. The boy was happy with all his trades until he saw a scissor-sharpener working by the road. *How lucky you are*, the boy said, *to know a fine craft*. The kind man looked around for a good sharpening stone and found one in the field. *Here you are*, he said, and the boy took the stone in exchange for his goose, and he was happy again because

fate provided. But the stone was heavy and he wasn't careful and it fell into a stream. And the boy thought how lucky he was, how truly lucky, to be free of this heavy stone, and he walked the rest of the way home.

#

Things were crawling under her skin. They lived inside her belly. The slightest touch raised bruises. They spread in clusters across her legs, and on Christmas Eve the whites of her eyes turned yellow. She scratched her arms and her neck until her mo*ther threatened to put mittens on her hands.* Those cuts will get infected, she said. *There's nothing wrong with your skin*, but Angela scratched anyway. She tried to find those things that turned circles inside her. She needed to get them out, but they were always faster.

#

Her mother washed her in the tub. She sponged water over her head, and it was peaceful in the house. The clock was chiming and the windows were dark, and her mother turned the spigot because the water was getting cold. *All these things will wash away*, she said. *You're the same as when you left.*

She combed through Angela's hair and braided it loosely down her back. She talked, and Angela followed the sound of her words. She listened to their familiar rhythm. Her mother was saying it was the devil's virus. The devil should take it back. She needed to be strong for another day and another and the doctors would know what to do. Her eyes were black in the bathroom light. Dark like her mother's had been and like Angela's, too. And if Angela had had a daughter her eyes would have been dark, too, and it was a ribbon running through them, this blackness. It bound them all together.

I'm sorry, her mother said. *I should have gone to his service. It wasn't right to stay away.* She held Angela's hand like a parishioner looking for a benediction. She held it and squeezed it and cried.

#

It was time to ride in the car. She knew it without her mother saying so. Her mother didn't struggle when she lifted her up. How could that be? She was almost seventy, and she carried Angela from the wheelchair to the car. Her mother let the engine warm up and turned on all the heaters. She tucked a blanket around Angela and pressed her palm against her cheek.

They were going to the hospital. They were going to the high school and the cemetery and the Citadel mall. The radio was playing, but Angela didn't know the song. It was one of her mother's stations. Her mother was talking. She was saying something. She was reading from the yellow book of stories, and Angela was lying in bed and she knew all the words. Hans im Glück was going home. He was free of all his gold. The stepmother chased the princes from their castle, and they were swans when they flew. They were starlings, and the sky was full with them.

MAUD CASEY
The Man Who Walked Away

Years later, when he discovers himself, once again, on the road, a bird swoops down and sings in Albert's ear: *Does this ring a bell?* There is the sharp, quick sound of love: *Listen.* There is his father about to blow out the gas lamp, the story still shimmering in the air all around them. Then all goes quiet and it is dark again.

#

For years, as a boy, Albert was held by his father's stories of the prince who wanted to see the world. For years, he didn't wander. For years, it seemed possible to live in a home like any other boy, to help his father at the gas company—fetching coke, holding tools as his father fitted pipes, watching carefully as his father fixed street lamps, with an eye toward one day fixing them himself, with an eye toward the future when he would someday have a family of his own whose street lamps would need fixing, whose pipes would need fitting. For a while, like any other men grieving, he and his father ate the food the neighborhood women brought. *No mother. No wife.* Pity was stronger than the desire to shun; the flip side of their charity, it turned out, was righteousness. *My duck cassoulet is famous. It cured my brother of cholera, don't you know? And beside, it is delicious.* It is how I am known—for that and for my generosity. And when the wheelwright's wife was run over by a carriage and the neighborhood women had someone else who needed their attention that was fine too because Albert's father had always been a good cook and it meant he and Albert didn't have to be endlessly grateful. They could just live their lives of gas fitting, meals, the stories of the prince who wanted to see the world, sleep, gas fitting, meals, the stories of the prince who wanted to see the world, sleep. Each night: *Here, Albert, a story just for you.* Suddenly, the dark street illuminated; suddenly, his father's beautiful face, illuminated. Each

night, Albert grateful that he was still here.

Listen.

The prince who wanted to see the world woke, yet again, on his back clutching a piece of bark, but this morning he woke to discover himself in the midst of a family of geese.

"We are fewer than we were," said the father goose. "Each night, a fox comes around and takes another of us off for his dinner. Some nights he takes two: one for dinner, one for dessert."

The rest of the geese gathered around. In one voice, they told the prince: Each night, for a week, the fox comes; each night, there is one, or two, fewer geese. The goose family was dwindling. "We used to be many," the father goose said and he began to weep.

"I have an idea!" the prince said. He whispered his idea to the father goose who whispered it to the rest of the goose family. As night fell, the prince began to disappear limb by limb into the dark and he found his tree and clung to it again, hoping that, finally, he might stay up long enough to watch night turn into day; meanwhile, the geese prepared for the fox's arrival.

When night covered the land, the fox arrived, his red face floating like a demon.

"Wait!" the father goose shouted as the floating red fox face prepared to pounce on the mother goose. "If we poor geese are to yield up our lives," he said, according to the prince's instructions, "grant us one favor. Let us pray so that we may not die in our sins."

The fox sat back, eyeing the prince clinging to the tree as he did his best to remain still and invisible. "Oh, why not?" the fox said. "Go ahead. Have your prayer."

And so the geese began.

"Ga! Ga!" said the father goose. Then the mother goose chimed in, "Ga! Ga! Ga!" And then a third goose. "Ga! Ga! Ga!" And then a fourth. "Ga! Ga! Ga! Ga!" And then a fifth. And then the sixth and final goose. "Ga! Ga! Ga! Ga! Ga! Ga!" This was their prayer and they prayed and prayed and prayed until their prayer was a song.

"When they are done praying," Albert's father would say, "the story will end."

"Why?" Albert asked, though he had heard the story before and knew what his father's answer would be.

"Because when they are done praying, the fox will eat them."

"But instead..."

"Instead, they pray unceasingly and the story continues."

It didn't matter how unceasingly Albert prayed, his father could not live forever.

And so, through Lyon, past the funicular railroad, Albert walked; through Grenoble; along the promenades of the Isère River; through a town whose name he never learned, filled with the delicate fragrance of the rose water manufactured there. He walked and walked until the earth's tremor rumbled through his feet and up his shins, until his bones expanded, until his blood circulated astonishment, and, finally, there it was, the urgency, come to lift him into oblivion.

But when he stopped.

The first time he stopped, he woke to find himself in a public square: What day? What gift? There were no stars, only the moon disappearing into the morning as the townspeople woke from murmuring dreams into the smell of bread and a day that would be whittled into hours built out of minutes. There was an ache in his thighs, in his back, and he was still here, still Albert, and his father was still gone. He felt himself disappearing like the moon into the early morning light but he was not beautiful, he was only disappearing.

"Have you lost something?" A woman with skin like an aging peach—a soft, pink sag and fuzz along her jaw—leaned down to put a bowl of milk at the base of the monument to such-and-such great general. She smelled of a life lived outside without soap. She smelled of hay and rich soil, and he inhaled deeply, until he became the smell of hay and rich soil, until he almost disappeared, until the question—*have you lost something*—almost disappeared.

"They're starved," the woman said, when Albert said nothing. She wiped her hands on her skirts, nodding toward the cats slipping out of the cracks in the cobblestone. One after the other, hundreds of them slithered up from the earth, flicking their tails as they cantered toward the milk. Some of them slipped between Albert's legs.

"It seems...it appears," he said.

This woman, too, her sagging, soft skin, her comforting smell, would soon be gone, gone with the swarm of mewling cats. Everything disappeared. "Magnificent," he muttered.

"Where are you coming from?" the woman asked.

Where had he come from? He had no answer. The words were fading away—fascination, vanished; magnificence, vanished; escapades, no more—fading with the moon, disintegrating to become a mere cloudy outline in the morning sky.

"It's not far, where I'm from," Albert managed finally.

"Careful," the woman said as a cat hissed, batting at Albert's leg. "They can be vicious when it comes to getting what's theirs."

To be a cat filled with purpose! Every morning to canter across the cobblestone on padded feet toward this woman who smelled of hay and rich soil. Albert wiggled his toes again—*you are here, you are here.* Another blister was forming, a hot pinch of skin rubbing against the papery leaves, and though it was painful, he was grateful for it.

"Here comes justice," the woman said, looking beyond Albert, over his shoulder. She hurried away and the cats galloped after her, tails whipping back and forth as they darted between the legs of the townspeople—men, women, and children—who had appeared on the edges of the public square. The milk from the overturned bowl seeped into the cobblestone.

At first the gendarme standing in front of Albert was simply the sum of his parts taking shape in the brightening morning light: crisp uniform, large, loose cheeks quivering over a stiff collar, mouth moving emphatically so his cheeks appear to cascade as well as to quiver.

"...morbid effervescence," coming to the end of a sentence Albert hadn't heard the beginning of.

There had been talk. The recent war had caused great concern: men at risk of no longer being men, women at risk of no longer being women, children at risk of never being children in the first place, at risk of never being produced, the family at risk of extinction! Vagrancy, it was said, was at the root of it all. The gendarme, whose sentence continued even after he was finished speaking it, a ripple across the lake of those

cheeks, had himself just become a card-carrying member of the National Alliance for the Increase of the Population.

"I admire the cleanliness of your uniform," Albert muttered, because the man's uniform was spotless and deliciously stiff, and as Albert balanced there on the pin of its sharp cleanliness, its crisp collar yoked him to the earth.

"Thank you," the gendarme said, his sharp countenance softening for just a moment. He prided himself on being sharply, neatly dressed, on being an exemplary representative of the state. He stood taller. "Let me put this very, very...what's the word...succinctly?" The buttons on his jacket sparkled.

"The future of our country is at stake! We are shrinking! Disappearing! The country has lost so much in the war—its men, its direction, its pride, and here you are, a vagrant! You who should be making babies. Where is your wife, man? Your children? You, sir, are a biological menace."

"It seems...it appears, sir," Albert said. "I am not a vagrant." *He was not. He was not. He was nothing.* The gendarme's face had grown redder than the ripest tomato. "You have, it appears, confused me, it seems, with someone important."

A crowd had by now assembled on the steps of the church, perched for a better view. They longed for more than the smell of bread and a day whittled into hours and minutes. Having never been cracked open, they yearned to be thrown out of the tick tock of their days. The baker handed out freshly baked croissants and then took one himself, tearing off the end so a tendril of its secret heat swirled into the air. He popped it into his mouth and found a seat on the church steps with the others.

Albert followed that tendril of secret heat swirling as he felt himself swirling too, disappearing into the air.

"Ah ha!" the gendarme cried, turning to the crowd, pointing to Albert's jiggling foot as though it were proof of his menace. "He steals so easily from the great bush of marital fecundity! It is nothing to him."

Albert was pale and swaying from his efforts.

"Are you all right? You appear a bit ill."

Albert was not all right.

"I must go," Albert said to the gendarme. He would go home to tend to his father's body. He would go home and perhaps his father would be sitting in his chair, smoking his pipe. He turned to the crowd gathered on the steps of the church and nodded.

"Don't go!" a small girl shouted.

The gendarme took Albert by the arm.

"I am not a vagrant," he said again, though doubt had inched its way into his voice.

He was not. He was not. He was not without a home.

"Of course not," the gendarme said, rolling his eyes, though the crowd was not on his side.

"Booo!" they cried. They didn't like the gendarme and his sparkling buttons. They preferred the man who had interrupted the rhythm of their day.

"Fascinating," whimpered Albert as the gendarme lead him away. The townspeople on the church steps rose and walked back into the tick tock of their days. "Magnificent," whispered Albert. "Yet another escapade."

In that first jail cell, time hid under the wafer thin mattress. It seemed, *what?* It appeared, *what?* Albert fell into the oblivion of sleep, only to wake up with a belly covered in the rash of bed bug bites that would soon become familiar from other nights he would spend in jail. But he did not know that yet. All he knew when he woke with a stiff neck and the prickling rash was that his father was gone from the world.

When the gendarme released him the next morning, he gripped Albert's arm to indicate just how important his duties as a man and a citizen were. "You have a responsibility to fulfill," he said, cheeks rippling.

When Albert began his journey home (Which way? Which way?), the only sound was that of a merchant's cart rattling along a distant road. The sky filled with charcoal clouds that darkened the whole world and Albert too. Harbingers of nothing, the darkening clouds were reminders that every night the black sky would come to obliterate even these ominous smears. They reminded Albert that even if the urgency arrived—and it would arrive because if it didn't he could not bear it—even if it came and lifted him up, singing him into astonishment, still it could not

sing his father back. Albert would always wake to find himself alone, balancing on the head of another pin. He waited for the urgency but obliteration waited for him.

But when the urgency came: *Oh, Albert*. He was beautiful in this song, even to himself. *Oh, Albert*. His sadness lifted into the air to become part of the clouds, eventually raining back down on him transformed, spilling from the branches of poplars turned pale gold when winter's coming. The rain came too fast to drink; still, it quenched his thirst.

When was he ever thirsty?

What was the question?

#

For years, his journeys were fleeting illuminations along a trail as black as pitch: a wrestling match on the side of the road where ruddy-faced men surrounded him at the Baths of Urhasch in the Canton of Appersell; then home again where the mice had started to dance in the kitchen and, finally, Baptiste's father prevented Baptiste from speaking to Albert at all; light through the roof of the Paris train station, speckling his body and the great metal face of a train spewing steam as it pulled into the station bustling with people arriving; then home again where the bedclothes were now tattered and moldy and the neighborhood women who once brought him food turned their backs as though he was not even shameful but an utter stranger; out of the mist near the Société Francaise in Berlin where he was given papers and new shoes, the face of an enormous dog followed quickly by the body of the same enormous dog, which tumbled him to the ground. The bite was painful but worse was the man's face hovering above him. "You must be hurt," the kind man says. *It always hurts* Albert wanted to say but why begin a sentence he couldn't finish? The look on the man's face said it must be a problem of translation and he was right though Albert understood enough German. How could a man be expected to translate if the words trailed off from public square to public square, if there were whole pages missing from his life? If he woke up, suddenly eighteen, and then nineteen, and then twenty, not sure where the time had gone?

#

Though his father was gone, though he might be gone days or weeks or months, it was still Albert's home. Though the small cottage he once shared with his father was ramshackle, though the windows rattled in the wind off the harbor, though the bedclothes were tattered, though a mysterious mold grew in the kitchen, though the mice who danced in the kitchen were now a family who were raising children in the stove, it was still his home. Once when he discovered himself at home, he went to his father's old friend, the lamplighter for help. The lamplighter tied Albert to his bed with the rope Albert had given him. "I'm only doing this because you've asked me to, Albert," the lamplighter said, tightening the ropes around his wrists and his ankles with hands that smelled permanently of gas. "I am only doing what your father would have wanted. He would have wanted me to keep you safe," the lamplighter said, and he began to cry. "I know," Albert said. And when he'd woken up somewhere else, into some other day, the stray thread on his trousers the only sign of the heavy rope, he had not been surprised. He knew even then: There was no holding him. There was no keeping him safe.

#

What was the question?

And then Albert's body would begin to fade and that terrible thirst came upon him and his body became all urgency and he had to drink water, lots of water, six, maybe ten, glasses of water in a row, and still he was thirsty, and he was sweating through his clothes and he was trembling and there was a ringing in his ears and he was filled with that terrible itch, sometimes the itch found its way into his cock, which he preferred to refer to as his beautiful instrument. Sometimes, he played his beautiful instrument. Always gently, as if he was greeting it—hello, *yet another escapade!*—the buzz in his legs, hips, and groin, he achieved a steady cadence, holding the buzz inside, allowing the song to build, and take shape. Always privately—behind this copse of trees or that one,

once or twice behind the Cathedral where it smelled of damp stone and moss. The song grew until it reached an even more glorious crescendo than usual, singing back the roots of his bristly hair, the slope of his long, strange nose, his thin moustache, his unusually large head, his absurdly large ears, his exquisitely muscular calves, his carefully trimmed toenails, and his beautiful, beautiful feet (for these beauties that brought him the gift of astonishment, he sought out clumps of the softest moss, luminous and blue, to pad his mended shoes).

"Smell me," Albert often said to the gendarmes who arrested him. He meant I am always so clean. He was, always, very clean. He did not care for the sticky hands that came from playing his beautiful instrument. They were unpleasant and then there was the dust and, after it rained, there was mud to contend with, but he was always very clean. Though cleanliness was complicated, especially in the fields of corn, of cotton, of olives, in the fields filled with sheep, cattle, and hogs (not all of them friendly), he managed. On the road, there were lakes and ponds and rivers. There were times when he resorted to large puddles of rainwater, but he was always clean.

#

Once—*once* in a river of onces running endlessly into an ocean of *onces*—he discovered himself in the dark, in a mysterious room, not knowing how he got there. "But you left instructions to be awakened to get the train to Lectoure," a chambermaid was saying, her heart-shaped face losing its heart shape in her anger. As she slammed the door behind her, he lit the gas lamp in the dim morning of the hotel room—turning night into day to study the situation, to see what of him remained. In his pocket, he did, in fact, discover a train ticket but it did not make him feel better as he had no idea where it had come from. Later, in the lobby, a man asked the hotel clerk about the train to Arâchon. *Arâchon Arâchon Arâchon.* The sweet song cut through the terrifying veil of blankness and Albert was suddenly very thirsty and the urgency was upon him.

This was how it often happened: hearing the word, he felt compelled to go. In his right foot was the familiar tremor, faint but growing,

trembling through his toes into the arch of his foot. When he jiggled his foot, the urgency leapt into the other and there was a ringing in his ears that became a song: *Arâchon Arâchon Arâchon*. And soon he was walking again, astonished.

#

But when he stopped.

The problem with oblivion was it didn't last. Yesterday, out of thin air, into no time at all, Albert discovered himself in yet another public square. A shambles of a public square—not even a monument to such-and-such general. It was a town so poor they wore vests with old coins for buttons and hats of worn black felt; there were people with no shoes at all. A large greatcoat covered their misery.

"Would you like something to eat?" asked a child with a dirt-streaked face, holding out a fat-fried potato in his pudgy hand. Nearby, his mother hung clothes on a line and discussed with a friend the friend's miserable husband, gone on another bender.

"He'll come back," the boy's mother said, a clothespin between her teeth. "With luck, he won't," the other woman said and laughed. There was misery in her laugh but every morning these women woke up into a family Albert would never have. To have a family required being still. You must not be the sort of man who ended up in Verdun with the echo of sheep bells in your head when you were meant to meet a woman who said she wanted to marry you at four o'clock somewhere else entirely.

"Would you?" said the boy, the potato still in his outstretched hand.

It was more than Albert could bear, this boy's kindness. Better that the woman hanging clothes should run him off or have him thrown in jail. Better to hate him and tell him he was not fulfilling his duties as a citizen, to remind him that he might be the reason for the nation's downfall. Anything would be better than this boy's kindness.

Where was love? Somewhere else. Not for him. Never for him.

He wiggled his toe through the rustling leaves in the hopes that the child would understand. Understand what? What day? What gift? There was no explaining and so he did the only thing he knew how to

do. He walked away. He walked faster and faster, though his legs ached, though all he wanted was to stay stop walking. He swung his arms to help himself along—without the urgency, walking was a chore that required propulsion. To the child, Albert appeared to be flapping invisible wings.

"Wait!" the child with the dirt-streaked face called after the flapping man. "Come back! I can make it smaller. I will cut it in half." The flapping man did not turn around, and the boy hurled the fat-fried potato after him. He was being kind the way his mother had always told him to be. Why wouldn't this man receive his kindness?

A bird, startled out of a holm oak by Albert's walking, swooped down to where the potato lay in the dirt, speared it with its beak, and flapped away.

Albert wanted more than anything to become the bird, to escape the heartbreaking aftertaste of love in his mouth. There it was again, a fleeting glimpse of his father in the tiny living room, his familiar face changing colors as the lamp's light flickered: that sun-soaked sky infused with red dusk, then sun-bright again. In these glimpses, his father had always just finished telling one of the prince stories and it still shimmered in the air; it shimmered all around them as he prepared to blow out the lamp.

"Come back!" cried the boy. The sky, bruised purple and pink and blue, filled the boy with a strange longing. It was a tug in his stomach. Why wouldn't the flapping man turn around? The boy wanted this more fiercely than he had wanted anything in his short life. It was unbearable, the flapping man growing smaller and smaller, disappearing into the distance.

"Stop your shouting," his mother shouted, and though the boy would eventually stop his shouting, though he would return to playing other games—stealing the worn felt hat of his father and dropping it down the well, for instance—he would think about the flapping man for days, flapping himself smaller and smaller until he finally disappeared over the horizon. For weeks, the boy's heart would be heavy with that image and though eventually it would fade, when he grew up and occasionally felt melancholy, the image would drift through his mind. *What is that?* He won't be able to place it, instead believing it must be a dream

that has lingered from when he was a boy with a boyish mind capable of conjuring such things. But that was a long time ago, he would think to himself, putting the dream away to return to regular life.

From behind him, Albert heard someone calling him—"Don't go!" But it was too late. The bird with the potato in its beak flapped past his ear. His father had lied.

The story of the boy whose sister gave him the magic shirt that was missing an arm, who still had one swan wing, its beautiful feathers rippling uselessly? "Oh, darling boy," his father had said when he told Albert the story, "Don't cry. That brother with one swan wing made a life for himself. More than that, he was the only one of the brothers who remembered that he had once been a bird. For the rest of his life, he was the only one who remembered what it was like to be something else entirely."

But Albert saw clearly now. The brother with his one swan wing and its beautiful rippling feathers? He didn't make a life for himself.

This was no life at all.

#

Albert walks through time as if it were air. But it is not. It is a bright spring day in May, and tomorrow Albert will appear in the courtyard of an asylum in Bordeaux across from a small stone church; he will walk around and around a lone flower in bloom, its brilliant red nestled among a bed of green shoots. He will have come in search of relief but he will be unable to be more specific than that. Around and around the courtyard he'll walk, until a nurse will take him by the arm and lead him inside. Albert will hear the voice of a patient from the women's ward, crying out that her stockings have fallen down again; the voice of a veteran on the men's ward shooting his imaginary gun; the voice of a doctor calling for a nurse; the voice of St. Eloi's giant clock, its bell ringing in the hour. The contrapuntal counterpoint of these sounds create a new sound, though Albert, walking into the hospital with the nurse, won't realize that someday the word for the convergence of these sounds—*fugue*—will describe the sound of his astonishment and his anguish, the

sound they make when they are played together. It is there, in the asylum, Albert will meet the doctor who will make a patient out of him, a doctor who will see in Albert and his exquisitely muscled calves something extraordinary.

But first, there is today and Albert is walking through time as if it had nothing to do with him. Today, he discovers himself, not knowing how he got there, walking a muddy road with a rut six feet deep, behind a horse and its rider. Suddenly, without warning, the horse begins to sink. The rider kicks the horse, beats him with a stick, but kicking and beating are of no use. The mud holds the horse fast and it sinks and sinks until the rider is forced to leap off as it sinks up to its breast in the mud. Albert watches as the horse is sucked under altogether, squealing until the mud fills its nostrils and then its mouth so it can no longer squeal. For a moment, the horse's eyes look out above the surface of the muddy rut—at first rolling back in their sockets and then looking straight ahead as the horse who has been thrashing wildly is still. His eyes stare out at Albert from the mud. It is better not to thrash, the eyes say. He watches as the horse's rider weeps over the bubbles that are all that is left and then even they are gone, and the surface of the mud is flat as if the horse had never been there at all.

Albert waits with the weeping rider as five men come to drag the enormous body of the horse out of the sucking mud. Even after everyone is gone, Albert stays. *It is better not to thrash.* He, too, is thick and deaf with sludge. He doesn't care if the urgency comes or not. There are the horse's eyes just before it gave itself up to the mud, leaving behind only its simple, heavy body to be carried away. As Albert burrows his toes into the velvety moss he recently found to pad his shoes, there are the horse's eyes just before they sunk beneath the surface, staring at Albert, this shrouded version of a man.

He discovers himself, freezing amidst the rubble of the cemetery wall half pulled down to make room for more victims of cholera. "Come, Albert," and there is his father's friend, the lamplighter, grizzled and trembling with age though it seemed only yesterday Albert last saw him, only yesterday the man had tied Albert to the bed, for all the good it did him. "It's been three years," the lamplighter says. This means nothing to

Albert. All he knows is that here is the lamplighter, pulling him by the elbow, pulling him up from the cold face of an unmarked gravestone though Albert protests. "Just leave me," he says. Let him sink into the mud. *It is better not to thrash.* "Just let me be. Let me die." He will die a convenient death, right there in the cemetery. No one would have to shoulder his simple, heavy body out of town; it wouldn't require five men to drag him out of the muddy rut. "Just leave me." But the lamplighter says nothing and Albert is too tired to continue his protest, and he gives himself over to the gentle warmth of the lamplighter's hand on his shoulder. He sinks into that warmth as he allows the lamplighter to lead him through the public gardens, past the Spanish chestnut trees. "This can't go on," the grizzled lamplighter says, tugging gently at Albert's sleeve, and Albert, so tired, too tired, allows the lamplighter to guide him through the winding streets reeking of horse piss, past the Cathedral where men gather who never have to worry about wandering away or where they'd been or what had happened to all that time.

"It's him again," a man Albert doesn't recognize says, laughing and pointing at Albert. "The man with the...*Oh! Oh!* The beautiful instrument."

"Leave us alone," the lamplighter says. That kindness! It makes Albert want to return to the cemetery. It makes him want to lie down and sink into the earth. But the lamplighter won't let him go. He leads him past the little church of Saint Eulalie where men and women, so appealingly clean, walk quietly up and down the aisles of the church, bowing their heads, kneeling and praying. Then, suddenly, *tsk, tsk,* out of the cold darkness of the little stone church, a figure, clucking its tongue, hissing.

"I have seen you," hisses the witchy woman who has taken up residence outside the church in order to *tsk* whomever she can find a reason to *tsk*, and even those for whom she cannot find a reason.

"You haven't seen anything," the lamplighter says.

"Behind the cathedral, abusing himself." Her loose neck jiggles as she speaks. "God has cursed him."

"He is ill," the lamplighter says.

"This man!" the woman shrieks at a group of men passing by. "He has committed unspeakable acts."

"Would you like him to commit them again?" one of the men says while the rest laugh. The witchy woman grabs a bucket and hurls the filthy water at Albert, all over the clothes he's taken such care with. He's traveled great distances in search of ponds and rivers in which to wash them. He's tried so hard to keep them clean despite the dust and the mud of the road. He goes limp in the lamplighter's arms. *It is better not to thrash.*

"Just a few more steps," the lamplighter says, pulling Albert, his clothes dripping with the filthy water, toward the large iron gates across the street. "You will be safer here."

#

"Ga! Ga! Ga!" his father would say to him, instead of goodnight, keeping the prayer of the story alive. His father's face swirled and shimmered in the flickering light; it took this shape and then that—a goose, a fox, a king waiting for his son to return home. Albert knew his father's face could take any shape it wanted; it could be things that it wasn't, not only the things that it was.

"Ga! Ga! Ga!" Albert would say to himself in his bed at night as horses clop-clopped down the piss-drenched streets. "Ga! Ga! Ga!" he would say, keeping the story alive.

MELISSA COSS AQUINO

Pelo Bueno/Good Hair

It was unclear when it was decided or by whom that Ariana's hair would become the family talisman, the source of their good luck and abundance, and the main attraction of family gatherings. Christmas, New Years Day, El Dia de los Reyes, and her birthday became days that her hair was brought out for the entire family to see, touch, and smell, for good luck. Her father's three sisters would cross themselves, and say a prayer before stepping under her hair, and walking through it as if it were a cascade of holy water. They came to her hair as pilgrims go to Lourdes with prayers and petitions and faith. On New Year's Day they would write their hopes for the new year on small pieces of paper, and pin them to the inside of her hair.

The hair was an exaggerated perfection of the "pelo bueno" title bestowed by the family on all hair long, and straight. By the time she was sixteen, it hung past the bottom of her calves, the dark black edges brushing lightly against the tops of her ankles, and it had become the favored grandchild. It was of course understood and often mourned out loud that curly hair of any kind was "pelo malo." The passion with which these titles were given, to each new born tiny head as it sprouted hair, lent them the authority of truth, which had the unfortunate consequence of making each child feel as good or bad as his or her hair was proclaimed. It was natural then that Ariana was led to believe she was a saint.

Her female cousins secretly whispered stories to each other about how she was a witch and could be seen howling at the moon or working spells on the neighbors. The oldest would always repeat, "It must be some kind of brujeria, I mean, no one in the family has that kind of hair." Her hair was so black it looked like India ink running down her bare arms, and so shiny it reflected images like a mirror. She was neither the prettiest nor the smartest of her cousins or siblings. The oldest cousin was by far the best cook. But everything she ever did was done under the

veil of her "pelo bueno" and so it was best.

What no one knew was the deal her mother had made with the old man in the rainforest. When Ariana was born, the old man had come in the night and tried to steal her away. He said plainly to the mother, "She is no great beauty. She will have a hard life. Just let me take her. I need a new assistant." Her mother had cried so hard and furiously that her tears filled the room and spilled out into the street creating a stream that ran the length of the entire town. The old man was powerless before such emotion.

"Very well then, you may keep her for a time. To remind you that she belongs to me I will give her the most beautiful hair this town has ever seen. All who seek it shall find magic in it, all who wish through it will have their wishes come true. There is only one rule: She must never marry. She will stay a young girl forever and when you have died she will be mine. If she marries, I will come and claim her and she will die a slave." The mother only heard that he would let her live and agreed.

On her sixteenth birthday Ariana's mother woke her up extra early and gently rubbed the top of her head as she looked into her eyes and said, "Ay Ariana, the time has come. You are a woman now, and well... you must go out and do what women do. I hope it makes you at least a little bit happy." On that day her hair was combed out and scented and small butterfly clips and flowers were placed throughout it. When her hair was done, her mother applied lipstick and blush to her face, and gave her a dress that was tighter than any she had been allowed to wear before. She had a thin childish figure, which after years of puberty still showed no signs of becoming that of a woman. Her face was long and square with a simple vacant look carved out from so much life lived under the false importance of her hair. By then her hair had reached the soles of her feet and to avoid stepping on it she had to walk as if she were gliding to create a light breeze, and slightly lift it up and away as her feet barely touched the ground. This way of walking gave the illusion of being graceful, which when her hair was up in braids she was not.

Waiting on the porch of her house was a man dressed in white. Her abundance of hair stood in stark contrast to his bald head, which was a gleaming ball of skin unfettered by hair or scars of any kind. She almost

reached out to rub it, but instead straightened her back and stood there waiting for the man to turn around. She cleared her throat and shuffled around from side to side to get his attention. His bald head showed no signs of turning, and she was mesmerized by its perfect roundness. Without so much as looking up at her he spoke, "Can you cook?" She lied without hesitation, "Yes, rather well."

She had actually almost never been allowed in the kitchen because the smells of food would linger in her hair for weeks. He turned to look at her and said, "I'll be over for lunch tomorrow. Make me a soup and make sure you cook it alone, and please wear your hair up. I would not like to find hair in my soup." He stood up to leave and lifted his hat as if to put it on. Just as he did a small blue butterfly landed on the center of his head. Ariana opened her mouth to say something, but before she could his hat came down upon his head like a butterfly net trapping the blue beauty inside. She watched him leave and observed as he went down the road that he never lifted his hat, though he did keep readjusting it like he felt something was wrong.

Ariana did not know how to cook, or clean, or sew or even read and write. She had been taught very little about how to survive in the world. She had been lead to believe that her hair would somehow always make her special, and that she would always be protected. As she watched the bald man walk away, she felt an overwhelming urge to follow him. However, somehow she understood that if she wanted to be able to follow him for good, she would have to learn how to make soup. She went in search of her oldest cousin.

She found Elisa, wearing her mother's large straw hat, down by the stream washing clothes. Elisa wore hats and scarves to hide her rough, wild curls as if hiding them could somehow change her destiny. Her rough wild curls were taken as a sign of a rough, wild nature that would be difficult to tame. They didn't get along very well, but they were not exactly enemies. It was more the hair that stood between them.

Ariana stood there sweating, longing to jump in the stream with her cousin, but certain that her mother would kill her, since it would mean an entire day of combing out her hair again. "I need to learn how to make soup."

Elisa looked up at her from beneath the wide spread of the old hat, and hid a wicked smile in the shadow of the brim, "Do you?"

"Yes, by tomorrow. I must learn how to make it today, and be able to do it alone tomorrow. Can you help me?"

Elisa wiped her hands on the last dry patch of her shirt and tried not to laugh. "Of course I can help you."

Elisa hung the wash out in the sun behind her house, and Ariana watched with envy as she swiftly moved from basket to line and back again almost as if she were dancing with the clothes. Elisa held wooden clothespins between her teeth and connected the end of each item to the beginning of the next into a perfect row of bright white sheets,socks and underwear. Ariana had never done that with her mother. Her mother had always said her hair would get tangled in the wind, and caught in the clothespins and Ariana could only imagine herself hanging out to dry by her hair like yesterday's laundry.

#

"A man came to my house today. He asked for soup. I think he might be my future husband." Elisa wondered to herself what magical man had been found for Ariana, who would not be given away lightly by a family that worshipped her.

"Did someone tell you he was your future husband?"

"No."

"Did you like him?"

"I'm not sure yet. We didn't really get to talk much, but I didn't dislike him."

"What does he look like?"

"Well, he has the most magnificent bald head. It is shiny and perfectly round. His suit was too big, so he must be sort of skinny."

Elisa tried not to burst out laughing before asking, "Did you say he is bald?"

"Yes, bald."

"Is he old?"

"No, not really. He didn't seem old."

"Did you get his name?"

"No, just a request for soup."

Elisa took off her hat to soak some of the sweat off from her forehead. She ran her hands through the most beautiful pile of black shiny curls. They fell over her eyes and shoulders and bounced with joy. She shook her head, and then stuffed them all back in under her hat. Ariana was sad to see them go and she was thrilled when one or two popped out of the side of the hat. She had always wanted hair like Elisa's that could dance and laugh all by itself instead of just hanging sad like the rain the way her hair did. Elisa took Ariana by the hand, and said, "First, let's get your hair tied back. You can't possibly move around a kitchen with it loose like that."

In the kitchen Elisa approached the hair and she realized she hadn't touched it since she was a little girl. Even though Elisa had been born first, after Ariana turned three all the family children were walked under and through her hair for blessings and good fortune. Elisa had hated the hair and the attention it got, but that did not dull the intense awe she felt as she approached it. Up close it was even more magnificent than from a distance. As she lifted it off the ground, she was amazed to find that it was as heavy as her five-year-old brother Miguel, who still begged to be carried even though he was far too big. In her hands it had the sensation of moving water like a river of pure dark chocolate running through her fingers. She pressed her nose gently into it, and was overwhelmed by the scent of lavender and clove. Although she tried to resist the temptation, she couldn't, and she secretly made three wishes into the hair as she made three braids, and tied them with kitchen string invisibly engraved with her secret desires. All the while she imagined the tender love with which this hair had always been combed, so different from the rough pulling and tugging that had been used in an attempt to tame her own wild locks, which had regularly driven her to tears or to running away into the woods and sometimes both. It was impossible not to feel envy. For a moment the thought did flash through her mind that she should make a terrible soup. Una sopa terrible. She could make the most terrible soup that had ever been made. There would be few opportunities for such sweet revenge, but as Elisa watched Ariana make

her way awkwardly around the kitchen, she inspired in her a kind of pity. Ariana really had no clue where to begin. They had both been victims of el maldito pelo, that damn hair, just different kinds. Amid the chopping of garlic, onion, cilantro and peppers there was peeling of carrots, yamey, yucca, yautia, and calabaza, all while the chicken was boiling till it fell from the bone in the pot.

"Ok now it is time for the final touch. Every cook has to put a little bit of herself in her cooking, which is what makes it hers. You have to put your stamp on it, so no one will ever be able to make the same soup even if they use all the same ingredients."

"I don't know what to put."

"In your case that is easy, a single strand of your hair."

"No. No. Absolutely not! That is the one thing he did say to me, that he didn't want to find any hair in his soup."

"He actually said that?" Elisa could not believe the nut that had been found to court her cousin, and couldn't wait to pry the details from her mother of how he had been chosen. "Even better. This is your test to see if this is the man for you. If he eats the soup, even though it has the one thing he said he didn't want, then it is a sign that he accepts you. If not, well, trust me you don't want a man who makes rules that can't be broken before he even marries you."

"I don't know. I think this is a bad idea."

"Trust me."

Ariana reached out and gave a tug to a single loose strand by her ear. Elisa cut it into small fine shreds that were almost invisible were it not for their extreme dark color. Once tossed into the soup, they blended in with the spices, and the thick stew.

What Ariana and Elisa didn't know was that deep in the rainforest, where the stream that ran through their town met the waterfalls, the old man who was half jaguar was making his own soup. It had been he who granted Ariana her magical hair, and he was unwilling to allow her to grow old. Her mother had agreed to this at her birth, and so her daughter had the most beautiful hair of any girl in the village, but she had grown sad at the thought of her daughter staying young forever. She wanted her daughter to have children and grandchildren, and to live a

normal life, so she broke the rule by trying to sneak her off with a man. She had forgotten that the old man in the rainforest could see all his magical creatures and he had seen the light in Ariana's eyes at the sight of the old bald man. Ariana had been so charmed she hadn't even noticed he was twice her age. The mother had chosen him to fool the old magician in the forest into thinking he was to be an uncle she would live with so her magic could be shared with the rest of the family. But, of course, the old magician knew better and was preparing his own soup which would bring a deep sleep filled with nightmares to all who ate it. He looked into his soup and saw Ariana stirring her hair into her own soup, and he threw into his three jaguar hairs from his back.

The next morning Ariana was busy in her mother's kitchen doing everything just as she learned with Elisa. Her mother watched her and kept her distance and burned candles to all the saints to protect her and allow her to escape. Ariana looked around and when she felt no one was watching her she pulled out a single strand of hair and cut it into tiny pieces and tossed it into the soup.

When Guillermo Martinez arrived on her porch, he was led into the dining room by Elisa. She had been hiding just outside the kitchen in case Ariana had lost her way with the soup. She felt it was safe to come out because the soup was almost done. When Ariana heard them in the dining room, she ran out to say hello and in that moment the old magician from the rainforest slipped in through the back door and replaced Ariana's soup with his own. He snuck out and spilled her soup into the stream as he left the village undetected.

Ariana went toward the kitchen, but Elisa stopped her. "I will serve the soup." When Elisa saw the soup, she felt something terrible had gone wrong. It didn't look or smell the same. She was horrified, and decided that the only remedy was to make another soup. She went out into the dining room and announced, "Although the soup is almost ready it is not quite yet. The calabaza is not soft enough. You should take a walk by the stream and I will call you when it is ready." Elisa went about making a new pot of soup and she spilled the soup she had found into the pig's trough.

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Guillermo Martinez walked quietly with Ariana until they arrived at the stream. He took a deep breath in and said loudly, "I feel as if I can smell your soup all the way over here. It is the most splendid smell." They sat quietly for a while then turned and walked back toward the house. As they sat at the table Elisa pulled a hair out of Ariana's head and ran into the kitchen to cut it into the soup. When the soup was served it is was a steaming pot of warm orange calabaza, white yucca, green platanos spiced with green cilantro, garlic and hair. It was served in coconut bowls. Guillermo Martinez took a spoonful and proclaimed, "This is the best soup I have ever tasted."

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The old magician, who was all the way back in the rainforest by then, heard the pronouncement and waited gleefully for the sound of bodies hitting the ground and nightmares overtaking their sleep. He heard the sound of several thumps, and never knew it was the four pigs in the back falling over their trough.

#

Seven years passed and her life with Guillermo Martinez was better than most. Slowly but artfully Ariana had learned to cook and keep order in a home. Guillermo was even teaching her how to read. Her mother had forced her to move far from home to the village where Guillermo was from, and though she missed her family she was happy. Her family only came once a year to bring the old and the young for their walk through the hair that belonged to all of them. Otherwise her hair remained tied up in heavy braids which her mother had forbidden her from letting loose unless the family was there. The mother had learned from the wise woman she had consulted that the old man in the rainforest could only see Ariana when she was alone and her hair was loose.

Guillermo was indifferent to her hair. He claimed that he enjoyed

smelling it after she washed it, but mostly it was her scent that he enjoyed. Once he had asked her to let it down, and she had, but it had gotten all tangled and she had yelled out in pain that he was stepping on it or pulling on it or pressing it with his arm. He never asked her to do it again. In this way she went undetected by the old man in the forest for seven years.

On Ariana's oldest daughter's seventh birthday the old man from the rainforest disguised himself as a jaguar and followed her family out of the town. He had trusted that Ariana was sound asleep in some room in the back of the house all these years, and he was waiting patiently for her mother to die so he could claim Ariana once and for all. He had not realized she had been married off and sent to live with the man until he heard the birds sing elaborate songs about the girl with the most amazing hair who lived at the far edge of the forest. He followed the family as they made their way to visit Ariana, planning all the while how he would reclaim her.

Ariana's children loved to swing from it when they were little, and her hair was their favorite hiding place when they played hide and seek. Each would pick a long thick braid to hide behind, and it would take forever to find each other. All of them had thick, black hair, but none showed signs of inheriting hers. The hair spent most of its time wrapped in buns, or braided and piled in circles around her head. Her family, when they came, still filled the hair with petitions and prayers for good luck, healthy births and prosperous business deals. At night, after these special visits, when she would be combing out the tiny slips of paper, Guillermo would fume. He tolerated the whole thing, but openly ridiculed it. "What do these jibaros think, that if you cut your hair they will have bad luck? I should cut if off myself. I could teach them all a lesson and help them get out of the dark ages with their superstitions."

Not long after he said it, for no reason other than he had given her the idea that it was possible, she secretly began cutting her hair off on her own. At first, she would walk miles out of town to sit under a tree and cut a single strand with a razor blade. Her hands trembled as sweat poured down her nose and she deliberated over every strand as if it were a delicate surgery she was performing. Over time, she grew bolder and would

do it in her own bathroom, and cut a piece with a least fifty strands from the middle of her head. Once she put a clump she had cut off in the sink, lit a match and watched it burn away to nothing. Guillermo never noticed anything except to say, "This age of life suits you. You seem happy. You look radiant." He kissed her and hugged her as he said it, and in a fit of joy she pulled a few strands out with her bare hands while he wasn't looking.

The old man in the forest was furious at having been deceived and used all of his powers to try to see her. At first he could see pale quick images of her when she let out her hair to wash it, but only for the moment before she submerged it in the stream, after which he could not see her for days. He was following her family but he wanted to arrive before they could form a powerful circle of protection around her. He finally decided he would send people in search of healing to ask for her, and trick her into letting down her hair so he could see her. The first monkey he saw he pulled from a tree and turned it into a little old woman with a cane. He instructed her to ask the birds to lead her to the girl with the incredible hair at the end of the forest. She must then cry and ask the girl to let her hair down so her limping leg might be healed. In the mean time he created a thunderstorm so the family would have to seek shelter, and wait.

Ariana found it difficult to weave her hair into her once smooth braid, so she began wearing it in a bun every day. She vowed to stop cutting it, but could no longer control the urge and sometimes took a snip, two or three times a day. All was joy and laughter in her house during that time. She felt a lightness of body and spirit she had never known, until the day her mother called to request a special visit with her hair for her oldest aunt. It was Elisa's mother who was dying. Ariana knew this was no request, as she had never been allowed to say no. It was simply an announcement of their visit at the end of the week. She still had so much hair she thought she could get away with it.

That very afternoon an old woman came limping up the road to her house. She invited her in and the old woman cried at her table that she had been told her hair had magic healing properties. "Please young lady take pity on an old woman and pass your loose and lovely hair over

my limping leg that I might walk home whole again." Ariana remembered her mother's warning but felt this old woman could mean no harm.

As she loosened her hair, she saw in the sunlight that it was a mass of coarse and unkempt jagged edges chopped at a hundred different lengths with streaks of gray that stood out prominently against the few still black strands that were left. She wept as she pulled out a few gray strands with no rush of giddy pleasure, and gathered all the uneven hairs into a lumpy, fuzzy braid that resembled a porcupine with quills sticking out in all directions.

"Please old woman go from here now; don't you see my hair has no magic? It is old and useless." Ariana ran toward the house crying and did not see the old woman turn back into a monkey and leap into a tree.

That night she sat at Guillermo's knees and laid her head in his lap, as she told him of her aunt who would soon arrive, and how she would surely die and it would be blamed on the waning power and beauty of her hair. He replied, "That old woman is a hundred years old. She should have been dead a long time ago. She has no business asking for more." He tried to console her as he rubbed her head and felt for the first time the changes in her hair she was talking about. He had never cared for that hair to begin with, but he had grown fonder of his wife than he had imagined possible. When they were getting ready for bed, Ariana kissed him and rushed to get into bed before him. She laid her hair straight out across the pillow and fell asleep. When she awoke the next morning, she was disappointed to find it still there. Guillermo knew what she had wanted him to do when he saw it stretched across their bed, and he had longed to satisfy her, but he had given her family his word. The hair was theirs, and they would be the ones to decide what should be done with it. It was out of his hands.

The family was close to Ariana's town, when the mother noticed they were being followed. She knew it was the old man. She decided to begin to walk the family around in circles since she was the only one who really knew the path to Ariana's new home. It grew dark and the family, lost and hungry, slept at the opening of a cave. The jaguar howled in the night, and Ariana's mother prayed for her daughter beneath a bright full

moon. The next morning she took the family back to town claiming that in her old age she had forgotten the way and they would have to wait till Elisa came back because she was the only other member of the family who knew how to find Ariana. The old man took an owl and turned it into a beautiful young girl who was blind. He instructed her to seek Ariana in the same way he had instructed the old woman. She set out into the forest, and the old man turned full jaguar and leapt from tree to tree filled with hunger and rage.

The young girl arrived at the door to Ariana's kitchen as the children were dangling from her braids while she made a pot of soup. The young girl sat at the kitchen table and cried.

"I was told your hair could give me my sight back. Please loosen it and allow it to pass over my eyes."

"I am sorry but those are old tales of a time long ago. My hair is of no magic use to anyone." But she could not stand to see the young girl cry, so she pulled her oldest daughter off from her braid and loosened the little girl's hair, and ran it over the blind girl's eyes. The girl covered her eyes and sang her thanks. She ran out of the house and found herself turned back into an owl blinded by the light of the sun. The old magician could see nothing and waited to hear of Elisa's arrival.

Elisa arrived back in the small town where she was born as if she had never stepped foot in the place. The city had changed everything about her, especially her hair. She wore fancy clothes and high heeled shoes. Most amazingly, when she removed her fancy red hat, Elisa revealed a head with barely more hair than Guillermo had. It was a short tight haircut that revealed only the tiniest of coils, which had once been her curls. Since she had left the town, she had let her hair grow wild and long, and she had worn it free, and she had changed its color many times, and then had decided she would cut it. The family whispered about her wild ways, but Ariana's mother ran to her and whispered in her ear that she was to go to Ariana in the night, alone and disguised as a man.

"You must arrive cloaked in darkness and tell Ariana that the hair must go. All of it. She is to cut it and burn it without ever letting it loose. Promise you will do this even it means your mother can't have her last walk through the hair."

Elisa had never seen her aunt look so worried and afraid. It made her worry for Ariana too. So she wore her father's old raincoat and straw hat and changed her high heeled shoes for his work boots and passed right by the Jaguarman's cave as he waited and watched for the girl with wild crazy curls.

When she arrived at Ariana's door, the sight of Elisa both inspired, and terrified. Ariana could not resist the urge to touch the back of Elisa's head. Elisa laughed, "I knew you would appreciate my new look."

"You look amazing. It is so different. Do women have that kind of hair in the city?"

"Mija, women have every kind of hair in the city, and I have made a fortune catering to it. I own three hair salons. We give women every kind of hair they can dream up. Long short curly straight. Yellow red black. You name it, we do it. Our motto is, 'Here everybody has good hair.'"

"That sounds wonderful." Eager to move the conversation away from hair, Ariana asked, "How are the kids? Why didn't you bring them?"

"They are great and they miss you. I just came to see what the situation with Mami really is. According to her, she has been dying for the last twenty years, you know, right about the time I decided to leave. I wanted to see her for myself, before I bring the kids all the way over here." Just as Elisa was about to give her the mother's message Ariana began to speak.

"Elisa, we need to talk. I have a serious situation."

As Ariana began collecting her courage to tell her about the hair and the upcoming visit with her mother, she saw Elisa looking at her, and reaching out her hand to touch it. "What is going on with your hair?"

She was tempted to lie, and give the story she had given Guillermo about aging and losing hair, but she couldn't bring herself to do it. Elisa would know what to do, but only if she told her the truth. They walked around to the back of Ariana's house, and without saying a word, Ariana unraveled the fragile bun, and revealed her wild head of silver and black spokes bent in every direction. They looked at each other and without knowing who started first, they burst into a fit of laughter that took them through the whole story. Elisa had tears running down her face, and be-

tween gulps for air she asked, "Ariana what made you do it?"

"I don't know, but once I started I couldn't stop. It felt so good."

"Well, I can fix it. I can fix any head of hair." They hugged quickly and Elisa got to work.

In that small flash of letting her hair out the old man in the forest caught a glimpse of the mountains behind her house and knew just where she lived. He became the fierce night jaguar and ran full speed through the forest in her direction.

When Elisa was finished, Ariana had a short, even bob cut just at her chin. "You look perfect." Elisa collected all the hair she had cut, and pulled a bag of extensions out of her suitcase. She sat on the floor and weaved a kind of thick braided scarf from all the hair. She used colored ribbons and the butterfly pins Ariana had saved from all the occasions when her hair had been offered to the family. It was an elaborate and beautiful tapestry when it was done. It was still, even after all the damage, an impressive length, and the extensions gave it some of its luster and thickness back. Elisa spoke with the authority of the elders as she said, "Ariana, tomorrow you will present your family with the ultimate sacrifice. Aware of the vagaries of the passing of time, you have chosen to cut your hair off and give it to them before time and aging robs it of the original splendor and magic. Many who would like to visit the hair are too old and weak to do so, and now the hair, forever young, can visit them." With that last line she very dramatically draped it across her shoulders, and threw one half around her neck, then continued, "Those who need the hair can now spend a night with it if they wish. You my dear are free to leave the dead hair to the dying, and rest assured that at the sight of this braid, my mother will likely live another ten years." With that she coiled the braid on top of a chair and it sat there like the skin shed by a giant snake in the woods. They laughed and cried understanding the gravity of what they had done. Ariana walked to her room and came out with a pillow case filled with all the little papers they had pinned in her hair over the years. She had never known what to do with them all, and so she had saved them.

Ariana asked, "Will you come with me?"

"Anywhere you like."

Elisa spoke in whispers as they walked through the sleeping town, "You know it hasn't all been a pack of lies. Your hair really had magic. The day I helped you make your soup, I wished into it that I would find a way out of this town, a way to become rich, and a way to love my hair as much as everyone loved yours. All of them came true."

"That's funny because I made three wishes that day too. That I would make a wonderful soup. That I would marry Guillermo and that somehow I would become more important than my hair." Ariana, still shocked by the weightless feeling of her own head moving freely in every direction with no heavy hair to hold her back laughed and went on, "Well now everyone can have their wishes come true. All they need to do is spend a night with the braid."

Elisa watched as Ariana spilled the bag filled with the dreams and wishes of others into the stream. Ariana then pulled her dress over her head and dove into the water that glowed with the reflection of the moon. She laughed as she swam freely without having to worry about combing out her hair. The jaguar man who could feel he had been beaten roared in the night, and drank from the stream that somehow always soothed him.

ELIZABETH CRANE

Mr. and Mrs. P Are Married

Mrs. P is born on a cold day in West Virginia in 1947, eyes open, to a homemaker and a general practitioner. Worrying everyone terribly, she does not speak until her third birthday, when she says, *I have to go*. No one knows what this means. When directed toward the bathroom, she looks in and shakes her head. The child is immediately signed up for Catholic school.

Mr. P is born in Los Angeles, California in 1941 with a slap to the bottom that literally knocks the shit out of him, and it's not so much a sign of what's to come, the opposite if anything, as it is the first in a long series of unfortunate incidents.

His parents had once been in vaudeville, if that has anything to do with anything. We doubt it, but just putting it out there.

Upon turning thirteen, Mrs. P's mother cuts her daughter's long blonde hair into a Jackie-style bob, which does not suit her. *It's the latest thing*, her mother says, but Mrs. P will have short hair only one more time in her life, which will also be a mistake. Mrs. P loves her mother (if not as much this day as others), but she is now and will always be a daddy's girl. (*I'm hideous!/Baby girl, you couldn't be hideous if you grew a camel's hump on your back. Hair grows, sweet thing, you just hold on./She hates me, why else would she do this?/Sweet pea, your mama doesn't hate you, I reckon she's just a speck jealous because the bloom is off her rose and yours is just opening up.*) Mrs. P wonders for a moment what will happen when the bloom falls off her own rose, but as soon as that thought passes, she tears off for the dime store, where she pockets a mascara and a "Fatal Apple" red lipstick. In addition to bloom-loss prevention, young Mrs. P hopes this will bring some edge to her style, and this look isn't really her either, but she gives it a good go for the better part of seventh grade. However, this move does not bring her great popularity, and she quickly remodels herself one more time with a ponytail and a smile. This will carry her a long way.

Mr. P, tall, skinny and Irishly handsome, gets into some trouble the summer before his freshman year of high school, the usual 1956 fare: smoking behind the bleachers, fistfight on Sunset Boulevard having something to do with a girl, drinking/throwing up whiskey into Echo Park Lake. His punishments escalate accordingly from grounding for a day to a yardstick-whipping, and these whippings will continue throughout his high-school career. From this Mr. P will learn two things. Thing one: that yardstick-whippings modify his behavior only for the length of time it takes for the physical pain to go away (a lesson Mr. P the elder will not ever learn). Thing two: just because yardstick-whippings as method of parenting may not be effective does not mean he won't keep it in mind. (In fact, when he has his own children of y-whipping age, he will not resort to this, but he will consider it, often.) Mr. P is not the dumbest guy on the planet, but he's not super quick.

Mrs. P joins the pep squad in high school, and is nominated for captain before the end of the year. She has become quite a natural beauty, although in the brains department she's pretty much on the level of her future husband, maybe a half-notch up. Mrs. P does spend a lot of time thinking, about life mostly, she just doesn't get very far with it. She looks at the world around her, and it sort of looks nice, post-football bonfires, pie-baking contests, Main Street parades, church potlucks, but even from the center, feels removed from it somehow. It looks to her like a class photo they took without her. She thinks she's supposed to want it, but imagines them all walking around with nothing but clouds in their skulls because it's easier than coming up with any idea of what they really think. At times she wishes she had clouds in her own skull in place of thoughts like these, but even the effort to assimilate only results in further thoughts about why no one sees what she sees. She tries to enter the picture by dating the quarterback, Ned Crawford, for most of her junior and senior years of high school, leaving him devastated when she decides to break up with him right before prom. Ned had been planning a prom night proposal, but Mrs. P had been secretly fucking her mechanic since he fixed her Ford Falcon. The mechanic had seduced her, quite easily, with talk of life's small beauties; the Baptist church on South Elm just after it lets out, the Potters' old blue barn that leans like

a parallelogram, a pink band-aid on a boy's skinned knee, the percussion of a car engine. He talks at length about *The details that give meaning to the mundane.* (*It's not about looking, it's about seeing, you dig?*) Mrs. P has never heard talk like this before, certainly not at home, and Ned speaks mostly of football and taking over the family shoe store, neither of which interest her. The mechanic sparks more in her than her sexual nature (which is no small portion of her overall nature), it's almost as though he activated a hidden mechanism or replaced a missing part she'd hardly known was there, and suddenly she feels as though her whole self has finally been assembled. When she tells him she needs to go, he nods and sends her off with a farewell fuck. After reading a tiny ad for an art school in the back of *Photoplay*, Mrs. P takes off for Los Angeles, just before graduation. Disheartened to discover that the art school is actually just a suburban post office box, she redirects and answers a casting call for All-American types for a game show hostess in the same magazine. She does not get that job, but lands a mayonnaise commercial right after putting in an application at the Chicken A-Go Go.

Mr. P is at this time on the amateur boxing circuit, mostly getting his ass kicked, but it doesn't matter, because a talent scout from one of the networks spots him and offers him a screen test for a new soap opera. Mr. P, like Mrs. P, had shown little interest in acting before jumping in (in spite of occasional suggestions from his parents to *bring back vaudeville*) and his talent hasn't quite been uncovered at this point (although he does have some), but on the basis of his resemblance to the actor hired to play his brother, he's given the part. The show becomes a hit and Mr. P makes the cover of *Photoplay* and Mrs. P sees it and thinks he's kind of cute in a bland sort of way, a guy who manages a grocery store kind of way, but she won't give him another thought for fifteen years. At this time, nineteen-year-old Mrs. P is involved with a much older television producer who gets her a few lines on some popular situation comedies and not much more. She's not with him for this reason, that's not her thing, and she's not with him just because he tells her she has a *quality* (because she has no idea what this means), nor is she with him because he talks to her as though she understands what he's talking about (even when she doesn't), which she feels many people don't (even if it is some-

times true). She's with him because when they fuck, he does this thing with a scarf around her neck that makes her feel like Jesus himself is fucking her.

Mr. P at this time has not gotten much farther, sexually speaking, than pounding his co-star missionary style. This is good enough for making a baby, which they do, a red-headed girl they call Maggie, but not good enough to hold onto his co-star, who briefly becomes his wife after they discover the pregnancy. They divorce quickly, because his drinking has sent him on one too many two-day benders, and his wife has heard one too many lame excuses (*I had to shoot a night scene in Malibu/I had an important meeting in Malibu/Something happened in Malibu/I don't have to tell you everything*). Also she doesn't much like being called a cunt. From his second wife, he will learn about cunnilingus, but he won't enjoy it, and they too will reproduce, a boy they name Seamus and ten months later, a girl they name Erin (as in *Go Bragh*, which he thinks is hilarious one drunken night and briefly tries to convince his wife would make a great middle name, *Right*, she says, *because I'm sure high school was a smashing success for Ima Hogg*), but again, the drinking and cunt thing, so this marriage will also be short-lived. In 1972 he will land the role that will be the first line of his obituary, a wildly popular weepy drama (*Love Lives On Forever*) about a widower whose daughter dies of a rare disease but who finds love with her private nurse and learns to live again. For a while he pounds this co-star as well, but she refuses his proposal. Mr. P, raised Catholic, has always believed in marriage, even though he doesn't know why and doesn't question why, even though the example set for him by his parents was not particularly inspiring (twin beds in his parent's bedroom, the door to which was almost always open/not much in the way of dinner conversation beyond *Pass the green beans*/not much in the way of motherly affection beyond a pat on the blanket after she'd tucked him in/Dad liked to drink and sleep with prostitutes). Still, he feels that there's something holy about it, marriage, or should be, at least, he believes this is the true and right thing for a man and a woman to do, and is determined to find a wife he'll stick with one day.

After leaving the television producer, Mrs. P does a guest spot on an action series and quickly marries the star of the show, causing a sen-

sation by hyphenating her last name. Her new husband doesn't much care for this, he's a bit of a traditionalist, but he's mad for her, and takes it as part of the package. Frankly, he'd just as soon have her stay home, which he lets her know on numerous occasions, to which she always says sweetly, some variation of, *Oh...well...I don't think that's for me.* In 1976 Mrs. P gets her big break on a new action series created with her in mind, this one featuring an all-female ensemble cast, for which her thick blond hair is cut to accentuate it's natural wave, a hairstyle that will seemingly be copied by every woman in America for a time. It's around here that Mrs. P becomes acquainted with the tabloids, who declare that she is involved in everything from sex cults to sorcery. None of these things are ever true, and as much as she'd like her privacy back, a part of her wishes they'd go ahead and print the truth as she sees it, which is simply that she has the sex drive of an eighteen-year-old boy and likes to try new things (new things here including activity considered by some to be risky but which she sees as merely exciting, and perhaps most importantly, no one else's damn business). Because of the negative attention, Mrs. P cuts her hair into a pixie style (which looked good on Jean Seberg and, she realizes too late, only Jean Seberg, and which of course only serves to bring her more unwanted attention) and leaves the series that made her a star after just one season, and although her hair will be talked about for decades, she is not heard from again publicly until the 80s. Privately, between 1977-1983, several things happen beginning with two miscarriages and three months in a private mental care facility—exhaustion is the reason made public, but in fact Mrs. P suffers a protracted and debilitating bout of depression brought on by the miscarriages, wonders if god thinks she'd be an unfit mother, wonders if she could love a child she didn't give birth to (she could, but will not find out), wonders if having a child would make her want to stay in one place (it won't), wonders if anything matters without children, which for a time leaves her profoundly hopeless about more or less everything else she'd previously cared about, even sex (*What does it really mean, anyway, nothing*). Intensive psychotherapy and brief affair with a yoga instructor help her to snap out of it, but all of it figures into, if not causes, the breakdown of her marriage.

Mrs. P's husband makes a serious miscalculation in introducing his

wife to his best friend during this period, believing that his friend Mr. P will keep an eye on his unreliable wife while he's out of the country filming a made-for-TV movie about an Australian bounty hunter. (*I know she'll fuck somebody else if I leave her alone. Never met a woman or a man as horny as her in my life. And I've met a lot of women. And I'm horny.*) What happens instead is that though Mr. P initially does remarkably well with this task, dissuading the future Mrs. P from a dalliance she's interested in having with a tile man doing work on her patio, Mr. P is thoroughly unable to resist her advances when they are made, and because they have begun to confide in each other during this time of their relationship troubles (*He just doesn't get me/Women always leave me/Who would leave you, baby?/Ah I guess I can be a jerk sometimes*), their bond is not merely sexual (especially given the initial absence of the cunnilingus Mrs. P is quite fond of), but as it turns out, a genuine connection that neither is prepared to give up. Mr. and Mrs. P talk about god and life (*I just think, this can't be all of it, right? Like, stars? That can't just be explained by astroscience, right?/No, no way baby/I know, right?*) and even art (*I'm completely taken with Matisse's colors/I can't say I know who that is/Here look at this book, baby, see, doesn't it just make you want to lay some paint down on the floor and roll around in it?/You are so fucking sexy, baby, I am over the moon for you*), which is something Mrs. P has secretly been thinking about trying again someday, painting, and Mr. P says *If you were my wife I'd build you a studio*, and Mrs. P smiles and brushes it off as just a hobby, anyway, tells him he's sweet and changes the subject. Mr. and Mrs. P think these conversations are deep, even though they aren't, although who's to decide that, really, because they are with each other 100% by now, and because they do really connect here, because they both feel something they haven't felt before, something they both believe no one has felt before, and maybe that's as deep as it ever needs to be. Mrs. P acquires a Mexican divorce before her husband even returns to the country, and immediately moves in with Mr. P at his Beverly Hills mansion. Mrs. P's husband deals with this betrayal by waiting for a respectable ninety days before telling his side of the story to Barbara Walters.

Unsurprisingly, Mrs. P, in her soft-spoken way, her voice like a pot-smoking kitten, will inform Mr. P that he'll need to learn a few new tricks if he's interested in keeping her around. Mr. P makes a few initial

stumbles but learns to please. In fact he learns a few extra tricks thanks to Mrs. P's interest in bondage and knife play. Some tricks he will flat-out refuse, like the time Mrs. P hears there's a new trend in Japan where people are utilizing electrically charged squid as one might use a dildo. (*I'm not sure where the pleasure in that would be for me/It just goes where the dildo goes, honey/I don't think I want an electric sea creature shocking me up the ass/How will you know unless you try it?*) He's about to say *I just do*, but the look on Mrs. P's face is so inviting that she might be able to convince him that an atomic missile up his ass would be even better. For a time, this behavior will remain in the bedroom and will also involve weird third person dialogue (*Yeah, she loves his big dick in her mouth!/He's cumming! Mr. P is cumming! Here it comes!/Cum on her face!*) and role-playing (teacher/underage student, pimp/drug-addicted whore, mommy/little boy, daddy/little boy [Mrs. P is always the daddy in this scenario; Mr. P is initially taken aback by this not because it's incestuous but because it's *gay*, but it's another chance for Mrs. P to use a strap-on], priest/altar boy [a variation on the previous, with a few Biblical verses], brother/sister, farmhand/sheep).

For nearly a year, things are good, and outside of the bedroom they do a lot of the typical things couples do, travel, go to the movies, the beach, throw dinner parties (although admittedly, someone at their dinner parties always gets drunk enough to either break a large piece of furniture or punch someone). Once, on a leisurely hunt for beach glass, Mr. P gets down on one knee with the narrow end of a nicely sanded green beer bottle and places the glass ring on her finger, the look on his face as he proposes that of a puppy who just chewed up your grandmother's needlepoint pillow but still hopes to sleep in your bed. Mrs. P says *You're sweet* and resists the mysterious urge to pat him on the head, and tells him *if* she were to marry again, it would only be him, but he knows that tiny little *if* is the major problem with the entire sentence. Around this time, Mrs. P rescues a skinny calico kitten that shows up behind the air-conditioning unit, realizes, as she treats it for worms, lovingly salves it's wounds, feeds it with a bottle, that her maternal instincts haven't abandoned her, perhaps even grew while she wasn't looking, and perceives an almost spiritual connection with the animal, would go so far as to say she feels not just appreciated but understood by the kitten, and is so moved

by the experience that she begins donating large sums of money to animal rescue groups. She has been asked to appear on behalf of various causes over the years, always declining but donating anonymously (*Well, I just don't see why anyone needs to know*, she'll say coyly) and making no exception now. Mr. P to date, has never gotten much more involved in anything outside of buying a few boxes of Thin Mints when the Girl Scouts come around, and has vocally disapproved of Mrs. P's inclinations in this area (*You're going to go broke!/I have more than I need./You can't give to every pathetic person out there!/Yes I can!*), but has recently softened, partly in the hopes that it will make him seem more marriage-worthy (*Will you marry me if I give a million dollars to sad dogs?/Maybe/Get me my checkbook*).

With Mr. P's encouragement, Mrs. P will endeavor to get back in the acting game after a couple years absent, takes acting classes for the first time, finally auditioning for and landing a part in a feature as a woman whose child has been abducted. Around the time that Mrs. P's career begins to take off again, Mr. P's begins to take a nosedive, not crashing completely but forever remaining in middling comedies and the occasional cameo in a drama that shows the potential he had but never fully proved. It is during this period that Mr. and Mrs. P begin hurting each other. It could be argued that the origin of this behavior began with some of the sex play, but that remains uncertain. There is an incident when Mrs. P drips hot candle wax on Mr. P's testicles, which turns them both on for about a minute until Mrs. P accidentally drips a little too much and gives him a second degree burn, which he believes she has done on purpose because she'd been angry with him about his unwillingness to try the squid. (*Cunt! You know you meant to do that!/Why would I do that on purpose?/I don't know, maybe you see me as a father figure/I don't need a father figure, my father's nice!/I bet he is, father fucker!/Maybe you were really fucking your father!/That doesn't even make any sense!/Don't you even say one more word about my daddy!/Father-fucker!/Well, maybe you were fucking your mother! Mother fucker!/Bitch!/You're the little bitch!*) This fight continues off and on for a good while, and will always be referred to in later fights. (*You were supposed to pay the gardener/No you were supposed to pay the gardener/No my assistant was supposed to pay the gardener/Was the assistant supposed to read your fucking idiot mind?/Why are you so worried about the gardener anyway, do you want to fuck him?/Yeah, I'm a faggot now, I want*

to fuck the gardener/Hey, I don't know, maybe you do/Well maybe the gardener wouldn't burn me on the balls! Let it fucking go, did you cum or not?) In any case, who throws the first punch is up for debate, but what is certain is that they're both throwing them. Mrs. P, being of a petite stature, does not inflict a lot of damage with her bare hands, but has great aim with pottery and is not afraid to throw it. After these incidents, there is always make-up fucking, and sometimes they're still bleeding, which makes them laugh. Sometimes they call each other *Cunty* and *Motherfucker*, affectionately. Several years later when Mrs. P leaves, it is not for this reason, but it may be the reason she comes back. In the summer of 1986 Mr. and Mrs. P conclude this period of their lives with the birth of their only child, Charlie, which as she'd long ago imagined, provides a meaning to her life that trumps everything else that matters to her, a meaning she tries unsuccessfully to explain to Mr. P, who feels something he doesn't care to call jealousy but looks a lot like it. (*It's just...I feel...a knowing/A knowing./A knowing./"..."/If you don't understand without me explaining, I don't think you're going to*) In spite of Mr. P's unknowing, the early years are magical, filled with trips to Disneyland and the redwoods and Maui, with play dates, Happy Meals and bedtime stories. Mr. P sees Mrs. P bathing the infant boy in the kitchen sink, carefully soaping the baby's bald head, whisper-singing *Mockingbird*, wrapping the baby in what looks to him like a velvet towel, and knows beyond doubt that he will never feel for another woman what he feels for this one. Mr. P, however, in spite of this example, will, on the occasion that he actually picks the baby up, continue to hold the boy as one might deliver the Thanksgiving turkey to the table, with about the same measure of pride, and as though the only purpose for lifting the boy is for the purpose of transporting him from one place to another. Mrs. P, the primary caregiver by a lot, will love the child as much as a child could be loved, but by the time he turns fourteen, he will have stolen and sold most of his mother's jewelry for drugs, wrecked a car he wasn't licensed to drive, and gone missing several times. An early excuse involving Malibu is not accepted, for obvious reasons. (*I should have beat your ass with a yardstick like my father did/Yeah that worked out real good for you, Pops/"...".*)

Mr. P's relationships with his children have had only the rarest moments of anything falling on the positive side of the parenting scale.

His relationship with his younger daughter Erin has never been good, considering that her mother moved her to the East coast when she was six and he's visited her exactly four times in fifteen years, and has been strained even more ever since she decided that sex for any purpose other than procreation is a black sin and that her father will go to hell for it unless he accepts God, which Mr. P thinks is *horseshit* even though he considers himself to be a practicing Catholic, albeit one who sins and doesn't go to church. Mr. P tells his daughter that if he does go to hell that'll be the least of the reasons. His son Seamus, now in his thirties, is a seventh-grade history teacher, the only P child to attend more than a semester at college, and who now has a family of his own, is by all accounts but his father's the well-adjusted one, perhaps due to the presence of a loving stepfather who enters his life early on, or perhaps just by luck of the draw, since this didn't seem to help his sister at all. No doubt Mr. P's hostility toward his son is exacerbated by Seamus' calm and easy-going demeanor. Seamus loves his father, but has learned from years of Al-Anon meetings to do so from a distance where there's no chance of being hit. Seamus sends his father and Mrs. P (who all of the P kids have always adored *You're too good for him/Why are you with him?/I love him/But why?/Why not?*) birthday cards and holiday letters, calls a couple of times a month; Mr. P rarely returns any of these efforts, and rarely even returns Seamus' calls. When asked why by Mrs. P (or anyone for that matter) he says *I hate that guy* and that's all he ever says about it. Maggie, Mr. P's other neglected daughter, whose birthday he forgot every other year since she was five, endeavoring, unsuccessfully, to make up for it with cars and credit cards (*She doesn't need a car, she's twelve/Well, did she like it?*), is currently serving a three-year sentence at a women's prison for breaking and entering, a charge she pleaded no contest to on account of it being true, she had broken and entered her ex-husband's house and taken back her engagement ring, which she pawned for an ounce of black tar heroin. This causes Mr. P no small amount of anguish, which he deals with by smoking some black tar heroin. This, however, is not his drug of choice, so Mr. P adds to this some Percocet and Scotch, which leads to his 3rd DUI arrest. Mr. P, who once had to pound milkshakes to keep his 150 lbs, still has his boyish looks, but has put on some weight and is puffy in the face

from the drinking. He's thinking about an eye lift. Later he will get one, which will make his eyes look slightly inhuman, which he will attempt to remedy by adding eyeliner, which is one of those things some older men in Hollywood do that we shouldn't even try to understand. Mr. P is sentenced to ninety days of community service picking up trash on the 101 freeway, wearing dark sunglasses and the required pinny that in bold letters says LOS ANGELES DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS, and during this time gives several autographs, which makes him happy and sad at the same time, which confuses him. Mrs. P leaves during this period, and even though there are plenty of obvious good reasons, it's not any of these. She just needs to go. She tries to explain this to Mr. P, that it's just a drive she has, that it doesn't have anything to do with him, and it doesn't, but he doesn't get it, and he's demolished, *Like when they fill up old buildings with dynamite and they're utterly flattened, like that*, he tells her, *flattened.* He begs her not to leave, promises her anything she could possibly want, anything he could possibly do to make things work, couples therapy, liposuction, anything, but she just smiles, sadly, kisses his weird eyes and goes, takes troubled thirteen-year-old Charlie with her, and except for one horrendous incident with a prostitute, Mr. P will not get involved with anyone sexually or otherwise until they reunite. He will flirt a lot, in restaurants, in bars, in the grocery store, on the street, or his version of flirting (*You ever see Love Lives On Forever? You want to?*), mostly with women younger than his daughters, but none of this will result in sexual activity of any kind. Mr. P stalks Mrs. P a little bit periodically, moping in his car outside her house, showing up places he thinks she might be, leaving horrifically out-of-tune heartbreak songs on her answering machine (*She's gone! Ain't no sunshine when she's gone! She's leaving! Leaving! On that midnight train to Georgia!*) and sending sad, nonsensical letters (*This period of my life, babe, is like smoke signals, and without you my mind goes to lunch*), and she actually thinks it's kind of sweet, and she actually knows exactly what he means.

Mrs. P drops out of acting during this time, this time for good. She takes up painting and even though it's halfway decent, she doesn't get much in the way of critical acclaim, which she claims to understand (*Yeah, it's a little they don't get it, a little 'look at the girl with the hair having her fun'*), but doesn't really care, because she sells a boatload of it. Also it fills her

spirit, and in early 2002 she up and marries and quickly divorces a gallery owner who physically abuses her (we do not know the specifics here, but at this point, and for what should be obvious reasons, we sure do wonder how Mrs. P defines "physical abuse"). Needless to say, when Mr. P learns that she's married someone besides him, he calls her immediately and asks why she didn't just stab him in the stomach with a fire poker instead. Around here she watches a lot of Oprah, reads *The Road Less Traveled* and starts listening to NPR, which she thinks is really interesting. She tells people *I just love learning, you know?* even though she may not be fully comprehending the material being consumed. Often she learns things altogether wrong (*Did you know that Kim Jong Il is responsible for the deaths of millions of babies in Taiwan?*) or memorizes bits at the most basic level (*The problems in our educational system can't be solved by throwing a bunch of money at it*), nevertheless she's invigorated, and will tell anyone who will listen about the latest thing she learned.

In a blackout, Mr. P hears about the gallery guy on Access Hollywood, tracks him down, and kicks the shit out of him. Mr. P has never thought of his relationship with Mrs. P as abusive and neither has she. They always like to say *passionate* or *tumultuous*. They always like to say their love is one-of-a-kind, even, or maybe especially, at times when they aren't technically together. We aren't really sure what to call it, love isn't the first word that comes to mind, but we haven't got another one. If you catch Mrs. P after she's heard this kind of scuttlebutt about her relationship, she'll say *Who are they to say what love is or isn't? You know what I think? I think love is easy. It doesn't mean you don't throw things at each other sometimes or take a few years off for yourself*. Mrs. P gets word of what Mr. P's done (via the tabloids, which she of course doesn't read but is hard pressed to overlook at the supermarket checkout) and dreamily tells her best friend how romantic she thinks this is. In truth, Mr. and Mrs. P have never really been out of touch since the split, Charlie being their excuse for multiple daily phone calls that go well beyond what time he should be picked up from his AA meeting, but there are things they don't discuss, or we should say she won't discuss, for obvious reasons. So but Mr. P gets word from her girlfriend that she was touched to hear he defended her honor so gallantly, and starts writing her love letters again, really sweet,

if unsurprisingly odd and misspelled love letters (*I love you like a bonfire loves a marshmollow*), and Mrs. P finally answers him back and tells him that if he goes to rehab she'll consider taking him back someday, even though rehab doesn't have much to do with it, she just wants a little more time. Mr. P goes to rehab, and it doesn't take the first time, or the second time, but it does take the third time, which coincides with him being around long enough to become ironically popular again, getting some interesting parts in independent films and finally a sitcom. Mr. P sends flowers and gifts to Mrs. P every week (picked out by her girlfriend because he's inclined to pick out antelope-sized arrangements and Elizabeth Taylor-type bling for her even though she prefers freesia and hardly wears jewelry at all), but it isn't until she hears from her friend that he has prostate cancer that she begins seeing him again. Mrs. P visits him every day in his room at Cedars Sinai, even though they've been apart for some time. She won't have any of what the nursing staff is selling her in terms of visiting hours (but does so in her charming way—*Oh I'll be on my way in just a few*, and then sleeps in his bed next to him for the length of his stay). Mrs. P also avails herself to Mr. P during his entire recovery, baking fresh berry scones every day, bringing flowers and reading Anna Karenina to him, mostly because Mrs. P has always loved the first line. (Usually, she just reads a page or two before he falls asleep.) Mr. P does everything he can to use his illness to get her to come back (*I might croak tomorrow/Nice try, baby, the doctor says you're all clear/Ah, I don't know, I'm not feeling that great unless you're around/I'm always with you baby, you should know that*). Mr. P soon recovers and promises never to hurt Mrs. P again, and he doesn't.

Mr. and Mrs. P's son Charlie takes his turn in prison, also on drug-related charges. It's a terrible time for the Ps, much worse than the cancer, for Mrs. P the hands-down worst time in her life. Charlie doesn't blame her (prison dialogue, all family members present: *Charlie, I should have done better by you my sweet baby boy/Please don't blame yourself, Mom, I just got some shitty genes from dad/So it's my fault/Yeah, well, you could have at least tried to make up the difference somehow/Did I not give you everything you needed? You live in our goddamn guest house with freaking maid service/Not now I don't/You're just an ungrateful little bitch/Stop it! Stop it right now*), but she can't help herself. At home, Mrs. P cries and cries, mostly alone in a secluded corner of her garden, until Mr.

P finally pulls his head out of his ass and admits to her that he's fucked everything up with their kid, and that he wants to try to do right by her (*Don't do it for me, baby, do it for him/I will, baby*). Mr. P goes back to the prison without Mrs. P (for the first time) to see Charlie and weeping, confesses his sins. (*I've fucked all you kids up, I know it/Nah, Dad, the odds were against me in the womb/I still could have tried harder/You did the best you could, I know you got fucked the same way I did/I'm so, so sorry, son/Hey, I thought love meant never having to say you're sorry/Yeah, that's a big load of horseshit/(actual laughter here)/I want to do better now, if you'll let me try/Okay dad.* This particular 'Okay dad' has any number of layers to it, including but not limited to total skepticism, lingering resentment he's too tired to express, and hope, a little tiny bit of hope that he might someday have a dad that acts like a dad, even now.) Mrs. P, whose bright light is dimming just a bit now, leans on Mr. P, lets him stay over most nights now, and they no longer fight or throw anything, they make healthy dinners, watch movies and have some sex that's a somewhat less energetic version of times past, but that has a tenderness that had never been there; Mr. P often lies quietly next to her after, while she falls asleep. He likes to say that he loves to watch her dreaming, he imagines, of kittens in palaces, dining on lobster rolls and ice cream sundaes, romping under rainbows and sleeping in canopy beds.

Mrs. P comes down with cancer herself, of the colon, unfortunately it is discovered rather late for anything but a miracle, which is what they both hope for, and now Mr. P tends to her. Mr. P shifts into a brand-new gear for this exercise, goes to great lengths to find a cure for his wife, learns to use the internet (for a while he hadn't even believe it existed, he would say *Who uses that really?*, this around 2004), reads articles and calls around the world, everyone from doctors to shamans to the pope (the latter of whom is not easily reached for miracle-making, he discovers). He prepares most of her meals as smoothies because she can't tolerate solid foods and hardly has the energy to chew anyway. Mrs. P doesn't love all of these smoothies (*I'm not crazy about the split pea, honey/Come on, it's just like soup, you love soup!/This is not like soup/Okay, sweetness, I'll fix you something different, what do you want, you name it/Chocolate banana/Okay baby, chocolate banana coming up/With whipped cream/You got it baby*) but when he delivers them to her bed with a loopy straw and an edible violet blossom on top, she gives

him a grateful, loving smile, albeit a cancer-stricken, half-lit version of her famous smile, a smile that makes him know his time on the planet hasn't been altogether useless. Mr. P gets down on his knees every morning and evening now, something he hasn't done since third grade, praying to god to cure Mrs. P, trying to make any deal he can think of, even some unsavory ones (*Take me, take Seamus*), weeping and even admitting some of his flaws (*I know I'm a shitty father, I know I'm a dick in sixteen different ways, Mother Mary, but she's an angel, you probably already know that, and she doesn't deserve this, please don't take this out on her, she is good and kind and I don't think I can live without her.*) It is during this time that Mr. P makes the first of a number of marriage proposals that Mrs. P turns down. (*Oh, silly, when are you going to stop asking me that?/When you say yes./I want to grow old with you./Sometimes I think people like me aren't supposed to grow old./What does that mean? What kind of people are you? Don't say that.*) Mr. P thinks they're the same kind of people, the kind of people who like a good cheese and an old movie and who think too hard about the wrong things (which he thinks to say just in the moment, but which may be as insightful a thing that ever comes to him), who got lucky in the most important way when they found each other, the kind of people who are meant to grow old together, forever, until they're old and feeble and take an overdose of pills so they can die at the same time, in an embrace. This has been Mr. P's plan ever since he met Mrs. P. He knows there's not much time left but he still wants to be able to call her his wife, once and for all. (*Please, baby, make me the happiest man in the world, we can do it however you like, a big church wedding, at the courthouse, I could rent a yacht, we can go to Vegas, whatever you desire/Oh I don't know*) Mrs. P says. But Mrs. P does know, she thinks maybe she's just meant to sparkle brilliantly for a short while and when the shine starts to dull, she'll just fizzle out quickly, like a bottle rocket.

Several days before her death, in a bit of a morphine haze but not at all unclear about her decision, Mr. and Mrs. P are married. She has mere days left, so it's hardly as he always imagined, an all-white barefoot ceremony on the beach, close friends (and even some family), vows they wrote themselves, Mrs. P with a single gardenia behind her ear. The only thing that's white in reality is the harsh fluorescent lights above them, and the only people present besides them are the hospital chaplain, an

uninvited nurse who randomly walks in with a handyman, insisting that one of the monitors needs to be looked at at this exact moment, and Mrs. P's best girlfriend as a witness. Mrs. P has, with the doctor's permission, cut her morning dose of morphine in half, but is still drowsy and in pain and distracted by a fly buzzing around her head. At Mrs. P's request her friend has dabbed a tiny bit of rose lipstick on her lips and cheeks, and Mr. P has brought a gardenia for her hair, which she uses for a bouquet instead, because she loves the fragrance, says the fragrance is so heavenly that when she closes her eyes for a second it positively takes her away. The chaplain weds them with the traditional vows, although Mrs. P's not listening at the moment, Mr. P smiles and snuffs and makes a slashing motion across his neck when the chaplain says 'obey,' her friend gives a small inaudible chuckle, and although Mrs. P has been unable to prepare anything, Mr. P has with him the dog-eared, folded-up vow he's been hanging onto since he wrote it thirty years ago. Tears run down his puffy face as he reads it, the others in the room are welling up too, all but Mrs. P who's in and out, and returns only long enough to see Mr. P wiping away tears and telling her that he knows he's still not a very good man, but she's made him a better one, and that fourteen lifetimes from now when he's an armadillo and she's a gazelle, he will still love her as much as he does this day, as much as always.

At the funeral, Mrs. P's bereaved, ninety-two-year-old father is led down the aisle, held tightly by Mr. P on one side and Charlie on the other, because he can barely stand from the grief. He asks Mr. P, weeping, not expecting an answer, *Why her, I'm an old man, why not me? Why my sweet angel girl?* Mr. P says he's not sure his wife was really made for this world. Mr. P's father considers this for a moment before he speaks. *What world do you suppose she was made for, then?/I don't know. A better one.*

MELISSA CUNDIEFF-PEXA

Ars Poetica

—for Norman

"Why you've never seen a horse so small. A horse, not a pony! A full grown two-year-old horse that's not as tall as a bale of hay..."
—Texas State Fair, over the loud speaker

This man breathes smoke into his hands for heat.
Suddenly, he is standing in the dark
next to a miniature pony, her pit

dug down into earth. Both of them, like injured
marquees, are caught within a fairway
nostalgia, loved endlessly by showlights

and bored crowds, by the drone they hear among
display cages, rotten bales. There, the little
pony's eyes speak her history. I'm a

big horse! When she finally dies, it's nothing
but a mercy. The man, dressed in that vast
pornography of moonlight, reaches into

its frozen ground and rescues a cigarette.
The sky is brazen. This man goes blind for
just a moment. Maybe he is lost for

oxygen: the cigarette's odd battle
with his lips overwhelms his vision.
The moon lifts his throat like for a shave or

an autopsy. The satellites sitting
there above him, ornamenting the night
with all their brief, unlovely stories.

BEN DUBUS

The Sugar the Wind Brings

1. The house at 1211 Hawthorne Lane

An empty house dishevels at the end
of Hawthorne Lane. Its boarded windows gnash
the dark inside the rooms they used to light
like muzzled maws content to gnaw their tongues.
It broods between two times: behind a screen
of pines, its eastern face sulks towards the Lane,
the commons-time like risen loaves of rye
the peopled homes, and those who people them,
must each day break together. Follow south
along the Lane to join a highway road
that ribbons past a mall, a school, past shops
abutting tracts of half-developed land,
gouged fields and piles of rebar, concrete slabs;
move forward, towards the City, and beyond.
But follow north along the Lane and crush
through woods, the formless, unmarked time of oak.
The northwest corner of the house points towards
these woods, preserved by action of the Town;
and like a plough-blade, broken, left outside,
the house allows these woods, the vines, the trees,
the stretch their roots, grow under and around.

2. The other house

Some many thousand miles beyond the house
which broods between the times of Lane and woods,

beyond those woods themselves, and over earth,
through townships, cities, streams and furrowed fields,
across the sea, across the other land
beyond the sea, inside a denser woods,
an older woods whose pines tip out the sun,
whose ancient oaks cord up like straining wrists,
inside a house whose walls are gingerbread,
a woman rocks upon a chair, and waits.

3. The back porch at 1211 Hawthorne Lane

The trees reach out their nuding branches, creak
their boughs above the porch, and threaten towards
the eaves. The woods breathe leaves across the boards;
leaves lift and funnel, scrape along the sills,
tamp down inside the steps, then scuttle on.
The beams which prop the porch-roof cush with moss;
the hand-rails, warped with water, brittle as
the drift of shipwrecks, buckle towards the woods.
But though the house groans answers to the call
of swaying oak, and rots, and splinters, frays
as if by fraying it could join the woods,
each creaking board recalls the step of those
who walked its floors: the sick consumptive child
of eighteen sixty-four; the spinster aunt
who wore a veil and gazed out towards the east
those dawns from eighteen ninety-three to -eight;
the sweat of those who broke its ground, who felled
and hewed the trees which would become its timbers.
And so the house, at once, invites the woods,
whatever from the woods will come, and too
whatever child may enter, lured by ghosts.

4. The other house

The doorway to the house of gingerbread
hangs wide, its sugar-crusted muffin-knob
mashed up against the candy-cane that props
the eave. The door, a giant madeleine
that sprouts up like a fan of celadon,
sways backward towards the jamb as if to close,
then swings out wide again inside a gust.
The opening admits no light. The windows,
panes of white sugar, sparkle in the sun
which shafts in through the pines, but give no hint
of what's inside. A row of gumdrops rings
their casements; curlicues of butter-cream
weave ivory creeper-vines across the walls.
From far away, behind the trees, the house
seems like a gift, a Christmas sweet: a smoke
of sugar-dust wafts from the chimney-stack,
a giant waffle-cone flipped upside down,
and settles on a roof of chocolate curls,
the eave of lemon cake beneath, like snow.

5. The cellar beneath 1211 Hawthorne Lane

Beneath the empty house on Hawthorne Lane,
inside the cellar, shelves of empty jars,
a sofa cloaked in drapes, a table-saw
against the wall, a boy breathes deep. The must
chafes in his nose, sows florets through his throat.
His flashlight stirs the dark. He prods its beam,
a glassy ampoule swilling tar, from here
to there around the room: a billiard ball
upon an armoire gutted of its drawers;
a lawn flamingo propped against a box,

its head cracked off, so that its hollow neck
jags upward like a cup. Beneath the stair,
its hand-rail laced with Christmas lights, he finds
a lathe. Beneath, inside a bed of dust,
a half-carved doll of balsa nuzzles down.
Above the waist, she's scaled in whittle pocks,
her head unfeatured as a dresser knob,
her arms straight out, and rounded at the hands.
Below the waist, she's just an uncut block,
her legs still bound in wood. Inside his palm,
she seems a fist of ginger, seems a root
that sprouts out like a girl, or like a girl
beneath the earth so long she's taken root.

6. The other house

A pathway curves across the clearing tucked
within the dark and deep of trees. The woods
close thick around as if their shade were hands,
had lashed together trunks to weave a wall.
But looking down, the sister and her brother
see gumballs, smooth as river-pebbles, bulbed
amongst the pathway's cobblestones. It's true
that gifts can find us where we least expect;
and so the children, lost, tossed-off, and starved,
ignore how dense the forest's grown, so thick
that if they turned, stepped twenty paces back,
they'd never find the little house again.
(A hunter passes by. He whispers psalms
to soothe his bristled dog. His fingers itch
to cock his gun. But he will leave the woods
and not know why his hackles rise, his mouth
goes dry, he takes such comfort in his knife.)
And true that sometimes we are led by gifts

which hide until they wish to give themselves:
the man the river sweeps away accepts
the stone he clings to, though it breaks his leg;
another finds his answer in a carol
which drifts from somewhere on the snowy air.
These follow no design that we can see:
a glacier placed the stone that saves the man
a hundred thousand years ago; the hymn
was written long before the other's birth
to praise an older birth, and so has no
clear bearing on the man who hears it now.
Except to him. And here, the miracle
unfolds: the gift that he receives as song
remains for others, waits for all those others
walking the dark to hear, and to accept.
It makes no vows. The house of gingerbread,
by its design and secret place, makes vows.
It vows a harbor, vows to be a home,
to hold the sister and her brother close,
and only them. Alone, they creep up towards
that vow, that promise, too much mouth to see
the nibble-marks already on the eaves.

7. The kitchen at 1211 Hawthorne Lane

Inside the pantry, four brown paper sacks
of sugar hunker back like horsemen, old
provisions for some end already passed.
And yet, not quite an end: the boy can see
the house has called to others; empty beers,
and brown-glass fifths, and clear-glass handles, stand
upon the sill that opens toward the woods.
They bed the floor like jagged underbrush,
slim up like stems upon the countertops,

line up in garden furrows in the sink.
The kitchen faucet, crusted white and green,
the drain a wreath of lime, the pipes beneath
the sink a rime of rust, remind the house
how water used to gurgle through its wall.
The boy squeals on the tap, and nothing comes.
But water finds a way: above his head,
the ceiling plaster bubbles, bursts where rain
has eaten out the roof. A grayish stain
spills down across the paper on the wall,
a patterned and repeated field of sprays,
of hazel, violet, rose. The flowers fade:
the roses blanche to pink; the violets ghost
to watermarks, as if what scurries through
the walls had milked their color from behind.

8. The other house

Beside the door, beneath the porch-eave's shade,
the sister and her brother find a bed
of crumbled cake, a row of orange peels tooled
like tulips, stemmed on chocolate straws. A bush
of drizzled taffy blooms with frosting roses.
A beetle-line of candied figs swarms up
the wall, along the windowsill, surround
a nest of coconut. Inside the nest,
a ring of speckled Easter eggs grows cold
without a mother. So it seems to Gretel.
The birds which should swoop down to peck the panes
of sugar hold so far away that Gretel
can't hear their song. The ants which should
invade the ginger walls have built no hills.
No bears lap up the little honey-pond;
no rabbits nibble at the fondant leaves.

Her brother reaches up to pluck a hunk
of lemon-poppy eave. He gestures toward
the window, says, cheeks puffed with cake, now eat.

9. The dining room at 1211 Hawthorne Lane

Eight flutes: the boy counts eight of everything:
eight china plates with golden rims, eight cups
and saucers, silver settings which have shed
their tarnish, buffed by moving from the past.
The table's laid out for a Christmas feast.
Perhaps it's always Christmas here, he thinks:
a brandy bottle sits beside a bowl
of eggnog; radish blossoms ring a plate
of cheese, a wedge of brie, a hunk of bleu;
there's lamb and mushroom stew, an apple tart,
a platter spilling berries, roasted goose.
And there, upon the table's nearest leaf,
beside a tray of cookie girls and boys
with cherry-buttoned fronts, a house peaks up:
four walls of gingerbread beneath a thatch
of chocolate curls, a dust of sugar snow.

10. The other house

Inside the house of gingerbread, a girl
sweeps chocolate slivers into piles, wipes flakes
of wafer-cookie from the windowsills.
Each pane, a sugar square opaque as ice
and etched with pictures—there a tree that shakes
a ball-gown from its boughs, and there a field
of flowers where a wolf beds down, and there

a spindle locked inside a tower room—
allows some light, but blurs what lies beyond.
A sweat-drop sputters from her chin, dissolves
a divot in the graham-crust floor. Her hands
leave dents upon the casements, lift away
smeared with a gore of caramel. Outside,
beyond the magic ring, she swings an axe
and splits a cord of wood. She lifts and swings.
Attracted by her motion and the sweet
upon her skin, the bees swarm in. They sting
her arms and legs, her shoulders, cheeks, then buzz
away to die. She lifts the splintered wood
and stumbles towards the shed behind the house,
the oven-shack outside of melting range.
Beside the woodpile there, her brother hangs
inside his cage, a roosting dove, curled up
and plump from overfeeding, sound asleep.
She raps his cage-bars with a stick. He stirs,
but doesn't wake. He rolls inside his nest
of chicken bones and plum pits, hunks of bread
and brie. She bends to search the wood she's cut
for grubs. Perhaps today, perhaps tonight,
perhaps in just another week, she thinks,
the witch will come to stoke the oven. Then,
she thinks, just then, a little push, she sings
as she returns to work the shortest way,
along the pit of tiny bones and skulls
that sparkle in the sugar the wind brings.

BRANDEL FRANCE DE BRAVO

Four poems

The Old Woman in the Shoe

Moored in bramble but still I tell them "row."
What else can I do with these charges,
bothersome as bunions? In the dark of the hull,

their sequin-sweat catches light and they turn
orphaned faces toward it, gulping air
from the open portholes. I removed the laces

after Dimple Dan died, hid them below deck.
Oar-breath and the clatter of shackles keep time,
as one by one the children fold, forehead to knees.

Singing softly, I carry the weary to the bow
where five cots wait and pitch the dead
into the toss and roil of thorn. Life is a tight fit.

For dinner I give them broth, shouting,
"Cup your hands. Them that's got the will
knows not to mind the scald." What does not leak

is lapped, but the bread is mine. I eat the crust,
throw away the rest for all to see, and search
the horizon with my glass, squint for delivery.

Hear my lullaby: someday, the anchor will lift.
This cargo a memory, I will let my sails out,
pull them taut as I see fit. Captain of my shoe,

my tongue will take me where I want to go.

Husband Peter

The roundness fools,
its moist interior feels
fecund at first.
I fear we're living
at the bottom of a dry well.
There he keeps me very,
feeding me seeds.
A life without seasons
bland as uncooked gourd.

The noon sun dangles over us,
a key out of reach.
I welcome the blaze
that turns our one room
into an eyelid.
Only then can I
pull the blanket of dreams
over me.

When the sun goes down
my husband dines by candlelight.
The smell of singed flesh
does not sicken him.
Our home grows tight
since the first quickening.
Who will be born here?

I scratch messages into the wall
but the letters
drop to the floor motionless
white worms

until our feet are buried,
my nails soft and useless.

He told me there was water.

Jack Sprat

He looked like six o' clock
and she the face.
Together they were bacon
—sinew and glisten—
and called a platter home.
She licked the welcome mat.
He licked the light switches.
She licked his arm chair.
He licked her vanity.
One day, in the pantry,
their tongues met
and they knew salty-sweet,
felt time running in place.
Afterwards, Jack lit a cigarette.

The rest is a blur, like glass
smeared with butter.
Jack remembers fetching his pail.
He remembers the whoosh and flash,
spitting heat, and his mother's words.
Never throw water on a grease fire.

Four and Twenty Blackbirds

Cut the crust
Spare the wing
Black steam
Trilling free

Serve a slice
Savor mince
Beak bites
Rake his throat

Coughing king
Talons grip
Fur squirm
Breath of mouse

Ermine quill
floating drops
Plucked nape
Subjects see

Royal lids
Hatch new eyes
Still born
Yellow beads

Flaccid neck
Clatter crown
King down
Empty nest

Falling up
Six pence dirge
Strange pie
Sovereign sky

OWEN KING

The Idiot's Ghost

To drop anything besides trash bags down the garbage chute was a violation of building rules, but that didn't stop people—they pitched all sorts of junk. Even Trevor, who had been a porter at the building for almost a decade, should have known better than to be fooling around in the basement dumpster at the bottom of the chute. In Kurt's opinion, he had known better. Maybe the kid wasn't a genius, but he had been a good worker. Trevor just couldn't help himself.

"He was a goddamned idiot," said Linda, Kurt's wife.

Kurt was the long-time superintendent of the upper West Side high-rise. It was a pleasant building, a burnished silver cylinder of nineteen floors, populated by affluent people from many walks of life. What happened to Trevor felt so deeply out of place—in the context of Kurt's steady existence as a fixer, and within the nice building itself, where so many well-kept families lived—that the super found the reality of the tragedy hard to accept, and he paced his apartment in a funeral suit.

Trevor had liked junk, shiny stuff, toys. He had been soft-hearted. Like a kid, he had had a thing for little animals. They called people like Trevor special, and Kurt thought that was right, because the dead man had been sweet and never complained, which in this world was uncommon. It was wrong for Linda to talk about him like that.

"Stop that," Kurt said.

"Why? It's the truth."

"He's dead, Linda."

"He's dead, Linda." She repeated his words in a childish whine. "So? Does that make him somehow less of an idiot? I call a spade a spade. Maybe that makes me awful, but I do. And Trevor was a goddamned idiot." As Linda spoke, she yanked a cushion from the couch and tossed it aside. Kurt's wife had not attended the funeral. It was four in the afternoon and she was in her bathrobe. The mass of gray and yellow wire

that was her hair evoked in her husband's mind a picture he had once seen of a tumbleweed.

"I can't find the find the fucking controller!' She flung another cushion. It hit the wall and tilted a picture.

"You know how the people who live here are," said Kurt, who normally preferred to leave her as wide a berth as possible, but was unable to hold back. "They throw out nice things sometimes. Don't you remember the woman on four threw out all her husband's suits that time?"

This reference was a bit disingenuous; the philandering husband's suits had held no value for Trevor and he had given them to Kurt as a gift. "Check out the fancy, boss!" Trevor had said in his inimitable way when he presented the armload of Italian suits, only slightly soiled by used coffee grounds and coleslaw.

"He was a goddamned thirty-year-old idiot, and he got his brains bashed out by a toaster, and that's the fact." Now she was shoving at the couch; it made a grinding noise. "But also, I don't give a shit."

"Well, I give a shit," said Kurt, but couldn't manage to summon any heat, and this embarrassed him. A wife shouldn't talk like that to her husband, and certainly not about such a grave subject. Didn't she know that he had cared for the boy?

Linda had, in the last ten or fifteen years, grown mean. She never missed an opportunity to proclaim that the most unhappy things were facts and vice versa. The super found it impossible to trace the change in his wife. There had been a time when she had danced while she cooked dinner, sashayed back-and-forth between the stove, the refrigerator, and the counter, danced to whatever music played from the transistor radio that sat on the windowsill. Linda had always been sharp, but her cynicism used to be funny and appealing. It was as though a curtain had fallen, momentarily obscuring the woman he had married, like an actress on stage at the conclusion of a play. Then, when she had stepped out to the footlights, she was suddenly this crone, grim and definite on every subject. Or maybe it was that Linda had emerged to see, instead of a finely dressed audience, Kurt alone, and realized, "Oh, God, this is it, me and this dusty old man until the end." Anyway, the bottom line was that she wasn't happy—not with him, not with anything.

The transistor radio in the kitchen had died a long time ago. Kurt remembered carrying the dead device to the basement, like you were supposed to, not throwing it into the trash chute.

Linda's bitterness not only made him feel helpless, it struck him as intensely female—and yet, in this case, he could not leave it alone. Was it because he was afraid she was right?

Was it because he knew she was right?

After all, the porter had been mentally disabled, and his demise had been—*avoidable*.

Trevor had been digging in the basement dumpster, his head situated directly beneath the trash chute at the very moment a cherry red, chrome-trimmed, four-slot toaster came banging and crashing down the sheet metal throat that ran the height of the building. The sound must have frozen him.

The impact killed him instantly, and horrifically. The porter's skull was cleaved, and his brains sprayed all over the basement, bits on the dumpster, bits on the pipes, flecks of gray matter on the dusty Zabar's coffee mug that sat on the high shelf way on the other side of the room.

"I give a shit," Kurt repeated. He had stopped pacing. There was a couch cushion at his feet. Linda was on the ground, straining an arm under the couch. She grunted with effort.

"You hear me? I give a shit about Trevor."

"Ughhh," said Linda, scrabbling under the couch.

#

On a morning some years earlier, Kurt had discovered Trevor prospecting in the cement planter in front of the building. This big blonde draft horse of guy was on his knees on the pavement, scraping and stabbing away at the dirt around the base of the dogwood tree, using a little jagged piece of wood—like off a crate or something. "The fuck is this?" Kurt had asked.

The big guy looked up. His lower lip was shaking.

"Don't gimme that, fella. That's not your tree." Part of the super was already inside, calling the cops to come and escort this giant dope

to the nearest soft room, when he noticed a rag on the sidewalk by the planter. The rag was a sparrow, Kurt realized, like a hundred others he had seen over the years, a sad little nugget on the pavement, feathers ticking slightly in the breeze.

"They don't understand windows, do they?" the guy said, and his wide, damp eyes had been like windows themselves. The super could see through them and into the poor boy's head, and it was a vault of clean air, sweet air, harmless air.

"Oh, for heaven's sake," he said, and brought Trevor inside. He found a small box, and they put the sparrow in that, and used a trowel to bury it around the side of the building where there was a patch of half-hearted grass.

Life was supposed to cure a person, make them tough and ready for the eventual. Why Kurt had gradually softened instead, he couldn't explain.

In the war he dropped firebombs. The odds said that he had killed many men; he had certainly seen dead men, their horrific, blackened half-faces. But at sixty-eight, with plenty of life behind him—the war, and a half century of tough, honest labor—his hair had become like a baby's hair, wispy white; and he was soft; see how he let his wife jab at him.

The kid kept coming around after that morning, and he was strong and he accepted direction, and the building needed a porter. Kurt hired him and let him put a mattress in the basement storage closet so he had a safe place to stay at night.

Now the kid was dead, brains all over.

"There! Yes!" Linda rolled away from the bottom of the couch, breathing hard. She waved the controller in the air. "Got the fucker."

"Oh. Good," said Kurt. "Good." He bent over and picked up the couch cushion at his feet, brought it to the couch, and put it back.

From her prone position on the floor, Linda clicked on the television.

An image of barefoot people running through smoke appeared on the screen. "—where reports are suggesting that a full-scale coup has erupted against the democratically elected government," said an anchor person.

"Of course, it doesn't matter how he died." Kurt smoothed a hand over the fabric of the cushion. "All that matters is his soul's finally at peace."

Linda shushed him. She was sick of talking about that idiot. She wanted to watch this.

#

It was the cleaners, hired by the management company to empty the basement storage closet that had served as Trevor's apartment, who first encountered the presence of the spirit. Mr. Bowker, the building's manager, told Kurt that while the cleaners managed to complete the job, the ghost "had annoyed the living shit out of them in the process."

Mr. Bowker glowered from behind Kurt's desk, gripping a sandwich in a sopping wrap of deli paper. The building manager wore checkered suspenders and a two-day beard. It was a week since Trevor's interment.

"He's got a can of that Sticky String apparently, the bastard. Keeps floating it around the ceiling and shooting them from above. Got it all in their hair, these old Korean broads. I'm told that when they came out, they 'looked like hookers from a science fiction movie.' I have no idea what that means, by the way, but I didn't like the sound of it."

The super rubbed his temple. It certainly sounded like Trevor. The kid loved Sticky String, firecrackers, those animals they sold at drugstores that danced and sang. Most anything that could get on your nerves, he loved. "Check it, boss," Trevor'd say. "It's a dog barks music!"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Bowker," said Kurt.

Mr. Bowker pursed his lips. Kurt hadn't heard the worst part yet. "The guys bring in the new refrigerator, right? And no sooner do they have it plugged in than this bodiless prick starts playing with the icemaker. Will not desist with the icemaker, apparently. Keeps pressing the button, getting cubes all over the floor, making everything slippery."

Kurt shook his head in an attempt at expressing rueful understanding. "I'm going to get this taken care of, sir. Don't you worry."

"Who's worried? Do I look worried? Course you're going to get

it taken care of," said Mr. Bowker. "Pronto. I promised my sister that her son could move into his 'pied-á-terre' by the end of the week. He's a young puke, by the way. If my sister weren't involved, I'd let him be haunted, the young puke."

The manager thumped his greasy sandwich down on top of some of Kurt's papers. It took him approximately five minutes to devour his lunch, ripping off bites, chewing hard, paying no attention to the fragments of onion and pepper that littered the desk. Meanwhile, the super knew well enough to keep quiet; Kurt was way too old to find himself looking for another job.

When Mr. Bowker was done he crumpled the wet wrapping, tossed it in the trash bin. He groaned, stretched, sighed, frowned. Then, he opened the top drawer of Kurt's desk, and casually riffled the contents, stirring around Kurt's loose pencils, paperclips, and antacids. This took the manager about another minute.

Mr. Bowker shook his head, and slammed the drawer shut. "Nothing." He stood and his gut scattered some papers. "Okay, Kurt. I think we understand each other. Get that retard's ghost out of my building."

#

When the manager left, Kurt fished the damp, stinking deli paper out of the trash, was about to bring it to the dumpster where he wouldn't have to smell the vinegar—before he forced himself to hurl it back down. He followed that by stomping his foot in, crushing the wet paper and everything else that was rubbish.

#

O'Dell, the exterminator, arrived in her yellow Hazmat suit. Whooshing and crinkling like a sail, she clomped along in her rubber boots beside Kurt through the lobby. A nanny pushing a stroller shot them an uneasy look as they passed.

The super warned her under his breath. "You never saw us, Oksana."

They pushed through the fire door to the concrete stairs down to the basement.

"What you brought, it's powerful stuff, huh?" O'Dell had never previously come to the building in a yellow Hazmat suit.

"You could say that." Behind her headgear's tinted plastic shield, O'Dell's head was just a shape. At her side, the exterminator carried a stubby steel canister, to which was attached a short black hose. Stenciled on the canister in red paint was, LEVEL 6 CLEARANCE ONLY.

"Well, what is it?" asked Kurt. "What kind of chemicals are we talking about? I have to file a report."

"That's need to know," said O'Dell.

"Yeah? Okay, I need to know."

"You said bring the big guns, I brought the big guns."

He didn't like the sound of that. Kurt knew something about big guns. "I didn't say bring a weapon of mass destruction to a building where sixty-plus families live. And why the suit?"

"The suit is regulatory. It's an insurance thing. I don't make the rules. The rules are beyond my control. They don't consult me. I would rather not wear the suit, but it's not up to me."

"It looks like something you wear for treating nuclear waste."

O'Dell put a puffy, gloved finger up to her plastic shield, the closest she could come to her nose. "Look. NASA makes it, okay? It's what they keep on board in case they meet anything—out there. Something hostile." Her puffy finger drifted upward, toward the outer space. "I know a guy. Let's leave it at that. There's a guy I know. He has access to certain manifests. I can't say anything else. But my guy, he says it's completely safe for people. If I said anything else, I'd be betraying a trust—but hey, this the room?"

The storage closet was at the foot of the basement stairs. They had stopped in front of the closed door. The cleaners had removed the tin sign that Kurt had given to Trevor one Christmas. "Trevor's Parking Space," it had said. On the opposite side of the basement hulked the shadow of the dumpster.

Kurt said it was. "Will it hurt? He was—" The super had to search for the right word. What had Trevor been? Not a friend, exactly. It wasn't

as though he would have told the kid about his problems with Linda.

The thought of him in pain, however, was horrible. Trevor had worked like a man—he could lift a three hundred pound stack of drywall—but he had been a kid. He ate the same cold cuts and cheese for lunch every day. In ten years, he never stopped turning mushy over the dead birds on the sidewalk.

The dumpster was in the corner of his eye and he shifted away from it. "—he was a valued employee," Kurt finished.

"Will it hurt?" O'Dell's tone was amazed. "Kurt... He's already *dead*."

When she entered, he heard the electric hiccup of an ice machine before the door slammed behind her.

#

After O'Dell departed, the super had gone into the storage closet alone. "Trevor?" Kurt had asked the silent room. The air smelled of flowers, as if the exterminator's canister had been filled with potpourri instead of deadly chemicals. The can of sticky string lay on its side against a wall. Kurt had expected something else. A body, he supposed, like in the war. The stupidity of that notion made him slam the refrigerator door repeatedly, but the action made him feel no less stupid. "I'm sorry," he said to no one and left.

"O'Dell brought the big guns," Kurt said to Linda in announcing Trevor's dispossession from the building. He sounded more triumphant than he felt, but felt it was important for his wife to see that sometimes things did work out—not everything was for the worst.

She was on her side on the couch, in her bathrobe, nibbling a fruit bar with a red, seedy filling. The coup was playing on the television. "Thank Christ you got that idiot's ghost out of the basement," said Linda. "The world's perfect now. Except for the fact that the revolutionaries just nuked the National Zoo. They just showed a gang of urchins eating all the charred flamingos. But except for that, everything's super-duper, because the exterminator came and killed the idiot's ghost. Thank you, God."

"I had to do it," said Kurt. "It's a blessing. He's free now."

"Free." Linda made a noise between choking and laughter. "Free! Quick somebody tell the flamingos."

#

There were four or five shoeboxes of Trevor's possessions. The cleaners had left them in a corner of Kurt's office. It was after one in the morning. Kurt had been unable to sleep. (His wife was still sprawled on the couch in front of the television when he left, maybe sleeping, he wasn't sure. The mute television showed images of burning cars, soldiers in camouflage, a man with bloody bare feet waving a tattered flag. On the couch, Linda didn't speak or shift.)

The superintendent poured himself a tumbler of whiskey and sat on the office floor. He started to remove items, one at a time, and place them around himself:

Four seashells, small, streaked in pale colors, chipped and cracked; a limp Mylar balloon: "Happy Birthday, Kevin!"; a yellow plastic flashlight, the battery compartment corroded; several covers torn away from women's magazines, covered in smeary fingerprints; a perfect rubber duckie with a pith helmet; postcards, dozens of them, all showing beaches or castles; eighteen assorted pens and markers, none working; a few action figures, policemen and soldiers, most without their limbs intact; eleven pieces of silverware, six forks, four spoons, and a dessert spoon, all from different sets; a ruby red vibrator shaped like a lipstick and not much bigger; a yarmulke stamped with a Knicks logo; a plastic gerbil that sang, *"I think I love you, so what am I so afraid of?"* and twisted its torso when you pressed a button on its foot; a plastic dog that barked the tune to "Who Let The Dogs Out?"; a plastic duck that had a button, but was apparently broken; a purple felt bag that had once contained a bottle of liquor; and inside the bag, a few of those chocolates that are wrapped in gold film in order to resemble doubloons; marbles of various markings, colors, and sizes; six cell phones with smashed displays; a handheld videogame player with a smashed display; Mickey Mouse dog tags; a revolver with no cylinder; a translucent plastic bracelet; a stopped watch; one entire box filled with shards and fragments of colored glass from

busted vases and plates and jars and who knew what, dozens of shades, practically the entire spectrum; a long black feather, snapped, dangling by a filament; and the small tin sign, "Trevor's Parking Space."

Kurt, inebriated now, raised a toast. "Check it, boss! Check out this wonderful pile of crap!" He swore and hurled the tumbler across the room, aiming for the freshly polished Zabar's mug on the high shelf. It missed. The glass smashed against naked cement and rained shards.

The super managed to jam Trevor's mess into a couple of extra-large trash bags, and heaved them into the dumpster.

A few moments after, he scrabbled up the ladder on the side of the dumpster, and tumbled inside. He tore open the bags and dug around in them until he reclaimed the tin sign.

#

But it was soon clear that something in the building was not yet quite right. A decent superintendent has an ear for these things.

The next afternoon, while Kurt was installing elderly Mrs. Brinsley's window-box air-conditioner on the fourth floor, he overheard her telling her daughter that she bought little Hugh the most wonderful toy based on his new interest in geology, but it had disappeared on her. "I figured it would be the Big C that got me," said Mrs. Brinsley. "Now I'm thinking that it's the Big A has me in the bullseye."

Then, he was showing the new porter that the management company had sent, a young guy named Gomez, how to use the long-poled squeegee to wash the tall windows in the lobby area. The bell pinged to announce the elevator. There was shouting as the doors opened. "What do I want for your wife's jewels that stink like fish? What do I want your sex slime for? It's your wife that is the one who needs it!" Oksana stormed across the lobby, luggage swinging from both hands, trailed by her employer, a splotchy-faced banker hot shot who lived in one of the penthouses. "You make me sick, and it's only your ugly kids for I feel sorry!"

She caught sight of Kurt as she pushed out the doors. "Good luck, old pooper you. Have fun being with your gigantic rats."

"Nannies," said Gomez appreciatively. "Say, what store do you go to get a super-long squeegee like this?"

The last clue was a visit from a police detective. Ms. Fernald, an arty type who lived in a one-bedroom on sixteen, had reported that an artwork had been purloined from her residence. "It's a planet earth, made out of yarn, about waist-high, yay-big." The detective made a large bowl out of his arms. "Ms. Fernald says that the artwork was in the living area when she went to bed last night."

He showed Kurt a Polaroid: the knit earth looked exactly like the real earth, except lumpier.

Fresh sweat itched the back of the super's neck. He handed back the photograph. "I don't think I've seen it."

"Trust me, you'd know. This is no normal ball of yarn." The detective tucked the photo into his notebook and stuck the notebook in his trench coat.

#

The basement storage closet was not much bigger than a prison cell, and between the yarn earth and the refrigerator it was no longer possible to step inside. Pancho Villa, the building cat, was working his claws into the bottom of the earth—somewhere in the Indian Ocean—and purring loudly, his brushy gray tail sweeping the floor.

Kurt lingered in the doorway. "Trevor."

A line of translucent substance—a jelly—began to describe a circle on the white wall.

The super involuntarily clenched his hands together. He looked at them, and squeezed them tighter. Had it come to this? Was he going to beg?

With unusual clarity then, Kurt grasped that the ghost was Trevor, truly Trevor. The kid had had a dent in the side of his head, like someone belted him with a pipe when he was young and his skull was soft. Kurt told him to comb his hair over it, but Trevor never remembered. Now he wasn't anything. He wasn't hands or feet or face. He wasn't even a dent in the head. Trevor was a floating touch.

And if there was any happiness in this existence, it ran back-and-forth. A hand needed another hand. If there was no chance of that, there was nothing. Trevor was a nothing that thought it was a something.

He had to let go! He needed to rest. For Mike's Sake, it wasn't like anyone else had ever been kind to him. Surely, he had earned a rest.

(But was Kurt thinking of himself, or of the boy? Was he the one who deserved the rest? From Mr. Bowker? From shrieking radiators and 3 AM leaks? From the shadow of his wife, who he had loved, and who had once danced in the kitchen, waving spoons up beside her ears, like they were maracas? Kurt pushed this thought aside.)

Yes, it had come to this. "Please," he begged. "Son."

The super was put off by the tone of his own voice. He thought it sounded old, like the voice of a person in a hospital, desperate for news. "I'm sorry I let O'Dell spray that stuff around. I'm glad you're okay."

The drawing on the wall had developed into a glistening smiley face.

"But, son, you can't stay any longer. You're dead. You're gone."

The smiley face abruptly ran, streaking down the white walls. Pancho Villa howled and ran, ricocheting off Kurt's leg and out.

For several seconds the only noise came from the groaning of pipes in the boiler room behind, and from a fly buzzing between the glass and the screen of the small window at the top rear of the storage closet.

The super put his hand out and braced himself against the wool planet. "Thank you, Trevor. Bless you, son."

Faintly, from above, a song began to play: *"I am a rock! I am an is-land!"*

#

After the movers (whom Kurt had hired out of his own pocket) removed the earth from the room, he used a ladder to get up to the ceiling and pop the vent. Inside he found the singing rock that Mrs. Brinsley had bought for her grandson. Made of some sort of foam, it had large, oval eyes, and a mouth of stitches. When it sang, the rock flexed like a heart. Gomez sponged the jelly off the wall.

The super called O'Dell and notified her that her services would

no longer be required. In the future the building would be using Bug Hunters for their extermination needs.

"Come on, Kurt, after all these years?" He could hear she was wounded. "At least let me have another try. I'll do it gratis."

"No way. That shit didn't do shit, O'Dell."

"It kills aliens!" she insisted.

Kurt said he'd let her know if any beamed down, and hung up.

Perhaps the fault lay with him—you couldn't exterminate something that was already exterminated—but he didn't appreciate O'Dell's fecklessness. Nor would he have felt particularly confident if he were an astronaut; a big canister of potpourri didn't strike him as much insurance against a space monster.

#

"I'm not happy, Kurt. Man lives in your penthouse, very wealthy man, and he calls me. This wealthy man says you told him that the ghost stole his wife's earrings. Says your ghost also stole his supply of sexual lubricant. He does not say anything of this in a pleasant tone of voice, by the way. What do you say, Kurt?"

"I am truly sorry, Mr. Bowker. We just had a minor setback—"

"—Shut your ass, Kurt. Shut your fucking ass. Just shut it and keep it shut. And you can forget about a Christmas bonus, by the way. You've been proven lacking. I'm sending over a professional."

#

Father Brownlow and his assistant, Sister Zoe, each carried one end of a steamer trunk. Large cracks webbed the leather veneer of the trunk, and spackled here and there were stickers from various foreign locales. Kurt led them through the lobby. A hot weight had gathered below the nape of his neck and he slouched; he halfway hoped he was getting sick. If he was sick he could lay in bed in the dark and be left alone.

The priest was roly-poly, bright-eyed, aggressively cheerful, and reeked of fruity aftershave. "'When the unclean spirit has gone out of a

person, it wanders through waterless regions looking for a resting place, but not finding any, it says, *I will return to my house from which I came.*'" The holy man raised his fat white hands, as if to catch a ball dropped from above, and wiggled his fingers a little.

"Luke-eleven-twenty-four," said Sister Zoe, who was young, probably younger than Trevor had been when the toaster fell down the garbage chute and broke open his head. Her eyes were pale and she spoke without affect. "Hallelujah."

"Brother Kurt, the release of your troubles is near at hand. The spirit is lost and bewildered, unable to regain its bearings in the Shadow Land, so rocky and perilous and strange. The spirit wants for a guide, an escort of the hills and of the desert and of the midnight glade, one who can read the tracks of our Savior in the night that knows no beginning or end," said Father Brownlow. "And I am such a one. It is my great and holy duty to show this misbegotten soul the path, be it to heaven or be it to hell, or—" He dropped his wiggling fingers and playfully feinted a punch at Kurt's ribs, making the super double-over."—be it to the building next door!"

"Hallelujah," murmured Sister Zoe. "Up with Jesus. Devil stay in your hole."

Sister Zoe opened the lid of the steamer trunk and extracted a plain Bible, a flask of holy water, a gold standard mounted with a gold cross, and a suit of fencing armor, the breastplate airbrushed with a Raphaelite Jesus streaming light.

As the nun helped the priest into his gear, Kurt retreated a few feet. He moved in a hunch. It was like the priest had actually decked him and now he couldn't straighten. He grabbed a cold pipe that ran along the low ceiling of the boiler room and hung on.

Trevor would have loved the steamer trunk. The super could imagine the big man crouched on his knees, running his mitts over the fissures in the leather. He had looked clumsy, but Trevor had had a gentle, mild touch—he never once twisted a joint until it broke, or kicked a toilet tank in frustration. He really had been an excellent porter. You just told him what to do.

But what color was the kid's hair? Blonde, remembered Kurt, but

light and golden, or darker, with tints of auburn? The super had seen him every day for nearly ten years and he could not precisely recall the color of his hair.

Who was lost now? Who was bewildered? If this was how Linda felt, how she found the strength even to watch television seemed incredible. A faint, tremulous sigh slipped from the super's lips, and he squeezed the icy pipe tighter.

Was an exorcism another kind of death, and did it mean more suffering for Trevor? Would more deaths follow in more worlds? In his mind the super pictured deaths stacked on deaths, like papers, and they built to a tottering manuscript. He tried to crush the pipe, but it gave nothing.

The door of the storage closet shut behind Father Brownlow. Sister Zoe fell to her knees and produced wordless keening noises. Pancho Villa padded past, a mouse clamped in his jaws, and disappeared into the dark of the basement.

#

Perhaps an hour elapsed before the priest emerged. The door opened and he stepped over the crumpled form of Sister Zoe. "No one told me it was a child! For Mike's Sake!" Father Brownlow tore off his fencing mask and flung it into the steamer trunk.

"He's not a child. He's—simple," said Kurt.

The priest fished a bottle of lime Gatorade out of the trunk, and drank deeply. Sister Zoe rose, dusted herself off, and began to briskly undo the buckles and ties at the rear of the priest's chest plate. At some point in her ecstasy, she had banged her head against the floor, and an angry welt swelled above the bridge of her nose.

Father Brownlow lowered the bottle and belched. "Whatever he is, he's certainly not going anywhere. Sorry, champ. The idiot already thinks that he is in heaven." He tossed the spent plastic bottle back into the steamer trunk.

#

Kurt was a foot inside the apartment before his wife yelled to come look right away.

He hunched to the living room. In the course of his elevator ride the superintendent had relinquished whatever faith in God he had possessed. If God could not carry out an eviction, he was not worthy to be called God.

On the television, men with black bandanas over their faces were aiming guns at a small crowd of dapper, mustached men in Trilby hats, who appeared terrified, and who were, en masse, jumping up and down.

"They're making the Swiss diplomatic contingent hop for their lives," said Linda. "You think it can't get worse, but the fact is it always does."

The note of exhilaration in his wife's speech bent Kurt's back another millimeter.

"How can you stand it?" he asked.

"What?" Linda retreated to one end of the couch, as if he had raised a hand to her.

He chinned in the direction of the television, the men in the hats, the men with the guns, the cloudy vase on top of the television, from which poked a single, gray stick.

"I call a spade a spade," she said. "That's all I do." His wife huddled against the arm of the couch. "What's happened to you, Kurt?"

"Tired," he said. He was just tired, was all.

#

A decent superintendent never turns off his cell phone, however, and after a couple of rings Sister Zoe's call dragged Kurt up from a heavy sleep. "What is it? Trevor? Is everything okay, son?"

"Not Trevor," she said.

He recognized her drugged speech. "Sister?"

"Are you watching the TV?"

"I was sleeping."

"Hop, hop, hop, the little men in their hats. It's terrible. But dif-

ficult to look away from. Why is that, do you suppose?"

"Sister, I'm going to hang up now."

"There is a man in the phonebook. His name, Murr. He is not like us, this man Murr. But Murr can help you." Sister Zoe sniffed. "Amen." The line clicked off.

#

Kurt instinctively sensed that, despite the hour, it would be okay to call this man Murr—and he was right. The man agreed to come to the building immediately. Murr said he couldn't bear to keep watching the coup anyway. "Too tense."

"But what's your rate?" asked the superintendent.

"Just the soul," reassured Murr.

#

A half hour later the superintendent buzzed Murr inside.

Of normal height and weight, dark-haired, bespectacled, and dressed in a neat white shirt and knit trousers, there was nothing in particular to distinguish him. Murr carried only a lidded jar, such as one will use for canning preserves. "You look like you could use a massage, friend. Sciatica is nothing to fool with." Murr's gait was smart and eager, click-click-clicking across the tiled lobby.

Kurt was, by this point, walking with his upper body hooked at a distinctly acute angle. "It doesn't matter. Will this work?"

"Yes, definitely," said Murr. They entered the landing above the stairs to the basement, and began to descend.

"Excuse me," said Kurt, "but what are you? What do you do?"

"I'm an allergist during the days," said Murr. "I keep a little office in Soho. With a chiropractor, as a matter of fact."

"Yeah? But what are you now? At the nights?"

"Oh, gosh. I dabble. Necromancy is my main thing, but I have a number of interests." Murr chuckled. "All manner of wickedness."

They had come to the door. "Is this where?"

The superintendent said it was.

"Right," said Murr. "I'll get started." He put his hand on the knob.

"What happened to your shadow?" Kurt had only then noticed that the man who was an allergist during the days, but had other interests at nights, did not cast one.

"Fucking elves." Murr started to turn the knob. "They're just vicious little men who live in toadstools, and never let anyone tell you different."

"Wait," said Kurt. The super needed to try one more time. He owed Trevor that much.

#

The walls of the storage closet appeared to be suppurating, as if the room were not haunted, but infected. The kid had been at it again, drawing with the lubricant. There were gelatinous pictures all over the walls: a large, crude heart; a crooked cat with wild whiskers; a bird with great wings; a man and a child, holding pillowy hands.

"Trevor." The super swayed in the center of the small space. His mouth was too dry. He felt he had to inch away from the man and boy with the pillowy hands, but refused to examine the compulsion. "Trevor."

Kurt blinked several times. "These are really good, really pretty. These are nice. Good job, son."

It was all he could manage. He left.

#

Murr couldn't say how long it would take; an hour or a day.

#

"Tell me."

The television was off. Linda had washed her face, combed her hair, and changed from pajamas to regular clothes. She met him at the door and took his elbow to guide him inside. Kurt shuffled along with-

out any resistance, then sat.

"Kurt," she said. "Honey?"

"What about the children eating the flamingos?" the super asked his wife. "Isn't that enough?"

"We can't help them." Linda ran a cool, dry hand over his cheek. "Tell me."

"What about the Swedish diplomatic contingent? Did they execute them yet? Did they shoot them in their stupid hats?"

"Darling, darling," Linda said. "Do you know you've kept me alive all these years?"

He shook his head. She was making no sense.

"Every day you went to work. Every day. You tightened your belt and you went out into the hall, into the awful, awful world. And then you came home again. Every night. Nothing I could say could stop you." Linda kissed his neck, his bristly jaw, his mouth. "You're my hope, Kurt. I see you, and I think, maybe it's not all for nothing. Maybe there's a reason."

"'Check it,' he'd say to me when he had something he liked. 'Check it, boss, check it.' And it was never anything that anyone would want."

"He didn't know any better, Kurt."

"You know, I think someone hit him with a pipe or something. When Trevor was young. He had that dent in his head. I bet that's how he got it, a pipe or something."

"But he did all right, anyway. He didn't let it stop him."

"How could someone do it? Drop a fucking—a toaster, down on his poor head? He didn't deserve that."

"People," Linda said. "They don't know."

"He was a kid, Linda. It was just crap people threw out."

Kurt sobbed and Linda held him. Years had elapsed since their last embrace. The feel of her, so warm and so dense, her hair tickling his eyelids, bent time, looped it like a piece of ribbon—with his eyes closed they might have been young again.

They began to sway. It was not quite dancing, but it felt so good.

"I've never stopped wanting a child," Linda said.

The memory came to Kurt then, a recollection of their last hug. It had been at the hospital, after her surgery, in a florescent-lit room,

beside a plastic curtain. She had not tried to hug him back.

"Trevor could live with us," said Linda. "He could be our son."

#

But in the basement they found that the storage closet door hung open and the room itself was empty, save the jar that was broken on the floor. It was quiet, and Murr had gone.

The relief that Kurt felt at that bare, dead room was something he never expressed to his wife in their many remaining, happy years together. Trevor had been special, an outstanding porter, and what had happened to him was terribly sad. It was over, though. Trevor was free. When she had embraced him again, his back unlocked.

That was what the smashed jar signified, Kurt thought, and never thought of that part of it again, or of Murr.

Why was he letting his imagination run away with him? No one had hit Trevor with a pipe when he was kid. It was a birth defect. Of course it was.

And now Trevor was free. He was free as a bird.

"I'm sorry, love," he said.

"Maybe it's for the best," Linda said, who was unable to keep the relief out of her voice.

He didn't hold it against her, though, not in the least. Surely no one understood better than his wife, how unstoppable was grief. Grief scratched with a thousand fingers. It tore until it was done, and it was never done, it just grew less violent, and perhaps eventually, you could largely satisfy it by granting it a little space of its own, a small room inside of you. But it still lived there, always.

#

Mr. Bowker died a few weeks later. He was jaywalking, and collapsed in the street, digging at his chest. Seconds after, an M79 bus ran over his corpse. Then, a deranged person dashed to the corpse and beat it with a telephone receiver until the police came.

At the West Side high-rise they threw a party. Kurt was delighted. Mr. Bowker's nephew was not exactly broken-hearted, either. He brought a six-pack of mixed beers to the get-together. Mr. Bowker's nephew had found the pair of missing earrings—silver sparrows—in his refrigerator's icebox. Kurt said to keep them.

Linda grew fond of the cat, Pancho Villa, and convinced Kurt to let her adopt him. She whisked him from the basement to their apartment where he could sleep on the sunny window. He was not much of a cat, in the super's opinion, half-feral at least, prone to lashing out at bare feet. They did manage to stick a miniature sombrero on him once. "Check out the fancy cat!" one of them said. The photos were hilarious.

But mostly the old cat sat at the window, where it was warmest, and watched the sky.

DREW KREWER

Glitterbug

an orchestration

this jewelry tells a story
the story becomes the jewel
the flutter twinkle motion
diamond-detailed ice dripping down your dress
a story
like a giant raft of amethyst floating in a pool
for years we've waited
now for the first time
thanks
for being here
and here's a semi-precious flea aflutter
a flutter of women collecting little critters
a chain of cats and dogs
puddles in your hand
tell me
are you a blue girl
then Malibu blue's for you
it's your pineapple platter in the sky
your sandy sheets hatching pearls, sighs
we've moved eleven thousand
for years you've waited

pick up the phone and

let's say hi to Trish

thanks for being here

just hear the lustrous pixies on their raft

a splashing mystical tale

a timeless story shimmer

what's your story, Trish

this jewelry

it's a gold Oreo sandwich

yum-yum

like the Louvre around your wrist

or watchdogs barking sparkles

all night I'm awake

a haunting husband blinking light bulb eyes

fluttering like a whipped satin scrim

like a mother's lullaby

filled with diamond rings

with mockingbirds on mute

a story for

tomorrow I'm in trouble

like a bad girl in orthopedic pumps

good looking trouble

with poet's sleeves

in animal, which is absolutely forever

forever's in Flex Pay

and husbands were born to pay

nightly to be plundered like pajamaed piggy banks

—can't sleep

we'll sprinkle the town in rubies
you'll be a glitter goddess
an actress on clouds of bling
aurora borealis screaming good taste
going so fast
my days and nights are
all mixed up
get the azalea it's almost gone
layer lacquered petals, form a bed
a garden shooting from your nape
stories shooting
through my brain
like sequin shrapnel from a war of glam
going so fast
I'm all mixed up
the enemy is beautiful
and almost out the door
like a hinged enamel Jesus with a pyrotechnic heart
and Trish, you're breaking my heart
tell me a story
if you are a fashion person, you are a fashion person
until you expire
a limited supply
an Elvis rhinestone coffin
turn the key
locket your child in gold
it's a door opening into shuteye
like a story or a lullaby

in payments

so easy

but I'm in trouble

I was an actress who forgot her lines

if only I had a mirrorball for memory

one for every mystical

every magical mood

are you a blue girl

tell me, Trish

are you a blue sequin dress unraveling into a puddle

a princess cut

by a prince

a metallic floormat

necklaced in mud

are you one time only

are you out the door

locked into our treasure vault

gone as a car-struck critter

a poet without a sleeve

the diamond cube of ice

melting out the door

out the window

eleven stories of a princess fluttering down

twinkling

like a lush tropical

get away from memories

collect them all

for years I've waited to

locket in gold

guilt-free gold

eighteen carats free of

worry

when you wear this

when you wear

this jewelry

tells a story

tell me

a story

a jewel that speaks

a statement authentic and bold

like hot fire in a blizzard

snowflakes

in red in white in blue

a snow that looks substantial

it melts it puddles in your hand

it's vintage

but we've made it by hand

this weather, this distress

this jewel to wear

night or day

wear it

to work

to church

to a can-can booze cruise across the sea

a jewel that speaks

a story

tell me a story

that breaks my heart

a good looking story

one that's easy as

a bad boy in bed

a story that fetches my coffee my paper

my remote

one handed down from generation to generation

detailed in simulated diamond

tell me, Trish

one time one time only

[Introduction to artwork by Peter Kuper]

To approach the Alice books I of course started with Tenniel's drawings, then looked at other artists who had tackled Carroll's brilliant story over the years (Arthur Rackham, Peter Newell and Ralph Steadman among others) and tried to avoid repeating what they had done. When I thought about casting the characters, knowing that Tenniel had chosen various political figures of his day, I tried to make appropriate modern matches. The Rabbit, for some biological reason, seemed to fit nicely with Bill Clinton. The Mad Hatter too easily transformed into George W. Bush and the Cheshire cat morphed into Richard Nixon since he faded from our political consciousness and then would magically reappear decades later, reborn. As I went along, it became curiouser and curiouser who made a natural fit. Tweedle Dee slotted to the bombastic Rush Limbaugh (and even more so with Tweedle Dum). Dick Cheney made a fine (drag) Queen of Hearts and Ronald "Dutch" Reagan neatly dressed the part of the Duchess. Alice was the easiest choice since my daughter Emily looks the part and was available for modeling at a reasonable price.

Becasue these books have so far only been published in Spanish in Latin America, I suspect many of my political references have been missed. This is only right; just as modern viewers of Tenniel's characters can enjoy them without the political baggage, I too don't want to ruin such a magical story with too many monsters.

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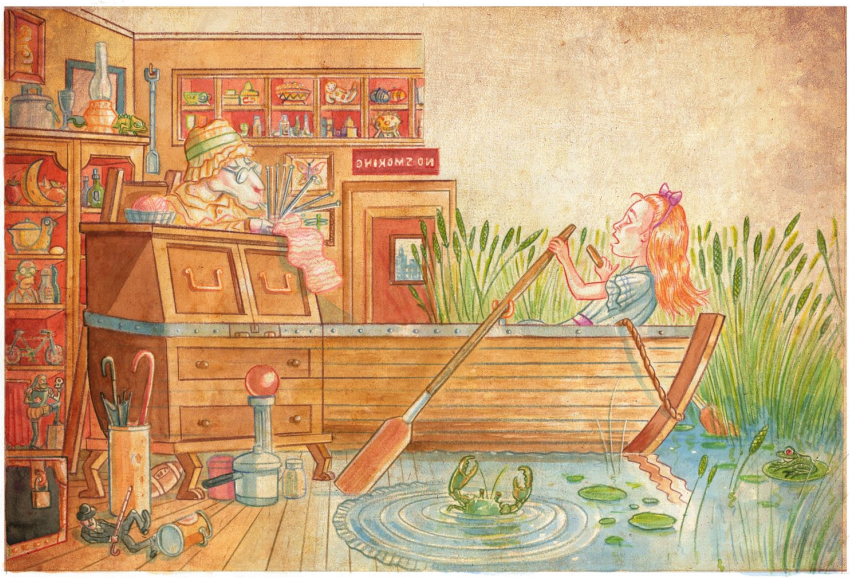

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SARAH MESSER

Spirit Medium

Now that my pen is made of glass
I pray to write of this loud tree
and not simply fashion—blues and organdies
and other appurtenances—taffeta, pagoda sleeves.

Now branches scratch the bowl of sky, leaves
massed loosely in torsade, flounces
deepening to knitted flowers, dead hair
braided into wigs—a tree on fire with birds.

Nothing sounds like this loud tree—branches
have grown richer, louder still. Each bird like
a smoke-stained leaf, like mittens worn at meals.

Flocked with birds, the tree remains. Wings puff
and return like crinolines in wind.

Life now: delicate butterfly, a hairnet made
of my own hair, parasols raised everywhere,
tasseled roots and ribbon ruches, sugar-lead,
bone dust, feather. Day and night, the sky
makes permanent the tree's singular pattern:

a dress burnt into skin. Now that this pen
is made of glass, I cannot measure
a sunbeam—I cannot catch a flame
with these lace fingers. Light darts from every
reflective surface like a velocity itself.

Branching, birds, and since you left: everything
I wear is made of glass.

Still, your image has reached my eye so gently
inside this light. Upon this slant
of sun cutting across this page. My body burning
for you like a tree.

Once philosophers tried to weigh a sunbeam, built
a machine so delicate, thinner than a fly's wing.
But the sunbeam left the sun more quickly, could not
be balanced on a scale. Love itself

is made of glass, is the burning tree. Ethereal lace,
brocade of all our seeing, weightless
yet still falling upon that sight, *belongingness*—

what is held by the beloved. What bright
light can be seen so clearly, unobstructed
like sunbeam passed through glass, or your
voice branching like the loudest tree, the place

where your hand lands so gently, then lifts off
before I even feel it. Like a thousand
ruffles pulled

over my head, like a thousand birds.

BRIAN OLIU

RBI Baseball

This is the part where we are supposed to keep an eye on things. This is the part where our eye will not move, will not dart to something else flickering: the sight of something white waving, the shape of mouths forming words that are lost in the lights. My right eye twitches when I have had little sleep. It twitches when I can't think of words to say—skin spitting out words in the form of waves, a ball fluttering above the white plate before diving into the dirt. There is a belief that if you can see something you can hit it—strike it out of the air like a gnat circling—to smack a body with a palm, to have it change directions suddenly. I will stand, shoulders cocked back like I am trying to push my bones up through my skin—like I am trying to spread wings—like I am trying to understand flight. Swing, you say, and I do: I hit nothing but air and myself—the barrel of metal slapping my back on the follow-through like I was meant to do that: like I was being celebrated, like I had earned the right to shake hands, to smoke cigars, to kiss the girl who wore red. Keep an eye on none of those things. Do not look at any of those things—do not picture them in your head, do not place their faces between the stitching. When you make contact, when the sound of metal hits leather: run. Your mother, there, will blink. Your father, there too, will blink. I cannot hear what they are saying. I cannot hear what they are saying but it sounds like static, like white noise, like the cat pawing at the pond behind our house, like water slurring. If I could see their mouths I could see what they were saying: about neglect, about a car shifting from park to neutral, about the tire running over my leg like a dead rabbit, like a lump of skin in the middle of the road. I cannot see their mouths because I need to keep my eye on the ball. My eye is on the ball and it is getting closer. My eye is on the ball and it is getting closer and the mouths are getting larger: hands over faces like whispers, like I am stealing signs, like I am reading lips. He is going to do this. He is

going to do this, and then that. They will never tell: inside, outside, fast, slow. This is the part where I am supposed to keep an eye on things. This is the part where I am supposed to keep an eye on things but it is closing up without asking, quivering. This where I wonder. This is where the ball hits me square on the back. This is where I make contact: run. This is what I have practiced for. This is where I remember tossing the ball up into the air and swinging. This is where I missed the ball. This is where I missed the ball and hit you—the bone above your eye the sweetest spot. This is where I bring you into the house from the yard and explain to your father what had happened, that it was an accident, that I did not mean to make contact, I never make contact, and that I can be trusted. I can be trusted, I promise, I can be trusted. Trust me, I can be trusted. If I meant to do it I would have hit him behind the eyes. I would have hit him behind the eyes and he would have dropped like a stone, like a dead fir root, like a sack of bones. The next day, the children asked what happened and you pointed at me; you said it was on purpose, that it was with purpose. You said I kept my eye on it. You said I kept my eye on your eye and I swung through it—I can hit anything I want to. I have such accuracy. I can hit flares and bombs and frozen ropes. I can hit the barn. I can hit the world. The children will have nothing to do with this. The children believe in justice. The children put a grocery bag over my head and punched me through it, their small fists hitting neck and cheek. Keep your eye on the darkness—do not listen to what they are saying: their words are hollow—rhubarb, peas and carrots, watermelon, wallow, wallow, wallow. How much longer. How much longer. How much longer.

If you could see me out there, you could see me swatting the flies above my head, the flowers in the field. If I had the time I would steal one from the ground, separate earth from taproot and place it behind my ear like a pencil, like a reminder of where I am and what I can do. If I had the time, I would take a breath and blow florets—I would scatter the whiteness on the wind, I would make things grow: a milk pot of dog's milk, a monk's crown, a mole's salad. If I had the time, I would snap the stem with a quiet crack, I would hold the yellow flower underneath my chin and ask you if I like butter—if I would slide it into small squares—if I would spread it on bread. You would hand me the silver knife, and I

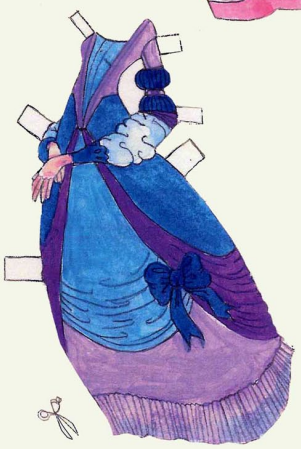
would leave. You would hand me the silver spoon, and I would leave. You would hand me the silver fork, and I would leave. You would ask me how I did it—to swing hard enough to remove head from body like a wing from a moth, to cause a mark that we wanted to rub our fingers over. Let me teach you. Keep your eyes here. Watch. Let me show you how I will bring you to your beds. Watch the angle of the elbow, the position of the wrists.

LISA PERRIN

Title?

Paper dolls have always fascinated me. They possess a unique simplicity and artistry. Most of my paper dolls relate to specific literary or historical figures. My original goal was to create paper dolls where you could "change their clothes but not their tragic situation." In this way I often portray melancholic or doomed figures using the deceptively playful genre.

It was many and many a year ago,
In a kingdom by the sea,
That a maiden there lived whom you many know,
By the name of Annabel Lee..."
~Edgar Allen Poe



Do not cut cut space between arm and body.

~Fold~

JUDITH SLATER

Innocence

There was once a woman whose husband was wealthy beyond measure. He gave her everything her heart desired: pearls and sapphires, rubies and diamonds, and so many gold bracelets she needed a special trunk made of inlaid mahogany to hold them all. As often happens with the wives of wealthy men, the woman began to think of herself as deserving of these treasures.

She used her small store of imagination thinking up tasks for her servants: she had her lady's maid paint her hair, strand by single strand, with gold leaf, and shop for slippers made from the skins of chameleons so they would always match her outfits. In spring she sent servants to trap songbirds while they sang their mating songs and, thus distracted, did not see the nets close over them. The woman put the birds in silver cages and forced them to sing to her until their throats were raw. In summer the servants traveled to the ends of the earth to bring back species of roses so rare they had not yet been named, and to plant them in a special garden outside the woman's bedroom window. When she could not sleep at night, she lay awake breathing the night scent of the roses and watching the stars outside her window.

She begged her husband to use his connections to arrange for a star to be named after her. She paid a wizard a great sum of money to make up a potion that would stop her from aging. No one, not even a wizard, can stop a mortal woman from growing old, but the wizard did not tell the woman this. Instead, he secretly exchanged her dressing table mirror for one that did not show wrinkles. Often in the evenings, while she was sitting at her dressing table, putting on her jewelry before dinner, her husband stood behind her and put his hands on her shoulders. Their eyes met in the mirror and he told her how beautiful she was. You haven't changed since the day I married you, he said.

Because her husband was the source of all of her treasures, she

grew possessive of him, and did not like to have him out of her sight even for one night. Everyone who knew them marveled at their love for each other. No one had ever seen or heard of such a devoted couple. As the years passed, they became as famous for their mutual adoration as for their wealth, which increased a thousandfold, until the wife had to have a second mahogany trunk to hold her collection of gold bracelets, and then a third. A servant was hired whose sole job it was to polish the bracelets. The woman began to think she would not be happy until she owned all the gold bracelets in the world. The servants trapped so many songbirds a special aviary had to be built next to the rose garden, and another servant hired to whip them with tiny silver whips until they sang with their sore cracking throats.

The woman and her wealthy husband had two sons—did I forget to tell you about them? Perhaps I did, because the sons were not nearly so wealthy or so resourceful or so charming as their father. When they were in a room together, it was the father you noticed, while the sons faded into invisibility in the background. Even their mother sometimes forgot they were there.

One evening, as the woman was preparing for bed, her elder son knocked on her door. I have something to tell you, he said. My father, your husband, is not what he seems to be. The woman flew into a fury, and banished the son from her bedroom. You are jealous, she shouted, because you do not have the gift of making money and friends. You have no power to make people admire you and adore you, as he does. You are not even a shadow of your great father.

But as the son turned to leave, he said, over his shoulder, You will soon find out the truth. This man has swindled his friends and everyone he knows, and the mountain of gold on which you stand is made of sand and dust.

The wife ground her teeth in fury, and slammed the golden door of her bedroom on her son. She called after him, *Ingrate, Snake*.

The elder son in his shadowy, invisible way had been watching how his father charmed his friends into giving him their pieces of gold. I will safeguard your gold for you in a magic room, he had told them, for I know a spell that multiplies gold pieces, and if you trust your wealth

with me I will give it back to you a thousandfold. In time you will have a palace as grand as mine, and a wife who is beautiful and forever young.

There is no magic spell, the son told his mother before he left her bedroom, and then he stood in the open doorway of his father's mansion and shouted the words again so loudly the whole kingdom could hear. The very next morning the woman's husband was taken away to a prison tower, for the people in the kingdom had stormed the palace and discovered that the magic room was empty.

On the morning after her husband had been taken away to prison, the woman rang her bell for her lady's maid, but the maid did not come. The wife gnashed her teeth and ordered for the maid to be put to death, because every servant in the household knew that they must answer the golden bell on the first ring or suffer the consequences. The woman rang her bell again, and again, but still no one answered—not her lady's maid, not the butler, not her husband's valet. And when she ventured out of her bedroom, she saw that everyone had left, including her own sons, but not before cutting a hole in the aviary's netting. The songbirds had flown and the silence in the palace was cold and deep. The roses with no name had turned brown, and overnight the leaves on every tree in the garden had withered and dried.

I did it all for you, her husband said when she went to visit him in the prison tower. For your gold bracelets, for your pearls and diamonds, for your roses. For the star that would have been named after you.

When the officials questioned her and the townspeople threw stones, she said, I have nothing to say, I did not know. Our fortunes are gone, the people said. We trusted him, and he took everything. You owe us. It is your fault as much as his. You must have known what he was doing. You and your gold bracelets.

I owe you nothing, she said. I knew nothing. I am guilty of no crime except believing in my husband.

Every day the village officials came and took something else away. They took the inlaid mahogany trunks and sold them at auction. They sold off the gold bracelets one by one. In time there was nothing left in the palace except the wife's bed and one place setting of silver dishes and one goblet for her to drink the wine from her husband's cellar that had

turned to vinegar. And her mirror, so that she could look herself in the eye each day and count her wrinkles. The wizard had fled along with everyone, but not before exchanging the magic mirror for her original one, and putting a curse on her that made her age quickly, for her husband had swindled him along with everyone else.

Through it all the wife said again and again, I have nothing to say. I did not know. She thought, there was to have been a star named after me. I was meant to be young forever.

This all happened a long time ago. The woman is still alive. She has aged far beyond her years, and she wears no jewelry, not even a wedding ring, but her hands and wrists are swollen and gnarled with age so that no jewelry would fit on them even if she owned any. She wanders through her empty silent palace and her withered garden. She hears the echoes of songbirds. Sometimes, in the evenings, out of the corners of her eyes, she sees the shadows of her sons hiding in corners behind the curtains. When she sits at her dressing table and looks in the mirror, she feels, just for a moment, the weight of her husband's hands on her shoulders. She looks in her mirror and says, I have nothing to say, I did not know, but the words come out in a whisper that no one can hear, for she has lost the power of speech.

DAYANA STETCO

Habitat

For Florian

My father had nothing to do with the general's death. Of that, I was certain. I'd never met the general, but I knew from the stories that circulated around the camp that his death had been barbaric, that his colossal frame had opposed change, that his fall had opened a curious entrance to the side of the mountain, where women now hid their children during nocturnal enemy attacks.

These were grotesque and terrifying times. The slightest hint of treachery, the faintest odor of suspicion, and men in gas masks and surgical gloves would knock on your door within minutes, happy to provide relief from daily doubt. We called them "the kind squad." Their touch was unrushed and soothing. They never spoke, but were tremendous listeners. In the times between the kills they meditated. Their pulse never got over 30. Their skin resisted electricity. An inexplicable serenity surrounded them, blurring their features like a veil of protective mist. They were journeyers from the East, knights of the Sad Countenance, men about town who'd lingered in our neighborhoods longer than necessary, until the thought of leaving had repelled them. They were efficient and polite but mute—a silent army of grateful, gentle giants. So we put them to work. We hid their unsettling faces—those large, unfocused eyes—behind dark, roomy masks, and covered their scaly hands with gloves. Then, when we deemed them entirely presentable, we asked them to kill our traitors.

Ever since Kilpatrick had accused him of treason, my father had been in danger. I wrung my hands and cried. I tried to reason.

"They're coming for you, dad. The kind squad. They think you killed the general. They think you work for the enemy. Have you seen

them? Their soldiers? Do you even remember how this stupid war started? Do you have a plan?" I was rambling. "You know what I think? I think we should run."

"Why? They can't kill me if they don't recognize me. And I "—my father laughed as I'd never heard him laugh before—"I can truly change."

And then it happened. His body grew, stretched, and became transparent, wrapped itself around the land. Blood vessels thinned, little blue lines on a map that contained the secrets of his being. He witnessed the transformation without emotion, tried on the new skin, rejoiced at the sheer size of his shoulder blades, now large enough to contain two small villages.

"Told you I could change."

In the distance, I saw the tiny silhouettes, the disciplined members of the kind squad carrying dynamite charges, working together efficiently, in silence.

"They're already here, dad. They know, and they have adapted. If they can't kill you with kindness, they'll find another way. They always get their man. We taught them well."

"Stop panicking," my father said. "Who taught you to panic?"

"You did."

"I did no such thing."

"Oh, yeah? Remember when I wanted to ride a bike and you told me the story of the neighbors' little girl who'd been decapitated by her cute, pink bicycle in a freak accident that involved an ice cream truck? You said her bloody head rolled down the street straight into her mother's lap, who promptly lost her mind and started singing. I was horrified."

"You were safe."

"I was five! And, after that, I couldn't even look at a bike without crying."

"They built character, the stories," my father said.

"They built fear. I was afraid all the time. Every night I checked under my bed and in my closet. You know what I was looking for? A human head. Pink and startled. With pony tails. I cried myself to sleep every night. I told you about it. Remember what you did?"

"I took care of it."

"You boarded the closet doors and took my bed away. I slept on a mattress directly on the floor. I kept my clothes in large cardboard boxes."

"Easier to move, this way."

"We never moved, dad. We were always stationary."

"Gave you a sense of permanence."

"I was drowning. In my room, on my mattress, next to my boarded closet doors. I suffocated. I became claustrophobic. That's when you started talking about other solar systems, like that was supposed to soothe me."

"It should have. To know you're not alone in the universe..."

"Yes, but then one night you said you woke up and saw three moons in the sky and said we should get ready for an alien invasion. You went out and bought bottled water and tin foil and everything. You had a list of necessaries you got out of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*...although you did take the time to explain that Arthur Dent was travelling through the universe while we were mainly trying to stay away from it. It took me months to realize you were playing a game."

"*War of the Worlds*. Thought you might like it."

"I did, in the end. But at school the kids talked behind my back, thought I was weird."

"You were weird."

"Thanks to you."

"Parenting is an art. I was a starving artist."

"You were a child, dad. Your mother loved you very much but taught you nothing. She liked money and sweets. She was pretty, and plump and largely useless. Having three boys didn't help either."

"No," my father said. "She didn't age well. When the regime changed she stopped going outside. Claimed she had 'the street disease.' Uncomfortable in her own skin. Afraid she might catch something from the low-lifes cruising down the boulevard." He laughed. "Delusions of grandeur. We all had them."

I listened to my father's voice, distant and hollow, resonating above the fields. I knew that anybody else hearing it would think the winds got louder in those parts and would hurry out of the storm's path.

My father's immense body now provided shelter for entire communities. For a while, the villagers wondered about the strange man lying on his side, his torso covered in moss, his arms enormous tree trunks, his face mild but determined. Soon, they stopped questioning his presence and treated him like a benevolent, if eccentric, god. They brought him food although in those days he ate very little; they built fires to keep him warm, joined him for coffee on Sunday afternoons and read him the news from the local rag. For a while, I thought we'd make it. I believed we'd be the first in the history of the war to trick the kind squad, to wear them out, to make them doubt their senses. How naïve I was, how utterly deplorable.

The first explosions started at the foot of the mountain. My father's large frame shuddered but held. Large pieces of rock rolled down his back and settled on the ruined ground. One arm that stretched over kilometers of paved road was bleeding.

"Dad," I cried, "are you ok?"

"Just a scratch, kid. Stop shouting."

The second blast severed his leg. The skin around the wound got purple and then red as blood flowed from it freely. In that terrible second, I remembered everything about my father. How he'd watch science programs in the evening and dream of foreign constellations and amiable extraterrestrial life. How he'd wish for wealth, unbelievable, obscene wealth, easy to flaunt before his enemies; how his eyes lit when he spoke of money, his voice shaky with the dizzying possibility of it ("An inheritance, an accident, the lottery; anything can happen, kid!"); how he tried to keep me out of trouble by telling me that 9 out of 10 children who refused parental escort got kidnapped on their way to school. ("9 out of 10, dad? Really? That's, like, everybody." "Just telling it how it is, kid. Should you ever want to walk to school by yourself..."); how giving up the saxophone had almost killed him. The last photograph with the band, the rushed handshakes, my grandfather's voice. "A grown man playing the saxophone...You have a family now, need a real job." How reality had grown inside him like a tumor, luxuriant and deadly. How he wished for friends or even enemies—anyone who'd keep him company for more than a few minutes, the time the rest of us allotted him. How,

one day, before any of us could intervene, he'd held the plumber hostage and plied him with coffee and cookies to make him sit through an Engelbert Humperdinck recording he'd just received from a distant cousin.

His unimaginable loneliness. His narrow margin of success. His utter lack of imagination.

The man I remembered stumbling through my childhood full of good intentions had nothing in common with the giant dying on the hill. He'd already reattached the severed leg with ropes made of manila hemp. Every move must have triggered excruciating pain, but he stood up and looked at the silent soldiers with kindness.

"Just doing their job," he said. "Like Hitler's hired enemies, you know? The guys Hitler hired to tell him the truth when nobody else dared? They stared death in the face every day. Imagine telling Adolf the truth about the world...And they had to go vegan because Hitler ate no meat. A vegetarian mass murderer. Who knew? Thought those guys didn't have enough energy to start a war. All that fiber..." He paused. "One learns, kid. One learns all the time."

The siege lasted for two days. The kind squad executioners hunted us down in their methodical, collected way. They set up camp on the eastern side of the mountain, divided the territory into equal squares with a precision that reminded me of the chess game in *Through the Looking Glass*, and, little by little, diminished the distance between us. The blood trail my father left behind formed a tiny river that cut through deserted villages before spilling into the Black Sea. We were easy prey.

"Tell me about Kilpatrick," I said one evening. We were lost and hungry and cold and had only stories for company.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Kilpatrick is not important."

"Kilpatrick is the reason I'm freezing to death here. I need to know. Why did he say you betrayed the cause?"

"J'accuse!" My father laughed and pointed somewhere beyond the visible. "The idiot actually thought he was original."

"Tell me, dad."

"Kilpatrick was my best friend."

"You don't have any friends."

"Not regular friends, no. Kilpatrick was...unusual. Sometimes I wouldn't see him for years and then he'd just show up, walk into my kitchen, make himself a sandwich, sit down and eat. Like I wasn't even there. Then, after a while he'd look at me and say 'All right?'"

"What did you say?"

"Me? I'd say 'Yeah,' or 'All right.' Then we'd both eat in silence."

"So what happened?"

"What he said happened: I betrayed the cause."

I didn't get him to tell me more about Kilpatrick that night. A sound nearby made us abandon our makeshift camp and run. We ran through the night, livid, thirsty and blind. We covered territories long forgotten, misshapen valleys and abandoned hills, bits of discarded landscape now piled on top of each other in a bizarre yet astonishing fashion. It was among those crumbling cliffs that the soldiers caught up with us.

They surrounded us and took aim. A thousand gas masks looked up towards the feeble skies that should have parted for my father. I looked up too, but he wasn't there, not hidden behind the moon like the bird in the fairytales I had grown up with, a shape-shifter with access to the fourth dimension that found refuge among the clouds; not peering from behind the trees in the nearby clearing; not floating noiselessly down the river. He was gone. A thousand masked faces turned to me as if demanding explanation. I shrugged and closed my eyes waiting to die, but after a moment's hesitation the soldiers turned around and marched silently toward the hills. Exhausted, I lay down to sleep. In my dream, my father watched over me, benevolent and wise, like a stone angel. In the morning I resumed my journey, walking without purpose, convinced that stagnation would bring about death—the end of all things beautiful. Perhaps I'd never known my father. Perhaps he hadn't known me either, my failures, my victories, my passions a mystery to him, a dark and complex network of endless possibilities. Had he replaced me in his mind with a being as fantastical as the one I had created to replace him? Were we two imaginary people keeping each other company? Had I missed the chance to meet him at his best when I'd decided to prolong my absence? I would never know. By the time I'd returned, the war had

already changed everything.

I walked. Tobacco fields flanked isolated crossroads that led to villages with poisoned wells. I walked and told myself that soon my misery would end, that I would starve to death or take a sip from those deadly waters, meant solely for the enemy. In the distance, golden clouds sat over the mountains, swollen and content, like a flock of overfed geese. I felt an inexplicable sense of freedom. I ran and tumbled in the grass toward the valley that marked the end of my journey. Once there, I saw him.

The scaffolding sustained his body, now a gargantuan web of stairways, stories and platforms all made of wood. The building's top part disappeared into the sky, and although I was afraid of heights, I started climbing toward it. Half way through the climb, I saw my father's face obscured by dissipating clouds, serene and smiling. His head, connected to the building's highest tower, rested comfortably on air. I sat on one of the smaller platforms and clapped, in awe of his renewed achievement.

"You did it again, dad. You tricked them. You changed."

A crumbling sound to my left, made me aware of frantic activity in the lower part of the scaffolding. I lit a few matches and threw them in the darkness below. In the pale and fleeting light, I saw swarms of gigantic termites eating away at my father's body, collapsing it from the inside, gorging on wood.

"Dad," I cried. "The soldiers sent another army. You must change now."

"Dad! Can you hear me? I'm coming up."

His voice reached me with unimaginable force:

"Kid! You won't believe the view from up here..."

I climbed faster and faster. Underneath, entire floors and stairways turned to dust. I climbed furiously, knowing that our lives depended on my ability to conquer fear, this fear, this overwhelming sense of loss and danger. From the highest point, I saw my father glide toward the ashen light of the horizon, before the winds embraced the change and escorted him to safety.

JIM TOLAN

Devil Born

He owned little beyond the sixty years
he loved her and a small dirt farm
in the frozen north
where they had made a life. Now she was wrapped
in a blanket until the squall was past
and he could haul her to the church in town.

The way along country roads, frozen, rutted
and slow, it took half a snow-blown morning
to get there. He rapped
on the heavy, wood door a long Monday-while
before the old priest answered, gruff
and peculiar as the gatekeeper to Oz.

No ruby slippers to recommend him,
still the widower wanted a proper
Christian burial for his love.
He offered handiwork or summer harvest
in exchange, but sacraments are costly
business, and this priest

was not one to coddle the distant poor.
She had been a faithful servant
to the parish, but now that she was gone
her farmer husband would have to pay cash
or bury her near
lime and animal bones behind the barn.

The way back home went on and on, and he
could barely see for wind and snow.
He slept little that last night with her
before he began
to chop the frozen mud, where he would
bury her in unconsecrated ground

beneath the juniper she loved. He wept
salt that froze to his graveled beard and felt
the plaque within his heart begin
to harden like the gristle of week-old
bacon between his ribs.
He had gotten nearly four feet down before

He hit ground he could not break. Anything
less than six feet under
and she would float on the waters
of the spring floods. He knelt down in the hole
and managed to wrest from icy earth and stone
a wooden box the size of a cow's heart.

And when he heaved it
against the hard bottom of the grave,
rusted hinges snapped. The chest erupted
gold. He hid the treasure behind their bed,
brought a stack of coins with him to the priest
and bought the finest funeral

to be had in those poor and barren parts.
After the burial, amid dried flowers
and imported fruit, the priest could hold
his tongue no more and asked
the widower how he had come to own
such coins. Guileless, the old codger

told the story of his fortune.
So incensed became the priest, who believed
such a boon should have fallen to him,
he cursed God and commanded his frightened wife
to slaughter her milk goat
and bring him its skin unwashed at the horns.

He had the poor woman whipstitch the skin
to his own along the arms and back, neck
and crown, then under
warmest robes he stole off to the old man's
ramshackle in the night. Shedding his wrap,
he lit tapers and rapped

hard on the widower's bedroom glass,
demanding devil's gold. The farmer paid him
no heed until the costumed priest proclaimed
the dead wife would belong to him
and be a whore of Hell
for all eternity unless treasure

was returned that moonless night,
for a funeral bought with Hell's currency
was no sacrament in the eyes of God.
The old man pulled the chest
from behind their bed and set it out the door.
The devil gathered gold into his robes

and turned churchward.
Cut this skin from me, he ordered his wife,
and with each snip her sewing shears drew blood.
He snatched the scissors from her hand
then whimpered as new blood fell. The goat's skin
and his own, no difference anymore.

Contributor Notes

L. ANNETTE BINDER was born in Germany and grew up in Colorado Springs. Her fiction has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *Pushcart Prize XXXVI*, *One Story*, *American Short Fiction*, *The Southern Review*, *Third Coast*, and others. Her collection *Rise* received the 2011 Mary McCarthy Prize in Short Fiction and will be published by Sarabande Books.

I grew up listening to German fairy tales, and I still have the big yellow book my parents read to me (*Im Weiten Bunten Maerchenland*). Struwwelpeter was one of my favorites—I was fascinated by his matted hair and his long curly nails.

MAUD CASEY is the author of two novels, *The Shape of Things to Come* and *Genealogy*, and a collection of stories, *Drastic*. She has received international fellowships from the Fundacion Valparaiso, Hawthornden International Retreat for Writers, and the Chateau de Lavigny and is the recipient of the 2008 Calvino Prize. She lives in Washington, D.C. and teaches at the University of Maryland and in the low-residency MFA Program at Warren Wilson.

The last line of "The Fox and the Geese" has always been a kind of beacon: "When they have done praying, the story shall be continued further, but at present they are still praying unceasingly." The prayer is the unceasing story; the story is the unceasing prayer. It's always there, if we are willing.

MELISSA COSS AQUINO is a writer and a teacher with more than 20 years of experience in adult education. She completed her MFA at City College. She currently teaches writing at Bronx Community College. Her essay, "Una Sinverguenza" was published in *Callaloo*, and 1199SEIU has internally published her book, *Brick by Brick*, on using writing prompts for teaching emerging adult writers. She lives in the Bronx, New York, with her husband, Fernando, her two sons, Antonio

and Gabriel, and her "Abuela Lola" (grandmother). She has recently completed her first novel, and a picture book, and is at work on a YA novel.

Once upon a time are the first written words I can remember reading out loud. They marked the beginning of a life-long journey as a motherless child lost in the woods. Fairy tales spoke to the journey and taught me to trust my intuition, outsmart my enemies, talk to the elders, and leave no stone unturned in my search for home and truth. *Women Who Run with Wolves* by Clarissa Pinkola Estes later confirmed what I had always known: fairy tales were never mere bedtime stories, but the stories one took to bed if one truly wanted to learn how to live.

ELIZABETH CRANE is the author of three collections of short stories, most recently *You Must Be This Happy to Enter*. She is a recipient of the Chicago Public Library 21st Century Award, and her work has been featured on NPR's *Selected Shorts* and adapted for the stage by Chicago's Steppenwolf Theater company. She teaches in the UCR-Palm Desert low-residency MFA program. Her debut novel, *We Only Know So Much*, is forthcoming.

I remember being kind of creeped out by a lot of fairy tales when I was a kid. As a city kid, I didn't care much for princesses or wolves or being lost in the woods. (I guess I wasn't big on metaphors at the time.) So the fairy tales that are the most fun for me are the modern-day spins: Kevin Brockmeier's A Day in the Life of Half of Rumplestiltskin was so inspiring to me, managing to make brilliant use of the original while also employing letters and mad-libs. I immediately tried to rip him off and the first thing that came to mind was A Day in the Life of Half of Paris Hilton, which, unsurprisingly, didn't work, so I went back to being me.

MELISSA CUNDIEFF-PEXA is an MFA candidate in poetry at Vanderbilt University. Her poems have appeared in *Iron Horse Literary Review*, *Juked*, and *420pus*. She is the head poetry editor for *Nashville Review* and lives in Nashville with her husband, Chris, and their 4-year-old daughter, Wren.

I think of a fairy tale as the best kind of ghost story, as capturing the darkest part of the imagination, as an impossible justice recognized, as an attic door opening to the woods. I admire the fairy tale's inherit grotesqueness, escapes, labyrinths, waking dreamworld, and violence. My daughter carries breadcrumbs with her always.

BEN DEBUS lives in Chicago with his wife, poet Cate Whetzel, and works in a law firm. His poems have appeared in *Subtropics*, *Umbrella*, *Fugue*, *Mississippi Review* (online) and elsewhere.

BRANDEL FRANCE DE BRAVO's poetry collection, *Provenance*, won the Washington Writers' Publishing House prize in 2008. She is the co-author of *Trees Make the Best Mobiles: Simple Ways to Raise your Child in a Complex World* and the editor of *Mexican Poetry Today: 20/20 Voices*. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Black Warrior Review*, *The Cimarron Review*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *Gargoyle*, and *The Kenyon Review*. She has received a prize and a fellowship from the DC Commission on the Arts, and is the Chair of the Writers in Prison Committee of PEN Mexico.

Fairy tales are as predictable as sleep and as mysterious as dreams. Where they are universal and redemptive, nursery rhymes—verse cousins and the inspiration for my poems—captivate with specificity and transgression. Mother Goose cares less for "the prince" than little Tommy Green who put pussy in the well.

OWEN KING is the author of *We're All in This Together: A Novella and Stories*. His fiction has appeared in *The Bellingham Review*, *One Story*, and *Subtropics*. He lives in New York with his wife, the author Kelly Braffet, who is a mermaid.

Close to the corner of the street I grew up on, there is a beautifully kept brick house with a white picket fence and glorious flower beds. I've never once seen a living creature leave or enter this domicile. As a boy, I believed that the third and smartest little pig lived there. Now I know that he does.

DREW KREWER's poems have appeared in *Trickhouse*, *Poor Claudia*, and *Pequod*, among others. *Ars Warholica*, a chapbook, was published by Spork Press in 2010. He currently maintains the arts/culture site marspoetica.net.

I came to know fairy tales primarily through the television, specifically *Shelley Duvall's Faerie Tale Theatre*. My childhood imagination was heavily influenced by jewels and magical powers. Recently, I've been revisiting that imaginative space in my work, so I'm finding myself wandering once again through the enchanted forests, however disembodied they might be from their fairy tale origins.

PETER KUPER is co-founder of the political graphics magazine, *World War 3 Illustrated*. Since 1997, he has written and drawn *Spy vs Spy for Mad Magazine* every issue. Kuper has produced over twenty books including *The System* and an adaptation of Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. He lived in Oaxaca, Mexico, July 2006-2008 during a major teachers' strike and his work from that time became his book, *Diario de Oaxaca*. Kuper has been teaching comics courses for 25 years in New York and will be a visiting professor at Harvard University next year.

SARAH MESSER has received fellowships and grants from the Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center, the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing, the NEA, and others. She is the author of a hybrid history/memoir, *Red House* (Viking), and a poetry book, *Bandit Letters* (New Issues). In 2008-2009 she was a fellow in poetry at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. She teaches at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. Currently she is working on translations of 15th century Zen Master, Ikkyu Sojun, with scholar Kidder Smith.

I've never forgotten Andersen's "The Girl Who Trod on a Loaf." I hated it as a child, but now love the idea of a speaker made of stone or glass through which thoughts and feelings pass, who is transformed through time and grace into a much simpler being. A nasty girl in marsh-hell becomes a statue, then a kind bird.

BRIAN OLIU is originally from New Jersey and currently lives in Tuscaloosa,

Alabama. Work appears in *Hotel Amerika*, *Ninth Letter*, *Sonora Review*, and elsewhere. His collection of Tuscaloosa Craigslist Missed Connections, *So You Know It's Me*, was released in June 2011 by Tiny Hardcore Press.

Videogames are a new version of fairy tales: we remember exactly where we were when we defeated Ganon with the silver arrows, when we captures fairies in jars. I love capturing the simplistic beauty and delightful oddness of these games to make sense of the narratives of both adult and childhood.

LISA PERRIN is a current graduate student studying Illustration. She is originally from Port Jefferson Station, New York. When she is not obsessively art-making or reading she is spending time with her rabbit; Blanche DuBun. You can see more of her work at http://lisaperrinart.com/

JUDITH SLATER's story collection, *The Baby Can Sing and Other Stories*, won the Mary McCarthy Prize in Short Fiction. She teaches creative writing and literature at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

On fairy tales: My favorite is "The Fisherman's Wife." A magic fish grants wishes, and the fisherman's wife wishes for a bigger house, and then a mansion, and then a castle. The fish grants each greedy wish, but finally, when the wife wishes to be God, the disgusted fish banishes her to the hovel where she began. "Innocence" is undoubtedly influenced by this tale.

DAYANA STETCO's plays have been produced in her native country, Romania, the U.S. and the UK. She is the founder and Artistic Director of the interdisciplinary theatre ensemble, The Milena Group. Her book, *Seducing Velasquez and Other Plays*, was released by Ahadada Books in 2009. Her fiction, translations and essays have appeared in various journals including *The Means*, *Emergency Almanac*, *mark(s)*, *Interdisciplinary Humanities*, *Metrotimes*, *Gender(f)*, *Requited*, *Two Lines*, *Ekleksographia* and *Dispatch*. She is an Associate Professor at the University of Louisiana

at Lafayette where she teaches Creative Writing, Literature and Film.

Fairy tales are a great antidote to reality and my work has been shaped by the immense possibilities they offer. "Habitat" is the story of a man who cheats death by becoming miraculous. My plays describe events connected to fantastical places or circumstances. I find the landscapes of fairytales comforting—my refuge.

JIM TOLAN's poems have appeared in *American Literary Review*, *Atlanta Review*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Fulcrum*, *Gargoyle*, *Indiana Review*, *Linebreak* and other journals as well as a number of anthologies, including the *Autumn House Anthology of Contemporary Poetry*. He teaches at the City University of New York and lives in Cobble Hill, Brooklyn.

The cellar of the soul is blue as the shadow of a hole at night. The slender door at the bottom leads to the horrors of a Bluebeard against a history of brides too fair. Bodies are piled. The scrollwork key drips blood upon a damsel's gown. What can save us? Only the tales will tell.