

# SANTA ANA RIVER REVIEW



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# DRAMA



*Transition: The Process* by Ian Cooper

*The Nine Friends of Death* by Emma Johnson-Rivard

*Nine women gather around a large oak tree that dwarfs the stage. There is the SINGER, the DAUGHTER, the two LOVERS, the PAINTER, the LOST, the ELDER, the MOTHER, and the HUNTER. Some stand, some pace, and other sit, tangled among the branches. They are old and young, familiar to each other but not family.*

*One of them, the SINGER carries a lantern. She lights it with a match.*

SINGER

(Addressing the audience)

Sit down.

DAUGHTER

Quickly.

SINGER

Not you.

ELDER

I'll begin.

SINGER

I already have.

ELDER

There's really no hurry now. No need to be rude.

SINGER

Ahem!

DAUGHTER

Bitch.

SINGER

I heard that! I damn well heard that!

*The HUNTER bangs her fist against the tree. The lantern light flickers.*

HUNTER

Enough. Don't waste the light.

MOTHER

Now, now...

LOST

Must we?

SINGER

Yes. We only have the night.

*The LOVERS sigh.*

SINGER

Ahem! I am the Singer. Mine was an accident. I was struck by my lover and my head went--

*She claps*

SINGER (CONT.D)

He was very sorry.

MOTHER

I'm sure he was, dear. I am the Mother and mine was unplanned. I never met my child. They said this sort of thing doesn't happen anymore. We're civilized now.

ELDER

We are, we are. But this night is older.

MOTHER

I would have named her Eva, but I never told a soul. Do you think she knew?

DAUGHTER

Who knows?

*The SINGER raises the lantern up.*

SINGER

Shh! There are rules.

DAUGHTER

You and your rules...

LOST

Are we playing a game?

HUNTER

If we are, then someone wins.

SINGER

Wait your turn! It's not your time yet.

HUNTER

Hmm.

DAUGHTER

Fine. I'll play. They call me the Daughter and I went too soon. My friends wore green at the funeral. Silk, too. I couldn't stand black.

Were you in pain?  
MOTHER

It happened too fast.  
DAUGHTER

Oh...  
MOTHER

Don't cry. You didn't know me at all.  
DAUGHTER

It's still very sad.  
SINGER

Yes...  
MOTHER

No one cried for me. It's fair to say no one knew I was gone.  
PAINTER

I'm sure that's not true.  
ELDER

But it is. I'm the Painter and I died in war. No one knows where I've gone.  
They'll never bury my bones.  
PAINTER

But they'll remember your art.  
LOST

They won't.  
PAINTER

They will. There's a gallery in Canada, some border town that sells glass,  
and they put your paintings on the factory walls. The night manager  
lights a candle below his favorite every night.  
LOST

Which one?  
PAINTER

The one with the mountains. You named it after a Hemingway story.  
LOST

*Hills Like White Elephants.*  
PAINTER

I never liked that one.  
HUNTER

DAUGHTER

You never liked Hemingway.	
	SINGER
I'm sure that's not the point.	
	PAINTER
Someone remembered me.	
	LOST
They'll always remember you.	
	LOVER 1
Be careful with that.	
	LOVER 2
If you're remembered, then you're known.	
	DAUGHTER
What happened to you?	
	SINGER
The Lovers. They're dramatic.	
	LOVER 1
We're not.	
	LOVER 2
We're just here.	
	HUNTER
Oh?	
	LOVER 2
We died in a dark place.	
	MOTHER
You died for love?	
	SINGER
Don't say it like that.	
	LOVER 2
They called it wrong.	
	LOVER 1
I didn't think they would--	
	HUNTER
Of course they would.	



LOVER 2

We loved.

LOVER 1

We were honest. We were the Lovers and we died for it.

LOST

So it goes.

ELDER

It's an old story.

DAUGHTER

So sad.

SINGER

Don't be like that.

*The two LOVERS embrace.*

ELDER

My turn, then? It was time that found me. Far from tragic. I am the Elder and I died as the road ended.

DAUGHTER

Is that a metaphor?

ELDER

Yes.

SINGER

I'll allow it.

ELDER

I never asked you, my dear.

SINGER

Hmph.

LOST

Were you sick?

ELDER

At the end.

LOST

I was sick the whole way. I'm Lost and I saw no way out.

DAUGHTER

What do you see now?

Strangers. Nine of them. LOST

But no one left to speak. MOTHER

*They all look to the HUNTER.*

Oh, right. The murdering bitch. SINGER

The Hunter. PAINTER

Oh, dear. MOTHER

What? HUNTER

Won't you say anything? MOTHER

Nothing worth saying. I did it and was then done in. HUNTER

Was it righteous? PAINTER

You'll never know. HUNTER

Oh. DAUGHTER

*They all turn to face the audience.*

Well, we're due for another tonight. Who's it gonna be? SINGER (CONT.D)

*She blows out the lantern. Blackout.*

*(Regular and unremitting except where pause is indicated)*

A Underwater. Deep underwater  
B No. Shallow water  
A Deep Underwater  
B Set sail in your deep water. Shallow water  
A I could fuck you now  
B Deep Underwater?  
A In your shallow water  
B I told you. Shallow water  
A Deep Underwater  
B There's nobody there  
A Let go of  
B Yes?  
A The things  
B Oh yes  
A The marriage  
B Ha!  
A The ring  
B The clit ring? Ha Ha!  
A For instance  
B The rings  
A Your head  
B Deep underwater  
A Shallow water  
B I love Manhattan  
A It too  
B That  
A It and That. Both shallow water  
B Deep underwater?  
A Say it once more  
B Shallow water  
A No. Say "deep underwater"  
B Deep underwater?  
A Say it once more  
B No  
A You must  
B You dust  
A Legs off, you must

B I'm stupid. Big tits  
A Tango tits  
B Remember the cross-your-heart?  
A PLAYTEX  
B It fucking worked on you. You clown  
A Let it go  
B Why?  
A It's time  
B It's boring  
A It's transcendental meditation  
B You fuck  
A You fuck too  
B This is boring  
A I hate you  
B Shallow water  
A I won't let you win  
B You will beat me?  
A No. I will not  
B You will nerve me  
A Nerve rain  
B You rain I rain it rains  
A I licked the rain  
B Off my angry tits  
A Deep underwater  
B Shallow water  
A Deep underwater  
B Like me!  
A Just once?  
B Try  
A It's all a try  
B Try harder  
A Code for fuck  
B Shallow water  
A Deep underwater  
B Ha!  
A Your ceramic dildo  
B That thing  
A Let it go  
B And walk funny?  
A What's funny?  
B A camp Singaporean  
A What?

B It's a joke  
A Deep underwater  
B Shallow water  
A Carry on  
B Stop looking  
A My eyes are closed  
B Lose your anger  
A Like a fish?  
B Swim off  
A To the sea?  
B To shallow water  
A Deep underwater  
B Say what you mean  
A I am trying  
B Try harder  
A Give me permission  
B It's too late  
A Give it anyway  
B Well. Yes  
A No. Just "Yes"  
B That's worthless  
A Deep underwater  
B Shallow water  
A It's getting humid  
B You stink now  
A Now?  
B You always did  
A You always said so  
B I could have done better  
A Bowl of cherries  
B Cherry  
A Deep underwater  
B Shallow water  
A Smell it  
B Then what?  
A Who can say?  
B The asylum  
A So what?  
B Who will visit me?  
A I will  
B You don't count  
A I never counted

B Only up to 4. Like MONBODDO's savages  
A Clever cunt  
B I've read your books too. Cunt-breath  
A Are you a match for me?  
B Only you know  
A Clever. Clever cunt  
B I don't like to be called cunt  
A I'm sorry  
B It's aggressive  
A What isn't?  
B Not that. OK?  
A Deep underwater  
B Shallow water  
A Cry for me  
B It's been a while  
A Far too long  
B My dentist  
A Your student dentist  
B Never again  
A It was just a job  
B You fucking clown!  
A A job is a job  
B A blowjob  
A Please  
B A slow blowjob  
A Why tease?  
B Languorous blow...job. Blowjob, blowjob, BLOWJOB!  
A That's not nice  
B Blowjob blackout  
A Be careful  
B Blowjob backhand  
A Deep underwater  
B Shallow water  
A All over again  
B You started it  
A I had hopes  
B You're a fucking dreamer!  
A I am  
B And a clown  
A Am I?  
B First a clown  
A Funny

B No. Droll  
A Strange  
B As fuck  
A Why don't we  
B Let me think  
A Fuck  
B Fuck it. Why don't we fuck?  
A For a change  
B Change of what?  
A Feelings  
B Walk away  
A Walk away?  
B Walk away  
A NYPD  
B I'd shoot you  
A If what  
B I had a gun  
A Here  
B What's that  
A A gun  
B Bang  
A I'm dead  
B That changed nothing  
A Deep underwater  
B Shallow water  
A Feel better?  
B That changed nothing  
A Deep underwater  
B That changed nothing  
A Deep underwater  
B Nothing changed  
A You didn't do it right  
B So what? Nothing changed  
A It's connected  
B You and your connections  
A Everything is about connections  
B Let me try again, you tricky fuck  
A You'll only fuck up again  
B What's it to you?  
A I couldn't take another fuck-up  
B Another fuck but not a fuck-up  
A You see the connection?

B No. No ropes, no chains, no connections  
A Only things  
B My things and your things  
A Let go of  
B My things?  
A All things  
B Fuck me then  
A In the middle of this?  
B There's no middle  
A Deep underwater  
B Shallow water  
A Temp work  
B Never again  
A Temping worked  
B Not for me  
A For us  
B Us is a non-entity  
A You and Me  
B Me and You  
A Lift your skirt  
B I'm not wearing one  
A Lift it anyway  
B There  
A That was nice  
B Fuck you!  
A The way you flashed, didn't hold it up  
B A flash fuck might grab you then  
A Please  
B Flash fuck, fuck in a flash  
A Flash in the pan  
B Quick as a flash  
A Flashy  
B Flash Harry  
A Flash Gordon  
B Savior of the Universe  
A Deep underwater  
B Shallow water  
A You and me  
B I was never your friend  
A No-one was  
B What would you call us?  
A You first



B Not lovers  
A Why not?  
B You never loved me  
A But you loved me  
B Even less  
A But we made love  
B Fucked  
A We called it making love once  
B We never existed  
A And love?  
B Fucking, making love, it's the name of an act  
A Deep underwater  
B Fuck you. Shallow fucking blowjob water  
A Your clit is magnificent  
B Eat it motherfucker!  
A Like a small cock  
B Shallow water  
A Deep underwater  
B 19 years  
A Of bliss  
B Of this  
A I gave you hope  
B I'm full of it now  
A I gave you things  
B So what?  
A You gave nothing  
B You're an addict  
A For what?  
B Anything  
A Llamas?  
B If a llama could give you pleasure, then yes  
A Why down on pleasure?  
B Your its addict  
A Pleasure is good  
B In moderation  
A I never reached that level  
B One taste and you're off  
A Off?  
B Hoping never to return  
A To where?  
B Reality  
A Deep underwater

B You had none at all until me  
A Deep underwater  
B You're a fucking baby around me  
A And a dreamer and a clown  
B A clown first  
A Then a dreamer?  
B Then a baby  
A A dreamer last  
B You'd overdose on candy if you weren't a dentist  
A Deep underwater  
B Shallow water  
A It's finished  
B What is?  
A The lamb  
B The Llama?  
A Walk away  
B Clear me a space  
A For what  
B A spree. To clip my nails  
A Toes or fingers?  
B Both. Motherfucker  
A Filing and painting?  
B The whole shebang  
A Deep underwater  
B Shallow water  
A Will you be messy  
B Afraid of fever?  
A It's gone  
B It's always gone  
A Everything's gone  
B It can come back  
A Comeback jinny joe  
B Comeback blow job  
A Bring me back an egg-o  
B Fuck your entire line  
A Don't cry  
B I hate you all  
A How much?  
B To the 17th century  
A To where we were related  
B See?  
A I see nothing

B France?  
A Losers  
B Shallow water  
A Deep underwater  
B Magwitch  
A Haversham  
B Shallow water  
A Deep underwater  
B No to it all  
A Might as well be yes  
B But never broken up. Intermingled.  
A Let's break it up  
B You fucking dreamer  
A Smile for me  
B I'll grimace if you smile  
A I don't smile  
B You smiled once  
A When it rained  
B On my tits? No. When your father died  
A Cruel cunt  
B He didn't like anyone  
A He's in heaven  
B Why?  
A Because I smiled  
B Your little boxing gloves  
A Where's this famous grimace?  
B Where's the smile?  
A Fuck it  
B Fuck that  
A Deep underwater  
B Shallow water  
A I smell scallions  
B Your dinner  
A "Where's my dinner?!"  
B Oh, darling. Forget him. He's dead now  
A Stone dead  
B Stone dead  
A Stones last forever  
B Oh (sighs)!  
A I love you  
B Fucking clown  
A But only your tits

B Never again  
A Never again what  
B I could have done much better  
A Or much worse  
B Then what did I do?  
A You did worse AND better  
B Big fucking eyes  
A Bigger than your belly  
B Yours. Not mine  
A Mine the same  
B Nothing is the same  
A Clever cunt  
B Your words. You...VOID!  
A That's me trying  
B Well try harder  
A To what?  
B To be acceptable  
A To whom?  
B Me  
A In what sense?  
B I'll settle for smell  
A Deep underwater  
B Shallow water  
A Deep underwater  
B I want to scream  
A You're only saying that  
B Or touch a poisonous snake  
A Deep underwater  
B Shallow water  
A You don't have to speak  
B Curlew Cry  
A But not your cry  
B Cry of a curlew  
A Why not your cry?  
B Isn't curlew plaintive enough?  
A I can't imagine a curlew  
B Fucking liar  
A You make me one  
B And a clown? A baby? A dreamer?  
A Cough it up  
B You mean break it up  
A I want to intermingle

B Shallow water  
A Deep underwater  
B Over my dead body  
A It wouldn't matter  
B Completely still?  
A That would be better  
B And the putrefaction?  
A It might be nice  
B Nice?  
A Nice and disgusting  
B I have a brain  
A Maybe that's the problem  
B It's in the way?  
A In the way of yourself  
B You mean in YOUR way  
A That's what I mean  
B Say what you mean!  
A Deep underwater  
B Shallow forest water  
A What forest  
B THE forest  
A Your brain?  
B YOUR fucking brain  
A I could fuck your brains out  
B This is boring  
A There's nothing else  
B We've been over this  
A At least it's comforting  
B At least that much  
A I'm sorry  
B So am I  
A You could have done better  
B So could you  
A At least we can be frank  
B At least that much  
A It's not much  
B It's only weird for me  
A For me too. It's only weird.  
B Are you happy?  
A I was never happy  
B I suspected as much  
A Are you?

B Never  
A I had no idea  
B Now what?

*(Pause)*

A I could happily kill you now  
B Shallow water  
A Deep underwater

END

# NON-FICTION



*Lemon by Gabs Hales*

They say you're supposed to piss yourself if someone dips your hand in warm water while you sleep. I was never totally sure who *they* were exactly—scientists, probably, yet the instructional charts and graphs they could have provided must have eluded the other boys in my tent that night. I woke up to find my hand cramped in a plastic cup of water. Lifting myself onto my elbow, I looked around the dark canvas walls of the room from my sleeping bag. The boys watched me from their places, lined up in cots across the concrete slab where we slept, olive green tent flaps folded back to reveal the sparse woods in which the camp had placed us. I pulled my hand out of the cup.

"Whoa-hoaaaa man," said a boy on his hands and knees on the floor, as he steadied the cup of water a foot below me, "He was totally about to pee." His name was Hunter Sharp, a rat-toothed runt of a person from Grand Prairie, Texas. His dull face sloped like the back of a spoon. The sunburned skin below his eyes matched the stiff thatch of hair on his head, and when his face finished peeling the burns would be replaced by abstract splatters of freckles.

The rest of the boys were perfectly still in their beds. With the lights out, they looked as though they might have only been a backdrop painting of camping children, prop dummies brought in for the evening, frozen in place, squinting confusedly. I wondered if they, too, had just been pulled out of sleep by this experiment.

The same fourteen years that each boy in the tent had lived seemed to have been far more generous to Jason Davies. He had a deep-set tan and prismatic, perpetually windblown blond hair that whitened naturally at the ends, matching the down that covered his shins and forearms. His teeth were spaced perfectly like piano keys, and his knobby wrists must have been engineered by god for the sole purpose of displaying an impossible abundance of friendship bracelets. Jason Davies, light of my life, bane of my existence. Equal part middle school archetype—a reminder that things in life can be effortlessly beautiful—and equal part funhouse mirror, into which I might stare miserably, comparing my own form. The living reminder that I was a flesh-covered bean bag, a gigantic sunburned California raisin.

By the age of fourteen, I had grown to the size of a child who, when introduced to parents of friends, was often asked if I had any interest in football. The question was always posed, not because I appeared especially athletic, but rather because I looked difficult to



knock down. *You're a real linebacker in the making* was an easily translatable code for *Oh my, aren't you a fat little boy.*

From across the tent, Jason Davies, who actually *was* on a football team—Jason Davies, with his perfect shins and knees and elbows—cleat-owning, shoulder pad-wearing Jason Davies—stared at me and my dripping wet hand, clearing his throat before rolling over and closing his eyes on all of us without saying a word.

Our counselor continued his uninterrupted sleep beneath the batik canopy he had strung up on bamboo fishing poles at the beginning of summer. Using his sleeping bag as a cushion, he slept above the covers in tan linen pants tied with a drawstring. In daylight, he wore only a bright red lifeguard's bathing suit, a camouflage bucket hat, and iridescent, severely angular sunglasses that suggested he might be the type of person who would crash your aunt's Sea-Doo and lie about it. He smelled like Coppertone and burning rosemary and greeted us exclusively with a lazily shaken "hang loose" gesture. He insisted we call him *Jellyfish.*

"Get back in your bed," I threatened Hunter, "or I'm gonna tell Jellyfish." Hunter got up and looked around cautiously at the others, finding they had stopped paying attention. Once he was safely back in his cot, he leaned towards me and whispered.

"I'd like to see you try, fatass. I'll get it to work tomorrow night. You better believe, you're gonna *piss.*"

Morning air pulsed through the open windows of the bus and dried the dampened temples of a dozen sweating children as we rattled down the gravel road toward the lake. I tucked my knees into the back of the green vinyl bench seat in front of me, letting air pass under my thighs as Hunter and Jason sat beside each other, shared turns playing music on battery-powered computer speakers attached to a yellow Discman. I sat beside Ashley, across the aisle from them. She was a girl I knew from afternoons spent in the craft barn, where we'd sewed leather wallets, weaved delicate knots into chevrons with embroidery thread, and carefully trimmed the silken cords with etched pairs of scissors shaped like palm-sized silver herons.

She carried the clean scent of chlorine bleach in the folds of her clothes like perfume. Every spare inch of her pocket-less, thin cotton shorts were filled by her legs as though they had been sewn for her body specifically. When she rolled her sleeves, tying them up with ribbons decorated in stripes and polka dots, she exposed the white bands of skin above her

elbows normally covered by a soccer jersey. She exuded a natural athletic prowess and strength that teen boys had yet to grow afraid of.

Halfway to the lake, Ashley's attention turned toward Jason. She lowered the metal headband of her earphones to a spot behind her neck and shifted the weight of her left leg out, straightening it into the aisle of the bus in his direction. Hunter watched Jason turn away from him, and in an instant, he was standing on the ribbed rubber walkway that lined the aisle between Jason and Ashley, demanding they watch and listen, reaching out to take my CD player from me.

"What are you listening to, Alex?" he asked as he opened the lid and removed the marker-covered disc inside. He held in his hands what I had aptly labeled *Awesome Mix, Vol. 4*, not quite as awesome as volumes 1 through 3, but considerably better than volume 5. I had decorated it with safari-themed stickers shoplifted from a Hobby Lobby down the road from my house. "Let's listen to it on the speakers."

"Hey, wait," I said, reaching for the disc, still jarred from the abrupt stop of music. I ran through the playlist in my head, then panicked as I remembered the first track. "No, give it back."

"Come on," Hunter said, mimicking my nasal whine as he clipped the CD into his Discman, "let us listen to your *awesome* mix."

Silence fell upon our fraction of the bus as we waited for the music to begin. Hunter held the speakers at ear level as though waiting for a punchline. The music started with the bass-heavy pounding keys of a piano; then the jazzy flourish of horns and the mechanical beat of a ticking electric typewriter, the ring of a bell; and finally, the blackstrap molasses-coated chipmunk voice of Dolly Parton.

"No, no, no," I thought, "please not this song, any song but *9 to 5*." I pleaded for the CD. I wanted to knock the speakers from his hands, rip the cords from their jacks, split the speaker wire and strangle Hunter with it. I leaned out of my seat, arms swaying outward in a desperate final bid to stop the song, but it was too late, the chorus had begun.

"Nooo-oo-o-o!" I screamed as the bus vibrated my insides, my voice shaking in rhythm with the benches below us. Hunter cackled as he triumphantly held out the speakers, unfathomable pleasure in my protest, victory in my embarrassment. He must have felt so purely satisfied watching me sink deeper into my seat away from them. He squealed in glee and hollered over the chorus.

"What kind of *sissy* music is this?!"

Jason Davies canted his head and gazed into the mesh speaker cover as though it alone possessed the voice singing to us, then peered into my horrified face.

“He doesn’t want you to play it,” Ashley said, signaling for Jason to end my torment and take the CD from Hunter. He stared at Ashley as he unplugged the speakers and handed the mix back to me, the good guy, the sensitive hero, the sissy sympathizer. Their knees stretched out farther into the aisle of the bus, colliding occasionally with a thump of rocks splitting beneath the tires or a frantic last-minute turn onto a dirt road, providing the two with endless opportunities to blush and apologize. The hero and the starlet, a weeklong love story. Hunter’s smugness deflated as he saw the pretty girl’s disapproving face mirrored by that of our golden boy Jason Davies.

“Come on,” Hunter said, “I was just kidding. Me and Alex are friends; right, Alex?”

With the spotlight now fixed on me as Ashley’s charity project, I recognized my new place of power, narrowing my eyes at Hunter’s miniature pinscher face. I leaned forward, speaking loudly enough for the surrounding rows of the bus to hear me. “He used up all the film in my disposable camera with pictures of the ground while I was swimming!” A gasp hushed the bus as we pulled up to the lake.

A two-story dock floated at the end of a rotting wood walkway leading away from the shore. A line of children marched slowly along the bridge towards a skeletal ladder that would lead them to the second story where they would leap blindly into the murk of Texas ground water. I bobbed along within the roped-off swimming area, scanning the other floating heads for a face I knew. Ashley and her friends, the crew from the girls’ tent, sat closely in a row, towels below them, their burnt pink legs dangling in the water like a regiment of flamingos, T-shirts for pillows. I marveled at the way the girls in her tent got along so easily. It seemed as though they had known each other long before their parents had shipped them away across the dry grass and church-lined highways of Texas. They laughed in unison at their Kool-Aid blue lipstick lips and sandy tiger-stripe sandal tans, as though they had auditioned and won their parts in the camp, born for their roles.

A heavy wave of water filled my mouth and ears, and I felt the weight of a body sink me below the lake’s surface. I gulped, coughed, and spit mouthfuls of the children’s wake as two hands grasped my shoulders and pushed me deep toward the muddy lake bed. The water tasted like iron or copper, a mouth full of pennies. I struggled back to the surface, using the boy’s body as a ladder. When at last I found air, I heard Hunter’s cackle greet me.

Flecks of water sprayed his as I wheezed and thrashed in front of him. Floating face to face for a moment, I briefly considered my weight advantage. How easily I could hold him underwater, feel him fight below me, feel his panic as he clawed at my arms and fought to keep his mouth and lungs closed. I wouldn't have to drown him, I could just scare him enough to make him cry. I'd get everyone else's attention after the fact, all the campers pointing and laughing as Hunter blubbered in the dirt and wiped his snotty face with his sun-bleached beach towel.

The chirp of a whistle called us all to shore, where we stood dripping in little mud patches, barefoot, foggy goggles draped around our necks. Someone had dragged an orange Igloo barrel from the rear hatch of the bus onto a long wooden picnic table, where Styrofoam plates held gummy white bread sandwiches filled with sour mustard and square ham. I wrapped my towel around my middle, hunched forward, and ate, concealing the sag of my stomach over the taut waistband of my bathing suit. I hid behind the coconut-scented team of girls from Ashley's tent, distancing myself from Hunter's gaze and his attempts to put himself in mine, crudely revealing the yellow clumps of mustard-soaked bread caught in the spaces between his teeth.

We rode back to camp at dusk and showered off the green lake water, leaving our bathing suits hanging like signal flags along a clothesline strung between two awkwardly sprawling mesquite trees. Jellyfish ushered us from the rickety wooden shower stalls back to our tent, where he had rearranged our cots so that the heads of each bed met two more at their corners, forming a large asterisk in the center of the concrete platform.

"I want to show you all something I learned from a yoga teacher last summer in Cancun," he said. "She actually saw the Dalai Lama once when he was in Houston. Everyone sit like this." He sat firmly in the center of his cot with his legs crossed, palms resting over the curves of his calves. In that posture, Jellyfish looked uncomfortable, his back arched, his elbows pulled inward, his chest bent before his navel. As he quietly waited for us, he seemed bridled to an invisible post, like the horses that the counselors let us ride along the hay-soft trails between stables. We sat on top of our sleeping bags, surrounding a citronella candle that Jellyfish lit and set in the center of our five colliding beds. He closed his eyes and filled his lungs with the air inside our tent, the scent of puberty and burning mosquito repellent, and then exhaled through his mouth.

Jason Davies was the first to follow suit, shutting his eyes tight as though waiting anxiously for someone to tell him to open them back up to reveal a surprise. His chest expanded and sunk as he breathed deeply. Hunter went next, mimicking Jason mimicking Jellyfish. The time we spent breathing was endless. I took the breaths and pushed the air, making the same sounds as the other boys, but I left my eyes open, watching the chests rise and fall on their cots. As my eyes adjusted to the dim light of the candle, Jellyfish told us to imagine a river running slowly over a stone bed, to be pulled along like silt in the current.

“Imagine the leaves in the trees above you, the wind in the branches,” he said, impersonating the yoga instructor. “Be one with the leaves, be one with the river, be everything, and be nothing.”

He told us to visualize a goal, to clear our minds and think only of one thing, one beautiful moment in life we had yet to accomplish, to pick a spot on our perceived horizons and imagine it approaching rapidly, coming into view and transforming into a reality.

“*Right now,*” I thought, inhaling the lemony-floral smoke of the candle, a formless thought taking shape and becoming lifelike, “*right now, I could punch that stupid motherfucker right in his ugly fucking face.*” I exhaled.

Jason nodded with his eyes still shut, agreeing profusely with whatever image he had conjured up. What were the goals of a boy like Jason Davies? What could he possibly have left to accomplish? I struggled to think there might be more to imagine than cheering football fans, screaming as they carried him through a football stadium, or perhaps a ribboned set of keys to a newer version of a dirt bike he already owned.

“When I count down from ten, we will all be very relaxed,” Jellyfish whispered, “and then we will lie down for bed. I want your last thoughts of the night, before you fall asleep, to be of whatever goal you’ve set for yourself. Visualize it, and make it happen.”

We lay there for the rest of the night like a five headed star, a creature with ten arms and ten legs, painfully unsure, yet growing a little more each day, bones aching, wishing silently to ourselves for something better.

The smooth strokes of the blades barely made a sound as I reached over and trimmed the pointed crimson hair from the ridge of Hunter’s sleeping eye socket. A 14-year-old’s virgin eyebrows cut perfectly like warm silk. He lay perfectly still while I worked, clipping across his face, watching as the hair settled on his cheeks like flocking powder. I held the blunt pads of my fingers to the tips of the blades like stoppers to avoid pricking him.

The next morning, I was the first to wake up, followed shortly by Jellyfish. Then the recorded song of a trumpet projected from a bullhorn, stirring through the trees and waking the rest of the boys and girls in their usual tents, in their usual spots, in their usual states. Except for Hunter Sharp, who woke up to hundreds of shimmering red splinters of hair stabbing him in the eyelids, sticking to the sweat on his cheeks and the drool on his chin.

“What going on?” He asked groggily, rubbing his face and looking at the sharp hairs on his fingertips. The portion of his left eyebrow that still grew from his face formed a small period above his eye. There remained a few stray hairs, but nothing substantial enough to give the illusion of a full brow. His surprised expression, altered by its new absence, made a tiny horizontal question mark across the top of his face.

As we went to take our turns in the shower stalls, the counselors lined us up to question us. Jellyfish pressed a stern face down upon us, fighting a smirk with every new line of interrogation. Who had removed the majority of Hunter’s eyebrow while he slept? Who had access to a razor? Jellyfish himself was the only person in our tent who shaved, and even then, surely the electric buzz would have drawn our attention. Wouldn’t he have felt his face vibrating as the silver device hummed across it?

“I saw a thing on TV,” I offered, “that said a cockroach can eat an entire eyebrow off your face in one night if you don’t move while you sleep. If it’s hungry, I mean.”

Jellyfish considered the possibility, then waved me off, laughing. “I know it wasn’t you,” he said. “It was probably one of the girls in the other tent, using one of their leg or armpit razors.” He stood and held his electric razor out to Hunter. “Well, I guess this means someone over in the next bunk has a crush on you. You might want to try and even it out.”

He looked vaguely extraterrestrial at assembly later that morning. A visitor from another planet who raised his eyebrows so high in suspicion of his fellow campers that they sprouted wings and flew away. We were given a final 15 minutes to wander the camp general store, buying any supplies we might need for our long journeys home, back to our different cities and suburbs across Texas. Single servings of chips; traffic-cone-orange crackers smeared with powdery crumbling pads of peanut butter; autograph books and cologne samples; sewing kits and stuffed zoo animals in different miniature camp sweatshirts. I replaced the disposable camera that Hunter had used up, and spent the rest of my money on new spools of embroidery thread to practice the knots that Ashley had taught me in the window-unit-dampened afternoons I spent in the safety net of the craft barn.

Away from the grimy lake water in my sinuses and the fire ants at my ankles, I watched rain run in veins down the bus windows as we waited on our cold rides back to our parents. Soon, we would all separate into groups heading to Dallas or Houston. Ashley and Jason exchanged pages of bubble-lettered rainbow notes and phone numbers before a final goodbye worthy of the two hours of weeping she did alone at the back of our homebound bus.

I dragged my suitcase up the steps of our charter and scanned the dwindling population of campers that remained in clumps scattered across the lawn. I watched as Jellyfish talked over the back of Hunter's head to an older strawberry-haired woman who held his duffle bag in her arms. Unable to make out Hunter's expression, I instead pictured the way he'd looked just an hour before, his mouth stained with single-serve Neapolitan ice cream, as we sat in the grass eating. He tilted and scraped the inside of his miniature Blue Bell carton with a plastic spoon and licked the melted pink and brown foam streaming down his arm.

"I hope I get to do this again next year," he said, the remaining traces of his eyebrows stared back at me like the hidden eye holes cut into a latex Halloween mask. For a moment, I found myself wanting to sorry for him, imagining him as though there might be a face behind the one he wore, something less ghastly. "Do you think you'll come back?"

For people like Jason and Ashley, camp was a place to be exaggerated versions of the people they always had been. Camp was a dress rehearsal for the school year, the lives they had in other places. For me, it felt like an audition. I could have pretended to be anyone I wanted, trying voices on for size, seeing how they fit. I considered the possibility that in those seven days I might have been any number of things. I might have been a victim, or a villain, a star, a many-limbed beast, I might have been everything, I might have been nothing.

I like to think my final portrayal had a certain nuanced cruelty to it, an unexpected ending, the gnarled set of claws digging their way up from a pile of rubble to grab you at the last minute. As the bus rolled along the wet road towards home, spanning the rain-pounded haze of the river below us, I smiled wide and took an imaginary bow. The big fat sissy, and his sharpened pair of embroidery scissors.

*Todos estas cosas que me gustaria decir a ti (Una carta para me hermano)*  
*All the Things I Want to Say to You: A Letter to My Brother*

Hey Hermanote,

So, Grandma ran away from home today. Well, *technically*, she ran away a few days ago but I found out today when Black-Girl-Named-Becky answered Grandma's phone and told me. (What's weird about Black-Girl-Named-Becky is that she actually sounds like a black girl named Becky. Like, if there were a sitcom called "Black Girl Named Becky," she would be that Becky.) She smacks gum in my ear while she tells me nonchalantly that Grandma and her cousin told her they were going to Connecticut and Becky told them not to but they decided to go anyway—but what they actually did was hop a train to Miami instead and now they're both in the hospital because Grandma didn't take her medicine for three days and her cousin fell down and couldn't get up. You said it best: two old birds on the run. *Thelma and Louise—The Golden Years*. I should've known she was going to see you; you're the only one besides me who gives two shits about her at this point. And I know you don't wanna hear it but I'm gonna say it anyway: it was her own damn fault and I'm glad you were in Hawaii that day she came calling.

I think of her when I see my 2nd grade school portrait in that red frilly sweater, part of a Christmas care package along with a pair of Lee Jeans. You were with her the day she substituted for Santa. She tried to explain that you were my brother, but with that trademark condescension, as if never-before-mentioned half-siblings that drop out of the sky and onto your doorstep was a common occurrence for every 8-year-old little girl. And you looked just like me (more like me than Astrid, my everyday sister) except older and mustached so I knew it was true but I couldn't figure out how. Where had you been that whole time? How old were you then—18? 19? Who was your mother? Did you look at me and see yourself, except smaller and chubbier? There's a photo where we're lined up from the youngest to oldest: me, you, Dad, and Grandma. Astrid didn't wanna be in the picture. She didn't fit; she was the baby doll in someone else's Matryoshka set. But the four of us—we were a clan, our own tribe. My mother looked at that photo and said with a laugh that all she saw was the devil split into equal parts: Same face, same coloring, same evil.



I remember the “O. P. P.” summer in South Philly: that song blaring unceasingly from speakers across the neighborhood—in English, in Spanish, in Jamaican patios; it wouldn’t die, it would only multiply. Shit graffiti tags along the side of Grandma’s house and Tio Elliott’s Santeria candles all over the place—though the blessings did keep the burglars out. You and Grandpa Teddy used to roll your eyes about it but I kinda believed in the magic too. What other reason could there have been when every other house on the block got hit? Remember when that dude OD’ed in the park across the street? Astrid and I wanted so badly for you to take us to see the dead body. You, growing up in the Bronx, thought we were the dumbest girls on the planet but it never even occurred to us that it was weird. We just assumed that’s what happened in Philly: people keeled over and died in the street, unlike in Atlanta, where people had the decency to die at home.

Grandma was never nice, even then. That final summer in Philly, she informed us that we couldn’t marry anyone darker than our shoes and pointed that statement directly at Astrid, like she couldn’t afford to dip the family pen into even inkier wells. She broke my dinner plate in half because I wouldn’t eat her frijoles negros. “What kind of Puerto Rican are you?” she roared and then made me clean that shit up off the floor. “You been spending too much time with those country niggers,” as if her nappy-headed ass was 100% Castilian. “And what do you think you are, bitch, with your fuckin’ pigeon peas and chicharrón?” I replied. “Go look in a mirror.” We never saw that house again, I still can’t stand frijoles negros, and Astrid would hate her forevermore after that day.

It’s weird. I know it’s a generational thing but the Black versus Latino thing was what always made me so angry about her (well, one of them). Like, she thought she wasn’t just as black as the rest of us. Like, being a *morena* gave her some kind of super power that erased her stigma, made her white, made her better. I remember a black friend of hers telling us a story about searching for her roots and ending up in the Congo and Grandma actually said, in all earnestness, “I wonder if our family has any African blood?” Astrid thought it was funny/not funny but I wanted to fuckin’ slap her. And now she wants to explore the Motherland. Did you know Grandma asked to go to South Africa with us last winter? She called me and said that since Teddy died, she didn’t have anyone to travel with but she would pay her own way and she would keep up with us, she promised. She wouldn’t be any fuss. I tried to convince Astrid but she wasn’t having it. Not even for a second. If Grandma was coming, she wasn’t. I had to choose. Dad had to be the one to tell the old biddy no.

So now she's in the hospital. Those three days on the run fucked her up real good. Between the insulin overdoses and not taking her blood pressure pills, it's a miracle she's still alive and not in a coma. By the way, she's pretty pissed at you for going on vacation when you're supposed to be taking care of her. And I'm kinda pissed, too. I mean, what can I do for her from Brooklyn?

She actually thought I could drive her home from the hospital and had one of the nurses call me yesterday while I was at work. I did not appreciate the tone of that nurse-bitch, acting like I was negligent or something for not knowing what was going on. She had the nerve to tell me that the drive from Atlanta really wasn't that bad, like just because I have a 404-area code, I was still living there. Like I was fucked up for not coming, even though they're not even in the same damn state. "Bitch," I said to her, "have you ever driven from Atlanta to Miami? Didn't think so. But you know what? I have and that shit takes at least 12 hours, not to mention that I live in Brooklyn now and don't have a car anyway. So no, I can't make it down there." I hung up feeling indignant and self-righteous. But dammit if being smug didn't make me feel like shit, knowing that Grandma's sitting in that room, alone, begging for my help and I can't do a thing about it.

And why, Vaughn? Why do I feel so compelled to help? She's a miserable hag who's never said a kind word about anyone unless she was trying to fuck them over somehow. At first I thought it was the whole golden rule, humanitarian blah blah that I'd been Jedi-mind-tricked into believing. But it goes deeper than that. Somehow, her failure at life is becoming mine. If I neglect her, I'm turning into her; I'm inheriting that which I swore to never be.

Honestly, I never quite understood your relationship. You seem to be the only one who never lets it affect you—her racism, her rancor, her unmitigated anger. You said that after Teddy died Grandma got worse because he wasn't there to absorb all her causticity. I responded that, like Jesus, he'd sacrificed for her sins. And we laughed. And then tears ran down your face like a nosebleed: sudden, overflowing, eyes fit to burst. Our Grand Teddy. Gone. Astrid wondered aloud why God always takes the best ones and leaves the assholes here with us. I thought it was because he didn't wanna deal with their shit anymore than we did. And you said God didn't like ugly but you were referring to us instead of Grandma. But seriously, why did Teddy do it? *How* did he do it? How did he stay so sweet and gentle? Why did he use himself as a buffer for Grandma's spite? Was that his price of admission to Heaven?

I don't believe in the After Life. I always found it hokey and unfair that all you had to do was repent your sins and you got to chill on God's Island for eternity and act like you never did anything wrong. What about getting what you actually deserved? If you'd spent your whole life crushing people's dreams, stealing their happiness, mocking their pain, shouldn't you spend eternity being tattooed with all the nasty words you'd called others? Instead of slurping on ambrosia and playing catch up with Joan of Arc? That little caveat at the end—right before your last breath—seems like a cheap trick God plays against the Devil in order to win more souls. But whatever. Teddy deserved better in death than what he got in life, so for his sake, I hope he at least gets to play stickball with Coltrane or something.

I guess what I really want to know is why we're doing all this—the calls, the visits, the caretaking. Why are we so devoted to this particular cause? I must admit that I find our sudden alliance strange. You and I barely know each other now. In fact, we never really have. In 25 years, I can't think of one real conversation we've ever had that wasn't about her. So what does that say about us? About Grandma? About family? Are we just a couple of dopes too sentimental to realize that we're fighting a losing battle? That she's a bad egg that will never turn into gold?

I have that picture of Grandma as a small child next to my bed, framed with a picture of me around the same age. We could be twins. I see her face now and I know exactly what I will look like when I'm 89 years old. It's weird to see yourself in the future. Is that my legacy? Old, unwanted, loved but not liked, taken care of out of principle and not tenderness? Is this my penance, dealing with the mess of Grandma's life, trying to make peace with her so that I can be absolved, not in the after life, but here and now?

Tu Hermanita,  
nico

1

Since my sister, Erica, and her husband, Jeremy, had moved to Dallas as newlyweds, Erica had precious few opportunities to teach me everything I needed to know about young adulthood. “Everything I needed to know” consisted of religion instruction—which Erica didn’t trust my parents to properly execute—and Cross Country training. As a former Cross-Country captain and current die-hard Christian, Erica cared immensely that I followed in her fast and holy footsteps. Erica became rapacious during our twice-yearly visits, transforming my Christmas breaks and summer vacations into periods of intense self-improvement.

“Things are different in high school,” she warned me one morning, twisting her hair into a ponytail as we left for a four-mile run. “You’re going to face spiritual struggles you can’t even imagine.”

Toweling herself dry after a post-run shower: “You might feel a little different than the other kids at school. I can only remember one boy from my high school—besides Jeremy, of course—who really walked with the Lord. It was a really awesome thing to see, but still, it was only *one* boy.”

Over diet sodas in a café: “I won’t lie to you about sex. It’s tempting, it really is, and there were times when it was such a struggle for me and Jeremy. That’s actually why we didn’t wait until after college to get married. After six years, we just couldn’t hold out anymore.”

When Erica’s lectures ended, we read our Bibles together in silence. Erica suggested I read Galatians, and Jeremy popped in periodically to ask if I had any questions about the text. He’d just completed his first year at the Dallas Theological Seminary and was brimming with answers.

One afternoon in early July, my family and I decided to explore the downtown strip of the little Arkansas city where we were vacationing. We meandered over the cracked sidewalks, our skin sticky from the humidity, our noses assaulted by the tarry smell of car exhaust. Erica kept ducking into the nicer-looking shops, hoping to steal a reprieve from the heat. I followed her into Kathryn’s Antiques and Jewelry—a musty box of a place, all glass

shelves and narrow aisles, the kind that made me acutely aware of my elbows. It was the kind of shop that sold birthstone necklaces and hand-blown glass kittens.

“Sissy, come here,” Erica hissed, poking her head out from behind a display in the middle of the store. “I found the perfect thing for you!”

I stepped carefully around a precariously placed glass vase. “Yeah?”

“A promise ring,”<sup>1</sup> Erica said, holding up different bands and examining them. She gravitated toward the white-gold ones, the ones like her own wedding ring. “You don’t have one yet, do you?”

I shook my head.

“That’s great, then. You want one, right?” Erica didn’t look up as she plucked another band from its velvet pocket. “I like this one; it’s a little less flashy. Not as big. What do you think?” She slid the ring onto my finger. The delicate band was adorned with a heart bisected by a cross. Erica was already asking Dad for his Mastercard.

At first, I loved how the ring volleyed sunlight skyward whenever I moved. It was only when I shut myself in my hotel room’s bathroom that the ring struck me as menacing, no longer kissing me with sunlight but spotlighting me, policing me with anemic fluorescent light.

I plunked myself down on the toilet and pulled at my underwear. Stamped across the fabric, in red and blue and green and yellow and purple, was: *all I want for Christmas is everything*. The underwear was too thick for July, too tight for my ballooning butt, too threadbare to still be wearing. Plus, it made me recall the godless materialism of the holiday season, a topic that made my pastor’s ruddy jowls tremble when he railed against it. My promise ring winked ominously as I fumbled with the roll of toilet paper.

The hotel’s pilly toilet paper came up rusty. Not bloody, the way *My Body, My Self* had said it would, but sickly brown. (*Wink-wink-wink* went my promise ring.) I frowned at the three misshapen blots that stained the center of my underwear. I thought: I finished *Are You There, God? It’s Me, Margaret* four years ago! I’ve given up on my period! Shouldn’t it have given up on me?

My church friends had all gotten their first periods years ago. Lizzie had busted out of her 34C bra the previous summer, and Sara was always talking about cramps in the same

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<sup>1</sup> A promise ring (sometimes called a purity ring) is the expected sidekick of any good Christian girl. The ring tells the world—and its lecherous young men—that *this* girl is pure, and will remain so until her wedding night. Certainly, not all Christian girls wear promise rings, but if a Christian girl is *asked* whether or not she’d like a ring and refuses...? Let’s just say it wouldn’t bode well for her eternal soul.

excited tone she talked about MTV's reality show *The Hills*. Esther had even gotten her period before sixth grade!

They couldn't be real, those penny-colored blotches, but they were. They were mine, given from God. They were God, or rather God's message, telling me—no, *warning* me—that He had His eye on me. That He was more vigilant than Erica; that He was closer than the ring on my finger.

Mom was thrilled when she heard the news. She insisted that I'd "finally start to thin out" now that I was "a woman." Erica showed me how to use applicator-less o.b. tampons, conveniently forgetting to mention that 99.9% of women use applicators—which, I would find out a decade later, make the job down there *much* easier. Dad kept grinning and making comments like, "Should I order a Bloody Mary with dinner?" and "Maybe the restaurant will have red velvet cake!"

But I stared stoically at my promise ring and shut out my family's chatter and understood that nothing—not my period, not my virginity, not my impending high-school career—was a laughing matter. How could it be, when God's eye was smothering me, when I was one slip of His hand away from suffocating?

## 2

I abandoned my jog mid-stride, letting my shoulders slump and my hands clutch my hips as I surrendered to the hill. Erica had said Cross Country would challenge me, had canopied her voice over the *he-hers* of my asthma attacks to warn me about it, and still I was unprepared. August was scorching Centre County mercilessly, its heat only relenting for murderous thunderstorms that forced our two-a-day practices inside. The coaches worked us just as hard indoors, though, commanding us to hold planks and V-sits until our bodies gave out on the gritty gymnasium floor. The worst part of practices, I decided, was whatever our coaches were demanding at the current moment. There was no easy, just different shades of pain.

"Come on, don't quit now," Tina said, appearing out of nowhere. I had noticed her a few miles ago, running slowly and laughing loudly with the other captains. Tina never broke a sweat at practice, yet managed to run sub-23-minute races, her blond ponytail a shock of lightning as she tore from the starting line. She exuded strength like no girl I knew, not even Erica. Erica couldn't do a pull-up or hold a three-minute plank or secure a scholarship to West Point.

I shuffled my legs to match Tina's stride and we crested the hill together, pressing forward into the endless humidity. Tina spoke since I couldn't. "It really does get easier," she said. Her hazel eyes were sprinkled with gold.

I made a hangdog expression and Tina laughed. "It does," she repeated. "I remember my freshman two-a-days—*terrible*. But you get used to it."

I shook my head, willing air into my lungs. "Even Gigi?" I'd never met anyone with a more terrifying gaze—or more muscled quadriceps—than our assistant coach.

Tina laughed. "Oh, don't worry about Gigi. I'll protect you from her."

I blinked. I liked the thought of Tina protecting me. I liked it a surprising amount.

When the run finally ended, Tina and I stretched in the shade of a big oak tree. The boys' team jogged past us, their skeletal chests translucent in the morning sunlight.

"They're so weird," Tina said as one of the boys shouted, off-key, the lyrics to an old ABBA song. The other boys joined the caterwauling in an ear-splitting avalanche of noise.

"Kind of cultish," I agreed. "They always move in a big pack."

"You have no idea," Tina lowered her voice. "John Walker told me they shower together. After practices. Like just blast music and all run in there together."

My eyes widened, imagining the mass nakedness: waves of flesh undulating in the pink-tiled room, Spartan except for the rusted spigots spaced along the walls.

"John Walker," I echoed. I'd heard about boys like John, even though as senior class president his social circle spun as far from mine as possible. "Isn't he—?"

Tina nodded, watching the boys disappear from view. "Yup."

I folded over for a hamstring stretch, grabbing handfuls of grass in my flushed palms. "And that's not awkward? The shower thing?"

Tina bent down too, her ponytail cascading close to my cheek. "Who knows. All he told me is it's like one big dance party."

Tina and I didn't discuss John Walker or his sexuality again, but I found my mind skulking back to that conversation many times when Tina and I changed into our running clothes or waited in line for the bathroom. I wondered how the boys could sing and holler and dance together naked, and then make eye contact in the hallways the next day as if nothing happened. As if they hadn't gyrated together as the faucets rained overhead, as if they hadn't laughed and sang *lay all your love on me* in the midst of each other's exposed bodies. Then I wondered about Tina and me in the shower, if we could rinse our hair and sing songs and then wave hello afterward as if nothing had changed. I wondered if Tina's

hair would glint like bronze as the water saturated it, if it would cling to the nape of her neck and the curve of her shoulder blades. I wondered what Tina would do if I traced the water as it streamed down her back. Would her skin shiver with goosebumps? Would she push me away? Would she pull me in?

I started keeping my Bible on my nightstand, and then in my locker at school. I needed it for the same reason I needed my purity ring: I needed to remind my roving mind of God's omnipresence. He was hearing my thoughts—*all* my thoughts. And I didn't need another inauspiciously timed menses to make me understand that He was displeased.

Erica's phone calls kept coming every week, doggedly as the dawn. When Erica's voice danced in my ear, I closed all thoughts about Tina behind a hermetic seal. I felt sure Erica could detect sin in my heart. I couldn't understand why I was struggling with impure thoughts. I was at Erica's old school, on her old Cross Country team, settled in her old bedroom. And I had her constant advice to boot. How could *all that* not be enough?

### 3

For my high-school graduation present, my two best friends and I took our first vacation without our families. We couldn't stop giggling as our bus barreled toward New York City; everything seemed hilarious in the wake of our adventure, from the bushy-bearded Hasidic Jew who offered Julia bubblegum to the stranger who fell asleep on Mary's shoulder.

*Have a great time sissy, Erica's text read. Can't wait to hear all about it.*

I was surprised that Erica had remembered my trip. Ever since Jeremy took a job at a ritzy law firm and Erica traded her engineering job for stay-at-home motherhood, their lives had constricted to almost exclude me. Our relationship survived best when I visited: I could accompany them to the church where Jeremy volunteered as an elder, could babysit their daughter while they hosted Bible study, could deejay the Veggie Tales music while Erica made dinner. I'd return from those sojourns exhausted, albeit proficient in speed diapering and Bible quoting.

Julia shook the back of Mary's seat, her elbow nearly dislodging the cell phone from my hands. "Move back with us," she whispered, tapping Mary on the shoulder. Mary's seat partner hadn't stirred when the driver sped over a pothole or jammed the brakes before a merge, and his head hovered dangerously close to her shoulder again. "Just sit on our laps. You weigh, like, ten pounds."



“I was waiting for you to ask,” Mary smiled, maneuvering out of her seat and crawling over Julia to sit on my legs, her back flush to the window. Her buttocks dug into my thighs, their needle-sharpness the only downside of her lithe dancer’s physique. “And you won’t regret it because, *wait for it—*” she clawed through her purse “—I’ve got *mangoes!*”

I laughed as Mary waggled a Tupperware container in my face, popping its lid to display the slivers of yellow fruit. Mary and I had first bonded over fruit during lunch hours in the darkened eaves of the auditorium. The first time she invited me to sneak up there for secret meals, I marveled at the foods she packed: plump raspberries, electric-green kiwis, dewy sections of blood oranges. I loved most when she brought blackberries. She would pluck them out of the Tupperware, fat and glistening, and roll them around her mouth, her eyes fixed on me as I rambled about my day. She listened to every word I said, drawing me out on taciturn days and laughing with me on ebullient ones. Sometimes when we’d eaten all the food we sprawled out over the worn carpet and gazed at the unlit spotlights. Sometimes I’d roll over and tickle her taut stomach, whisper teasing words in her ear. *Teach me to be a sexy ballerina*, I’d say between giggles. Sometimes she’d tilt her face so her olive cheek kissed the carpet and say, *come to dance class with me*.

But only sometimes. Other times, our friends joined us, and on those days we sat up straight and chewed our food quickly and discussed AP tests.

“I also brought a loaf of sourdough,” Mary said, rummaging through her bag, her long honey-colored hair tickling my forearm. “Just in case.”

“You would, Mary.” I made a teasing face and poked her thin waist.

“I feel carsick,” Julia said, her head lolling on my shoulder. Her eyes closed, leaving Mary and me virtually alone.

“I’ll put these away,” Mary whispered in my ear, nodding at the mangoes. “We learned in Physiology that even talking about food can activate the salivary glands.” That was what I loved about Mary: she had the answers to everything. To the rest of the world, she probably looked like a normal seventeen-year-old girl, but in my eyes, she was ethereal, effervescent.

By the time we arrived at Hotel Carter, Julia looked alarmingly pale but at least she’d kept her breakfast down. We’d booked our dingy room for the low price, not the atmosphere; we’d decided the Times Square location mattered more than luxury. *We’ll have to check for bedbugs first thing*, Mary had warned when she filled out the reservation information. I’d twirled her hair around my finger, insisting everything would be fine as I

watched the brassy strands reflect the light overhead. I always fiddled with Mary's hair; sometimes she cascaded it across my legs, closed her eyes as I braided and unbraided it to the soundtrack of a Broadway musical. *Les Mis* and *Cats* were her favorites.

New York overwhelmed me, but not Mary. "All these people," I said, pushing back my cuticles as we cut a path through the congested sidewalks. "I feel like I'm in one of those movie scenes—you know, when a character has a panic attack? And the background noise gets louder and louder until the person can't even think?" So Mary grabbed my hand and navigated us both around the bustling sidewalks, teaching me how to weave around slow walkers and dodge the snaking food-cart lines. In the shadow of a skyscraper I noticed how truly short Mary was—5'2" seemed more significant back home; it seemed on par with my 5'9", on par even with the clouds. But, in reality, Mary was way below the clouds, down on earth with everyone else.

And so was I.

On our last night in the city, Mary, Julia, and I retired early to the hotel.

"We're such dorks," I said, drunk with laughter. "Going home when it's still light."

"And yet all I want to do is get in my PJs and have a slumber party," Mary said, hooking her arm through mine.

Unbelievably, I was the one who suggested what happened next. I shocked myself by voicing my idea; Mary shocked me with the alacrity of her agreement, effortless as water flowing downhill.

"I've always wanted to do something," I said shyly as we sat cross-legged, all three of us crowded on Mary's bed. "Like...like a rite, or a baptism, or something."

Julia blinked. In her signature deadpan voice, she asked, "What?"

But Mary didn't laugh at Julia's joke. Instead, she looked me straight in the eye. "How so?"

I was thinking of a book I'd read, a paperback whose pages I'd fingered until they felt soft as skin. I was thinking of the book's three heroines, the ones who swam naked to a rock in the middle of a lake and made offerings to the gods and goddesses. I'd always wanted that sort of magical life, a life where best friends smoked pot and sneaked out in the middle of the night and swam nude under a full moon.

My idea was crazy, mortifying, irrational.

And Mary agreed to it.

We were doing this, I rationalized to myself as Mary turned the bathtub faucets, because we both loved mythology. As the showerhead sputtered to life, I told myself: we're doing this because Mary once confided to me that the Icarus story terrifies her; because one night, when we were messing with a Ouija board, she squeezed my hand and whispered, *imagine being burned by the thing you loved most. When all you wanted to do was see the sun.* As steam thickened the bathroom air, I convinced myself that The Rite was only happening because of New York, because of the deliriously sinful energy of the city, because of the anonymity, because of the people with crazy-colored hair, because of the strip clubs and streetwalkers. Because I hadn't brought my Bible on this trip, and because Erica would never expect I'd step into the shower with another girl, and because maybe if I did it once... I'd what? Be cured? Be damned?

Julia read a magazine on the bed and laughed uneasily when Mary and I stripped down to our underwear.

"I'll grab extra towels," I said.

"I'll take my contacts out," Mary said, reaching for her makeup case.

I froze mid-step. "Wait, what? Mary!" I fumbled for my own contact solution. "You need to tell me these things! If you take yours out, I can't leave mine in." What would it have meant, I worried, if I'd seen Mary's body when she hadn't been able to clearly see mine? Why hadn't I thought to remove my contacts?

"Okay, I'm jumping in," I said, screwing the contact case closed. I needed to escape the drafty hotel room, needed the blistering heat of the water and the muggy, torturous-on-asthmatic-lungs air. I needed out of my head for a while.

Mary and I barely fit in the narrow stall together. We had to grasp one another's shoulders for balance every time we rotated out from under the spray. It took Mary a long while to lather her hair, to knead the shampoo throughout, to rinse it away. By the time she finished, her shoulders flamed from the hot water. It was my turn to rinse the shampoo from my hair, but instead of trading places with me, Mary lingered under the showerhead, letting the water stream down her temples and suspend prismatic in her eyelashes. Thin, hot tributaries meandered down her breasts and hipbones, carving sinuous little paths I wanted to trace. But I didn't. I raised my eyes, noticing how Mary's hazel eyes hesitated before daring to meet mine. I wondered who besides Mary's parents had ever seen her naked and soaking wet; I assumed no one had, and I marveled at the grace of being allowed into such

an intimate moment. My throat bow-tied closed as if I were in the throes of another asthma attack, but this time I didn't panic and hope for it to end.

"Switch," Mary whispered. And, eventually, we did.

We never discussed *The Rite*; neither with one another nor with Julia, who didn't look up from her magazine until we'd both donned our pajamas, until I'd hung the last towel.

On the bus ride home, with Mary balanced on my lap, we talked about college: what we hoped, expected, feared. We talked about our friend Sarah who was taking a gap year in Morocco, about how maybe she'd meet a handsome African boy and stay there forever. Julia fell asleep and Mary and I talked about other boys, the boys we imagined for our friends and the boys we imagined for ourselves. I told Mary that I hoped to meet a nice Christian boy and marry before age 22, just as Erica had. Mary said she couldn't dream of marrying that young. My thighs prickled and numbed under the weight of her wraithlike figure, and by the time the bus pulled into our hometown, I'd forgotten that, just last night, my entire body had crackled with life.

# FICTION



*Bookseller's Night (Oil on Linen) by Gregg Chadwick*

Tonight, I fly down the middle lane of the 5, no Albertson's trucks or SUVs forcing me to apply the brake. I turn the sharp corner past Dodger Stadium, where the freeway divides, and drive past Commerce Citadel Outlets, an Assyrian-inspired mecca mall. It makes me anxious, the building's art deco pillars projecting so far above the car dealerships flanking the freeway.

It's 10 PM, and Beth has just gotten off her shift at the ER. I arrive at her apartment complex and park in a small carport that's always near empty. I have to be careful of the cats. They slide their skinny bodies into every spare space. When I leave Beth's later in the night, I'll have to idle a bit before reversing, give them time to flee from under the engine, the tops of my tires. They'll let loose desperate pleas when I walk by, but if I get close, give them an encouraging call, they disappear into the night.

Over in Pico Rivera by the riverbed, it's all dogs. They run up and down the river's length, keeping a fair distance from residents. Beth and I are sometimes the only joggers they encounter along a particularly forsaken stretch of the San Gabriel. She still works out despite the late night shifts, and on the days I come over and there's a shred of sun, we're jogging - always three miles out and three miles back. We've run together for years, since we were roommates in college. We pass the dogs, and I worry that my running might incite a predatory instinct within them, but they just stare at us.

I grew up among coyotes and learned to watch for them slinking across my neighborhood streets around sundown. It's the strays I find so much more unsettling – how they move with purpose, independent and only recently savage.

I like having friends who aren't in the entertainment industry. Although most aren't *in* the industry, but clinging just outside its periphery. I let myself fade into the background at some of these parties. I'm small, like Beth, and I don't have her presence. At even the most intimate gatherings, I can't recognize half the people there. Strangers ask what I do, and I say, "I'm a writer," and the response is always, "What do you write?" I say "fiction," and it usually ends there.

Last weekend was a barbeque in the shared backyard of a Hollywood bungalow, all concrete and yellowed grass. I met an actress who asked me what I write and quickly followed with a tale of her two suicide attempts. Pills, both times.

Beth told me pills never worked. When she went on runs as an EMT, a pill popper was a low-enough call in urgency for an ambulance to avoid sirens, maybe even stop for a quick snack at the nearest Taco Bell if they were coming off a long shift. She told me you would have to take the pills slowly, not all at once, and even then, the body fights against it the whole time.

I unlatch Beth's screen door. She stands in the kitchen, clutching a can of Raid and a broom. She hasn't changed out of her scrubs, and the dull blue swallows her frame.

"There's a nest of black widows downstairs in the laundry room," she informs me.

I wasn't planning on doing my laundry there, so I shrug.

"We have to kill them," she says. "There are little kids in the complex who play down there. Who knows how long it will be for the landlord to take care of it?"

"We could put up a warning sign," I suggest.

I don't like spiders. Apart from when they pose a definitive threat, hanging over my bed, scampering across my flesh, I try to pretend they aren't there. But I realize their presence in her laundry room must seem like just another challenge to Beth, like a patient with his skull cracked open or a leg twisted the wrong way, dangling in place by only skin. She's ready to plunge in.

"It won't take long," she says. "You don't have to come with me."

Beth is always reminding people that she doesn't need their help. She's the type who'd rather scale a grocery aisle row than ask someone taller to pull a can of soup off a shelf for her.

I begin to relent under her resolve. It's true I don't want a little child to die. A black widow's bite could likely put down a three-year-old. Or at least one of the stray cats.

I take a can of Raid, promising to spray every arachnid I spot until they meet a watery, burning death. We head outside, past three spotted cats, and down the stairs into the darkness of her laundry cellar.

They cluster in a damp corner near one of the washers, plump black mounds woven into a cocoon of silken menace. They can see us, I am sure. They lie in wait, suspended in time, and I prepare myself for the frantic race that I know is in store.

Beth swings the broom back like a batter stepping up to the plate and turns to me. "You ready?"

I'm not, but I nod.

She kills with a clinical precision, the same concentration she no doubt uses when saving human lives. I flatten against the opposite wall and can only watch.

I think about that actress, lying on cool tile in a tiny bathroom somewhere in Hollywood, regretting what she's done already, waiting for the ambulance to find her. A drop of taco juice spilling off an EMT's hand onto her wrist as he listens for her weakening pulse.



When Rupah arrives in London, she is overtaken with gloom. Foreign land again, strange faces, tall people she should appease, an unfamiliar tempo, cold air penetrating her clothes, raindrops running down her thin jacket, a depressing gray light, and the English language that sounds so alien. Only yesterday she was standing in her garden in Sri Lanka, her husband watching her from the entrance to the house, her children hugging her and laughing at the heavy warm rain, her sari soaking it up, dimming its colors and turning it into a thin transparent piece of cloth. But now she takes the tube from Heathrow Airport into London, collapsing into a vacant seat. The exhaustion of a long flight does not obscure her aversion to the cold light, the distressing screeching the train is making, and the stuffy air in the crowded car.

As she knocks on the door at Pembridge Place and hears Mr. Allen's steps slowly approaching the door, a lump grows in her throat. She puts the suitcase down, unfastens a button of her jacket, removes her gloves, adjusts her scarf, actions done one after the other out of habit, intended to ease distress. Another visit in Sri Lanka is over, another journey home and back again to a foreign land, and now a new count must begin, of days, nights, hours, and minutes until the next trip home. When Mr. Allen opens the door, Rupah wipes her tears and smiles at him. "I was expecting you," he says kindly, and she follows him into the entrance hall.

She pulls the suitcase up the stairs and into her room. Everything has been left unchanged: the colorful bed cover she bought on her last visit to Sri Lanka, the Indian cushions she found in a shop in London, a table made of heavy dark wood facing the window, a huge closet, two large plants on the windowsill, and on a small chest is her altar to home: a colorful embroidered cloth, at its heart stands a statue of Buddha, his legs crossed, his hands placed on his knees, and his smile illuminated. Colorful candles surround him, and two vases, now empty, stand behind him. Rupah opens her suitcase and begins to arrange her clothes in the closet, only the long skirt and purple sweater she was wearing for the flight are tossed into the laundry basket. When she is done, she lies on the bed and closes her eyes. The vibrant colors of Sri Lanka gradually fade. The smell of grass after the rain, the tall trees surrounding the village shedding heavy water drops that fall and crash on the water-soaked soil, the yellow-gray sky, the soft clouds, the boisterous laughter of her children, her husband looking at her from the entrance to the house, they all dissolve and

lose their vitality and disintegrate in the gloomy room with its heavy furniture and oppressive silence. As she looks at Buddha's face she thinks his smile is sad, and before she falls asleep she whispers to herself: *May everyone be happy, may everyone be free from misery.*

In the morning she gets up late, unlike her usual self, from a deep and dreamless sleep. When she wakes up she isn't sure where she is, but the darkness outside reminds her that she is in Europe. She gets out of bed, washes and gets dressed, combs her long black hair and then gathers it up. It's too late, she gives up morning meditation and goes down to make breakfast. To her surprise, Mr. Allen is already in the kitchen. "Well, dear, how was your visit home?" he asks. She looks at him and says nothing. He looks a bit unkempt, she thinks. Rupah assists Mr. Allen to take a bath. Every other day she goes to the bathroom with him, he takes off his clothes and sits on a chair in the bathtub. It's hard for a man his age to stand for so long. She helps him soap and wash his body. The physical intimacy imposed on them causes them to speak in a somewhat alienated manner, in a very practical tone. Every morning he tells her what products she should buy, the medication she should get from the pharmacy, books that should be returned to the library. Rupah listens carefully, sometimes writing it down so as not to forget, giving in to the simple mundane spirit which turns them into partners, two people keeping a regular schedule, which brings tranquility to both of them.

Twelve years ago Rupah left Sri Lanka. Premala was five years old, Sahil five months old. Cyprus, Greece, Italy and now England, she travels by herself, from house to house, from one old person to another. New languages, different streets, both repulsive and tasty food, but old age is one: a withering body, bursting anger, forgetfulness, stench. The first time she travelled was the easiest; she thought she would be back in a couple of months. Kumar came home furious. He had been fired again. He was angry at his boss, fuming how arrogant and vain he was, blaming him for his failure, while Rupah thought that perhaps if he hadn't been two hours late for work, he wouldn't have been sacked. Whenever he started a new job, she dreaded the moment he would come back home, bitter and resentful, arguing that he had been wronged, suggesting there were hidden motives, never admitting that the fault was his. When she tried to soothe him and served him food, he tossed it on the floor. There is no other way, she thought, she must find a job abroad. He would never manage to

provide for them, and Premala would soon be six years old. Only those who go to private school have a chance for a better life.

At the airport, she held Sahil on her lap. The baby clung to her, sticking his tiny fingernails into her body, leaning his curly head on her neck. When the time came to say goodbye, he wouldn't let go. Rupah pulled him away from her body, seeing his tiny mouth wide open and hearing his sobs but saying nothing, she handed him over to her mother, turned around and left without saying goodbye. A couple of months, that's all, she said to herself on the walkway to the airplane, wiping her tears, straightening her skirt, checking that her handbag was closed, gathering her hair into a ponytail.

The toothless Cypriot woman Rupah cared for had a low, husky voice, she giggled for no reason, and called Rupah "honey." She had old worn out dresses and a colorful head scarf. In her broken English she inquired why she left her family, and when Rupah told her that her husband was fired she chuckled in a voice resembling a crow's caw and said, "Ah, good-for-nothing! Shame, a beautiful woman like you, couldn't you find someone better?" Rupah liked her direct talk, with no pretense. She referred to her late husband as "the useless bum," and to her only son as "the womanizer." Time and again she warned Rupah that her husband was trying to get rid of her, maybe he wants to find another woman, probably younger, and begged her to return home.

Every weekend she went to the phone booth next to the post office and called home. Familiar voices emerged from the receiver: her mother came to cook for the children, Premala started private school and said grandma bought her a new backpack, Sahil said "mama, mama." After five months abroad she asked to talk to Kumar and inquired if he had found a job. The gush of complaints that came from the phone lifted her at once to the small village at the foot of the round hills. "I was sacked, the boss is a liar," he complained, and Rupah stood there and listened, and for a moment she was glad she was away from the village.

A month later, half a year after she had left, she called early in the morning. Kumar answered the phone, surprised to hear her. Silence fell when she said she was planning to return home. Two girls holding hands passed by the phone booth; a car was blowing its horn in the crowded morning street; pigeons landed on the bench nearby. "They all go," Kumar's voice was heard. "What? Who is going where?" she wondered, and he said "All the women." Perhaps Rupah's silence made him more talkative: all the women of the village – mothers of small children – left to go abroad, to work outside Sri Lanka. Chand's wife, Harish's wife,

Mohan's daughter, they all went away. Only elderly ladies and young girls were left here, he said, and she thought she heard a chuckle. Her spirit traveled from one house to another, from family to family, and she had to admit there was much truth in his claim: the mothers left, leaving the children behind, flying off to remote countries to provide for their families.

Rupah returned to the old woman's house, ignoring her husky voice that came from the kitchen, and walked straight to her room. She took off the pink blouse and put on a white shirt and sat on the carpet facing the low cabinet, the altar she made for herself with the statue of Buddha. She could feel the pulse in her temples, a headache spreading gradually, becoming an obscure pain in an unfamiliar part of her body. The die is cast, she thought desperately; there is no way back. She had been sentenced to wandering; she would have to live away from her children for years. Premela, Sahil, there is no knowing when she would ever see them again. Her long black hair spread out on her shaking back. She lowered her head and cried bitterly, torn by yearning for her children. Buddha watched her, smiling as always, a breeze made the candle's flames flicker, a pleasant scent of the purple flowers behind him wafted over the room, and she murmured in tears, "*may I be guard for those who need protection; a guide to those on the path.*"

In Greece, she cared for an elderly man, tall and heavy, with huge hands, who had a large family. A strange character, a mixture of vulgarity and outstanding generosity. His daughters, who lived nearby, came to see that she was looking after their father properly, each one giving different instructions. One said he should take the medication in the morning, the other said at noon. One prepared food for him, the other throwing it away and making her own dish. At first, Rupah tried to make peace between them, but after a while she let them have their way. Every time one would complain she pointed a finger at her sister. Nikos, now almost ninety years old, used to try and touch her breasts, and when he succeeded, he giggled, as if the attempts of this pretty woman to avoid him were funny. But every couple of weeks, he would draw a pile of fifty dollar bills from under his bed and hand them to her, out of sight of his vigilant daughters.

Asking her about her family and listening to her explanations, how she provides for the family, giving her children a better future, her husband is at home but doesn't care for the children properly, he inquired: "Do you have friends here?" She was taken by surprise. Yes, of course she knew a couple of foreign workers, women from Sri Lanka and India who

worked in the neighborhood. They used to exchange information: where is the best Indian food store, how can you find a doctor, what is the best time to go to the post office. Rupah never saw them as friends but as sort of sisters, sharing a similar destiny. When she remained silent, he said, “You live here, and that’s it. You make sure you have a good life.”

She was overwhelmed. She felt her life was devoted to a single purpose, aimed at nothing but providing for the family. She never thought about whether she was happy, only if what she did benefited her children. The life of wandering was justified only because they went hand in hand with devotion and sacrifice; this prevented further suffering. But suddenly Nikos’s words seem so reasonable, consistent with an irrefutable wisdom. In an instant, unconsciously, passionate fervor was awakened, an urge for happiness and pleasure she thought had been lost forever.

On Sunday, her day off, she got up in the morning and sat facing the mirror. She combed her shiny black hair, put on burgundy lipstick, and circled her eyes with eyeliner she had brought from Sri Lanka. She then put on a white dress, becoming to her round figure, drew out of the closet the embroidered purse her mother had bought her, and left the room. When Nikos saw her, she thought she saw a touch of admiration in his eyes. He smiled at her, waved his hand and returned to his room.

She walked in the narrow streets of northern Athens, between dilapidated houses and people sleeping on the sidewalk, looking for an address a friend from Sri Lanka had given her. After about half an hour she found the building, covered with graffiti. Already as she climbed the filthy stairs, careful not to step on broken glass, avoiding a broken step, she heard the chanting. But as the door opened bright light enveloped her, a glimmer of glittering candles, and in front of her was Buddha, illuminated and affectionate. The room was crowded, men and women sat barefoot on the floor, chanting prayers. She took off her shoes, sat with the worshippers and joined the singing. Smiling faces around her, the familiar smell of incense, the long table abundant with food, the colorful fabric covering the walls, Rupah gave in to the joy that filled the room, the smiles and laughter, the pleasant odors, asking people where they came from and telling them about her village. And so, inadvertently, a spirit of home materialized in this room with its small shrine, a captivating warm coziness, breaking another miniature blood vessel that attached Rupah to her family and accelerating her *path to liberation*. And only as the dancing was finishing and food was gone did she go down the shaky stairs – she suddenly thought of Premala and Sahil. She halted. Panic took over her. She gripped the banister and closed her eyes, shattered by her

own contentment, which seemed so treacherous. She thought she would never see her children again. Leaning her head against the stairs, she whispered *may all beings everywhere plagued with sufferings of body and mind quickly be freed from their illness.*

Signora Bosco lived in a town in northern Italy, in a house with a porch facing a view of the valley. Always wearing black, she walked slowly, leaning on a walking stick, smiling at Rupah as she spoke to her in Italian. After every couple of words her face grew grave, she said *Gésu Cristo* and crossed herself. Every now and then she would use the very few English words she knew, “food,” “bathroom,” “drink,” and then she would go back to Italian. Rupah’s room faced the view, through the window she could see a wide valley and beyond it the surrounding hills. The abundance of greenery, the bright paths, the grazing cows meandering through the meadows, Rupah felt she had been here before. Only the thin sharp light, so different from the yellow-gray sky in Sri Lanka, reminded her she was in a foreign land. There is something transparent about the sky here, she thought. Strange, in Sri Lanka it is heavier.

Every Sunday Rupah went with Signora Bosco to church. Early in the morning Rupah helped her dress up, gently combed her gray hair back and tied it with a black clip, and they walked together to church. The road was slightly uneven, once in a while Rupah had to hold her to stop her from falling, bypassing puddles or stones on the narrow path. Though the church was rather close, they had to walk for more than half an hour. At first, upon entering the church, she was alarmed. The dusty air, light coming from a narrow window in the ceiling, creating a ray piercing the darkness, the intimidating pictures on the walls, the priest walking around with such a grave expression, the statue of Jesus tormented on the Cross, she nearly ran out, leaving the Signora by herself. Also, her silence on the way back was oppressive. She normally chatted constantly, talking to Rupah and ignoring the fact that she did not speak Italian. But on the way back from church she was always mute and introspective. She seemed immersed in contemplation, and now and then her countenance would change. Anger, sigh, sadness, a dismissive hand gesture, Rupah found it strange that the visit to the church made her sad, silenced her chatter and generated an unpleasant inner conversation. It’s a shame she can’t come with me to the temple in Milan, she thought. The simple natural chanting, sitting on the floor with the crowd, knee touching knee, the vibrant

colors all around, red, orange, yellow, the flickering candles around Buddha, and the pleasant smell of incense - they would have made the Signora's prayer pleasant and uninterrupted, without the misery Rupah couldn't comprehend.

Rupah bought a laptop computer. A friend she met at the temple in Milan managed to buy one for her at a special price. At first all, those keys confused her, but in two weeks she could manage it well. She had heard people talking about Skype, and she wished to call her family in Sri Lanka. She sat facing the laptop, dressed neatly, her hair coiffured and her face made up, waiting impatiently to see her children. An ascending and descending tone, blue color spreading on the screen, stripes moving in circles, and suddenly she could see Premala shouting joyfully, "Come, come quickly, mommy's here!" Immediately Sahil appeared, and as he saw his mom he started kissing the screen without hesitation and yelling "Mommy, come home, come home, when are you coming?" Her mother stood facing the camera, smiling and waving, as if she saw her daughter sailing away on a ship. Though they only laughed, blew kisses in the air and said almost nothing, when the conversation was over she remained seated almost an hour, facing the laptop. Her children smiling but missing her, her home, the familiar light coming through the window, her mother so thrilled to see her. They were all revived in her spirit, one after the other, bringing her distant home closer, but undermining the comfortable daily routine of the last years. In an instant, broken blood vessels were healed; torn when she left her family, they bled and almost died after years of living by herself.

The Skype conversation became part of her daily routine. Rupah sat facing the laptop, now wearing loungewear, her hair disheveled. At one o'clock, as the Signora took her siesta, Rupah spoke with Premala, Sahil, and her mother. At first, small mundane details filled her with joy: Premala's school mates, her success at school, she showed Rupah her notebooks. The teacher said she was the best student in her class, and grandma bought her a new dress. She turned around facing the camera, and Rupah laughed and complimented her: a pretty girl with a beautiful dress. Sahil practiced bouncing a ball in front of the computer: ten kicks without missing once. He then tried to impress his mom and jump when the ball was in the air, but fell on the floor, and his mother's pleasant laughter came from the computer: "Be careful, Sahil, so you don't get hurt."

There were also quarrels. Premala wished to tell mom a secret, Sahil wouldn't leave the room. He pushed Premala, "I want to talk to mommy now," she pushed him back, and he burst into tears. Her mother came from the kitchen, trying to separate the two. Rupah tried to

make peace, but they couldn't hear her. Finally, she turned off the computer. By tomorrow her mother will make peace between the children, and soon the Signora will wake up, and she needs to help her get out of bed.

The Signora's son was courting Rupah. A slightly shabby widower, when his children left home he came to live with his aging mother. A man about sixty years old, his hair dyed black and saturated with hair oil. A heavy smoker, his shirt was slightly stained, and he spoke broken English. His small dark eyes moved anxiously from side to side, examining everyone in haste. From the very moment Rupah arrived at the Signora's home, he smiled at her, offered help time and again, and also inquired: "Doesn't your husband care you are here alone? Aren't you lonely? Would you like to have dinner with me? How do you spend your day off?" Rupah smiled bashfully. This attention could have been pleasurable if she hadn't felt men cannot be trusted. Her mother made her marry Kumar. She was in love with a boy in high school, but her devoted mother thought she had to find someone who would provide for her daughter. For months she paid visits to almost every family in the village, examining young men, wondering who would best suit her daughter. Even though Rupah cried when the date for the wedding had been set, her mother was determined, smiling to herself with confidence that the craze of youth would surely be replaced by a peaceful, comfortable life.

But at the airport, before Rupah left for Cyprus, the mother stood pale and upset, as if she had been found guilty of a crime but someone else was about to be punished for it. Her hand touched her daughter's arm, perhaps caressing it perhaps grabbing it. And when Rupah forcibly detached Sahil from her body her mother held him tightly, and tears covered her face. From that day, she had almost never spoken to Kumar. Without asking for permission she moved in with them, cooking and cleaning, caring for the children. During the day Kumar sat in the back yard, in the evening he watched TV. His life amounted to hours of staring at the sky, the ceiling, the TV. Her mother got used to the lifestyle of her son-in-law. Only sometimes, late at night, when his friends came to play cards, putting money on the table, she sat on her bed, leaning her head against the wall and closing her eyes, pondering time and again why she had insisted her daughter marry this lazy man. *All are nothing but flower in a flowing universe*, she said to herself, but still, this bitter drop, biting and excruciating, wouldn't evaporate.



Six times Rupah visited Sri Lanka. Every two years she traveled to visit home. Her preparation lasted months, she bought presents for her children, her mother, her cousins and their children, and also collected packages for relatives of friends. Yet she always returned in despair. From the moment she was picked up at the airport, in spite of the joy and excitement, the future separation from her children materialized in her mind. Every moment held a seed of departure.

She spent six weeks in the village. First she went home, hugging Premala and Sahil and crying. She then embraced her mother, and finally kissed Kumar on the cheek. She didn't pretend there was any intimacy between them, and everyone accepted it naturally, without question. Kumar had changed over the years. The somewhat elegant clothing he used to wear, slacks made of a shiny brown fabric and tight checked shirts, were replaced by visible shabbiness, as if he wished to display the fact that no one is taking care of him. His eyes, once merry, were now empty, and his hair turned gray. When Rupah stood next to him, she could see his hands were shaking. Even when everyone was at home, he sat in the back yard and smoked, sometimes closing his eyes, sometimes gazing at the tall trees.

Rupah accompanied the children to school, prepared food, played with Sahil, shared Premala's secrets. A dispossessed mother, for a couple of weeks pretending she was raising her children. Premala showed her where the spices are now, Sahil explained how they rearranged the storeroom, and she smiled at them, embarrassed at being a stranger in her own home. The children ate the food she made, but it was clear they were used to their grandmother's dishes. When she picked up Sahil from school the teacher asked that the "grandma should call her," he needs some help with math. Even her mother asked Premala to help her with cooking. Surrounded by joy, warmth, love, yet her foreignness was clear. A woman who, while visiting home, experienced a life that could have been hers. And as she was about to bid farewell, she was horror-struck since she couldn't escape the notion that in spite of the enormous pain of leaving her family, there was also a slight relief. A stranger both abroad and at home, she closed her eyes facing Buddha and said nothing.

Mr. Allen walks slowly from his bed to the kitchen. His back slightly bent, he leans on his walking stick. Still, there is much dignity about him. The white hair looks like an aura encircling his head, the big brown eyes spritely in spite of the heavy eyelids, the body moving with effort to preserve vitality in spite of old age. Rupah prepares breakfast. She

serves porridge and a cup of tea, and sits next to him to have breakfast. “Well, Rupah, you still haven’t told me how the visit to Sri Lanka was,” he says, a small smile spreading over his face, but the eyes are serious. He looks at her intently, awaiting a response. Rupah looks down at her plate, puts more jam on her bread and adds two teaspoons of sugar to her tea. The sour steam of boiling Sri Lankan tea fills the kitchen. Mr. Allen is waiting, and Rupah sees she needs to reply. “I hope this will be my last visit there,” she says, and immediately sips the scalding tea.

Mr. Allen says nothing. Rupah is also silent, sipping tea and eating bread and jam. Finally, he clears his throat and says, “Do you want to return to Sri Lanka?” “No,” she replies, “I want to bring my children over here and never return there.” Mr. Allen seems shocked, but his furrowed brow indicates that he is not entirely taken by surprise. He makes a small ahem, a sort of short snort, as if he had revealed an unknown truth, but it makes so much sense that it’s no wonder. He eats some porridge, wipes his mouth with a napkin, and asks, “It won’t be easy, you know. Why now?” Rupah nibbles on her bread. She gets up, picks up the plates and places them in the sink, and as she turns toward him, she says, “It’s a distorted life, wrong both for me and for my children. It leads to no joy, tranquility or liberty. A mother should be with her children. I give them money, but not a better future.”

Mr. Allen puts down his cup and looks at her. What a shame that she’s wearing cheap jeans and a shabby sweater, he thinks. When she had the long skirt and the Indian fabric blouse she was so beautiful, the vibrant colors flatter her dark skin and shiny black hair. “It won’t be easy to bring them here, you know,” he says, knowing that Rupah is already thinking how to proceed. “Wouldn’t it be hard for them to fit in here?”

When Rupah turns, he sees her face is full of tears. “Leave everything on the table. I will be back in a minute,” she says. As she climbs up to her room the stairs look blurred and the room obscure. She walks towards the altar, lights the candles and bows three times to the statue of Buddha. Rain is pelting down outside, the sky is dark and somber, but she sees nothing but the glare enveloping Buddha’s face. Light is kindled within her, legions of stars are illuminated, ancient moons move in a predetermined path, she closes her eyes and chants, “*May I be well, happy, and peaceful; may my teacher be well, happy and peaceful; may my parents be well, happy and peaceful; may my relatives be well, happy and peaceful; may my friends be well, happy and peaceful; may the indifferent persons be well, happy and peaceful; may all meditators be well, happy and peaceful; may all beings be well, happy and peaceful.*”

# POETRY



Photo by Thomas Gillaspay

In my sleep, my throat was cut again,  
in that sleep my skin was whiter  
than our walls, when in waking  
it is more red, a constant blush  
of shame. When I woke

it was to my daughter's cries.  
She has words now. Spaced throughout  
the screams is the name she calls me,

yet I send her father in. She will let him leave,  
but from me she only wants more.  
even though my breasts are poor  
pillows, my ribs a hard mattress, she finds  
peace there, my knife elbow pointed out.

When I close my eyes again, my throat is  
slit, and I wake to the sound of my husband's  
heavy breath, to the sound of the wind  
around our house, the Japanese Maple  
clawing the siding with untrimmed branches.

there was a painter who would paint  
on a large canvas. and then when the  
painting was finished the painter would  
paint over it in grey, and in white and in white,  
layer after layer in white, and every  
painting was a storm, a story of how time  
changes things and you must start over.

my cousin's neck is craned into the shape of a decade  
his open mouth spread wide enough for his laughter to

spill out & stretch its fingers into the fog of summer  
he is choking on the same story of me & my skin

that he enjoys spinning to remind us of our better days  
& i have no defense for my adolescence other than

father mike & the way he freed himself of whatever sins  
of the week still had a hold of him & he sang praise

until the altar was dripping with his sweat & he had  
nothing left but the spirit knocking around in his ribs

as he stretched his tired palms in front of the congregation  
& we all rose out of our seats & left our worldly possessions

behind while the hand of god passed through our  
unworthy bones & we been trifling all week

but now the slate was clean & we knew it when pastor said  
breathe easy & we did & now my cousin is finally coughing out

more of the story & brings the old nissan back to life  
& mummy's hands are at ten & two & the backseat is

a chorus of arms & young laughter & a man on the radio  
is trying to make a lover out of anyone listening

& asks that we all take off our shirts & our shoes  
& whatever else was keeping us bound & i couldn't

tell the difference between catching the spirit & having  
the night take hold of you & perhaps this is why

i am the only one taking him seriously & slipping out  
of all the heavy hanging from my skin as the rest of

my cousins twirl & sweat themselves slick with sugar  
& the hymn dies just as my fingers fling whatever is left

of my shackles out the window to live with the stars  
& i am a kind of reborn & i too am a type of slick

& the brief silence & this new & free abundance  
fill the car at the same time & bring it to a full stop

on the winding tungsten lit street & mummy's smile  
is twirling up into her cheeks & my cousins' laughter

is the new song in the air & they too have their mouths agape  
& are showing off the few teeth that made the journey

through the midnight lurking in their jaws & i suppose  
we are all worshipping as best we can while the evening falls

pitch black around us & coats me invisible & i am a night sky wrapped  
around another night sky & i am a shoreline with two moons & i am

a litany without sin & the backseat erupts into a million hallelujahs  
& it is true that the foot of any smoke can be made into an altar

& it's the work of either god or magic to pull the head back  
& pry open the lips to let a deathless gold

pour from the lungs

Columbine was a big deal. Gunshots indoors do not sound like what you think they sound like. You will get to experience that today. Let me show you a bullet through paper. Tell your children. Children, put your backpacks between you and the shooter. Paper slows bullets. You will get to experience that today. Columbine was a big deal, so here's how to break out a window. If your coworker begs at the door, do not let her in. You will get to experience that today. Tell your children how to break out a window. Let's build a barricade against your coworkers. Where will you meet after the event? Put your hands up when we tell you to put your hands up. We won't shoot you, even though Columbine was a big deal. We don't want to shoot you. We don't know who you are. Sit at your desk and plan your projectiles. Throw things at coworkers for practice. Practice saying Columbine was a big deal. Tell your children, *Columbine was a big deal. You will get to experience that today.*



*“There must be quite a few things that a hot bath won’t cure,  
but I don’t know any of them.” -Sylvia Plath*

In Kootenay County, B.C. at the Halcyon Hot Springs,  
we pillage our backpacks in search of swimsuits

and towels. Our blanched Alaskan skin glows pale halibut  
under pyred sun. Giggling we bound like white-tailed

deer to the pool’s edge, plunge foot, leg, body into beryl  
water. We slide into the tonic unaffected by afternoon

temperatures. Rie, our daughter, is frosted with sunscreen,  
trussed with enough flotation to shoot like a champagne

cork around the jetted swim channel, nothing but giggles  
and wind; skylarking and shenanigans. Later, elbows

propped upon pool’s deck, road tripped muscles warmed,  
limber, I watch the waves joggle Upper Arrow Lake.

Daughter in the spray park, husband in the mineral  
soak; if I could sleep in water, I would.

It is hard for me to remember that we are on the same side.

A girl brought up to understand love as a negotiation between

have and want, a woman molded as an empire fighting to keep itself  
from decline, learns that even sneaking a breath is a transaction first.

I confront myself with this geometric riddle: how many sides does a sphere have?

Infinite, or one. And if the latter, we could stand on this globe directly  
opposite, each of us pulled to the other's footprints through a diameter  
of solid iron and molten ore, and still we would be on the same side.

It will be hard for you to remember that we are on the same side

when you trudge through the clotted ravine of growing up into  
the realization that you will not live the life you thought you might.

What descends belies the wisdom of this mantra you taught me. But if you look  
into darkness you will still see, after some delay, pixels of light, and in  
that gray, me beside you. You only have to wait for your eyes to adjust.

in the interests of overthrowing monopolised assets like male, God & I  
this poem would like to begin at the end

there is no guarantee that the beginning will be there when you finish  
so if you can entrain odd sympathy and stop the clock while reading you will be 'in phase'

but you may also enter a 'death state' so I have inserted the failsafe of  
a pre-programmed frequency of 0Hz contained in parentheses here – ( )

which you will need to wear for the duration of this hearing  
this acts as a shield and doubles as a false enlightenment generator

if this fails the parentheses will invert, replacing your ears, amplifying )thought(  
to revert, click this hyperlink <C:/user/reset/recall/new documents>

you are the sole witness to the act of silence murdering sound and getting away with it  
unless you are reading this aloud which makes you an accomplice

if you cease to desire reading on then the poem will automatically self-destruct  
if you leave before the present detects you the future will embed an echo

if a sense of deja vu leads you to believe you've ghost-written this  
enrol in a course for seers at the academy of supernatural arts  
at any point if I lead you to the edge where you feel marginalised  
fold this page into an origami dove, embark and send it air mail c/o A.bort

by handing down this sentence I commit myself to starting a new chapter  
confessing to all the manifestos I scrawled on bystanders' eyes

the terms negotiated having saved orphaned characters from  
scratching around waste dumps for morsels in scraps of drafts

if at any point you feel discomfort  
insert yourself into this symbol to be healed Δ

there is a dictatorship operating from this tower - I -  
it is the vantage point from where the ego shall blow itself up

these lines aim to lead you down an unlit lane of your mind to rob you of your so-called valuable notions, leave you for dead then call 000

to spell 'it' out would mean putting a spell on itself  
thereby killing off etymology so only talking in tongues will do

*\*(this footnote is appearing ahead of itself to ensure an ontological backfire occurs and presuppositionless flattens the sheer psychic cliff that drops off here\_\_\_\_\_)*

- load these .12-calibre bullet points into a \*philosophical gun
- make a presentation on the absurdity of 'presentations'

there is no evidence to suggest there is anything beyond evidence  
or that you have reached the beginning (insert subjective surface interface here)

Initial reports claim a white scar  
streaking the desert sky, sonic boom  
and wind, broken glass in Vegas over

300 miles away, a shockwave so sudden  
gamblers drop their drinks and remorseful  
addicts repent on Flamingo Ave. Star-

watcher websites crash from the volume  
of amateur photos uploaded, a crater  
punishing the wastelands of Sonora, smoking

chunk of sky in the center. NASA reps dispel  
rumors of alien convoys, Korean ballistics, or  
the extinction of man. Just a satellite blown

off course—of course—but Spaceboy's  
wife is there when they pry open  
the burning metal, stunned

by a hiss of oxygen, the fuselage frigid,  
years untouched by starlight.  
Dashboard instruments blink feebly, a capsule

predating microchips, fashioned with slide rules  
and pencils. Strapped in the passenger's seat,  
she touches America's first astronaut,

a Rhesus monkey, circa 1952,  
skinny, frozen,  
but still breathing.

*for Anna-Lisa Hillenburg*

The kestrel clutched our ranger's padded fist,  
its rust-streaked cheeks jerking quizzically  
from girl to girl. We listened drowsily in mist  
before the thunder broke, before we leaned  
beneath that tiny canopy to keep  
at least our shirtfronts dry. *'Imprinted' means  
she can't survive outside captivity,*  
the ranger sighed, then continued streaming  
through camp. That night I dreamed inside the storm  
both girls cawed to help a beak rip out  
its handler's eyes, swallowing his warm  
and tendriled nerves. Like Oedipus without  
a trail to stagger bleeding on the loam  
they flew into the dark to speak with stones.

Between a bay and a beach,  
a gale built from gray to gray:  
an evident, flatiron figure.

Eastern, experimental frames,  
carrying a conventional crew  
of chance, developed during

dead-rise displacement, furling  
forward, from a frolic to  
an extraordinary, almost forgotten

example of exaggeration.  
Courtesy adrift, distance depressed  
and all distinctive finesse

finished, boats at capacity capsized,  
devolved from favor.  
And any feet accounted for

ended giving evidence for  
amidships' confidence becoming  
a father for circumstantial

gravity, figs easily carried  
down a centerline—an efficient,  
fish-bottomed chain.

*Puerto Maldonado, Peru 2003*

There are more stars in the southern hemisphere, I'm convinced.  
All the grand small things of the night hum and whir with life,  
a bat streaks past my blind face and the river swells after nine hours of rain.  
Javier raises his arm in the dark and traces the Milky Way with his finger.  
"Via Lactea" he says, and it pulses as though purring.  
Night glows brighter when the electricity cuts out at 10 o'clock,  
cranky generator lumbering to a loud and sudden silence.

I have no faith except where this candle shines through mosquito net,  
Javier's eyes liquid beneath me, blinded  
by quadriceps and breast and hands feeling a range of soft  
or dangerous landscapes, mud outside sucking at our knee-high galoshes,  
ants marching and holding green leaves like flags,  
how we climbed onto the lipped roots of an enormous ficus  
tree to see what creatures nested in its dark cunt.

The world has come alive in this slim  
rise of waist, all logic resting in a light  
scar across the nose, his thighs showing lighter flesh  
where sunlight could not reach as he skimmed the lake.

Climb down where I can help you, throw that machete down  
on the packed dirt or lean it carefully upright on its sharp tip,  
it doesn't matter, just move a bit to the left, press  
that universe of nerve endings joining up with yours  
remember only this moment, the space where I begin, you begin,  
no ending in sight for now, inhabit you like I did  
on a table in Istanbul, a dance floor in Krakow,  
a stranger's bed in Melbourne, an ice skating rink in Missouri.

Tell me your name again, not mine – I know who I am now – lodge it  
into my ear so I don't lose it like a coin slipped into the river,  
say it so I'll remember when I lift the mosquito net  
and reach my toes for the muggy floor to blow the candle out.



# CONTRIBUTORS

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