



fugue

Issue 50

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J. H. YUN

BLOOD TYPE

A

While spinning the skin off an apple
I nicked my thumb, tasted
my tannins, sweet and undeniable.

So much like my mother
no wonder mosquitos can't
keep away.

We slick our legs with cinnamon oil,
eucalyptus, whatever to alleviate the bites
raising landscapes on our thighs.

But still, such embarrassing joy, these nights
of fed resignation, sikkhae we drink too quick
sugaring our tongues with rice and nectar.

The spiral wick burning down to an eye
as we scratch, blood blooming through our cotton pants.

Just hope nothing covets you more than this.

AB

Tired of releasing them, my friend begins seizing
the mice, the trap's spring too cheap to kill,
and strikes them against the wall. It's awful, their eyes
bulging red, Surinam cherries taken between teeth,
and the sound—

Once, I find him drowning one in the sink,
its claws scrabbling, trying to find purchase on porcelain.
Not wanting to watch it go limp, I turn. When I ask why
he answers he was curious how long it would take.

B

Sometimes without warning, I'm there again. In his blue room,
in the blue dusk where he wakes me again and again. I feign sleep
when I feel his reaching. Acknowledge that when he pants,
my throat hurts. Outside his window, the moon looks too whole. I want
to pull it through a sieve, keep the fractured light for myself
—something wounded
to own. Hadn't mother warned me of men of his type,
B the mercurial, B the bad boy. When I feel him rising
against my leg, I remember he is a man
of God. He only comes to claim the rib I've borrowed.

O

the ways we treat the body.

J. H. YUN

PRAISE

Yesterday, a thumb of light reached for me
through Harlem's milk froth sky.
The warmth on my cheek held me like a body
I've missed on the corner of 115th and Broadway.
I heard my mother's voice in the tired rumble
of the trains below as I hear her voice in all things

weathered. Not the clear bell it could be,
but work worn when she rises in the coldest swell
of night to ready for her twelve hour days: hands
wrapped around the hilt of a hot iron
eyes closed, still half dreaming of barley fields
and sugar buns spilling on her palm their molten hearts
of *hodu* and honey. How joy tasted.
Be good she'd say each morning, though I'd grown,
and too tired, I seldom answered.

Once I came home to her wringing dollars,
stringing them up like egg swelled *kulbi* fish drying on a line.
A patron had thrown them in the oil slicked sink water
here is a tip for the uneducated assistant, and I realized
I don't understand what a mother is.
What unknowably toothen thing lives inside
for her to take my hand, smile proudly, say
Jihyun-ah, this is the richest we have ever been.

J. H. YUN

SOME ARE ALWAYS HUNGRY

We pass the last chicken thigh between us
three generations of girls at the table
scraping around the pot that dwindles
to root and peppered broth over kerosene flame.
Our eyes are the same, they do not stray.
It's rude to watch the hen's last migration
her limb passed from empty bowl
to empty bowl, body having sated
no one.

Enough, Mother says,
and when Grandma finally picks up the thing,
she dismantles it like a lover. Disrobing it
of its home of skin, parting the twinned bones
the flesh in tatters, she leaves nothing: the cartilage
that cradles, the muscle, the jut of tendon,
she takes that too.

I hate to watch her eat
the way she squalls like one
just discovering the concept of plenty
and knowing she will always distrust it.

JENNIFER WHALEN

EVEN IN DISGUISE

1.

Talk leans small over the balcony rails:
is this starlight member to some far-off nebula?
Tell me the longevity of any given swan.
I didn't belong there. Not that I didn't love
swans and stars and parties, I did; I do.
On twitchy summer days, I think *there is a sun;*
I could do something worthwhile
with my hands: gum wrappers born new
as tiny creased swans; party gifts to strangers
on streets. But this night was different
than that wanting. I wanted to fall in love
with a daffodil for its daffodilness; not
those fundamental facets that make it unlike
a daisy. Others thought this wishy-
washy, neither here nor there. Like an unfolded
then refolded paperclip, I was neither my former
love nor this newer, lopy self. But this
was a dinner party!—love was both in
and out of the question.

2.

When I plead to the bus
not to crash its broad side into mine,
I mean there are countless avenues. Impact
is merely one. I could forgive a frog its lonely
croaking, teach a sponge-scrub the inside corners
of an oven. It is better to believe
our nebulae into some good warning: the stuff
in the sky that makes dancing-nights
worth dancing; someone in our midst
who comes to learn my recipes, who longs
to love my loves.

ISAAC KIRKMAN

AXIOMÁTICO

*Dedicado a la Doctora María Santos Gorrostieta Salazar, ex
alcaldesa de Tiquicheo, (nacida 1976- cuerpo descubierto
15 de noviembre 2012) y todos aquellos que rechazan callasen.*

ACT I: WHERE THE WAVES BEGIN

Summer 2008

Tucson, Arizona

Sitting on this stoop, I feel like I'm vanishing. If I looked in the mirror, I might not see the change, but if I took a picture of myself each day and flipped through them, I'd see myself slowly fading away. The dissolution is subtle, the transformation unseen, like a raindrop dissolving into the Santa Cruz River, like my papá disappearing in the Sonoran Desert. Tiny footsteps to the horizon, then nothing.

It will be my fifteenth birthday tomorrow, my first without my papá and first without Sophie, my best friend, since we met three summers ago. I haven't heard from my papá since last winter, when he went to Sinaloa to bring my sisters back to the United States. Sophie's nana said the cops took her away last week, but I don't believe her.

I pull my hair into a ponytail, and pick at the dirt with a stick. Ants race across my sneakers as the buzzing sound of unseen cicadas overtakes everything. Sweat streaks across my forearm scars, tiny memories written in a language only I can read. Above me the sun throbs, fiery and alien. It feels strange sitting here without Sophie. I check my watch. Marcus should be here any minute.

I flip through the copy of *The Selected Poems of Rosario Castellanos* that Sophie gave me when we last kissed. The words made immobile in her absence, like a fleet of mud-entrenched boats after a lake has been drained. I turn to page 57 and read silently. Sophie got me the book because she knew I wanted to be a poet. My fingers trace where she wrote my name, Ximena María Salazar. I check my watch again. Monsoon clouds thunder in the distance. The smell of creosote meshes with the pungent smell of the marijuana bales we pretend not to notice bundled beneath tarps in the trucks in the parking lot. The truck tops are painted in desert camouflage so helicopters don't spot them. You see a lot when you're a young girl and no one thinks you're of any worth.

My eyes shift from the sprinklers spraying the emerald grass toward Mount Lemmon, framed ominously by blue haze and wind-warped olive trees. To an outsider, this Tucson apartment complex, where I live with my tía, looks like paradise. But the truth is nearly everyone here is a gangster, or related to a gangster, or like Sophie and me, trabajadores, paid by the gangs to be lookouts or run errands.

When I think about what this place truly is, I think of something Sophie showed me last spring: a page in a book on Vavilovian mimicry, where a weed comes to resemble a domestic plant to avoid detection and removal. She was fascinated by animal and plant mimicry. I watched her flip the pages, her thin, honey-colored fingers tracing each image with wonder, pausing at the Zodaraiid ground spider, which imitates ants' movements to move safely through their nest. Maybe she meant something else then, a subtle suggestion of hiding what she is, hiding what we were to her nana and to the world.

I watch as an elderly white couple gets out of a station wagon. The car has Michigan plates. With their gentle movements and University of Arizona shirts, the pair look like grandparents visiting their grandkids at college, and perhaps they are. They may or may not be aware of it, but they will probably go home with drugs stashed in their wheel wells and under their hubcaps. Gangs from all over America come here to buy their drugs wholesale. I see them turn toward

Building 7 and call one of the middle-aged white go-betweens by his name, Eddie. My heart sinks. For a moment, I hoped a grandparent could just be a grandparent.

Eddie coordinates the pickups between the local and out-of-town gangs. I feel a sickness churning, a slippery bile, algae being dispersed, but all that comes up is acid in my throat. I hate this heat, and I hate this place. I dream of being held by my papá, I dream of holding my sisters. And I dream of holding Sophie. As I wipe my mouth, a shadow stretches over me.

“Whatcha reading?”

Reflexively, I conceal the poetry book, pausing when I realize it’s Marcus. My hands relax. Although he’s in the same grade as us, Sophie and I know Marcus best through his Uncle Antwan, who we work for but never see. Marcus delivers our payments from his uncle. Antwan pays some kids to do much worse. Marcus takes a seat on the concrete steps next to me. On his lap are two books, a large astronomy textbook and a history book on Islamic astronomers. “Oh, nothing, just something Sophie gave me.”

Immediately, I feel shame in the falseness of my words. It’s as if I cupped a hatching egg to protect it and made it lifeless in my hands.

“Can I see it?”

My eyes dart to Marcus’s books. When I first saw him carrying around an astronomy book, I thought that it was just to conceal something, the center carved out to hide a knife, or drugs, but as time passed, I often saw him alone in the courtyard, reading and studying, each page inked densely. My eyes follow the rope marks singed into his palms and the gunpowder burns on his knuckles. The last time we talked, he said he hoped to enter the planetary science program at the University of Arizona. My grip on the Mexican poet’s book softens. I slide it towards him. “Sophie gave it to me before she disappeared.”

Marcus opens the poetry book and examines the table of contents. There’s a dense gravity to him that pulls me in with its stillness. Marcus traces the stanzas with his finger and mumbles phrases to himself. “This is dope. She got bars.” He speaks softly and looks up

at me with eyes the color of a sleeping tiger. His features are darker, more African than his cousins', almost Jamaican in their richness. To an outsider he may seem meek, but those who know the work he does with his family, and their deep Sinaloa Cartel roots, know his steadiness has an unseen turbulence. He is an ocean wave that begins in calm and ends in storm.

“You still writing?”

With my foot, I scrub a trench in the dirt. “Not since Sophie’s nana said the cops took her. I try and try, but nothing’s coming out.” I carve the arc of her name in the ground. “It’s the shittiest block I’ve had. I was writing all the time, my best stuff before this. I can’t even think when I’m not writing.” Aside from Sophie, Marcus is the kindest spirit I know. He leans towards me, his hand in his bag.

“That’s a shame.”

I watch him slide my lookout payment into the poetry book. Only 20 bucks since I didn’t see anything to prevent. At nighttime, if Sophie and I see something strange in our section of the complex, if someone approaches one of the smuggling tunnels, we text the number Marcus gave us and men in masks come and take care of it. We get a little just for keeping an eye out, but get a bonus if what we see protects a shipment. Once we thought we had the bonus, but it went to some other kids, some dirty little pendejos.

“You know the cops didn’t arrest Sophie, right?” He slides the book back into my hand and continues. “Her nana sent her to stay with some relatives in South Carolina. Her uncle came by and took her back with him to Charleston.”

Marcus stands up and places his right hand on my shoulder. My heart’s beating so hard, I wonder if he could feel it from there. “You didn’t hear that from me.” His smile is weary. He’s a male Mona Lisa, hinting at everything, revealing nothing. “I have some family there, I’ll try to find out where she is. I can’t promise anything, though.”

ACT II: LOVE IN THE TIME OF CARTELS

Another morning passes into afternoon. Last night I tossed and turned unable to sleep. All day I've felt sick, like a cat with a hairball, my throat clotted with storm clouds, my esophagus coated with confederate mud and cicada wings. In the pit of my stomach, a band of coyotes scratches sanctuary space around the bend of my ribs. Sweat pours down my face.

I've been out here all morning, a spin top in expectation's hands. I'd prefer to bury the hours beneath my bed covers and let my dreaming eyelids confess what my pen is incapable of, but my tía is perched in front of her telenovelas and her nagging has been extra barbed, sharp as saguaro needles. So I wander the apartment corridors, avoiding places where the cleaners are removing traces of last night's killings, in my hand a few poetry books and a journal full of blank pages lonely for my pen. I take a seat at every slope of grass and stoop where Sophie and I kissed, hoping she feels my presence shiver through her.

From the stoop, I spot a freshly planted patch of grass. There's a muddy swell around the addition. Someone must have tried to dig up one of the tunnels last night. I try to avoid looking directly. The tunnels are Medusa's eyes. The tunnels are everywhere. Even if I can't see them, someone is watching, I know. Someone is always watching.

My papá, an engineer, worked for the copper mines in Cananea, across the border, and he worked on the tunnels here. I had noticed them before, but when I told him, he said to drop it. One drunken night before he left, my papá told me about them. The tunnels are small, and they go beneath the yards, linking each building and opening into various closet floors in the apartment buildings, sometimes underneath bathtubs and sinks. Some are as small as a medicine ball, others large enough to walk through hunched over. They link our apartment complex with all the neighboring ones, as well as bars, restaurants, and houses. A vast, sprawling underground circulatory system.

Thousands of pounds of narcotics flow through the tunnels, moving with the gurgling spasm of seasonal harvests. The demand is as steady as the breath in my lungs, as steady as the sunrise. To move the drugs, the maintenance crew turns off water service to the apartments, block off some tunnels and pump water through others. It works sort of like bank teller tubes, with water instead of air. If a rival gang member uncovers a tunnel in our lookout section or tries to intercept the drugs, we text the number Marcus gave us, and the men in masks will come. That's what we are paid for.

They sent my papá to work on tiny tunnel systems all around the Deep South and as far away as Detroit and Chicago. Cops or another gang try to snatch your product? Swoosh, send it underground to another apartment building or to a car with a hole in the trunk positioned over a tunnel exit, or move it through holes connecting apartment floors and through false closet walls. Moving weight across America on the interstate and things get hot, pull out to a small town off one of the main roads and vanish it through a motel tunnel system into local stash spots. They do the same with bodies. Tunnels are like us brown girls, they are everywhere in America and no one notices them.

I cast my focus back to the pile of books in my lap. I flip through each one, my attention seldom landing, hovering and dancing away. All I can think about is what Sophie is going through, my imagination animating every possibility. Her being dragged off, or tricked into her uncle's car, trying to break free from him at every bathroom stop, trying to make her way to a phone, or to her Myspace account, or to a train yard but caught every time. Her buckled in the seat, the entire eastward trip strafed by church radio hosts condemning her for her sin, condemning her for our perfect moments. Her secular uncle reading passages from the Bible as she gnaws on gas station sandwiches. Her crying and screaming till her throat is as parched as mine, and in the stillness of that exhaustion, her summoning me with the telepathic compass of her lips. Archangels moving westward

like spiders across the invisible web of cell phone and radio signals to deliver me her silk-wrapped prayer.

Then I see her face fading beneath a watery wreath of kudzu, her fingertips rising like branches from the mud before disappearing beneath the shadow of a passing crow. Then I see my papá's cold face, his stolen body wrapped in darkness, partially buried in the desert. Ants like children navigating the jungle gym of his eyelashes. Then the thousands and thousands of vanished, drenched in darkness, becoming unthreaded from the tear-drop quilt sewn by the agony of a million broken, crying hearts. Each missing face slipping into the soft oblivion as loved ones' eyelids slowly run-out of strings. The Mexican landscape silent with her secrets.

I begin to cry, not out of defeat but to defile the asylum of numbness. As the sun steals tear by tear, my cell phone vibrates. It's Marcus. "Can you meet me at the pool at seven? I have news."

ACT III. THE CELESTIAL BLOOM

I sit for some time, my focus scrambled by questions. Waiting has made the space between each minute feel as vast as the Sonoran Desert. As the ants betray our intimacy with their bites, the rumbling in my stomach grows louder. The sun above drips into the mountain, darkness spills up from the power lines and the gnarled roots of the olive trees. Soon everything is soaked in shadows and the stars swim to the surface, no longer drowned by the sun's light. A pre-monsoon wind writhes through the complex, leaving the olive leaves as shaky as my hands. Hungry and restless, I rise with the shadows and follow the winds through the corridors and make my way through the parking lot towards the Sonic Drive-In.

Crossing the street, I step over the ceramic-tiled snake sculpture in the median, the one Sophie and I chipped with our feet during our frequent munchie migrations. Its eyes and forked tongue still attached, but broken-off chunks of its scales and body missing. My tired face glazed in the pink-sodium vapor light of the street lamps.

The way the monsoon clouds are advancing, it's as if the spirits in the tunnels have summoned them.

I make my way toward the glowing Sonic sign. Carhops in short shorts and roller skates glide to and from the cars with money and food. I order a fruit drink and some chili fries, and sit alone on the curb, thinking about my fingers intertwined with Sophie's. The two of us in her bedroom, her body tight against mine. Both of us insufferably hot and sweat-soaked, but neither wanting to pull away. Her lips tasting like ocean waves and *Datura* blossoms. My tongue tracing a path from her breast to her hipbone, her sweat scented of starlight and cannabis smoke. Our bodies winding in calligraphic spasms and twists. Then sneaking out before her nana got home, careful to not knock over the prayer candles that lined the way to the door. Using our skills as lookouts to stealth to Sonic and avoid anyone that might tell her nana. There we ordered the biggest drinks they had. So thirsty. So parched. Together we drank and sat silently on the curb, managing only to stare dumbly at each other, before looking away with smiles so big that I thought our heads would snap off and roll down the street, eye to eye laughing, as our bodies chased after us.

My thoughts shift as I notice a series of trucks pulling up to the parking spot menus. In the rainbow brake lights, I see Sonoran plates, and I think of my papá, my heart jumping with each rolled-down window. But none of them are him. More traffickers, more sicarios. Men I've seen talking to Eddie. But maybe fathers too. I think of that as I finish the chili fries. I think of all the men these men have killed, of them washing their hands afterwards and buying a stuffed animal on the way home for their Mathilda or Juan. Them sitting at the dinner table with their family, like my papá did with us. Then I feel the sadness again, the undertow of skeletons, and kisses, orgasms and tears. I notice blood in the back of the Datsun truck bed, like the remains of a deer removed, and think of Marcus graduating and growing old far from here, crunching data in some laboratory, studying exoplanetary things, studying impacts on Mars, surrounded

by his little scientist children, who will go to the university like him, and I smile. I don't want to die alone. I don't want to live like this.

I check the clock and wipe the chili from my lips and dump the container in the trash. It's time to head back and meet Marcus. I'm not sure what to think, or what to expect. All I know is that whoever I was before this moment, whatever I thought my life was will be over. I will no longer be in imagination's utero, I will be born into whatever world Marcus's words open.

ACT IV: DARK ORDINANCE

I arrive at the empty pool and sit on a recliner. As I sink down, I realize the plastic bands are broken and make my way to the side of the pool. The lights and shifting surface of the chlorinated water encase the area in a haunted, drugged-out aura. I glance at the hot tub, its steam absent Sophie's shape. The distant horizon seizes with impending rain. I remove my shoes and socks and dip my feet into the water.

The gate creaks, and Marcus arrives. He takes a seat next to me, slips his shoes and socks off and slides his feet into the pool. I notice the blood on his shoes but avert my eyes. He pulls out a blunt and lights it. He takes a drag and sits there silently for a bit. For a moment I think he is going to cry, but his expression steadies. A grail of smoke rises from his lips. Then he speaks, staring ghost-like at the smoke. "Do you know much about the dark ordinance?"

He hands me the blunt. I take a hit and shake my head no.

"It's an ordinance that limits the use of artificial light at night. To cut down on light pollution. It allows astronomers at Kitt Peak to have a clearer view of the night sky. It's why Tucson is so dark."

I pass the blunt, and he takes a deep drag. His voice is worn and flows melodically solemn.

"It also makes it much easier for my uncle and cousins to do what we do."

He doesn't have to say; we all know about the killings, the kidnappings. Unless your TV is on all the time, or you're in an Ambien fog, you can hear the screams every night. Rivals being tortured. Gunshots. There are no bodies, no crime scene. They just vanish. On this side of the border, everything must be kept quiet till the shipments can get to Phoenix and from there to the rest of America.

In the rippling blue glow, Marcus looks briefly like an old man, then a young boy. He speaks as if in a dream or waking up from one. "It's strange how that works, the very ordinance that allows us to see and study the wonders of the universe, allows" – his voice trailing off – "all of this."

He lifts the blunt up and points in the direction of last night's gunshots. "None of what we do would be possible without those shadows." Then points up to the sky. "And none of these scientific breakthroughs would be possible either."

His eyes shimmer with tears. He inhales deeply then passes me the blunt. Exhaling, he continues. "I feel so lost out there, Xi. I feel so lost out there with my uncle. I look up at the stars as I hear the screams, and I think of what the scientists are looking at. I think of what they're studying, and it steadies me. The stars are so cleansing. The stars are like water, Xi. Sometimes when I walk through the campus, for a minute I forget about this life. I stand in an empty classroom and imagine myself there. All I think about is that one day all of this will be over, and I will be studying the stars somewhere wonderful, like for NASA in Pasadena or one of those observatories in Chile or Morocco."

He slides a paper out of his pocket.

"Sometimes it seems so far. Then I think of how far that starlight has travelled, how far the stardust in my body has travelled, and I have hope." He turns to me with that same weary but warm smile. "Sophie's okay, but when her uncle got to her to Charleston, she ran off. One of our connects spotted her in Atlanta."

He slides the paper into my hand.

“I hate to run, Xi, but I have to go. It’s going to be a long night.”

Smoke escapes my nostrils. My hands are trembling. I stutter multiple thank yous. Then realizing his last words, I lock my eyes on his, and I add, “I owe you more than I can ever convey, Marcus.”

He slips his socks and shoes back on.

“Just keep writing.”

He’s smiling, but sadness haloes him. He looks exhausted. It’s easy to forget he’s fourteen. As I pull my feet from the water, I try to hand him the blunt, but he waves me off.

“Keep it.”

As he nears the gate I rush over and wrap my arms around him, the blunt smoke spinning around us, and kiss him on the cheek. “Be safe.”

“I’ll be okay. Good luck, my friend.”

ACT V. XIMENA’S LABYRINTH

As Marcus exits the gate, I open the book to find an address on Peachtree Street in downtown Atlanta and a number. My teeth rattle as the bass from Marcus’s ride rumbles through the complex like a fantasma, followed by the sound of thunder rolling across the sky. I leave the pool area, my eyes locked on the paper. A razor of lightning slices the sky, and raindrops bleed onto my skin. Deep in thought, with my mind’s compass spinning to where Sophie might be, I walk the wrong direction back to my tia’s apartment, twice. I look up to find myself exactly where I should never be, near the entrance to one of the tunnels.

With the rain falling, I tuck the poetry books and paper under my shirt and move swiftly away. The rest of my steps through the courtyard are cautious. It’s not the rain I worry about, it’s what it brings. The killings always come in the rain. The smuggling routes are always being fought over. Even though I am connected, I know it’s best to stay clear. Even innocents aren’t safe. They are the soul mates of stray bullets.

I plop through puddles, my feet leaving welts in the mud. My eyes scan the vacant playground area. The swing sets and slide were removed because their weight caused the ground to sink into the tunnels. As the downpour makes a marsh of the yard, the rain seeps into the tunnels, revealing the outline of their network. They look like a junkie's track marks.

Sometimes people move here without knowing better, and bad things happen. A greyhound that belonged to one of those people was off the leash and kept digging up one of the tunnels, so it was led away and shot, its ribcage stomped in, then its body dumped on the road to make it look like it had run off and been struck by a car.

Soaked in rain, I barrel towards my building. All I know is that I am done with this place. I'm done with the shootings. I am done with the tunnels and the gangsters. I'm done with the fear and the secrets, and all I can think about is if Sophie's okay. I stomp up the stairs, my heart drumming, visions of Sophie making me dizzy with possibility. All I know was this morning I felt lost and now I am an arrow drawn against a bowstring. I leave my shoes on the mat and walk into my tía's empty apartment. I feel relief that she works the night shift cleaning offices. I have time to think.

I pace as the rain whispers against my bedroom window. I've lit candles for la Virgen de Guadalupe and San Judas. I've lit candles for Jesús Malverde and Santa Muerte and prayed to anything invisible listening. I've counted my savings over and over, pilfered what my tía won't miss and have enough to get to Atlanta, but not enough to do much else. I slump into my chair like a sullen lotus and gaze blankly. For some time, I sit with only the sound of my heartbeat and the rain, so long it feels like my heart is pulling the raindrops from the sky. A flicker of motion outside jars me from my lull. I pull forward to see a stranger with a shovel, stomping the ground near the tunnel.

As I study him, I take my cell phone from my pocket. I watch the man fumble in the rain, stabbing at random areas of the streetlight-glimmering bog. I imagine what will happen to him if I send this text. My fingers hesitate over the camera button, then I think of my papá

never returning and think of Sophie's smiling face and a new life with her. One text will pay my way east and give me a fresh start. I see a light flicker on across the courtyard in the bedroom of one of those putos who snagged our bonus. I will not let Sophie down. I lean in close to the window. The camera on my phone focuses on the image of the rain-sodden man who's now digging furiously in one spot. I lean in, take one last picture and text it to the number.

I lean back against the chair, my whole body tectonic. A minute later, I hear yelling as lightning explodes. As the yelling grows louder, all I can think to do is pick up a pen and write. I am entranced; the words finally flow. The stranger's scream pushes the words onto the page. I furiously scribble; prosaic imagery fills each blank space till I hear a final gunshot and my pen stops. Silence. I sit there, pages filled with poetry, hands trembling.

A few minutes pass, and the cell phone vibrates. I look over and see a single dollar sign sent from an unknown number. Relieved, I smile, my body magmatic, then delete the text and the photos. I feel a whirlwind spinning in my chest as I stuff clothes in my bag. Surveying what else to pack, my room seems oddly small and distant, the way it would look to a ghost leaving its body. I slide the picture of my papá with my sisters and me out of the frame and secure it between shirts in my backpack. I head into the kitchen, pack a few sandwiches for the bus ride east, and Sophie's favorite, a big bag of M&Ms, before stopping in the living room to tear the Georgia state pages out of my papá's U.S. travel map book. I return to my candle-lit room, light incense and crack the window slightly, my eyes avoiding the wishbone-shaped exit tracks of the man dragged away in the rain. I light a prayer candle for him and place it on the rain-enshrined window seal, whisper an apology and promise silently to write a poem for him one day.

I pull my chair up to the window, sit down with my notebook in one hand and the blunt in the other. I light it, and as the rain falls, I begin to write, all the poems rising out of the same unknown that holds my papá, rising like rain from the river, like shadows from the sun. Calmness comes over me. Tomorrow I will step aboard the

Greyhound bus for a two-day journey east, and when the bus doors open in Atlanta, I will wake, rub my eyes, step towards the light and into the humid soul-food-scented streets. I will find Sophie. Till then I dream and fill the page with words. A tiny galaxy spirals through my pen, and all the nerve endings of the blank page begin to sing. They sing of you, my love, they sing of you, my papá, and to you, the mother I have never met. They sing to all of México and all those dreaming of freedom, and they sing the names of everyone that has vanished in the light behind God's eyes. Yo te amo. Yo te amo. Yo te amo. Yo amo. **f**

KATIE PRINCE

O HELL O HELL THAT MILD THING

once, I thought
if you were a reed I would play you
with my teeth.
the mouth on you.
I thought
o red ship

and ignored the way
it was always sinking

PAIGE LEWIS

ON THE FIRST FERRIS WHEEL, 1893

A man riding thinks please let these windows be paintings, let the floor trembling be only knees, be an earthquake—anything. This is the first time he has craved the dirt. He becomes charged—a bull, he dents the rail, wants out even if out means air. His fellow riders are not bulls. They came to wave revolving over headraised strangers. They ask if it would be safer to stand centered or to line the edges.

One of the women riding unzips her skirt, chases after his rush—all elbows, stiff shoulders. She wraps her cotton tight around his eyes. She becomes his mother, and it's his birthday—warm candlelight pricking through blindfold. He stops spinning. Dizzy, he doesn't feel the pin. His tail. There's so much silence, he can't remember if they already sang or if everyone is waiting on him, dry mouths open.

PAIGE LEWIS

THE LAST WORDS OF THE FIRST MAN TO DIE IN SPACE

Darling, the walls are blistering
and I'm spinning so fast I can't see

Earth, but I see you. I see our
children building moon-suits

in the yard—they've got colanders
on their heads and silver paint

on their boots—my little spacemen.
Teach them that the world is not this

spiteful, that its branches never mean
to break under the weight of growing

boys, that its thunder can do nothing
but make itself heard. Remember that

every bump in the road is not a dog—
is not me. Oh, love, I'm so close

to the stars' mouths and they're
talking so loud. Can you still

hear me?

DETACHING

I smell spring in the air when my dog and I emerge from a dense, chilly tunnel of pines at the Marilla Reservoir into warmth and light and ducks. I've been walking, worrying, passing through light and shadow, remembering how, when my daughter was small, slats of blinds turned into sunlit cages on the floor while she learned to color inside lines. Ten years have disappeared since then, and now, sometimes, it's like I'm emerging from a tunnel of time to discover the onset of old age, my daughter poised to make her break for independence.

I am fifty, and though in relatively good health, I have arthritis, plantar fasciitis, posterior vitreous detachments. My brother, one year older, just had a heart attack. While my dog weaves, sniffing out olfactory stories of rotting leaves and frozen earth, squirrels and possums and other dogs, I've been tromping over pine needles, wondering how anyone lets go. Of their children, of their own youth.

And then here we are, squinting in the uninterrupted sun, a flock of ducks marching and preening on the gravelly walkway. My dog speeds up to a trot. She's beside herself with joy at the sight of all these ducks. She crouches in the play position.

As she bounds forward, the ducks stop. They watch, still as the windless water below.

Run, I think. Run for your lives.

*

According to Buddhist philosophy, attachment is the cause of all human unhappiness. But the opposite of attachment is not detachment. It is non-attachment. "I will not be attached to the

outcome,” my friend Lee kept repeating as we painted opera masks in a workshop in Beijing. Her words liberated me. I gave my mask dangly earrings and a nose ring.

*

One evening months ago, white lights started pulsing at the periphery of my vision. By the next morning, smoke drifted in front of me, rising suddenly when I blinked, flying off to the side when I turned my head as if blown away by a sudden wind. Swarms of gnats appeared above me and small insects darted below, flies and bugs winging and crawling, crowding and dissipating. Sometimes the smoke turned to scribbles and scrawls, or big dots and then little dots shrinking into hundreds of black grains of sand.

It was early autumn then, the season reluctant to change, some of the leaves yellow, some green, all of them hanging on as if unwilling to detach from the trees. My eye doctor met me at his office although it was Saturday. Somewhere beyond a blaze of light, he said that looking into eyes was like peering through the layers of a fishbowl. I pictured his light beaming past the lens of my pupil, through murky water sprinkled with small flecks of food, past tiny fish floating by, down to turreted castles and colorful rocks.

Except instead of fish or food or castles or rocks, he described what seemed to me equally unlikely images, scribbles and scrawls, none of these conjured by my imagination. He could actually see the origin of those black specks that pixilated blank pages and sunlit windows, the spinning whorls and strings of pearls, the drifts of smoke like after one of those charcoal snakes grows on the sidewalk and then crumbles, turning abruptly from an imitation of life to a heap of ash.

Dr. Cohen wrote down terms: posterior vitreous detachment, Weiss ring, pre-retinal hemorrhage.

*

Now it's almost spring, and as my dog and I approach the ducks, she is full of delighted surprise, prancing joyously toward these potential new playmates who watch, seemingly placid, unwary, yet understanding instinctively that she draws no real boundaries between playmates and meals.

This is the reason I have a dog: because they are all energy and impulse, happily acting without any thought of consequences, counterbalancing my temptation to fret and dwell. I can see it, though, how a playful paw, a puppy nibble, a cheerful swipe could easily turn to bloodshed, to flying feathers and shreds of ducks. I know just how my dog would clutch those birds between her teeth and shake wildly, head whipping from side to side. She does this with my daughter's stuffed animals, cotton innards flying everywhere while she cheerfully attempts to break their necks.

My daughter used to bring her bike to this trail, always ahead of me, speeding around curves and out of sight. Now it's just me and the dog, zigzagging, mesmerized by the scents of old pinecones and shedding bark and someone's lost shoelace. I wish I'd thought to bring gloves. I wish for hot tea, a fire, a fuzzy blanket as the sky like an overturned teacup fuzzes to dark.

*

Attachment, according to Buddhism, makes us grab onto whatever we can and hang on tightly: ideas, opinions, relationships, objects. But things get lost, and the world fails to conform to our expectations, leading to stress, worry, and disappointment.

*

Throughout the fall, smoke floated before me, drifting elusively to one side when I tried to examine it. Once years ago I attended a

meditation workshop where we focused on our breathing and watched emotions pass before us, fleeting. Now each time the smoke wafted back, I just watched it, telling myself that it would pass, that all was temporary. After a day of being upright, gravity settled the floaters, as if, Dr. Cohen said, my head was a snow globe. Doing a headstand would really shake things up, he said. He claimed I'd get used to the floaters like the dead bugs on your windshield that you stop seeing after ten thousand miles. But I didn't believe those nightmare swarms of flies and bugs would ever go away, those spiders lowering themselves on tangled black webs.

In ancient times, did people with vitreous detachments think they were losing their hold on sanity, hallucinating cobwebs or fleeting fleas, the English translation of the Latin term for this phenomenon? Or maybe they were considered visionaries, able to see what no one else could. At least my pointillist grains had disappeared, leaving behind black clouds, threadlike strands, a kite tail, ragweed, and bead necklaces.

Floaters, someone wrote on a new-agey online forum, are the images of your own thoughts. In which case, my thoughts were wafting, spiraling, shapeshifting things.

I preferred to imagine that these were visions, not just small flecks of collagen fiber that had shrunk and shredded, changing the amount of light that hit the retina. I preferred to imagine that these visions had meaning, were portents like my future in tea leaves. But on second thought, I wasn't so sure I liked that, that wafting, shapeshifting, spiraling future of mine.

*

The spring day my dog and I run into the ducks, I've been walking briskly, trying to shed agitation, gradually settling into a dreamy daze. I've been watching the way the leaves bask in the sun's glow, undersides concealed. Walking, my sadness fades and I reinhabit a calmer, more accepting self, watching change and balance cycle

continually. I will go home and be pulled back into my daughter's needs, my own defenseless love.

But for now, I'm still in my trancelike state when all of a sudden here we are, entering this gauntlet of ducks, my fist tight around the leash, while the dog's tail seems to tick out words: play with me, play with me. And then she bounds forward toward her own gleeful capacity for destruction.

Last fall, trying to cultivate non-attachment toward the effects of my vitreous detachment, I focused on viewing my fear from a distance. The world went on out there past the shapes that drifted before me. When fear shot through me like bright lights, fear of growing old, fear of the day when my daughter would be gone, I blinked it away, floated it off to the periphery again.

The day I realized that my floaters had ceased to bother me, I was watching rain plop onto leaves, some yellow, some green, all shivering in the wind, then shuddering under the raindrops' force. It was like the leaves were spring-loaded, recoiling, that even though the same things happened over and over, they were startled every time. Some loosened and twirled to the ground. The rest hung on, shiny as if laminated.

Now, at the reservoir, the pines stand unchanged while elsewhere trees start to bud, my sight of them unobstructed by weeds and creepy specters, skies of dark clouds and kite-tails and bead-like constellations. Floaters are just shadows that haunt the edge of my vision.

And down the path, the ducks watch my dog, then lift in unison and float down to skim the water, unhurried in their resistance, serenely outpacing their mortality.

The sky brews to dusk, the earth's rim still on fire with its blaze of light. My dog skids to a bewildered stop. She dashes to the edge of the reservoir, eyes full of confusion and hurt and betrayal, so sad that if I'd been a duck, I might have offered myself up to her just to spare her feelings.

Maybe this is my downfall, the greatest pitfall of parenthood: I don't know how to be on my guard, to prepare, to steel myself, to

protect myself from the inevitable. But everything lets go: the leaf that showed its dark side to the world, edged with yellow, increasingly brittle, its vulnerable pale underside visible each time it shivered in the wind. Everything lets go: the leaf from the tree, my daughter of her need for me, my vitreous membranes from my retinas, my dog from her temporary fondest desire, as the ducks, feeling no remorse or obligation, float peacefully away, just out of reach. **f**

ALEX LEMON

TREATS TREATS TREATS

One never knows
What to look out
For until it's too
Late: banana peel,
Tear-away pants,
The sweet-smiling
Lady juggling
A newborn in one
Hand & a pistol
In the other. For
Months you have
Each day from
The kitchen window
Looked at the bandana
Crumpled beneath
The park bench
Across the street—
When finally you
Unwrap it a pale
Finger drops to
The dirt. The fairy
Tale in each of us
Ends in dazzle,
Dart & is populated
With crossdressing
Woodland creatures
That speak—but

Only about knives.
There, in our darkest
Darks—something
Resembling grandma cut
Out of the wolf's guts,
A breadcrumb trail that
Leads to a creek's edge
Where shimmering green
Beatles gnaw the stringy
Meat off of a bone pile—
Machetes gleam, shine.
Think about it & every
Thing behind your
Eyes goes blank—
Silence cloaks the day
Around you—no blue
Jays or whippoorwills—
Not even the caw-caw
Caterwaul that echoes
Through the city when
Someone throws in
The towel—falls down
Dead or just rolls over,
Plays possum. It feels
Too right when you
Really think about it
But you won't tell any-

One. The blacker than
Any midnight shames
Curling deep within
Our caverns, the bluest
Blues of our loves.
Face first you fall onto
The floor, wake with
Strangers over you,
Asking how much
You want for your
Insides. Be strong.
It will get better or
Before too long you
Will die. Long ago
I learned to stand my
Ground, even when
The dirt blossomed with
The songs of people
I cannot stand & now
I am so far past being just
A little bit on fire. Now tell
Me—who is ready for a few
Dreams you wouldn't want
Anyone to know about?

ALEX LEMON

ONCE YOU COME HERE YOU DON'T GO
ANYWHERE

Heatwave, lock & key,
Suicide bomber in

The World Series crowd—
There is so much room

In the jigsawed light
Of the day for bad news.

Always, we are learning
New forms of cruelty. Always

We are failing the ways
Of love. Whatever anything

Is supposed to be about,
It will always be a little

More about loss than
Anyone wants to think

About. Enough already—
I am so damn tired

Of the flaming tire swing
Inside me. I want to drink

Sunlight & smog, to know
Their goodness, then explode

Into a ever-swelling star-
Dust of razor-lipped shards.

ALEX LEMON

HOW TO BE A WINNER

Nuzzle all animals,
Especially the tree
Kangaroo. Borrow
Babies from mothers
Too young to say
No—firmly tug
Their velvet-soft
Limbs, then nod
With satisfaction
At an invisible shape
In the sky. Wear
A T-shirt that says
My Love Is 100
Feet Tall & a short
Monochromatic kilt.
In packed elevators,
Standing-only buses,
Reverently close
Your eyes, whistle
Amazing Grace, then,
Do not let anyone get
Off until you're
Finished singing
Still Not A Player.
Though starlight,
Pearls, cannot compare
To the beauty in
Them, tell no one

About your cat
Slaughtering—
The heavenly glow
Of the toothpicks
You carve from
Their bones.

ELIZABETH ONUSKO

AGAINST ADAPTATION

Your take on that Greek myth
bores me—whether it’s Orpheus,
Persephone, or especially Icarus.
Each generation is convinced
it’s the first to discover flying
requires falling back to earth.
I mean, really. Enough
misapplied imaginations
have remade the same stories
that we could’ve dreamed
our way out of a few wars
or into another galaxy by now.
You don’t have an urgent need
to describe how the sun fixates on
a barren field or a shadow
overtakes a delicate profile in retreat.
This is about your fetish for seeing
your suffering as archetypal
and yourself as noble for bearing it.
You can’t admit how ordinary
your pain is, just another farmed pearl
shut inside an oyster
that you’re prying open with a knife.

SWIMMING LESSONS

The more I hit him, the less it hurts. Each time my knuckles strike his face it just feels like they're smacking an enlarged, ripened plum. He's slumped against the beige tiled wall, reaching lazily for my t-shirt. His fingertips graze the fabric and I grab the sides of his head with my palms, slam the bridge of his nose on a urinal's lip. A viscous, bright red spurt rockets from his nostril down the slick porcelain.

I step back and look at him, make a tight fist, then hit the iron side of the nearest stall as hard as I can.

"Someone *help!*" I yell.

*

I've waited, planned patiently and soberly for this cereal-box-faced, blonde-bearded fuck—Daniel Massey, MD, one of the youngest, hippest doctors on staff at Riverview Hospital. The one who was assigned to my sister two years ago. With nowhere else to turn under the umbrella of state-assisted health insurance, Amy had to try and convince someone new, once again, that she did not, did *not* just have 'anxiety-based, psychosomatic issues.' This is the doctor whose Latex-handshakes stopped after only the second visit. His bright smile turned lukewarm when he sent Amy on her way with scripts for some generics: clonazepam and trazodone.

Amy regurgitated Massey's words to me after the appointment, which I'd heard variations of throughout the years: "I know it feels horrible, but the hallmark symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder and panic attacks are shortness of breath, tingling or numbness in your fingers and arms, chest pain, tachycardia, even those constant

skips or ‘butterflies.’ They’re premature ventricular contractions, totally benign.”

She said he looked at her with demeaning Dad Eyes. I wasn’t there, but I could picture it.

Granted, Amy never made it easy on anyone. She was always persistent with her requests for second opinions and additional tests, but Dan stopped returning her calls entirely after reviewing her single, year-old EKG. No echocardiogram. No Holter monitor. Even I thought my sister was being paranoid when she told me she’d tried scheduling an appointment with another doctor, only to find that, per Dr. Massey’s advice, everyone in the practice had unanimously agreed not to *enable her*.

Then we found the link to Don’t Panic (a proudly mentioned reference to a Coldplay song) on Riverview’s website. It was a welcoming outreach with message boards, downloadable writing exercises for the purpose of practicing mindfulness, and videos (starring Dan Massey) on coping techniques concerning various mental disorders.

I read dozens of posts on the boards. They read like faith healer testimonials: “Someone this frank and relatable, this *knowledgeable*, is exactly what this area needs with the growing epidemic of anxiety and depression-related suicides—Mary S.”

On the way home from work a few weeks later, I pulled my truck up to the curb in front of North Street park, where a big poster was tacked onto the telephone pole: A Riverview Sponsored Seminar, “Fighting The Mind,” at Colby College’s Whitcomb Building. With speaker Dr. Daniel Massey, Specialist in Anxiety Disorders.

There was a large photo of him in a charcoal blazer and light-blue oxford paired with a striped tie, his teeth looking freshly stripped clean by weapons-grade peroxide. Was this his headshot on IMDb?

“The genesis of your problem lies with your thoughts,” the quote underneath his photo read. “Anyone can learn to conquer their thoughts—you’re the general.” Jesus.

That was six months ago; a couple days before Amy’s boyfriend Paul found her in her apartment, motionless on the carpet, all dressed for work with her thermos leaking coffee onto the floor.

*

For the past couple of weeks, I've had Mike do a little reconnaissance for me on Dr. Massey. Paul is nice, but he's an unreliable pacifist who drives a burgundy Subaru Outback with a Life Is Good bumper sticker. The interior always smells like Nag Champa. When I met him, walking towards me all giddy, holding Amy's hand like it was his babysitter's, I knew he didn't come from the type of families I grew up around—the ones that're synonymous with cold lunches for their kids and 12-hour workdays.

This isn't to say that my reliance on Mike comes from his being some grain-fed brute—he's not. At thirty-two, he's on his third and hopefully final go-around for a degree in radiology at the local community college. He takes care of his pre-teen daughter solo, all while managing one of the local McDonald's; this one, where I came an hour ago to wait for Danny Boy. He's also my oldest friend, with arms and hands made of gristle from decades of roofing and re-siding houses, someone who until just a couple years ago had a hard time replacing a bottle of beer for a textbook. More relevantly, Mike always had a protective fondness for Amy. When I was away at college in Orono, he was the one who looked out for her when she'd had too many mudslides at The Shay.

"He always comes in on Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays during his lunch," Mike said. "Around one o'clock. Gets twenty Chicken McNuggets with a medium fry and medium Sprite. Shitload of sweet n' sour."

I didn't buy it. Dan Massey, the Doogie Howser of Bentonville, avid competitive cyclist, Paleo Diet advocate—constipating his arteries?

But then in he strides wearing a navy windbreaker and chino shorts, with dollar store aviators and a custard-colored cap bearing the logo for his Portland-based cyclist team: The Cyc-lones. He keeps the sunglasses on till he gets to Mike at the counter.

Sitting behind the fogged glass of a booth, I overhear him order his usual. There's only one other person in here—a woman in her

40's with her thin lilac readers almost at the tip of her nose, tapping at Scrabble pieces on her phone, holding her mustard-dripping McDougle with a limp wrist.

Dan takes a seat near one of the windows and starts inhaling his kid's meal, utilizing all nine sweet and sour packets. He doesn't see me. I smile and dunk a trio of fries into my paper cup of ketchup.

I've lost more sleep than what's fair over this man. For nights I was fidgeting, trying to physically jostle the images out of my head; Amy choking on nothing, strangled by a heart that finally stopped pumping, sparklers crackling in the black swamp that's become her vision. Then her world is gone. Over. And I can't do anything. I couldn't have done anything.

But Dan Massey could've.

Popular opinion aside, by statistical patient-wellness-to-treatment standards on Healthgrades, collated from his previous tenure in Massachusetts, Dan Massey is not the best physician. (Nor the best cyclist; he got 90th out of 212 participants in The Tip to the Dip Trek this past summer.) However, I've gotta hand it to him, he's deft with the sculpture of middle age. I've never seen him buy more than a six-pack of beer, or more than two drinks at the bar. He calculates when he says "Hey guy," versus "Hey sir," gauging carefully the social rank of man he's speaking to, even when he's not in a lab coat and Birkenstocks. He's infrequently at Mass, just like most of us, but when he's there he's always rapt during the sermon, hanging loose with his Catholicism just as the rosary swings from the rearview in his modest Ford Explorer. Though last Saturday, at the movie theater, I did catch him gazing a little too long at a black BMW coupe peeling out of the parking lot. There was the slightest tinge of envy as he casually scratched his scruff and walked inside.

He's very disciplined.

And hey, that's great, discipline is crucial for both of us today: his adherence to greasy sins, and my incomprehensible amount of self-restraint from the impulse to overreact.

In order for this to work, Dan also has to be predictable in two other areas. One, the post-binge preening in the men's room, which Mike said was inevitable. And two, it's important I haven't underestimated him. Adrenaline is scarier than a handful of coke. He's about my height—I have maybe ten pounds on him—but for all I know he could've studied aikido for ten years. So this has to be quick.

Upon plucking a lone sliver of crispy nugget skin out of the container, popping it in his mouth, Dan gets up and trashes the debris, heading for the bathroom.

I wait about twenty seconds until he's just inside the door and get up after him, throw my cardboard sleeve in the garbage. I see Mike leaning over the shoulder of a trainee on register, paying me no mind. *Good.* Inside the men's room, a welcome surprise: Dan is taking a shit in one of the stalls. The floor is slick with suds; a mop with a duct-taped handle sits in its wheeled vessel. There's two plastic CAUTION! WET FLOOR foldout signs and I take both, collapse them and wedge them tight between the door handle and the wall—easy to dismiss as happenstance.

Dan comes out after a flush and a zip, walking over to the sinks, doesn't recognize me without a five o'clock shadow and a crew cut. He pumps some green foam into his hands from the dispenser. I turn on both faucets near me. "Hey, Dan," I say.

He looks up at me with both eyebrows high, about to crack a cordial smile. I can imagine the tiny muscles at the base of his throat contracting, buckling, snapping like toothpicks. Before another second passes I grab fistfuls of his jacket and heave him into the wall with the urinals. I'm careful with my shove that his neck doesn't smack the pipes, but he's denser than he looks. He crumples to his ass.

"Get up, motherfucker," I say. It sounds a lot more rugged than I thought it would. Like an actual crazed person, a renegade street boxer.

There's a rage I didn't think he was capable of, rippling in his brow. I want him to *try*. He doesn't say anything, just gets to his feet and jabs me, hard, just below the ribs. I let him swing and bust my

lip before I shove him back again. Then I rush for him, land my tight fist right into his moisturized cheek. He's on the floor, guarding his face with his elbows. After I break his nose on the urinal he makes a sound like an angry steer.

I lean in and press my thumb on the tenderized cartilage just below his eyes and he lets out a shrill groan.

"As I'm sure you know," I say, on my haunches in front of him, "the coroner deemed it sudden cardiac death due to A. Fib. *A-trial fibrillation*." I sound it out. "Calling it A. Fib makes it sound kinda harmless. What A. Fib really is, is treatable. Right?"

Dan's face is a crimson river system.

"Treatable," I say again. He looks at me with one eye welded shut. His Cyc-ones hat fell off in the urinal and he glances at it for a second. "I've done my research on you, Dan. I'm a thorough dude. And so are you. Born in Farmington, star goalie for Mt. Blue's soccer team. You even look about the same. Most of us balloon right on up."

A low, garbage disposal-like noise rumbles out of him. I wipe the blood from the stinging crack in my bottom lip with the back of my hand.

"Graduated from BU, magna cum laude. You did your residency at Brigham and Women's. I bet all of that impressed a lot of dates." I give him a haughty smile.

He wants to say "Fuck you," but his lips bobble and a thick string of saliva dribbles down his beard like molasses.

"In fact, I've seen you with a pretty hot girl or two at that Greek restaurant on Union Street. Amy used to *love* that place."

Dan lowers his head. "Why?" he says with a stutter.

"Good question," I snap. "I asked that myself when I was watching the videos on your website. I thought; is he really doing this? Why? But we both know."

He doesn't look up.

"You want to be it all—doctor, model citizen, food connoisseur. Teacher."

I wait a minute for his expression to change, for it to flood with some guilt. “Stop teaching people how to swim, Dan, when you can’t even *fucking doggie paddle*,” I seethe through my teeth.

Amy wasn’t the trophy on our parents’ mantel or the catch of a lifetime, but she was my sister, *someone*. A kindhearted person. A tireless worker even though her resumé was all over the place. But most of all, she was tortured by things that many of us didn’t wholly believe but still tried to help her solve. When I went out with her shopping in Freeport, I watched as she slyly counted her pulse with fingertips as she bent over to look at a pair of folded pants on the table. I took her late-night phone calls as she often said, through a tear-sputtered filter: “Please, I can’t breathe. I’m so scared. God. Please come over.” I drove well past midnight to her apartment, each time finding her on the couch, sweaty and pale, because she thought she was going to die because her heartbeat skipped ten times in a row while she was just trying to pour a glass of milk.

We felt an obligation to her, at the very least because she was suffering, and that’s just what you do. And if you don’t do that, and someone *dies*, there are consequences. Well, there often aren’t. But today isn’t often.

I hear the door handle rattle and there’s a couple knocks. Still kneeling in front of Dan I take a cloth-wrapped package out of the pocket of my hoodie—my hunting knife. I press the spring-assist down through the rag, careful not to touch it with bare hands. “Take it,” I say.

His mouth hangs open, his breathing labored.

“Take. It.”

He extends his hand and with the blade facing me I place it firmly in his palm and take the cloth away. He wraps his fingers around the handle, gingerly. I look down and study the short row of serrations near the base of the blade. The judge will be lenient. Amy was friends with his daughter, Lauren, in high school. And I don’t have so much as a surface scratch on my record, save for one instance of very public, very loud, and very underage drinking with Corey Hanner at the

football field. Maybe I'll get some jail time even for self-defense, but I doubt it. Dan will lose his medical license.

I close my eyes, and swift as a breeze I grab Dan's wrist and shove the knife all the way up to its last divot into my stomach.

"AGHH. *FUCK!*" I yell. My voice ricochets through the stalls. The sensation of metal shredding skin and nerves is biting, electric. Blood pools through my sweatshirt. Dan's left eye opens wide, and through the small slit between the other's swollen lids I see an inky pupil explode. His hand tries to shake free. My molars are clamped so tight I can almost hear cracking enamel. The door's handle is jiggling furiously like a flipper in a pinball machine.

I guide his hand pulling out the blade, then go in once more. I nearly keel over the second time. Sight darkening, I look at his battered face, words tumble out of my mouth: "Are you done now? Are you fucking done?" **f**

THE BAKA

Huts bordered a red clay road that not long ago was a footpath crossing the eastern Cameroon rainforest, sanctuary of hunter-gatherers and trees so massive as to test the mind. Logging trucks rumbled through the village of Ngola, hour after hour on their long journey to the port. One thatched hut had a door blocked by a stone the size of a head. Within the hut, lying on a mildewed foam mattress and unable to walk, was a fourteen-year-old girl named Clarisse, a girl of the Baka tribe, *Pygmies* in the pejorative, those who for millennia have made the forest their home. Clarisse was walking the clay road a day prior when a Bantu, using his motorcycle as a taxi and carrying *four* passengers, with children riding on the gas tank between his legs, lost control of the bike and slid into her, mangling her foot in the spokes of his rear wheel and cutting her Achilles tendon. The local custom of the Bantu, the dominant tribe, was for a family to take possession of its problems, and the driver's father had locked Clarisse in his house, her plight standing for the history of subjugation suffered by the Baka, in whom the government had tried to *create new needs* to lure them out of the rainforest into permanent roadside settlements so the trees could be logged. Violence befell the holdouts until all were displaced, the Baka enduring Bantu abuse, in decades of forced labor for wine, women seized, dominance in the bloodline.

*

Three days before seeing Clarisse, I pattered into Ngola on the back of a cheap Chinese motorcycle because I'd heard that off in the jungle were rare Baka living by the old culture away from roads. But

entering the forest without the blessing of the local Bantu big man had earned me threats of arrest and harm in the past. “It’s not safe for you to stay here,” said a Bantu woman in Gabon. “You have to leave. The men—they’ll hurt you.” My crime was having made friends with a sister tribe of the Baka without involving the Bantu, who tried to command everything that went on around them. So upon arrival in Ngola, I asked a crowd of surprised and smiling villagers to be taken to the headman. Richard was his name, father of twenty-five children, a Bantu as wealthy as the rest of the village combined, his French more assured, house trimmed out in tile and ornamental ceilings, inconceivable luxuries against the backdrop of thatched huts.

*

On my second full day as a guest in Richard’s house, three Baka stormed into the living room wearing clothes that had taken on the permanent brown of village life. One of them, Andres, the oldest of the local Baka, was barefoot. Andres pulled me by the arm away from Richard to the far end of the couch. He gripped my hands, spoke, and searched my face for a promise greater than the bond we’d formed chatting in the dark outside his hut. Born in the unbroken forest, Andres did not see a road in the first twenty-seven years of his life. That we sat together at all was a wonder, I born in Houston to a family of engineers and entrepreneurs. To be sought out and needed by such a man, to be touched by him, caused me to feel the thread running through all that was shared.

Andres had the wide Baka nose and smelled of alcohol and in labored French he told me what I’d heard in rumor that afternoon about the motorcycle crash. “You can help her,” he said, certain that I, as an outsider, could rescue Clarisse over Bantu prohibitions. One of the younger Baka, Samuel, shouted at Richard, who as a Bantu didn’t accept that they could address him as equals. “Lower your voices,” Richard said in French, “and stand away from me.”

A plastic hula girl danced on a table under power of Richard's generator. Andres begged for my help in the plight of his grandniece. Perhaps it was when he grasped the tenuousness of my position, where interference risked expulsion, that he released my hands. He stood, pointed, and shouted at Richard in *Langue Baka*, and somehow I understood: "We have no money, and you have a car. Why can't you get the girl from that hut and take her to the hospital in Yokadouma?"

Blaise, Richard's Bantu brother, strolled in chewing on a matchstick. He pulled out a chair and sat at the table with his back to the Baka and said, "David, let's eat," and nodded toward the chair he wanted me to take. Blaise, who had seventeen children but only three boys, claimed he would stop having kids when he had six sons; "It's a matter of honor when I go before the angel Gabriel." Blaise lifted the lid off a pot. "These are sweet plantains," he said, wholly unconcerned about the Baka pleading with his brother just feet behind him. "David, the plantains are delicious. Try them."

Racism that was the relegation of the Baka to non-beings.

Blaise did not so much as glance at them. He joked about the mundane, about village life.

Andres no longer paid me any attention.

I felt sick and struggled to chew.

Then Andres turned and led the Baka back out into the night.

Don Williams, an American country singer revered in Africa, sang from the stereo, though the speed of the tape player was off and pitched his voice too high. Richard ignored my questions after dinner about Clarisse and asked me instead what jobs in the U.S. pay the best. He looked at me, chin in hand, in an almost flirtatious manner through our discussion of wealth. Then I squared my shoulders to him and said, "I am a guest in your house and a guest in Ngola. But if I walk to Andres now and give him 5,000 francs (\$10) for transport to get the girl to the hospital in Yokadouma, if I say half the money is from me and half from you, will you give me permission?" I figured it was best to honor his authority through inclusion.

Richard sat back without answering, so I repeated the question.

“If you give them money,” he said, finally, “they’ll just drink. They’ll use it to buy beer and she won’t get to the hospital. There’s no point.”

Here was the old justification for the mistreatment of indigenous people, for paying them with tattered clothes, for paying them with liquor. I lay that night in bed, within Richard’s locked house, boots on as a promise against my cowardice.

*

Logging trucks shot through the village the next morning loaded down with ancient African mahogany, the trees making their way abroad, the Bantu of Ngola as mistreated by the government as the Baka were by the Bantu, who as Francophones in the eastern forest occupied the bottom of a political hierarchy on which the Baka didn’t even register. Petrol and container trucks rattled over the road like crashing loads of loose metal—in commerce benefitting people elsewhere. The village was serene, full of birdsong and children, and the aggression of the roaring trucks was incomprehensible. And incompatible with the slow pace of rural Africa; on a similar road a week before I’d seen a Bantu man sprawled out in his blood, killed by a logging truck whose driver hadn’t stopped.

I was chatting with Richard near his porch when a Baka passed on the road.

“How’s the girl?” I called out in French.

“She’s still in the house,” the man said and motioned in front of him.

I turned to Richard. “Let’s go. You and I.” And I stepped toward his old red hatchback. To my surprise, Richard shrugged and pulled the keys from his pocket. We drove south and picked up an older Bantu man walking the roadside. Richard, who didn’t know the names of many of his neighbors, had run twice for village chief and failed. Ngola now had no chief, and though made mostly of thatch and mud it was less a village than a suburb.

We arrived at the house of the motorcyclist's father, Simon, who was off in his field. His wife led us to the next hut. She rolled aside the heavy stone and opened the door, allowing in the sunlight. Foodless and without water, Clarisse lay on a yellowed foam mattress, her face streaked with dirt, foot wrapped in gauze, a soft incarceration with a long precedent in the world.

"It's best to wait for Simon to return," said the older man we'd picked up. "He'll take care of things."

"Two days have passed," I said, "and she hasn't seen a doctor."

"It's best to wait for Simon," said the old man. "She saw a nurse, and the nurse put in sutures."

The nurse ran an infirmary without electricity in a village just to the south.

"People who saw the accident said her ankle was cut through," I said. "The nurse didn't fix this. The only important thing is whether the girl will walk. Everything else is secondary: who has responsibility, what the law says, whether Simon will be offended." I didn't like the sound of my sanctimony, but it was the best weapon I had.

The old man stepped away, to distance himself from me. Richard, maintaining eye contact, seemed to want to hear more, perhaps out of respect for the power in my strangeness. "Richard, she needs a real doctor," I said. "I'll pay for gas. I'll pay the hospital bill. The time for waiting for Simon to do the right thing is over. Let's go. You and I. Right now." Of course there was a limit to what I would do, but I figured I could at least get her out of that room.

Richard entered the hut without saying a word and reappeared cradling Clarisse. He walked to the car and laid her in the backseat.

She wouldn't look at my face.

The hospital was in Yokadouma, a frontier town that seemed to have been built all at once from the same three or four materials by men working with no coherent plan. The Bantu doctor inspected Clarisse's foot as he might have glanced at something dead on the ground. He said, "We wait two days. If the foot is better, she'll heal."

If it's worse, she'll have to go to Bertoua. We can't do such a surgery here."

*

I was alone in the hospital courtyard that evening when three men stormed up.

"What's your name?" one man said.

Another removed a small notebook and a pen from his shirt pocket.

The third was Simon. "You dishonored my family and myself!" he said. "You went into my house and yelled at my wife and took the girl without my permission. You made a serious mistake. *J'ai souffrais. J'ai porté la fille á la médecin. J'ai payé pour la fille. J'ai souffrais.*"

"You've suffered?" I said. "You suffered more than the girl who was actually cut?"

"You committed a crime," said the man with the pen. "We're going to the police."

My first thought, as fear struck, was of ways to leave Yokadouma. My second thought was of the absurdity that the Bantu had created a conflict about honor and responsibility more important to them than Clarisse's health. My third thought was that a little groveling would probably disarm them of their ferocity.

I apologized for being ignorant of their culture. I apologized to Simon for dishonoring him. I said I'd done only what I thought was right.

"Did you see all the Baka in the room with her now, her mother and sisters? They're all here because of you," he said. "Who's going to feed them? I can bring plantains from my farm tomorrow but I don't have money to feed them tonight."

"I'll get food," I said.

"If you see Richard," said Simon, "tell him he's in danger."

*

The Bantu settled Ngola in the 1930's, their connection to the land as tenuous as that of most settlers, who were better at altering environments than preserving them. The Bantu were farmers, and farming meant clearing jungle. The Baka had no cropland or grove of fruit trees, few possessions and little to defend. With a vast forest around them in which to hunt, they fled from conflict and moved elsewhere. Until the forest filled up with farmers and loggers and there was nowhere left to flee.

With Clarisse in the hospital, Richard and I returned to Ngola the next morning. Then he led me into the forest. He wore rubber boots, a hardhat, and a knitted red hood with a hole for his face. "Let Simon do what he wants," Richard said, gripping a double-barreled shotgun that he'd brought to hunt animals. "I'm tight with the judge."

Several Baka, one carrying a chainsaw, were coming to work for the day on Richard's farm. In the entourage was the Baka Samuel who'd agreed to lead me to the remote encampment. That he'd brought a friend for our journey reminded me of something Andres had said: "When a Baka works alone, he becomes weak. If there are two Baka together they flee. They are strong enough to run away."

The sun raged where the canopy had been felled. Richard pointed to forest in the distance and said, "*Ca c'est la forêt vierge.*" The virgin forest. "And this is my plantation, where I grow cacao." His work that dry season was a clearing, five hectares of trees lying on the ground as though toppled by the gods. Just before the rainy season, Richard would set the felled trees aflame, the surrounding jungle wet enough not to burn. His mother, sister, and wives would plant seeds, plantain suckers, and cassava in the ash. They would also plant cacao, a permanent crop in a shallow soil. With twenty-five hectares under cultivation, Richard had earned a relative fortune on the rising international price of cacao.

He snapped the chain onto his meter-long saw, patted his hardhat, and yanked the cord. Silver smoke surged from the hissing saw as he

held the throttle, walked to a thin tree, and made incisions in the trunk. A section of canopy fell away. He angled the saw into another tree, carving with the tip. The tree rattled to the forest floor in a crack of flying wood. Richard sliced his way through the shade, one chainsaw and a global marketplace allowing a single man to blur the line between an agrarian and an industrial society.

The Baka Samuel sat beside a fire in the distance roasting plantains.

Richard hauled the saw to a tree so large that three men could not have joined hands around the trunk, the tree covered in vines, lichens, flowers, the saw, propped on Richard's knee, slicing upwards into the wood. I thought of Wendell Berry, who wrote, "If you have no land you have nothing: no food, no shelter, no warmth, no freedom, no life...People who have been landless know that the land is invaluable; it is worth everything."

"Stay close," Richard said to me as water trapped within the trunk streamed forth from his incision over the sawdust. He set the whirring saw on his thigh and pressed into the wood. Out of the wounded bark water gushed, and he withdrew the blade.

"The water will keep the tree from falling."

"Where did you learn how to log?" I said.

"The Belgians. Tell your people you met a man who knows how to cut wood."

He set the chainsaw back into the groove and cut three-quarters of the way around the trunk, the saw whirring nearly beyond his control, the man standing at a point it was easier for me to deny I occupy; I own an old red car slightly nicer than Richard's hatchback but I didn't have to fell five-hundred-year-old trees to get it.

The mammoth was tipping.

Richard grabbed my arm and we dashed away as the tree sheared off the tops of two others and thundered down like a pedestal.

*

Richard had given me his blessing to visit the remote Baka. But when I told him Samuel and I were heading there, he seemed to change his mind, the man concerned, perhaps, that my true intentions were in line with those of most outsiders in the Congo Basin who came hunting mahogany, mercury, and gold. “I’ll see you in a few days, Richard,” I said and turned away, though not without worry.

The growl of Richard’s chainsaw faded as I slipped through the trees behind Samuel, who wore foam sandals and shorts, who’d brought nothing but a chandelier of plantains for our journey, and who sliced a path through the vines as though the machete were an extension of his arm. The words came now from Samuel’s lips, unsolicited: “*Forêt vierge*.” Just beyond there. Beyond the farms. Toward the Bangui River. *There*, both the Bantu and the Baka said, full of elephants and gorillas, was the untamed world. We followed trails through the afternoon, passing trees Samuel said marked the start of the great forest. But just as quickly the trail led us back onto patchwork cassava farms hacked and burned from the jungle.

And we reached the encampment.

Perplexed Baka emerged from bamboo huts. Two fires wove threads of smoke. An old Baka, his vision failing, groped for my hands. A muscular teenager arrived with a clutch of fish and a spear. The teenager looked away when our hands met, avoiding my gaze as Clarisse had. Ten Baka sat around me in the unfinished room connected to the elder’s house. They laid palm leaves over the roof beams to cast me into the shade.

I asked the elder how life had changed since he was a boy.

“Nothing has changed.”

I mentioned Andres, who’d said it was impossible to return to deep forest. I pointed to the plantains growing in a plot beside the village. I mentioned logging. There was little I cherished more than talking with elders, though I’d learned over the years that living *out* of context or having traveled was often a prerequisite for perspective.

“Yes,” the old man said, “if they cut the forest where are we supposed to live? Baka just want to be left alone.” It was possible the thought extended to me.

The forest buzzed with insects and birds through the night and into the morning, when I mixed instant coffee in my canteen. In a village of some twenty people, there was but a single half-melted plastic cup. I gave the canteen to Benjamin, Samuel’s friend from Ngola, who poured a taste into the one cup for each Baka to drink in turn, my act at least partly related to *creating new needs*. How difficult it was to imagine that continents full of people could afford to replace what broke. Save for a few sacks of cacao they harvested each year and sold to buy razors, machetes, and salt, the Baka here were independent in terms of survival.

We walked into the trees to explore. Women came along to dig for tubers. The teenager followed with his spear. Samuel made stilts and slashed into a tree for honey. His deftness with a machete—arcing blows high off the ground—was a skill rooted in childhood, like the perfect accent of one’s native tongue. The noise I made cracking through the jungle and tripping on roots was as much proof of my foreignness as my ignorance of *Langue Baka*. I was shedding weight and shaky with malaria that I didn’t know was about to emerge. But to walk with Baka was to answer questions from loved ones about why I didn’t crave a more normal life, though a normal life, by older measures, was one more like the Baka’s.

We reached a tree with thick vines dangling down from the canopy like braids of hair.

I said, “Can Baka climb something like this?”

“To hunt monkeys,” Samuel said.

The muscular teenager set aside his spear, grabbed the vines, and swung himself off the ground. He climbed straight up, hand over hand, legs enwrapping the vines, climbed to a height perhaps twenty times his own, in one instant offering proof of what it meant to be born in that place, proof of the genes passed down by those who’d

thrived there. The boy climbed so high into the shadows that I lost sight of him.

“Samuel,” I said, “ask him what he sees.”

“I’m not to the top,” the boy called down.

Claude Levi-Strauss wrote, “...there was a particular tribe which was able to see the planet Venus in full daylight, something which to me would be utterly impossible and incredible.” The Baka were masters of their environment. The Western version of communing with nature, a voyeuristic one, made an incomplete argument for why the forest was good.

The boy led us onward. The plantations, Samuel said, were behind us, the great jungle ahead. We all seemed to share the urge to enter old growth forest, something beyond influence, a world not yet counted.

“Samuel,” I said, “what’s your Baka name?”

“Emola.”

The shadows lightened. The canopy thinned. And we crossed out of the forest onto a dirt road.

“What is this?” I said.

“The road of the company cutting the wood.”

The road curled through the forest east of Ngola, the work of a Lebanese logging company, the hierarchy of abuse reaching from the Baka to the Bantu to the government and across the planet. The reality of a shrinking forest had yet to break down the mythology of untouched land.

*

It was dusk when we returned to camp. A man sharpened his machete with a file. A boy played with the tin of sardines, now empty, that I’d given his mother. One of my t-shirts had caused a fight. I sat on a cracked drum as we ate unsweet plantains and the shoulder of a monkey, good meat meant as a gift for me. Samuel pointed to the heavens and asked about the stars. I moved close to

the fire, grabbed a pair of papayas, and tried to explain the rotation of the earth, shooting stars, and why it was only sometimes light. Samuel nodded. Other Baka stood and walked away, unconvinced or rejecting the hierarchy of teaching in a culture that learned, not through instruction, but imitation. The words that left my mouth I had merely borrowed. “Thinking is a public activity,” Clifford Geertz wrote. That I possessed some knowledge of the solar system I could credit only to my having been born in a place where we were exposed to a decent part of what man had figured out. But we’d lost nearly all knowledge at the individual level of how to survive in the natural world—the hundreds and hundreds of plants Samuel knew, the behavior of birds and mammals, technology for making tools and weapons from wood, and the reading of the forest for the presence of change. I was illiterate in ways I had failed to notice.

When I’d asked Andres whether it was still possible to live by hunting and fishing, he said, “If we go far into the forest, if we leave, the Bantu will find us and bring us back. No matter how far we go. They will make us work. Life in the village along the road is not good. No. Life is good in the forest, but the Bantu will find us.”

There *were* two Bantu women staying in the camp.

Cold settled into the trees. Samuel moved burning logs inside the hut that the old blind Baka had vacated for us to sleep in. Benjamin put the stick door in place and lay in front of Samuel, two grown men turned the same direction on a bamboo bed in a pure statement of a lack of needs. The gift I would give Samuel for leading me through the forest he would use in part to buy batteries for a radio, which, of course, brought voices from elsewhere. I stretched out on a sleeping mat beside a leafy wall as brittle as dried tobacco. Other Baka, who I’d thought were asleep, began to drum and sing a song perhaps passed down in just that way through a number of generations no one had any need to count.

*

Back in Yokadouma, Clarisse sat in the sun on a porch at the hospital, her disheveled hair curling out from her head, the anguish now absent from her face. The doctor had declared that her foot would heal without surgery. For the first time she turned and met my gaze. But slight mobility in the foot, I learned later, did not guarantee the Achilles tendon was intact. I wanted to sit and chat with Clarisse, but the gender divide, added to the cultural one, seemed like too much for us to overcome. So I left her in peace.

Richard's brother Blaise spotted me near the hospital. He ran into the road, took my hand, and led me to a bar where he introduced me to his friends as a professor of literature, philosophy, and economics, of which I am none. Beers began to arrive, from Blaise and Bantu I'd never met. "I'll prepay so you can drink on my tab as long as you're here," Blaise said, his friendliness toward me difficult to reconcile with his racism toward the Baka, until it occurred to me that selective warmth *was* racism.

Richard sat off to the side playing checkers, the board balanced between his knees and his opponent's, the game a barrage of quick moves and taunting. He said, "David, I forgot to tell you; there are so many Baka who are sick. While you were in the forest, I brought another woman from Ngola to the hospital."

The Baka needed the help of men like Richard, whose people had seen them as obstacles to possession of the forest. Settlers everywhere had done the same and then convinced themselves the land had been empty. With differences in ways of life ebbing, the Baka needed everyone to see them as equals, as masters of the oldest kind of learning. **f**

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