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The Future of Memory: A Collection

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THE FUTURE OF MEMORY: A COLLECTION

A Thesis Presented

By

AMANDA LYNN HUHMANN

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THE FUTURE OF MEMORY: A COLLECTION

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AMANDA LYNN HUHMANN

Approved as to style and content by:

Sabina Murray, Chair

Chris Bachelder, Member

James Tate, Member

Dara Weir, Director
M.F.A. Program for Poets and Writers

Joseph Bartolomeo, Chair
Department of English

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THE FUTURE OF MEMORY. THE HISTORY OF THE SUN.

Domes of smog are caught in pictures looking like the pinkish grey halves of a rotting, semi-transparent peach set over the city. An urban heat island caused by cars, industry, concrete, and the release and reflection of heat from buildings. Studies show that even small green areas disrupt this dome. The city has recently taken measures to disrupt this dome on a grand level. Laws have been passed to make it mandatory for landowners to have a certain percentage of their property be 'green.' Because of a general lack of space, it is suggested that these green areas be on roofs and balconies. This law has problems, loopholes, and indisputable weaknesses (for instance, the fine for disobeying the law is about the cost of creating a decent rooftop garden), yet Kate waits for the day the city transforms into the hanging gardens of Babylon. She wished it had already happened.

In the spring, the rainy season came and went without shedding a drop. People in the city were happy to not have to constantly carry around umbrellas and watch the sky vigilantly for the moment they would have to bring in laundry from off the line. But Kate felt sorry for the rice farmers; then for herself. By June she was miserable and at home shed as much clothes as decency allowed. She slept with her head rubbing against the screens of open windows. Her manners on the commute to work corroded until she shoved and threw elbows at anyone who even looked like they might be trying to stand closer to the air conditioning vent than herself, regardless of the fact that the train was always too crowded to let anyone choose where to stand. By the time she reached work her scalp was wet, and the back of her shirt bloomed with sweat. So it was no surprise the day she pick up the morning papers and saw a huge '40!' printed in the area of the Mainichi Shimbun where the

picture normally went. The previous day had been the hottest ever recorded in the city, heat index not accounted for. 40° Celsius. 104° Fahrenheit. 313.15° Kelvin.

That summer, as the temperature rose, Kate's performance at work steadily decreased. She spent long spans of time looking out the window thinking of house plant guy and trying to figure out if the building next door was a love hotel or not. It was in the right part of the city, plus the building had an ornate façade, darkened windows, and no one ever seemed to move around it during the day. But it was probably not a love hotel, because sometimes Kate could see hints of clothes hanging out to dry on the balcony that faced away from the street. Besides, about the time everyone realized the rain wasn't going to come Kate found a small store in the basement of the building selling trinkets and Americana. Coke signs. Cowboy figurines. Fucking Americana.

Kate was waiting by the temple's outer gate for Justin, squatting down on her heels in the shade, reading a book to pass the time. It was early evening, but the heat was still oppressive. Tourists gaggled about the shrine entrance snapping pictures of the large red lantern and the carvings of the wind god and the lightning god that guarded either side of the gate. Kate was crouched beneath the wind god because she liked him best.

Looking over the edge of her book, Kate watched a young family close by. The mother and father were each holding the hand of a five year old making a face. The mother blew hair out of her eyes and looked up, beseechingly, to the wind god. The child pulled at her hand and spouted out a stream of high pitched words that Kate couldn't understand. She picked up the words 'scary' and 'go', but that was all. Yet, even then, scary sounded a lot like cute, so really, Kate had less than a 50/50 chance of knowing what was going on. However, that was about normal for her, so she stuck her nose back in the book.

A few nights back, at the Samurai Jazz Bar, Kate had suggested the temple outing to Justin and he had liked the idea. Had even emailed yesterday just to make sure the plan was still on. But now he was late. Kate closed the book and ran her teeth along the top cover's edge as she scanned the crowd for Justin, then realized what she was doing, looked around to see if anyone had noticed, and quietly slipped the book in her bag. Justin had probably already been to the shrine. And walking around its grounds eating rice cakes on his day off wouldn't have struck him as ideal. Kate had also been to the temple before, many times actually. She liked its massive wooden buildings and gardens, with this sort of seediness lurking out the temple's back gates in the form of dark little dive bars and pachinko parlors. And then, of course, there was the temple's legend, which appealed to Kate greatly.

The legend that long ago fishermen cast their nets into the Sumida River (which runs like a snake through the modern city) and pulled from the river not fish, but a golden statue of the goddess of mercy. The temple was built by that spot in the river for the goddess. And because the statue, if there still is a statue, can't be viewed by the public, Kate invariably spent her time at the temple dreaming up sizes, shapes and designs for the golden statue. She wondered about those fishermen and the day they fished up gold. Wanted to get it right in her head. What it must have looked like, the river and the undeveloped Kanto plain stretching out around. She wondered if it was raining or if they had trouble pulling in their net. How tall were the fishermen? How old? And why didn't the goddess let herself be found by a woman? But they were just silly thoughts and Kate amused herself with them the way she wondered about Virgin Mary sightings and UFO's.

Eventually Kate found a phone booth, called Justin, and learned he couldn't come. Someone had broken their back and Justin was called into work. Kate said 'literally? Their back? That's terrible.' Then wished him luck in not falling down the stairs like that other guy. Justin rolled his tongue in a sigh and said 'bring a rice cake to the jazz bar, for me, for later.' Alright dear, Kate assured him.

Kate hung up the phone then decided to go for a walk along the Sumida. She wandered along the sidewalk at the top of the concrete embankment until finding a concrete park with a few concrete benches overlooking the river. It was a rather desolate spot, but it had a great view of the river and the opposite shore's skyline. The Boss coffee girl wore a cowboy hat and smiled from her billboard while two buildings over and forward a giant golden horn glinted in the falling light. No one was around, but it was just the time of day with the sun setting and everyone already at the place they wanted to be for the evening. Kate decided she was where she wanted to be and slouched on the bench. Because of the

summer heat, dusk was the time of day she liked best; cooler but still light. A young couple walked by holding hands like young couples do; ten minutes later two salarymen in cheap three piece suits carrying briefcases. After that no one came by for a while and Kate read.

She didn't even look up from her book when she saw the man in his house slippers walk by, although she did notice he was wearing black socks and those house slippers actually looked more like the rubber toilet slippers used in most elementary school bathrooms. The slippers left her line of vision and only then did Kate look up to watch him.

From the back, he looked almost old with grey in his hair and slightly bowed legs. He walked with a straight back, and his knees seemed to kick out more than necessary with each step, but it all played smoothly into a slow, albeit peculiar, saunter. The man's path ended up crossing with that of a homeless man about fifty yards from Kate's bench. The man said something to him and the two began chatting, which Kate thought was nice. Strangely, the bowlegged man gently put his hand on the other man's face. From a distance it looked like a blessing, but it wasn't, it couldn't have been, because the homeless man then turned into a house plant.

Occasionally, Kate would imagine herself having to survive on a deserted island or heroically rescuing a baby from a burning building. She never actually imagined doing these things; she just imagined telling people about them afterwards. She imagined their looks of awe, and the way their eyes would widen and their mouths would open ever so slightly. Those awed folks would ask a few questions and say, ‘oh gosh, I could never do anything like that,’ and Kate would bask in her own heroism.

So, when Kate rescued the man-turned-plant from the grasp of an obvious lunatic, she thought Justin or Megu would be a little more, well, impressed. But of course, they didn’t believe her. When she called them from the train station later that night they laughed. When she walked into the Samurai Jazz bar carrying a potted Indian Rubber tree they just thought it was cute.

“Oh, *kawaii!* A gift?” Megu said.

“Nope, this is a homeless guy.”

Megu and Justin started laughing and Justin reached out to pet a leaf.

“No, I’m serious.” Kate slapped his hand away and lowered her voice. “I was in Asakusa, by the river, and no one was around but this old dude and a homeless guy. They started talking. I blinked and suddenly there wasn’t any homeless guy, just this house plant. I’m still, a little, in shock. And I definitely need a drink.”

Megu and Justin looked at her, waiting for Kate to let on that it was all a joke. The bartender came over to take her order. Kate asked for a vodka lime and after he left, smiled and asked how everyone’s day had been. Megu looked at Kate with a straight face and said she had lost a coworker to an ogre.

“Oh, Jesus. Fine. It was a joke.” Kate tapped her fingers on the glass tabletop and decided that this was not going well. She looked over at Justin. “Can I bum a cigarette?”

“Sure.” He produced the cigarette, and with a flip of the wrist extended it to Kate. “So, that was why you sounded so distressed on the phone? A house plant caused you so much trouble? Why? Was it difficult to settle on the variety? Or maybe the price?”

Kate took the cigarette and looked at Justin. “Oh, fuck off. It’s not just any house plant. Please, light?”

“Ok-la.” Justin smiled, put his own cigarette to his mouth and leaned over for Kate to light hers from his.

“It’s a dirty habit you know,” Megu said.

“Cigarettes or the way Justin lights?” Kate asked.

“Both.”

“We know. We all know.” Justin smiled as he straightened back in his stool. “Want one? No? Ok, then, tell us a story.”

“I’d rather hear Kate’s.”

Kate turned to blow smoke out the open window behind her. The Samurai Jazz Bar was on the second story so she could clearly see the street below. It was getting near 11 pm and fewer people were out. The noodle shop across the way had two customers, both in uniform, hunched in their seats. “It was...It was nothing, really. I just acquired a plant.” Kate turned back to look in Megu’s eyes and nod once in what she hoped was a convincing way. She knew Megu would never believe her, Justin might, but she would have to work on him later, alone.

Megu was the type of girl Kate had always envied. She was beautiful, petite, infuriatingly bright. She had graduated from a prestigious university with a degree in science.

She hated bullshit, and wasting time. She regularly nursed one drink all night. She spoke three languages, had lived on four continents, and had probably sailed the seven seas, by a boat made of gold and rubies. Justin loved her.

“Tell us a story, Megu,” Kate asked, her head again turned to the noodle shop.

“I haven’t got a story.”

“Don’t be modest,” Kate replied.

“What have you written in your book today?” Justin asked, his hand open, palm up and beckoning. “I’ll read for you. A story by proxy.”

“No. I think I’ll go home now.” She looked at Kate apologetically. “We’ve been here for hours and after your call were only waiting around for you.”

The three always left together, so Kate looked at her drink and downed it. “Fine. Let’s go.”

Kate had known Justin for the better part of a year, but it was only when she expressed interest in liquor and jazz that they started to spend a lot of time together. That was when Justin took her to the Samurai Jazz Bar his quasi-yakuza friends had told him about. These friends also told him this was the bar the sword wielding sushi cook from a popular martial arts movie was based on. After Kate saw the movie, she realized this was bullshit, but they still went because the place was wonderful. The proprietor chain smoked, made good vodka limes, served pre-made food on plates from the *100 yen store*, charged 350 for everything on the menu because he didn’t want to take time on math, and played jazz non stop. He had a penchant for Charley Patten and John Fahey (sometimes the lines between the blues, jazz and progressive folk were blurred). Two swords hung above the kitchen door, a sword hilt was the handle to the front door, and according to rumor, if you

brought your own samurai sword to the bar, the proprietor would sharpen it while you drank. For a reasonable fee, of course. The place was small and dusty and an out-of-commission baby grand took up all the space at the front of the room. A plate of glass was placed over the lidless piano and stools with tiny seats were lined up around it. Kate's ass never really fit on the seat of those stools, but she and Justin always sat in them, drank like fish and told their stories. Their first night there, they hunched over the piano and Kate said, "Justin, we aren't even fit for the blues. We were made for bad country songs."

"Speak for yourself" Justin had laughed. He had this charming habit of turning his head down and to the side when laughing, as if sparing Kate from the garish spectacle of delight. And that first night, after four vodka's and two records, Kate learned that Justin was the prodigal son of a family with no money, that he was having trouble with his visa, didn't have money for school, his job sucked, and the love of his young life had died for reasons he wouldn't talk about. Kate's response was that you could make a good blues song out of all that. As for Kate, her big complaint was a loss of freedom, and feeling she had to be home at a reasonable hour of the night. Living in close quarters also made minor cultural discrepancies significantly larger, subsequently fraying her nerves and making her question if this was exactly the deserving way she should spend the 23rd year of her life. This was less bad country song worthy, more selfishness, and Kate knew it.

Late that night, Kate tiptoed into her building, the rubber tree in tow. She had missed the last train with local stops and had to take a taxi, which was expensive and annoying. At Omiya, the taxi line stretched out in front of the station, snaking its way around the trusses of the elevated tracks. The people swayed slightly, fanned themselves and gave Kate repeated odd looks, presumably because of the rubber tree. The taxi driver hadn't

liked it either, and when he stopped in front of her house, had watched disapproving as Kate tried to remove the large plant from the back seat.

Kate rented a room in a family's large old house and was one of several tenants. Somewhere between Justin, Megu, and the Samurai jazz Bar, she was hardly ever getting home before everyone went to sleep and she felt like an immoral tenant coming home late from bars, smelling of sweat, cigarettes and liquor. She didn't want to wake anyone up, especially the children of the family. And so, it was only when tiptoeing up the stairs and down the hallways late at night that Kate longed for home. There, she would have a private apartment where she could come home late or walk around naked, or do both, at the same time, while singing a sea chantey.

Kate took the Indian rubber tree up to her room, set it in the corner, and then stepped outside onto the balcony to check if her clothes were dry. They were and she carefully plucked them off their clips, counting her underwear as she went to make sure none had been stolen. It happened sometimes.

Kate tiptoed back into her room and sat down on the floor to fold. The room had been advertised as furnished but when Kate got there she realized furnished meant a low table, a lamp, a mat to sleep on, and hangers in the closet. Which was fine with her; she liked Spartan environments and was a long way from home with only the stuff she could pack in two suitcases and a carry-on. Kate turned on the table lamp, looked over some of her papers from work, and then picked at her calloused feet (here she spent a lot of time just walking around). Out the window, the city lights created a grayish halo in the sky, obliterating the stars and occasionally the moon. The view from her second story balcony was miserable, but she went and looked anyway. At night, her neighborhood took on a particular charm that it lacked during the day. The tight winding street looking better, and

almost inviting in the night, and Kate could even glimpse, in the distance, the towering downtown buildings marked by their lights. She imagined the people living in the city. The millions of people she would never know curled in sleep on their futons, drinking beer with their friends, or wandering the streets thinking. Kate was sure that somewhere out there bad things were happening. Incredibly good things too. And that man with the bath slippers, he was out there as well.

At her feet, the leaves of the rubber tree seemed to shake and sway. Kate rubbed her eyes hoping they were playing tricks on her, for today she was seeing all the things that were genuinely impossible. Then, just to be on the safe side she put the rubber tree in the hallway for the night.

When Kate woke, she took the rubber tree downstairs and gave it to her landlord, who just loved it. Her five year old daughter, Kyoko, alternately studied its leaves and danced around it waving her hands. She would run between the rubber tree and Kate, talking in an awed voice. Kate tried to catch the words, but it was difficult and a little depressing, because sure, Kyoko had a sing-song voice that melded words together, but it still meant that a five year old had a better grasp of the language than she did. Kate looked to her landlord, cocked her head to one side and asked, “What?” Her landlord, Minomi, just laughed indulgently and said, “Silly Kyoko.”

To get to work every morning, Kate had a twenty minute walk to the train station, a twenty minute train ride, a line switch, another ten minute train ride, and a ten minute walk to the office. And in that hour, Kate thought of nothing but what she had seen the evening before. At work, she spent most of the morning staring at the not-love-hotel across the street, feeling alternately confused about what she had seen, guilty about her subsequent actions, and thankful that her desk was so close to the window because it seemed like maybe someone at the not-love-hotel had rustled a curtain.

Kate had an impressive capacity for self doubt and guilt. Perhaps the plant transformation she had seen was not real. But the product of what she saw was, most definitely, tangible. Then, there was the fact that she had gone to all the trouble of stealing the plant from the man (stealing!) just to give the stolen plant away, in what amounted to a gift. Also, there was the problem of the house plant actually being a person and what if her landlord didn't water him enough and he died? Stealing and murder, both probably mortal sins, definitely the latter, at least.

There were really only two ways to think about what she had seen: either it was true, or she was going crazy. Kate could replay the scene in her mind. Two men meet and begin talking to each other, the one reaches out, rests his hand on the forehead of the other, she blinks, and then there is only the man with the bath slippers, and now a potted house plant. It had been a momentary blink, infinitesimally miniscule, but a blink none the less. It doesn't take a second to blink. Just to make sure, Kate looked at her watch, blinked, and looked at her watch again. It wasn't enough time for the homeless man to run away or hide. She knew it now and she had known it then.

So, when the house plant guy bent down to pick up the rubber tree, in the ergonomically correct way with his knees sticking out and his spine ramrod straight, Kate had followed. Due to inexperience, Kate wasn't good at tailing someone. She had tried to stay just out of sight, but a six foot redhead lurking around corners and gates was hardly inconspicuous. House plant guy had gone directly to a plant shop down several winding residential streets. He stopped in front of the shop, set the rubber tree down by the front doorstep to fumble with his keys, and then entered. Without even really thinking of the consequences, Kate had run out of her hiding spot in a dark alley, grabbed the rubber tree (which was heavier than expected) and ran away.

During her lunch hour Kate went through her usual routine of going first to *Don Quixote* to buy her lunch of tofu and juice, then finding the closest phone booth to call Justin or Megu for after work plans. She felt like she spent all of her life in either trains or phone booths. She was becoming a connoisseur of both. The best phone booths close to where she worked were the ones in air conditioning at the department stores. But as the summer progressed, the worse Kate looked, and finally she got tired of the dirty looks given to her by the doorman and prim not-at-all-sweaty shoppers. So, Kate took her dirty sandaled feet and sweaty self to the pay phones outside the *am/pm* convenience store and watched the cars drive by while leaving phone messages on Justin's cell saying things like 'Samurai Jazz Bar at 6?' or 'Yoyogi. Outside the pachinko parlor at 7.'" Sometimes he answered, sometimes he didn't.

Today Kate knew for a fact that Justin was working, so she left a quick message and decided to send an email for good measure. Justin showed up at the station promptly at 6 in his uniform of blue slacks and blue shirt, no nametag. He changed in the train station bathroom and borrowed Kate's cologne because he was self conscious of not showering after moving things all day. What a job. Moving things.

Justin worked in construction. Not exactly construction, that's just the word he used when he first told Kate what he did. Justin actually moved things into and out of buildings. Here, there were jobs like that and Kate imagined Justin driving around the city in those stocky moving trucks, listening to the radio, straining to read street signs. One day the truck would be full of potted plants for offices, other days desks, sometimes rugs. He told her the only things that ever stayed the same in those offices were the clocks. Apparently, they got them all from the same place.

On the train ride to the bar they didn't talk much. Justin rested his head on his hands and rubbed his eyes, letting himself sway gently with the movement of the train. Kate just watched him, held the overhead strap and asked if it had been a tough day.

"Not really. I'm just sleepy. Had a long night."

"Yeah-la?"

"Yeah-la." Justin smiled back. "Just not in the way you are thinking it."

"You took Megu home, right?"

Justin sighed and said, "This is our stop."

The Samurai Jazz bar was past a pachinko parlor and straight down the street about 500 yards from the mouth of the train station. A red lantern with the silhouette of a samurai hung above the stairway door that led to the bar. Kate could walk the path to the bar in her sleep, but she always looked for that lantern, lighted and swaying in the wind.

"Megu's coming tonight."

"That's good," Kate said as she took her usual stool, back to the window, facing the keyboard lid.

"Vodka lime?" Justin asked when he saw the proprietor heading towards them, and then ordered two. Kate usually let Justin order because his language skills were better. Impeccable really and he spoke without that strained thinking look that Kate usually had. She waited for the proprietor to head back to the bar before turning to Justin.

"I need to talk to you before Megu gets here."

"About last night? Megu was not amused, by the way."

"I could tell." Kate shrugged and put her purse beneath the stool on which she sat.

"We should have the contest before she gets here. She wouldn't approve. Winner buys the next round?" Kate was about to object, but Justin quieted her with "we'll talk after

the contest.” He pulled out a pack of cigarettes and laid them on the piano’s glass tabletop along with his cell phone.

Justin and Kate played perverse games occasionally. They held contests of shoving handfuls of wasabi peas into their mouths just to see who could eat the most, the fastest, without bleeding from the nose. They cracked their teeth on hard peas. The wasabi left their noses numb. They cried from the taste the whole time. Megu almost always joined in their drinking nights but she hated their games.

Kate took Justin’s cell phone and opened it in order to keep time, then separated the bowl of wasabi peas into two portions. At the beginning of a new minute, they began shoving handfuls of peas into their mouths. Kate’s eyes started watering and she tapped her toes.

While Kate usually just looked in pain during the contests, Justin always looked like he was waiting for Kate to catch onto a joke. He found it all very funny and sat running the palms of his hands up and down his thighs while he chewed and smirked in Kate’s direction. Less than two minutes into the game Megu walked through the door, spotted them and shook her head mouthing, “You assholes.”

As Megu headed towards them, Kate looked at Justin and said, “I need to talk to you.” Because of all the dried peas in her mouth it came out so jumbled that Kate was surprised that Justin understood and nodded.

“Don’t you two ever get tired of acting like such fucking foreigners?” Megu set her purse on the piano top, tucked her hair behind her ears and looked at them expectantly.

“How was your day-la?” Justin asked.

“Great-la,” Megu smiled back at Justin.

“Great-la? A very good day then.”

“It was.”

Justin and Megu immediately got lost in their own little conversation and Kate just studied her drink. The proprietor was eventually the one to interrupt Megu and Justin, and after Megu ordered her drink, she fixed Kate with a scathing look and asked, “No plant heroics today?”

“No. My savior complex is satisfied for at least the next few days.” Kate figured she probably could have said something a little wittier. Her eyes flickered up to meet Megu’s for only a moment before she looked back down at her drink and her own hand poking a lime wedge to the bottom of the glass. After giving the lime one last poke she decided not to worry about it, and to just pretend in Megu’s presence as if the whole rubber tree incident had never happened. Besides, it seemed especially futile to convince anyone of her story after the utterly ordinary day she’d had.

“What’s the news for us today, Megu?” Justin grinned at her and waited. Megu was a very good storyteller and gatherer of random bits of interesting information. At all times, she kept a notebook with her, in which she wrote down interesting thoughts and bits of news. She usually consulted the notebook repeatedly during the course of an evening. She wrote in it constantly, and Kate often worried that somewhere in that notebook was a page entitled ‘Quotes from Kate’ filled with all the stupid things she had said.

“Well, I did read this rather interesting bit of news in the Times. It was just a little article, barely a few inches of type about disappearances.” Megu flipped through her notebook, and talked about the article, the possible on-line suicide group the police suspected, and the complete lack of evidence in the case. The people just vanished. Nothing. The police even worried that there were more people that they didn’t even yet

know about because it took some time before bills didn't get paid and loved ones in far off provinces started worrying. "Seems just awful," Megu concluded.

"How do they know the disappearances are connected?"

"I don't know. The article hypothesized that perhaps they were going together to the forest outside of the city. Maybe they found their cars abandoned there."

"The forest?"

"The sea of trees."

Kate just looked at Megu; arched an eyebrow.

"It is this very beautiful forest that has a reputation as being the place people go to never be found again, whether they intended it or not. Although, usually they intend it."

"It's that big?"

"Oh, it's not so much big as primeval, and very easy to get lost in. They say compasses stop working in there and even handheld GPS. But that's all saying."

"It's also the place for suicides," Justin added, gesturing with his drink and nodding. "Lots and lots of suicides."

"No one really knows how many suicide victims are in there, Justin." Justin shrugged and Megu then continued. "Apparently, every year the prefecture police got in to search it and bring out the bodies, but even then they can't search every inch."

"That's awful. Wouldn't the people want their families to find them?"

Megu just shrugged and turned to Justin. He shrugged too and then looked at Megu, and just like that, they were off in their own little conversation, talking about his visa trouble. Kate took a cigarette out of the pack Justin had left on the table and looked over to the noodle shop. 8 pm, 6 customers, one in a striped shirt with unbelievable love handles.

Over her shoulder, Kate could hear Megu say, “I was thinking that maybe my grandfather can find you a job. If you are employed it will be easier to get a visa.”

“I am employed.”

“Then I don’t understand the problem.”

“I’m here on the wrong visa.” Kate could hear the exasperation creeping into Justin’s voice. “It’s complicated. I’d leave the country, get the right visa, come back. And I just don’t have money for that.”

Megu was quiet for a moment then gave a little giggle and said, “Well, we could have a sham wedding, and then you could stay.” Megu was laughing harder than was appropriate so Kate avoided looking at them and poked at her lime wedge instead. From the corner of her eye she could see Justin beginning to slouch and looked up to find him wilted and Megu oblivious.

“What do you know about this forest Justin?” Kate asked, grinding out her cigarette into the ashtray even though it was far from done. Kate didn’t really even like smoking.

“Not much. I’ve never even been.”

“Honto-la?”

“Really-la.”

“I thought you were such a big hiker.”

“Sometimes.”

“We should all go hiking there.”

“That’s a terrible idea Kate.” Megu joined in. “That place is full of scary.”

“Have you ever been?”

“I’ve seen it, but only when driving by parts. And once, when I was little my class hiked the mountain and we ate our breakfast at a rest area edging the forest.”

“Then it can’t be so menacing if teachers take you there to eat breakfast.”

“They wouldn’t let us even step into the forest.”

“It can’t be that bad,” Justin interrupted. “A bus goes there every hour and I’ve heard they even give guided tours...maybe to cut down on people wandering off, but still.”

“Would you want to go hiking there Justin?”

“Definitely. Megu?”

“No.”

“Oh, come on Meg. You’ll love it.”

Megu fiddled with the spiral of her notebook and didn’t answer but Kate was already making plans. After a few hours and a few drinks, Kate always felt that the world was a much better place. Walking down the street with Justin and Megu, Kate looked at the graffiti covering the metal of the closed storefronts and thought it was brilliant. Here even the graffiti was good. And perhaps, this was the most pleasing city in the world, and if Kate could find a little apartment with just enough of a closet and hopefully a toilet of her own, then, she would be happy. Once on the train platform, Kate hugged both Justin and Megu goodnight even though they would travel all the way to the central station before parting ways.

That night, Kate stepped into the phone booth outside her train station's entrance and contemplated calling Justin. It was quite possible that he was with Megu, and it would look odd if she called him during that. She could call Megu, but that would only be slightly less odd. Kate listened to the sound of the dial tone and wished she had someone else to call.

The walk home took twenty minutes at a leisurely stroll, fifteen at a good stride, and eight at a run. She figured it was a little less than a mile. Kate always enjoyed the walk home, up and down small hills with the houses closing in on the narrow streets. Considering all the density and concrete in the city center, the outskirts were surprisingly green. There were a few fields and even an orchard squeezed into little lots between the tightly packed houses and roads. There were also rice fields at spots along the way and Kate loved everything about rice fields. Perhaps a little too late in the growing season she started taking pictures everyday so that she could capture the development of rice. By this time in the summer, the rice was deep green and at least a foot high. Kate pulled out her camera and crouched down lower to the ground to take a picture. By the light of the moon, she could see the dull brittle algae which had conformed itself to the earth like carpet and which had shattered in places like glass. The rice patties had dried up and she couldn't decide if this was an effort to kill the algae or simply a mistake. Every morning the farmer of these fields walked around the perimeter in a ridiculous straw cowboy hat surveying his crop. Kate hoped that he knew what he was doing and decided that regardless, she would go to the library and figure out how to grow rice. It seemed like an important thing to know. She took a picture then bolted to her feet as a boxy looking van pulled up beside her. A man leaned out and asked a question, but all Kate caught was *Omiya*. Kate's language skills were

spotty and mostly she guessed at everything people were trying to say to her. *Omiya* was the next train station down the line, but Kate didn't know how to give directions so she pivoted and pointed in the general direction saying apologetically "maybe?"

Kate awoke the next morning with the sun shining in on her lying in a tangled pile of sheets, and already little beads of sweat were forming on her forehead. She sighed, and pulled the curtains shut, and sadly there was so little wind that they didn't even move. It was hard to imagine that a day which started so hot and unclear from the beginning would be good. To redeem it, Kate decided to make plans for the evening with Justin. They would bask in air conditioning.

Before leaving the house, Kate called Justin from the phone in the foyer. She put on her shoes, and kept the phone jammed between shoulder and ear while listening to Justin, who over the phone seemed very happy. He was already at work, and Kate could hear, in the background, the sounds of cars and music coming from shop doors. He practically chirped his "hello."

"Morning. How was your night?"

"Fine. What's going on?"

"Wondering if you have plans for the evening. Because I have a plan to laze around in free air conditioning and see one of the stunning sights of this city. Sound tempting?"

"Of course."

"So no other plans?"

"Only yours."

Kate stood up from the bench and said "Meet me tonight at 6. Central station. Central entrance."

"Inside or out?"

"Right outside the building. By the topiaries."

When Justin walked out of the central exit and spotted Kate by the topiary of a bird, he immediately asked what the plan was. Kate told him first they would walk, then they would drink, then it was the main event. But Kate used the wrong gestures and tone of voice when she said this because Justin just looked at her funny.

Restaurants and bars lined the streets of the city center, and the sidewalks were filled with office workers carrying briefcases and tourists with cameras dangling from their necks and wrists. In the winter, heat escaped from the doors and Kate liked just walking by, enjoying the warm spots of air and the smell. In the summer, it wasn't nearly so pleasant. The air conditioning billowed out the doors just making the oppressive heat seem worse. Kate and Justin walked up the streets and found nothing promising or cheap enough. When they walked by a convenience store, Kate went in, bought four little cans of plum wine and a bag of flavored marshmallows then led Justin through the crowded streets until finding a quiet one with a lighted underpass beneath the train tracks. Kate sat down at a clean place along the sidewalk, leaned back against the stone wall and asked how Justin's day had been.

“Good-la.”

“Yeah, you sounded pretty chipper this morning.”

Justin just smiled and leaned up against the stonewall of the underpass. He had changed into khakis, a polo shirt, and sandals at some point between work and the station. And although he hadn't asked for Kate's cologne he didn't smell, in the least, unpleasant. He looked far more dashing than Kate and seemed to grin because of it. She handed him a marshmallow and a can of ume-shu.

“Sometimes I like mornings.”

“Even though your job is moving things in 40° heat?”

“It wasn’t quite 40° today. And you forget, I’m Malay. We’ve not got these lovely four seasons.”

Kate shrugged and took a sip from her ume-shu.

“You know, my first winter here it snowed... It was wonderful. I had never owned a scarf before. I loved it.”

“Well, it didn’t even snow this year.” Justin’s seemed so happy about it, about snow, and Kate didn’t know what else to say so she looked into her can of wine and contemplated the fat green plum sitting at the bottom of the glass bottle. She wanted to eat it. She wanted to suck off its skin and the meat beneath, and then spit the pit at Justin as a joke. But he probably wouldn’t laugh. Kate smiled at Justin and wiped sweat from her forehead saying, “But yes, I suppose snow is sometimes nice.”

Justin had fallen silent and sat with his head resting against the concrete wall which gave him a halo of graffiti. A mysterious purple halo of words Kate couldn’t read. She guessed it said ‘I’m fucking bored’ or ‘Tetsuo likes 12 year old cunt’ or something to that effect. On the underpass’s opposite wall the loveable blue children’s cartoon cat was painted scampering on a fertile green background of ferns while throwing the finger to passersby.

Justin sat looking into his glass of wine and finally said “people probably think we’re crazy just sitting here drinking.”

“Well, it’s not immediately obvious what we’re doing.”

“Yes it is,” Justin laughed. He finished off his wine and put the empty bottle back in the plastic convenience store bag. “But it’s ok.” Then he leaned over a bit and wrapped an arm around Kate in a hug. After a few moments Justin stood up, wiped his palms on his knees and said, “Well, what’s the main event? I’m curious.”

By this point they had finished all the wine and it was dusk. Kate jumped to her feet saying alright, hopped for a moment from one sandaled foot to the other while waiting for Justin to wipe the dust from his pants, and then led the way out from the underpass.

The International Forum was on Kate's list of favorite things (along with bare ankles and holidays). The complex was made up of five buildings. Building A-C and E were dull boxes, but D was what she loved. It was a perfect symmetrical cavern that ballooned in the middle and tapered down to points at both ends. The ceiling was dominated by huge, curved, rib-like rafters. The giant support beams that stretched from floor to ceiling looked like licked clean pieces of bone: stark, white, and stripped of life.

Kate waited for Justin to say something as they walked toward the building and she pointed out Building D's glowing glass walls peaking above the skyline. Building D was for public use: meetings and galleries and at night it buzzed with activity. Plus, the glass glowed. All the glass walls gleamed from the city and building lights. In the courtyard, in front of the east entrance, people lounged around on interactive sculptures. Everyone was well dressed and calm. The cadence of their voices seemed light as if they were all telling jokes or whispering declarations of oneness with the world. Once inside the building and walking up the ramps leading to the upper stories, Kate waited for Justin to say something. He hadn't yet said a word. She wanted him to like the building as much as she did. But he remained silent and observant as they trudged up the ramps that zigzagged to the seventeenth floor.

When they finally reached the seventeenth floor, Justin and Kate leaned on the rail and watched the people in the lobby below, looking like plankton swimming and gliding in the act of being digested.

“It's great isn't it?”

Justin nodded and Kate looked into the glass far opposite. Their reflections stared back, wavering and iridescent. Justin was looking down at the people. Kate was looking at Justin.

“Doesn’t it remind you of being in the belly of a whale?” Kate pointed up to the ribs-as-rafters and the dwarfing space around them.

“How does it remind you? Have you ever been in a whale?” Justin was grinning, and just waiting for Kate’s answer to laugh.

“No. But if I ever do I hope it looks half as nice as this,” Kate replied. “Bathrooms and a view.”

Justin smiled and turned away from the railing and gestured to either end of the building. “I read about this place. They say it was designed with a ship in mind. It’s the shape. I like your interpretation though.”

Kate watched Justin saunter to a water fountain, and as he leaned over to take a sip he looked back to grin at her, a gesture which Kate chose to view it as an invitation to check out his ass, which she did.

Together, they walked down to the third floor and sat on a bench to talk and watch people. They pointed out happy and sad people, those with bald spots, and ugly hats. Kate talked about looking into people’s faces when she was on public transit. Justin reminded her that this was rude, but Kate said she didn’t care, and that she was really just trying to figure out their lives.

“Like her, down there. Do you think she’s happy? Likes her job? Does she live in a tiny apartment or in a house? Boyfriend, husband, or single?”

“Well, I think she must have someone. But she looks like she’s having a bad day. And she just dropped a piece of paper, but an older gentleman is picking it up for her.”

“Maybe they’ll strike up a conversation, go out for a beer, and flirt.” Kate looked back to see the man who was trying to catch up with the girl and went a little numb when she recognized house plant guy.

“Or end up in bed together.” Justin laughed, “Well, probably not considering his choice of footwear.”

Kate jumped up and motioned for Justin to follow. She tried to keep her eye on house plant guy the whole time she was hurrying down ramps, but it was difficult and she lost him, then found him again just as he was headed out the door still following the girl, although he seemed to have given up trying to catch her attention. Kate couldn’t imagine him changing her into a plant considering all the people that were around, but who knows why he would change people into plants in the first place.

“What are we doing?”

Kate ignored Justin and hurried out the east exit. Outside the building both house plant guy and the girl had disappeared into the crowd. Kate looked around and watched the people walking into the building, coming out, wandering around the sculptures. She turned back to Justin who was staring at her.

“What was that all about?” Justin thrust Kate’s bag at her.

“I was just curious... And I thought I recognized that man.”

Kate met Justin at the dog statue just outside the train station entrance. She had called him the morning after seeing house plant guy at the International Forum. It had been an awful night, Kate had cut the evening short immediately after seeing house plant guy and then spent her commute home half expecting him to jump out of every corner, carrying a ficus and trying to touch her forehead. By now, Kate was feeling a little more rational about the whole thing. Although there was only so rational one could be when they suspected someone of turning people into house plants.

It was early evening and Justin was still in his work pants but had put on a clean t-shirt and a hat. He often wore this particular hat that fit tightly at the top of his skull and then flipped up violently at the ends. It was navy blue and sat above his face which was a slender perfect moon. Kate would fixate on this hat during conversations. Marvel at its blueness and formed fit, and wonder at how Justin could wear something that looked so thick, and wool, considering the heat.

Kate led Justin through the back maze of streets until she found the building she wanted. The café was on the roof of a four story building, up an elevator, then a tiny set of stairs. Part of the café had a roof, but the rest of it just had thick canvas nailed over rafters to protect patrons from the sun. Kate found a little table next to a bookshelf filled with large, glossy decorating books and empty colored glass vases. They could just see the skyline and some windows of the buildings opposite. The street below was obstructed from view.

“So.” Justin touched his hat and then folded his hands on the tabletop, waiting.

“I need to talk to you about the other day.”

Justin sat there expectantly, almost graciously, as if he had always known this would happen.

“The guy at the International Forum that I tried to follow. That was him, the house plant guy.” Kate touched the tabletop, as if for momentum, and forged ahead. “There are millions of people in the city. Millions. And I see him again. He’s in pretty much the same clothes, which, for the International Forum, are informal to say the least. I mean, he’s wearing bath slippers for god’s sake. And I see him in the International Forum running after a woman in a business suit. What are the odds of that? You don’t just run into people you know here...let alone...well, let alone him.”

Justin reached out and touched Kate’s head with his free hand while taking a drink of his iced coffee.

“Relax,” Justin said, but Kate slapped Justin’s hand away; he was touching her how house plant guy had touched the homeless man. It was a universal touch, one meant to be comforting. The kind of caress mothers and fathers give to their sick fevered children. It seemed cruel that this touch would be a kiss of death. Kate was sweaty and Justin wiped his palm on his shirt.

“I wish this all was my imagination, but its not. That’s why I wanted to meet you.”

Justin avoided eye contact while Kate explained in detail what happened that evening at the Sumida. How she had seen the old man change someone into a rubber tree, then followed him through the streets until he sat it down outside a plant shop while he fumbled with his keys. He had let the plant sit on the pavement while he went in, and Kate had taken the opportunity to grab it and run.

“Are you sure of what you saw? You said you blinked. Maybe you just stole someone’s plant.”

“No I didn’t. And the homeless man, he just disappeared. How can you explain that?”

“Well, no one can be changed into a plant. Anyway, if this house plant guy knew you were there, why did he do it out in the open? It’s something people would notice.”

“I wondered about that too. Maybe he just didn’t see me there.”

“Hardly. You stick out.”

“I blend in nicely. And maybe house plant guy has just done this so much he isn’t afraid anymore. Maybe he thinks people will think they’re crazy if they see something like that, instead of believing they saw someone get changed into a plant.”

Justin didn’t answer and Kate hated it when people didn’t answer. “You want proof don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Jackass.”

“Just take me to the store Kate.”

Kate started backtracking from the bench by the Sumida. She took three wrong turns down winding streets before stopping short in front of a tiny plant shop with a long bench situated beneath the storefront window. Kate crouched down behind the bench and peeked through the window.

Kate could hear Justin sighing behind her. “Let’s just go in,” Justin said heading for the door.

“No! He might recognize me.” Kate continued crouching by the store window trying to get an idea of the layout through all the plants on display. Justin went in and walked out of Kate’s line of vision. He was back in less than a minute saying no one was even in the shop.

“Did you call out? He’s probably in the back.”

Justin assured her that no one was in there, told her not to snort at him, and then headed back inside. Kate stood up and walked in after Justin. The shop was only about twenty square feet. The walls were lined with shelves full of plants and in front of the shop window was a bleacher-like wooden construction with various types of bonsai on display.

“Normal plant shop.”

“Normal my ass. Why isn’t anyone here?”

Justin shrugged and peeked through the curtain hanging in the doorway to the backroom. “Nothing. Nothing’s here. Nothing’s fishy.”

They took a different route leaving because Justin believed there would be a subway or train station closer. The streets of the city were normally convoluted, but those back streets seemed even more mazelike. They were also quiet for a summer’s evening, at just after 7:00 pm all sorts of people should have been headed home from work, but there were only one or two at each bend in the road. Justin stopped a salary man for directions and learned they were headed the wrong way. The salary man continued past and around a street corner, with Justin, studying his cell phone, following slowly behind.

Kate let Justin walk a few paces in front of her while she berated herself for ever opening her mouth to Justin. When she turned the corner, Kate saw house plant guy standing in the middle of the road with his back to them. She pulled Justin by his shirt around the corner of a house to watch as house plant guy stood over a large fern, just looking down at it, calmly.

Kate turned to Justin and whispered, “You see that?”

“Yeah, that’s the guy from last night.”

“Yes. And where did the salaryman go? Did we see a plant in the middle of the road when we walked this way before?”

“He could have gone into one of these houses.”

“You said he was heading to the station the same as us!”

“He didn’t necessarily say that,” Justin whispered, turning back to look at house plant guy who picked up the fern and continued walking down the street. After he was out of sight, Kate and Justin came out from their hiding spot and stood in the middle of the street looking around. Kate pointed out the briefcase sitting off to the side of the road, leaning against a house as if it were thrown there, thoughtlessly. She picked it up and the two then trailed behind house plant guy, knowing exactly where he would go. They watched from the side of a house as house plant guy went straight into the plant shop and shut the door.

Justin then knelt on the ground and opened the briefcase. Inside were papers and pens, a book covered in brown paper. In the little pocket under the lid were a carefully folded spare tie and a picture of a couple, arm in arm. The man in the picture was the same salaryman they had asked directions from. Justin leaned back against the wall of the house and pushed the briefcase away from him.

“We shouldn’t have touched that.”

“Why? Its owner certainly won’t need it.”

Justin began wiping the briefcase down with his shirt. Kate flipped the picture over, looked at the writing on the back, then showed it to Justin. He looked at it, read the writing and said, “It says ‘August 2000, Midori.’”

“That’s a while ago.”

“Almost four years.”

“I wonder if it’s his wife.”

Justin shrugged, closed the briefcase and stood. “We should go.”

“So you believe me now, huh?”

Justin didn’t say anything until they parted at the train station, and then it was only to say he’d call tomorrow.

Kate accidentally rode the train past her stop that night. She was sitting, which was a rarity, on the green upholstered seats, just staring vacantly at the city flying by. When Kate first started riding the train she thought it was odd that the other passengers would do that vacant scenery stare. But it was easy to slip into, even enjoyable. The city was, for lack of a better word, amazing. Kate had never lived in a city, and the cities she was used to were so spread out. Here, the city was dense, and there was always something new to notice. If it wasn't the design of houses (ramshackle or architectural wonders) it was the signs of the people living there. Bicycles chained to water pipes, chalk pictures on the sidewalk, posters papering the wooden walls of old buildings, the shapes of cars, the shops, people's faces as they waited on the platforms for their trains. Kate just forgot about her stop and ended up in Omiya instead.

Omiya was a far bigger station than her normal stop and there was a large bookstore just down the street. Kate stopped and bought a Mainichi shimbun, and went into a tea room to read it. The tea room was empty and whether it meant to or not had a depression era feel about it. The tea was served in ornate and slightly yellowed china with etched spoons, checkered calico tablecloths, and a single dandelion in a water glass. Kate sat in a booth by herself and spread the paper out on the table, putting her tea cup at the top corner. Most of the front pages were news articles Kate had already read online: fears of plagues, political maneuverings, economics, and elections. Usually Kate got her news online, but sometimes, an actual paper was nice. Moving her tea cup off the top corner, Kate tried to fold the paper like salarymen did on the train. They folded it neatly into rectangles big enough to read from comfortably, but also not get in anyone else's way. It was an ingenious folding technique, that even allowed them to easily turn pages, but it took a few tries before

Kate got the knack. And in folding, Kate noticed the headline about the missing woman. A Lynn O. who went missing and no one realized it for two months. Kate had heard about old people living alone who died and nobody found them for months, but a young person, with a job, and family in the city was another story. They hadn't realized she was missing until the phone company sent a creditor looking for her. That detail was particularly sad. The article went on to say that the 11th ward, where Lynn lived, had had a disturbing spike in disappearances in the last two years.

Odd article, odd story, and where was the 11th ward anyway? Of course she linked, almost without hesitation, Lynn's disappearance to house plant guy. There were, if Kate wanted to think about them, other possibilities. Jilted lovers, family problems, gangs, random violence, even the mob. In a city with millions of people, some were bound to go missing. But this poor girl. She had a job, and a family, who the article said thought were being disowned by the unanswered calls.

Kate sat the carefully folded newspaper on the tabletop and took a sip of tea, then said "shit" under her breath. Now, she would have to buy the Mainichi everyday, just to read for disappearances. She would have to look for news of the salaryman and hope he wasn't leaving behind a wife and children, or sick and aging parents. She didn't even know his name.

That night Kate didn't hear from Justin, nor did he call or email in the next two days. For her part, Kate didn't even care. She went to work, went home, read the Mainichi for disappearances or suspicious obituaries while sitting cross-legged on her balcony floor drinking from a liter bottle of carbonated water. Below her she could hear her landlord's TV and Kyoko singing songs to herself while her mother did housework or tended to the little

herb garden her strip of yard allowed. Up and down the street, windows were opened and closed, mats hung on balcony rails, people walked the street, plants were watered, people spoke and giggled and called to their children for dinner. When Kate closed her eyes, she could hear the movements and rustlings of all sorts of activities, she wondered is that the sound of a handled fan? Sandals slapping pavement? Was the little child (girl or boy?) asking for a piece of candy or pointing out a crow? And that was definitely the meow of a cat, probably sunning itself on a front step. In the distance, the train pulled into the station. The sun moved behind clouds and Kate could feel the change in light on her eyelids. She could open her eyes to check and see if this was in fact the case, but instead noticed the beads of sweat rolling down her forehead, then her back, and decided she could count them, she was that sweaty. Kate wanted to take a shower, drink lots of water, lose 10 pounds just so the heat wouldn't feel so oppressing. She wanted green grass and a shade tree, a reasonable temperature and a gift with language; she wanted it all at the push of a button or through a conveniently placed doorway. She wanted lots of things.

“I think I was in shock when I left you. I got home and I still had that briefcase in hand. I had meant to ditch it in a train station garbage can, but I still have it.”

Kate was sitting on a polished wooden bench in her building’s foyer, in her pajamas, yawning. It was late and Kate was rather annoyed that Justin had called. Her landlord had politely knocked on her door and told her about the phone call. Minomi had probably thought it was an emergency, something terrible, at least that’s what Kate had been afraid of when she’d taken the phone. But it was Justin, whom nothing bad had happened to, recently at least.

“Yeah, you were a little out of it.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Well, what’s going on?”

“Since I had the briefcase, I thought I might as well look through it again.”

“Of course. And?”

“I found the address of his company.”

“Well, that’s progress.”

“Yes. I’m going to go there tomorrow and find out what I can. Can you meet me after you get off work?”

“Yes. But you could have just emailed me about this.”

“I thought of it now, and I wanted you to know what I was up to.”

“Umm, Ok. Goodnight then.”

“Goodnight.”

Kate fell asleep without having moved much after she entered her room. Books, English language newspapers, and loose papers lay splayed out on the floor around her, scattered by the movement of air every time Kate flopped from side to side in her sleep. She awoke far too early and made the trip down to the kitchen to make a cup of tea and headed back up to her room and her balcony. The sun was just beginning to rise and Kate was amazed at how hot it still was. She almost believed she could still see the heat radiating up from the streets and buildings. It was as cool as it was going to be for the day and Kate lay down on the floor, resting her cheek against the wood hoping for a little relief.

Kate decided to go visit Justin before his visit to the salaryman's workplace. She was curious and felt slightly vindicated now that Justin believed her. Plus, he seemed to be worked up over it. And he would be, Justin was the kind of fellow who believed in the goodness of humanity. Kate, of course, didn't. She remembered one of the first times she and Justin had hung out. They had gone to the modern art museum and walked through displays of hundreds of plaster hand casts made from children in a third world ghetto. Justin had nearly cried, while Kate was still fuming and angry about wasting her money on what she termed, 'this bullshit', which was a giant interactive black spandex contraption symbolizing the womb. Justin had thought the symbolic womb fun, the hand casts sad, and Kate's curses curious. She heard him mimicking her and trying out her accent; he was giddy over the way she spoke. He'd said, "Is this how you all talk? You curse under your breath, and your English comes from the back of your throat. It's grating." He did a little wave movement with his hand. "Full of dip thongs."

Of course, Kate knew that he really meant she talked funny and he was amazed that a nation of such bad speakers remained the only superpower. So Kate said she supposed

she talked how everyone else talked, punched him in the shoulder and stalked off through a room of plaster hands.

Shortly after the museum incident Kate had introduced him to Megu at a small party thrown by Kate's landlord (they always invited their tenants). Megu was reserved and drank only one glass of wine while everyone else around her got slowly sloshed. The housewives and their husbands drinking dixie cup after dixie cup of wine. They had even mistaken Justin for Kate's boyfriend, complimenting him on his imperceptible accent and good manners. Justin though, was shyly hitting on Megu all night while Megu preferred to play with the children and talk nonsense with them. When one of the little girls proclaimed to everyone that she could fly, Megu agreed, picking her up and carrying her around the room. Megu had been wearing a blue t-shirt and skirt. Everyone joked about how she looked like a thundercloud and Kate, tipsy, had leaned over to Justin and said, "More like cotton candy in a hard wind." For some reason he thought this was insulting.

Kate showed up at Justin's apartment before seven that morning. It couldn't really be called an apartment. He had a worse living arrangement than anyone else Kate knew and his whole existence was confined to a 9 by 6 foot room in an old wood framed house on the outskirts of the city. It had a shared toilet down the hall and no shower, although there was a bath house a few blocks away. The place was small, but Justin considered it worth it after having shared a slightly larger room for so long with a roommate who bathed only occasionally to save money and often peed in empty soda bottles late at night so as not to have to walk to the shared bathroom.

Justin's room was mostly taken up by his bed which was still lying out in disarray from sleep. When Kate came in, Justin sat up, noticed it was her, then fell back into the

mess of sheets and motioned to the briefcase at the foot of the bed. Kate looked at it for a moment before opening it. This time she slowly shuffled through the papers. There weren't that many, but they all dealt with money. Pages full of graphed numbers, expenses or assets. Memos from higher ups that Justin translated for her, all of which said mundane things or handed out insincere praise for the work done. It all seemed rather boring. Aside from the picture, there was no personality in the briefcase. Of course, the man probably had his wallet, cell phone, and other more personal things on him. Yet, Kate was somehow disappointed. It wasn't often that she got to pillage through the private things of another. It was voyeuristic and yet Kate had nothing to show for it, no evidence of another life except for a picture.

“So you're going today?”

“Of course, I have today off.”

“I wish you'd wait. I could go tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow I have to work.”

Kate gave an irritated sigh, shut the briefcase and pushed it away from her.

While Justin was at the public bath house cleaning up, Kate waited for him at a chain coffee shop. By the time he got out it was midmorning and already unbearably hot. Justin had taken a cold shower after his hot bath house soak, but the cold water hadn't helped. Sweat soaked his shirt and Kate didn't look much better. In a convenience store, they stood for a while under an air-conditioning vent deciding on breakfast. Kate settled on a banana and a chocolate bar, while Justin went for a cold canned coffee and a prepackaged Danish.

“I'll call you after work?”

Justin nodded and they hugged goodbye on the train platform.

Kate was uniformly worthless at work that day. She watched the not-love-hotel, took a long lunch break, and read the news online. Then she skipped out 15 minutes early to run to the convenience store down the way and call Justin from the payphone. Predictably, he didn't answer. He'd become quite flakey about his calls in the last week. Kate hung up the phone and looked at the traffic driving by. She decided she'd go to the Segfredo's, read the Mainichi, then meet up with Megu over drinks at the Samurai Jazz Bar.

The Segfredo's took up three floors in a building that was only a block or so from the station. It attracted an odd mix of city dwellers, all drinking macchiatos and eating panini. Kate ordered herself a macchiato and headed to the third, non-smoking floor, and because the red couches by the window were taken, she settled for a little table in back next to an attractive Japanese woman absently flipping through the pages of a large language textbook sitting on the table in front of her. While Kate read the Mainichi, a young man came up to the woman, introduced himself in accented English and it became clear that he was her language tutor. He began instructing her in introductory French phrases. Hello, nice to meet you, what is your name. Kate watched them from the corner of her eye because the day's issue of the Mainichi was terribly boring. Next to her the two laughed, and the woman lifted her espresso cup with such delicate hands. The young man, for his part, was clearly pleased his pupil was so attractive.

"I am going to France," the woman announced, as if it wasn't obvious that she could go where she pleased and live how she wished. The man smiled brilliantly, said something in French, which she strained to comprehend then gave a clear, ringing laugh and the two leaned over the table towards each other and commiserated.

That was the point at which Kate finished her drink and went to the payphone in the stairwell and called Megu to see if she wanted to go the Samurai jazz bar. Thankfully, Megu

answered in her sing-song hello and said she was free after she finished some shopping with her mother.

“Thank god. I’ll meet you there at 9,” Kate said.

As it happened, Kate got to the Samurai jazz bar long before Megu did, so when Megu walked in, Kate looked up from her paper and greeted her with a “hoorah, sister.”

“Fucking Christ. How long have been here?”

“Oh a little while.”

Megu looked at Kate in a way that sobered Kate up a notch or two, because Megu’s look was one of pity.

“Have you spoken to Justin today?” Kate couldn’t help but ask.

“No, not today, but he did call.”

“Ah, that’s good.”

Megu gave Kate a quizzical look and sat down at the piano, then pulled at the edge of the Mainichi and asked what Kate was reading.

“The Mainichi.”

Megu sighed. “I read it also today.”

“In English?”

She shook her head.

“Does it change much, the two versions?”

“Probably.”

“Did you read a bit ago, about a woman who disappeared?”

“No, but there have been a lot of disappearances lately.” Megu then ordered her drink and a plate of noodles. They sat in silence for a while, then Megu got out her notebook and began flipping through the pages.

“I saw something the other day and thought you’d like it.” She pulled from the book a little 3x5 photo of an empty lot with a leather couch set out in the middle of it. “I was walking around and passed this empty lot with sheet metal up and I peaked through a crack where two sheets met, and there it was, just sitting there.”

Megu grinned, terribly pleased with herself, and Kate just smiled weakly and handed the photo back to her. Kate didn’t quite understand how an empty lot made Megu think of her. Megu just continued to smile and put the photo back into the pages of her notebook while chatting about classes she was currently taking and the plans she had for going to Cambodia.

To this, all Kate could think to say was, “We’re going to that forest. The sea of trees. Justin and I, we’re going this weekend, on Saturday.” This of course was a lie. Kate hadn’t thought of, or spoken with Justin about the sea of trees since the first time Megu brought it up. But as she said it, Kate knew it would happen, and that they would go there. And it also seemed something of a punishment for Megu. Either she didn’t go with them, and therefore was a terrible person, or she went and was scared.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Pish-posh.”

“There are lots better places to hike. I could show them to you.”

Kate wrinkled up her nose, thought about this, then said no.

Justin was waiting for Kate outside her office building after work a few days later. Kate hadn't heard anything from him since the morning when she had gone to his room before work, so she was surprised to see him sitting on the building's steps. He was smoking and wearing his ugly hat again.

"What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you."

"I figured that. Why didn't you call?"

Justin stood up and they headed for the train station. He pulled the picture, taken from the salaryman's briefcase, out of his back pocket and handed it to Kate. "His name was Harry. Midori was a girlfriend."

"How did you find this out?"

"I went to the company and talked to a secretary. It wasn't easy."

"Congratulations then. But how did a secretary in a big company know our salaryman?"

"It wasn't that big a company, and the secretary was Midori."

"Well, then..." Kate stopped in the road, taking a moment to digest all this info, but Justin kept walking and talking. He had gone into this little nondescript office building and who did he see, but the girl from the picture sitting right by the door taking a phone call. She looked the same, hadn't aged in four years, and even had the same hairdo. Justin was new to the art of extracting info while giving none away. He hadn't known how to proceed. He didn't even know the name of who he was looking for and all he had was a picture he couldn't show. But Midori had already noticed him and was looking at him expectantly, so, Justin had lied. He said he was supposed to meet a gentleman whose name he had

unfortunately forgotten. After describing the salary man's look, Midori had smiled. It was one of those beautiful smiles, and well, Justin personally doubted that anyone ever smiled that way when his name was mentioned.

Justin and Kate stopped at the square in front of the train station and leaned against the rim of a giant concrete tree pot. Justin looked across the intersection at the four-story tall plasma screen that broadcast commercials day and night.

"Midori said Harry hadn't come in to work today. She asked when I had last spoken to him and I lied saying sometime last week."

"Do you think they knew he was missing?"

"No. I asked if he was sick or on holiday and Midori said he just hadn't come into work. Then she asked if I wanted to reschedule my appointment."

Justin took off his hat and wrung it in his hands like a rag. Kate hadn't realized how disturbed Justin was over this.

"It's ok," she said and laid a hand on his shoulder and shook it slightly.

"No, it's really not." Justin continued to wring his hat and look out at the crowds moving across the intersection.

"We're going hiking this weekend you know."

"Yeah, Megu told me." Justin looked Kate straight in the eyes and said, "Listen, we have to do something about him."

Kate continued to look Justin in the eye, willing herself not to look away first, but the last thing she wanted to do was confront house plant guy, so she was the first to look away and concentrate instead on the commercial playing on that giant plasma screen where a happy little blue cartoon character was selling bottled tea. In her mind, Kate counted all the people she believed to be, or had seen being transformed. It was four of them, four lives.

Two women and two men. All of them from varying positions on the social ladder and there was very little logic in any of it. No reason, no geographical significance, no common thread. And perhaps that was why Kate didn't find herself more disturbed. She had witnessed two people change into plants, and suspected it happening to two others, and she had just wanted to wash her hands of the business, pretend it had never happened, and go to the bar. Justin had seen it once and was now forever wringing his hat in his hands. Frankly, Kate felt shamed.

“Why go to all that trouble?” she asked.

“Because it's someone's life. Probably lots of lives. Maybe every plant in that shop was a person once... That man is basically a murderer.” Justin had a little knot in his brow and narrowed his eyes. People were flooding past, occasionally brushing against the two. The square was probably one of the busiest intersections in the city, and there were people everywhere laughing, talking, walking with a determined step towards the train station, wanting to go home. Kate saw a co-worker pass in the mob and waved, but he didn't see her.

“So what do you suggest we do about it?”

Justin's first suggestion was to go talk to house plant guy. Justin believed in a world and people that were mostly good. He was always touched deeply by human emotion and apparently Midori, the secretary, had touched him. He felt that this was his own personal mission and that house plant guy just couldn't be a wholly evil lunatic.

“There's just got to be some reason for turning people into plants,” Justin said
“Maybe he is just misguided. Maybe he thinks he is doing a good deed, that people will like being plants better than being people, or that being plants will make people happier. I mean look around, no one particularly looks happy do they?”

Kate looked around her and before she could respond Justin was off again.

“Perhaps house plant guy was doing this because of some traumatic incident in his past. Maybe he lost someone he loved and so was lonely that turning people into plants was the only way to make sure he had company. We just need to talk to him. We have to.”

Justin trailed off and Kate looked at her feet. She was far more skeptical of the guy. Kate believed in a world full of people with varying degrees of spinelessness. Everyone was just a base coward (Kate knew she was) and it subsequently made people do bad things. Kate figured maybe house plant guy just liked ruining people’s lives. Maybe it was his only skill. Maybe he turned people into plants solely for profit. And mostly, maybe he wouldn’t stop just because Justin asked him too.

It was only after the parking lot and visitor's center began to fade that Kate decided Megu might have been right. The place was creepy. This feeling was only amplified every few yards by plastic tape marking off pathways, or food wrappers and water bottles lying scattered in the undergrowth. As they moved farther away from the forest entrance these little human signs became less and less common. Justin led the way, with Megu in her bucket hat and sturdy shoes walking in the middle and Kate taking the rear. Justin plunged ahead relentlessly and when they came to a fork in the path with one way obviously being the correct way with a sign pointing hikers ahead to the wind cave, Justin instead chose the path only recognizable by the yellow tape trying to rope it off and dissuade hikers from going down it. When he simply ducked under the tape and went marching off through the undergrowth, Megu looked back at Kate and raised her eyebrows.

"Justin dear," she called. "The wind and ice caves are over this way."

As she said this, an elderly couple walked past them on the path towards the caves. They looked back over their shoulder several times and finally stopped in the path to say something to Megu, who politely answered and must have placated them because they smiled, bowed their heads and went on their way. Justin through this exchange had not really waited and only when he was down a ways, on that slim path, did he turn around, wave them in, and say "come on."

"Justin, I'd rather stay on the paths," Megu said.

Kate nodded her agreement and said she really did want to see the caves, especially the wind cave, because she new she'd like it best. But Justin was having none of it because he just turned around and walked farther in. Megu looked at Kate, crinkled her brow and shook her head, but when Kate lifted the tape for her, she ducked under it.

They hurried down the path after Justin. Kate knew Justin was angry, that morning he had again stated his desire that they go talk to house plant guy, but Kate had demanded the forest instead. During the bus ride, Justin had staying mostly silent and sullen. And on the trail, the way he had pushed aside branches and shrubs was unnecessarily harsh. Even as she and Megu followed him, Kate could pick out the bent and broken foliage he left in his wake.

The previous night at the intersection, Kate had refused to go to the plant shop with Justin. She hadn't just refused going, she had also prevented Justin from going. And done so in a fairly devious manner; she had gotten him drunk. Standing in the square, surrounded by that sea of people moving around them in waves every three minutes when the little crosswalk man turned green, Justin had just seemed so earnest and outraged, and most frighteningly, careless. He wanted to head to the plant shop right then and talk it out with the guy, but Kate refused. She had stood there and been scared for both of them. When she suggested that they have a drink beforehand to bolster their courage, she knew it would lead to two, and believed that this would be a favor to him.

Kate led Justin out of the square and to a Nepalese restaurant her coworkers favored, which was tucked into a side street next to a shrine the size of an outhouse and a record store. They had rusty nails, ate little dumplings, and when the restaurant's oil painting of vast grassy plains began to undulate before her eyes, Kate called Megu on Justin's cell. Megu had giggled into the phone even before she'd heard a voice and seemed a little surprised when Kate slurred into it that she needed to come downtown and she needed to come now.

Megu got to Ropongi first and when she saw Justin and Kate stumbling up the stairs, out the underground, she gave a wave and a little subdued jump. Justin and Kate waved

back and held onto each other and the banister for balance. Megu ran down the first few steps saying “Oh, thank god you’re here, some guy just propositioned me and I had to stand in the phone booth for ten minutes just to avoid any other lecherous fools.”

“Propositioned, eh? How much did he offer?” Kate asked and made the near fatal mistake of taking her hand off the railing long enough to gesture.

“You two can’t even stand straight right now!” Megu said, genuinely shocked. Kate again gestured with her limp drunken arms and told Megu that she was painfully sober.

“No, you are not sober!” Megu nearly shouted.

“No,” Kate said. “You misunderstood, you are the sober one. And we have to change that. Preferably with karaoke! Then disco!” Then Kate had added a ‘bitch’ but meant it to be in a funny-street-slang-sort-of-way, but she couldn’t carry it off at that moment, and Megu slapped her.

“She didn’t mean it,” Justin said, waving his hands around as if he was a symphony conductor, then he ushered them across the street. Someone on the corner was handing out paper fans promoting a dance club down the way, and Justin took one of the fans as it was extended to him and started fanning Kate’s face. Megu grabbed the fan out of his hand, read the advertisement, and said “let’s go to this place. It’s not far and I do need a drink quickly if I’m going to hang around with you two fools this evening.”

“Oh, such harsh words,” Justin smiled and teased. But when they got inside the club he bought all her drinks. It was a weeknight, with very few people in the club and the dance floor empty. They tried to talk over the music, but it was impossible, so Kate suggested they switch locations and Megu agreed, downing her drink and then Justin’s.

They wandered around for a while and finally settled on a bar that a suited gentleman on the street was passing out flyers for. Megu grinned and waved the slip of paper around like it was a flag. “It’s a hookah bar!” She laughed.

Kate hoped the bar would have a Persian theme, but once inside, it proved to be just a standard darkened bar in the city’s pleasure district. Suited men sat at the bar and lithe catlike foreign girls sat around at tables drinking cocktails and taking pictures of themselves. The only difference between this and any other bar was the three foot tall hookah pipes everyone sucked on with languor. Kate switched to water and slowly sobered up while Megu and Justin got drunker and light headed from smoking. They touched their fingertips to their temples and moaned of how their head ached, and then went back to sucking on the pipe. The bar’s air hung heavy with smoke and an indistinct smell that was somewhere between mint, fruit, and heavy incense. Justin had a habit of leaning back in the cushioned booth and drawing in on the pipe while loudly proclaimed the flavor. “Mint,” he kept saying cryptically while trying to blow smoke rings.

“It’s mint and strawberry,” Megu said. She sat back in the cushioned seat of the booth and folded her hands over her stomach. “Kate, I’m sorry I slapped you.”

“No, I was being stupid.”

Megu scrunched her face up into a smile. “I think I might leave soon,” she said. Megu had been threatening to leave the city for a while; jet off to Europe or some more glamorous and all around better life. And she could do it too. “I hate work. I hate my classes...I want to be a farmer.”

Kate guffawed and the water she had been drinking went up her nose. “Are you serious?”

Megu looked a little hurt, so Kate gave her a kinder smile and said “It’s not an easy life you know. Farming’s hard.” Kate wanted to say something about the old pictures in her grandparents’ photo albums of skinny barefoot children in barnyards full of stripped corncobs and sheep, but decided not to mention it.

“Well, what are we supposed to do?” Megu asked.

“About what?”

“Well, if we can’t go back, and here isn’t any good, and forward...well, we’re well on our way to ruining forward. What are we supposed to do? Live with it? Turn into plants like that rubber tree of yours?”

Megu laughed at her little joke and stared at Kate for a while as if Kate was really supposed to be able to answer that question. Megu then lost interest and looked at the thick curtains behind which big burly suited men came and went periodically. “I bet this is just a front for yakuza,” she said absentmindedly. Justin, who was in the middle of the second round of tobacco (apple this time), realized he had been completely monopolizing the hookah, which had made him so dizzy he was afraid to even stand.

After they left, walking back between the dark interior of the bar and the closed-in florescent of the underground, Justin, Megu, and Kate looked up and laughed into the dark sky made murky by the lighted neon signs and large number of people on the streets. People with shining, sweat-slick faces. People calling out to each other and calling out to them as they ran down the street trying to catch the last train, which they didn’t.

Megu, always the bright one, even when drinking, suggested that they pool their money and just get a room at a cheap love hotel.

“Brilliant!” Justin shouted on the street corner in front of the underground.

“How do we even find one?” Kate asked.

“Oh, we just walk around.”

And so they did. And as they were in the pleasure district, they didn’t have far to walk. From a vending machine in the lobby, they put in their money and chose the room they wanted by little pictures posted above buttons. Justin wanted the one with a Jacuzzi, but Kate was no longer drunk enough to handle getting naked with them and so suggested the room in Moroccan style. Megu, however, wanted the castle room, and Justin, deprived of the Jacuzzi room, wanted the tree house. They ended up with the medieval castle.

“I have never understood this fetish. Why couldn’t we have just ended up in a boring love hotel with plain rooms?” Kate said.

“I don’t care what you think,” Megu laughed. “If there is a princess costume in there I am putting it on just to spite you.”

Justin unlocked their room door and once inside Kate went straight to the fainting couch and collapsed into it.

“I have such a headache,” Justin called from the bed and Megu went over to inspect. She ended up rubbing his head and they all chatted about the odds of having a fainting couch in a medieval castle and the rumors or experiences they’d had with love hotels. Kate was about to fall asleep, but Justin got up, shook her shoulder and told her she’d sleep better if she washed her feet.

“What?”

“I don’t know, it’s something my Mom always told me. If you don’t wash your feet you have bad dreams. And Kate, your feet are filthy. You can’t wear flip flops in this city.”

Kate looked at her own feet, which were truly filthy, and shrugged. Megu followed them into the western style bathroom and sat on the toilet lid while Justin and Kate stood in the tub and washed their feet.

That night Kate had no bad dreams. She slept deeply and awoke early to the light filtering around the edges of the drawn shades. The fake stone of the walls looked especially bad in the morning light and Kate glanced around the little room. Justin and Megu were spooning in the bed, and just seeing that made Kate feel worse, so she went and took a shower. By the time she got out, Justin and Megu were up, nursing their handovers, and Kate had come to the conclusion that work was not the place she needed to be that day.

“We’re going hiking today,” Kate announced.

“I thought that was this weekend,” Megu said. “And don’t you have to work?”

“I’ve changed my mind.”

“Well, ok with me then. I’ve nothing to do today,” Megu said. Justin just narrowed his eyes and shook his head at Kate.

“Good, it’s settled then, we go to the forest.”

While Justin and Megu each took showers, Kate left the love hotel and went to the Uniqlo to buy a cheap t-shirt and shoes so she wouldn’t have to hike in work clothes and flip flops. She met them at the entrance to the train station with cold canned coffee and a few candy bars.

Kate had spent so much time looking at the bent twigs and branches that when she looked up, Megu was just a white spot of bucket hat up ahead, and then, even that turned out to be an illusion because the spot of white didn't move and when Kate finally got close enough, it was just a handkerchief tied to a tree limb. At her feet was nothing resembling a path, but only the humus of decaying pine needles, bark, and vegetation. The forest was mostly coniferous, towering, and deeply green. It kept a forbidding look about it from the many broken off branches around the lower trunks of the giant trees. These branches had been choked for light and so had died, rotted, and fallen to the forest floor. And Kate, seeing a larger branch at her feet, sat on it. As a child, she had once been told that rattlesnakes liked to live around fallen trees and rock outcroppings and so, whenever hiking, she had always stepped high and wide over these landscape features like some sort of high strung horse. At the moment, Kate didn't really care about anything beneath her tree limb, snake or otherwise, and just sat down, clutching that bit of white cloth.

The handkerchief was linen and tiny bits of bark were stuck into its weave where it had been tied to the tree. If Kate wanted to be morbid she would guess that this handkerchief was left by someone going into the forest to die. Maybe they had placed it there to point out the way to their body. Or, even more disturbing considering Kate's situation, it could have been placed there by someone lost and trying to mark their way. Kate spread the handkerchief out on her lap, and looked around her. She shouted out a 'hello' and a 'Justin' but it was not surprising when no one answered.

On the bus ride up, Justin, Kate, and Megu had sat in the very back, right next to the toilet, just because they could all sit together and talk. Megu had said that there were people who made their living off of looting suicide victims they found in the forest. One of the few

things Justin said during the ride was that the spirits of all the people who had committed suicide over the centuries lived in the trees of the forest and so, with all that accumulation, were malevolent and tried to prevent hikers from leaving. Hence the malfunctioning compasses. At that Megu had snorted and said the malfunctioning compasses were because of massive iron deposits beneath the forest floor, and that was supposedly why the cheap *100 yen store* compasses didn't work.

Kate looked around her and couldn't feel much malevolence. Instead, for the first time in nearly a month, she felt pleasantly cool air. The temperature had to be a good 10° cooler than in the city. There were little green plants growing at her feet which Kate couldn't name because she didn't belong to this continent, and light filtered gently through the upper canopy and fell onto her face. She sat like that for a while, thinking about home.

She'd always been told to follow water to people if she was lost. People always settled by water, so it seemed like fool proof advice, although she'd never had occasion to use it. Any long jaunt around home would eventually lead her to barbed wire. Kate was always aware that some of her friend's family businesses or estates had histories that stretched longer than her own country's. She liked that. She liked walking around in the woods on her families land and thinking, this spot, right here, has never been touched by a human foot before. Of course, this probably wasn't true. People had a tendency to spread out, move, and wander. Someone's foot had been there. They just didn't always leave the kind of footprint that was left now. Kate remembered, vividly, being 10 and terrified, that someday, they'd take it all away. That there would be nothing but houses and her family's measly thirty acres would be all that was left. An oasis in a new kind of sea. She'd told her father about this and he'd said he'd felt that way as a child also, and had asked his father the exact same question and his father had said he'd wondering the same thing as a young man.

But all the worrying had been for naught, because here it was, so many years later and there was still open land. At ten, Kate had been comforted, but later, she'd realized that her grandfather's youth wasn't exactly today and she wondered if her grandfather was still alive if he'd even be able to recognize the farm he grew up on. So, the forest did scare her a little, and it seemed in a way fair that it should.

Eventually, Kate wrapped the handkerchief around her wrist and stood up. She began following the evidence of her own hike-to-the-handkerchief, after that she followed Justin's broken twigs and kicked spots in the humus of the forest floor. Then, quite suddenly, she could hear the sound of footsteps and the rustling of leaves. Justin popped out of vegetation and a bend in the barely perceptible path and enveloped Kate in a hug. He said something silly, like "Kate, I thought we'd lost you."

"Well, you did lose me. You were walking rather fast, and I wasn't paying attention, I suppose." She grinned. "Where is Megu?"

"She's waiting back at the real trail. When we realized we'd lost you, we backtracked and then Megu waited there."

"Thanks for coming back for me," Kate said, pulling at the hem of her t-shirt as she said it. "It wasn't so bad though."

Justin cocked his head to one side, questioning.

"It wasn't."

Justin looked around and shook his head. "Let's go."

As they walked back, Justin again took the lead and Kate watched the movements of his shoulders beneath his t-shirt. "We need to talk," She said.

"I know you don't want to go speak with him."

"No. I don't want you to go," Kate replied. "I'm just worried."

Justin looked over his shoulder and smiled widely. “About me? How sweet.” Kate rolled her eyes and pushed him forward.

The walk back to the trailhead took not even twenty minutes. They hadn’t been in that far, but when she saw the tape, Kate was honest enough to admit that she felt a little relieved. When Megu saw them, she smiled, waved and gave a little jump, a repeat of the greeting she gave them last night.

That night Kate called Justin from her train station. She wanted to tell him about being alone in the forest. She really just wanted to talk with someone, but the minute they had gotten off the bus in the city, the heat had just enveloped them, and then they had all hugged, said quick goodbyes and went their separate ways. Although Megu and Justin's separate ways happened to be together.

Kate leaned back against the wall next to the phone booth and tried to look at the stars, but they were obliterated. Around her, very little was going on. A few people wandered into or out of the train station. Down the line she could see the lights of Omiya, and Kate imagined that all cars and pedestrians were headed in that direction. It seemed comforting to do that, head towards people and well lit spaces. So Kate headed back into the train station to take the short ride down the track, to conquer the loneliness and satisfy her thirst.

She got a beer and a bowl of noodles and sat down by herself at a little table in the back of a beer garden and tried to watch others while still avoiding eye contact. Girls laughed, boys in uniforms slurped noodles and watched laughing girls. Everyone eyed everyone else. Being around all those lights and people didn't help in the slightest. It was incredibly lonely, so Kate quickly finished her noodles and left. Went back to her station and her phone booth. Mid July and it was hot, the rice fields looked like shit, and the city, that incredibly clean city was starting to stink from the heat. Kate leaned against the wall and listened to the ringing through the receiver. When Justin didn't answer, Kate left a simple message about meeting for coffee tomorrow or the day after, and then as an afterthought blurted out that it was still, at close to midnight, really fucking hot.

Even though nothing more disturbing than a car wreck or a suicide ever happened way out in the suburbs, Kate still half jumped each time she heard footsteps or the noise of cars as she walked to home. Lone businessmen walked with quick steps past her and into the side streets. Their shadows caught then lost by the glow of paper lanterns and lights hung down streets for summer festivals. They would be going home to their children and wives fast asleep in quiet apartments. There was nothing dissimilar about their lives. Kate too, had learned to open her door quietly and not wake the family or other tenants while in the dark she lined up her shoes in their row, walked on the balls of her feet to the bathroom to rinse her face, brush her teeth, then look into the mirror, into her own eyes, and sigh.

That night Kate nestled on her sleeping mat in her tiny room and listened to her headphones. Sometime during what must have been REM sleep the ground began to shake and the building to sway. Kate woke up long enough to think ‘just go ahead and shake.’ Like it was a dare and she was being debonair for deciding sleep was more important than the swaying carnival ride of the tremor. And knowing she was making the choice of sleeping during what usually terrified her was soothing. The tremor passed, the building settled, and Kate dreamt of the building swaying, tilting, then falling. She later blamed this on forgetting to wash her feet.

In the morning, Kate woke to hot air coming through the squares of the screen door, the sun in her face (still no hint of clouds), the headphones wrapped around her neck an inadequate noose, and little Kyoko standing in the doorway singing like it was the first time the sun had ever decided to rise. And maybe for her it was.

At work that day Kate talked to no one. No one emailed, and no one answered their phones when Kate called from the *am/pm* phone booth at lunch. In the evening she sat on the balcony of her room and drank a little can of plum wine while flipping through the pages of a book.

She slept like the dead and woke up needing to know what the hell Justin was up to. For some reason, in her sleep she had begun to worry about him. It was a Saturday and she hadn't heard from him since the day they went to the forest. Before leaving that morning, she sat on the bench in the foyer and called Justin's cell and while listening to it ring, her landlord handed her an umbrella saying there would be rain. For the first time in nearly a month, rain. Kate hung up the phone and left the house. Kate called Justin again from her train station, then from a phone booth outside a park, and she emailed him twice from an internet café and a foreigner's library she liked to frequent. He never responded and it never rained.

Kate spent Sunday on her balcony. It was overcast and rain clouds threatened, but Kate still hung her laundry out to dry. Monday she called Justin again from the *am/pm* during her lunch hour, but he never answered so Kate put more coins in the machine and called Megu, who did. But when she asked if Megu had seen Justin all she got was a huff and a no. Kate was standing in the shade the building's overhang afforded. Cars passed on the street. Her feet, in flip flops, looked absolutely foul. Megu said something about not wanting to talk about Justin. Kate said ok, take care, have fun, bye.

Kate went into the *am/pm* and bought two rice balls for lunch then headed to a neighborhood shrine. She sat on the rotting wood bench, shaded by the tired dry leaves of a young tree. There wasn't a cloud in sight. Little fox-like stone dogs guarded the shrine

entrance and Kate read while she ate. Mostly she was irritated with Justin, who wouldn't answer, who was obsessed with house plant guy, and who had probably gotten himself in trouble somehow. She would have to go to his apartment and find him. Then, surely, Justin would make her go with him when he confronted house plant guy which was nothing Kate really wanted to be a part of. She halfheartedly threw her book away from her. It skidded on the flat stones in front of the closed shrine door, and laid splayed open, its center pages bent. Kate looked at shrine entrance and thought that if fox-like stone dogs knew her thoughts, her history, and could suddenly move they would tell her to lighten up and have a cheeseburger. Or they would say she was very self-centered. Smart little foxes.

She headed straight to Justin's after work. His building, with its green painted roof, could be charming in a certain light. It had a long portioned off porch accessible to the occupants by large windows or sliding glass doors. Most of the tenants filled their porch space with clothes drying racks and plants, but Kate new Justin's porch by its complete emptiness. Another tenant going in allowed Kate into the building. They exchanged smiles and small talk about the weather (it was getting overcast and windy) while headed in the same direction down the narrow stuffy hallway. No one answered Kate's knocks on Justin's door and it was locked. The man who had let Kate in was just down the hallway unlocking his door. Kate looked at him, wanting more than anything to be able to ask clearly and precisely when he had last seen Justin. Instead Kate said excuse me, pointed to the door and said 'Justin where?' Their conversation was strained, lasted about 10 minutes and Kate guessed at most of what he had said which seemed to be Justin wasn't there and hadn't been there in three days. As she left the building, she took an umbrella from the stand by the front door; she was already starting to fear the worst.

On the train ride back into the city center, Kate was able to get a seat because rush hour was almost over and she was headed into the city when most people were headed out. Still, there were some people in suits and skirts standing in the aisles of the train, holding onto the overhead straps. They read newspapers and books, listened to music on headphones. A gaunt looking salaryman stood slightly to the side of Kate, his newspaper crisply folded into fourths. A picture on the backside showed the prime minister with other world leaders at the G8 conference. The words Kate couldn't understand, so she closed her eyes. Occasionally, Kate felt very stupid. Sometimes she told herself being in a foreign country was like getting your IQ cut in half because the place, language, and social rules were

unfamiliar. Yet, it was over a year since she had arrived there and she still knew very little. Now, she was headed alone on some crazy mission to confront a man who turned people into plants and she didn't even know how to talk to him.

Kate kept her eyes closed, waiting for the intercom to announce the next stop. If Justin really hadn't been seen in three days that meant he must have confronted house plant guy alone. He had wanted to do it right away and Kate had prevented it from happening, and flat out told him it was a bad idea. He had probably decided it was better to go alone. There were still several possibilities (he could be avoiding her or he could have gotten hurt on the job) but Kate automatically assumed the most awful and bizarre explanation.

The sun was setting behind a gray haze of clouds, but the heat was still soul killing when Kate got out of the station and hurried down the streets towards the river. She took the same path as always, starting from the bench by the Sumida and winding through the streets looking for the odd architectural landmarks that let her know she was headed the right way. Before she turned the corner to the street of house plant guy's shop, Kate took the time to wipe the sweat from her face and readjust her grip on the umbrella handle. She also talked herself up. Justin was fine. He was fine. He was not a plant. And she was big, she was really big, so much bigger than everyone else. Kate marched out into the street, and didn't hesitate when opening the door to house plant guy's shop.

Once again, no one was in the shop, and it caught Kate off guard. She walked in brandishing her umbrella, expecting mayhem, but there was nothing and no one. Kate came to a halt in the middle of the room and looked around. Not much had changed. Counter and cash register in the back, pots of green leafed plants lining the wall, orchids in the windowsills, bonsai on wooden bleachers in front of the display window. Kate leaned over to inspect the bonsai. Little maples, gnarled oaks, flowering crabapple, boxwood, holly, lilac,

red pine, black pine, and the ever present juniper. The bottom row of bonsai were huge. One juniper that had a trunk about the diameter of an aluminum can and it grew in a flat tray at least a foot long. On the top row were much smaller trees, and a pale green one caught Kate's eye. She reached out to touch its round, moon shaped leaves, which were tender and smooth as plastic. Kate picked the tree up to look at it more closely, small and exquisite, it cost around 60 dollars. Kate heard footsteps and whirled around with the bonsai still in hand. House plant guy was standing in the shop's back doorway. He stood in flowered Bermuda shorts, collared shirt, and those bathroom slippers, gardening shears in one hand. Kate had been thinking of exactly what she needed to say, but 'hi' slipped out before anything else. House plant guy answered hi back, he looked so calm and friendly. He motioned to the bonsai in her hand. "That is a snow bush."

Kate was surprised that she understood exactly what he said and that the bonsai didn't have a more difficult name. She nodded, "interesting."

The two continued to look at each other and Kate wondered if he knew that she knew that he turned people into house plants. She wondered if this pretended innocence was just a show so that he could come closer and change her into a little tree or something. He took a step forward and Kate, startled, took a step back. She launched into her rehearsed questions, and broken accusations. Justin where? I saw you and man. At Sumida. Make plant. Why? Justin. Where? Stop. Stop.

House plant guy was coming closer and Kate held up her umbrella as defense. Pointed it like a sword. Said Justin's name. Pointed the umbrella around at the plants, said 'people?'. House plant guy was coming forward, speaking quick and songlike, words flowing from his mouth. He looked, with his hands outstretched, like he was trying to calm Kate down. He gestured to his shop, said something else, said Justin's name, said more, pointed

to the plant in her hands. Kate started crying, cursing in English, and with every one of his steps forward she moved back until she was at the door which opened out.

Kate backed out into the middle of the street and house plant guy closed his door and looked at her with arms crossed over his chest. They stood like that for a few moments, then Kate ran away. She rode all the way home cradling the snow bush in her arms, protecting it from the violent sway of the train.

Somewhere during the train ride Kate noticed the rain on the windows. For the few moments between leaving the station and heading into the convenience store across the street to buy a beer Kate felt the rain on her head and shoulders. It felt in ways like it sizzled, like water in hot oil. It had stopped by the time she had bought the beer, and she didn't even have to use her umbrella.

Kate kept the snow bush in her room and after an internet search found that the tree was tropical and its leaves turned a light green or whitish pink if it didn't get a lot of sun. Its color was best in winter. For a while Kate toyed with the possibility that the snow bush actually was Justin. In the evenings, before she fell asleep, she talked to it about all the things she should have said, like *'Justin, your hat was stupid, but it gave you a face like a moon. I mean that in a good way.'* And *'Justin, when we were in the supermarket and, in the space of 5 minutes, you spoke to people in four different languages I was both jealous and impressed.'* And just once, after she'd been drinking, *'Everything that happened to you, it wasn't fair you know.'*

In the next few weeks Kate occasionally had drinks with Megu at the Samurai Jazz bar. She finally found out about Megu and Justin's relationship and realized the full extent of what Megu termed the worst thing she ever did, which was pour a bowl of noodles on Justin as a way of breaking up with him the night they got back from the forest. Kate felt that explained a lot of things, sort of snorted, and then said she doubted it was the worst thing Megu had ever done. Megu said 'fucking foreigner' and purred deep in her throat, which for her passed as a laugh. She never could tell Megu about house plant guy, and just let Megu assume that the reason Justin never showed up again was that he hated her so deeply he never wished to see her again. If Megu didn't realize that Justin was incapable of that sort of hate, she didn't need to know the truth. As for Justin, Kate got tired of trying to call and email. Once she went by his apartment building and his balcony was covered in plants and drying laundry.

Sometimes, when Kate sat on the floor of her balcony she would close her eyes and listen to the noise in the street. She tried to name the noises, and then tried to clear her mind, tried not to want, tried not to think of Justin, and instead just let her mind wander and

at those times, she found it hard to believe that there are over 6 billion souls on this earth all stumbling around in the daily succession of light and dark, reaching out to hold someone then watching them slip away. If Kate were a more optimistic person she would say this reminded her of a dance, but she is not so optimistic and the whole perpetual course of movement is both inevitable and unbearably sad.

FIGURES MADE OF SOMETHING OR STONE

When the spots on the horizon turned into a vast forest of dead wood Blain thought to himself, “fan-fucking-tastic.” He then turned to Scratch and pointed towards the woods. Scratch looked in the direction of Blain’s finger, but his blank expression didn’t change. Scratch could have seen that forest a hundred times or just today. He was reticent to the point of idiocy.

The forest that rose out of the barren red-orange earth reminded Blain of drawings little children make. Primary colors. No depth perception. The trees seemed to go on forever and light penetrated everything giving the same sun drenched look to roots rising from the earth as branches dangling in the blue, blue sky. As Blain and Scratch came closer to the tree line a foggy memory of a single primordial leaf formed in front of Scratch’s face. Scratch plucked it from the air, licked the leaf once like it was a lollipop, then shoved the whole thing into his mouth. Blain watched this and thought two things. One, “the little guy doesn’t eat much.” And two, “I think I saw that leaf fossilized in a museum once. Maybe.”

Scratch was Blain’s accidental travel companion. They had met, if it could be called that, on the red clay plain as Blain was aimlessly wandering around. He and Scratch were the only two people/things walking on the soft clay paths that skirted the large holes. Blain had woken up curled in the fetal position on that plain perhaps three days earlier. He had sat up, held his head, and squinted out around him. There had been nothing except the gentle rise and fall of the earth. And then, the indents that sloped in and out resembling swimming pools or giant cereal bowls. When Blain had crept to the side of one of these and peaked in, he saw people silently pacing around or lying down contemplating the sky, which was

impossibly blue. The people looked hopelessly wilted and a little sad. Occasionally something foggy would appear in front of their eyes and they would pluck it out of the air and eat it.

Blain didn't want to go down into the holes, so he sat on the path for a long time. It hadn't taken him long to realize he was dead. No real place could be so like a movie. He spent, perhaps hours, just touching the earth. It had high clay content, gave under pressure and conformed to his ass over time, leaving a shallow, smooth indentation in the path. If Blain was still living he would have taken some of this soil home and given it to Lese to use for sculpting. But here Blain had done little more than rub the earth with his finger then sit on it.

Blain began walking after he became bored with sitting and it was in walking that he saw Scratch. Scratch stood a little under four feet tall and was staring blankly into a cereal bowl indentation. Blain wondered what social rules prevailed in the world of the dead. It was possible this little person would not let him pass. Would stand in the path like the billy goat of children's stories. The little guy was hairy enough to be a goat. When Blain got closer he couldn't help but marvel at how much hair the guy had. Then, the nose, it seemed to take up more room than humanly possible. It spread out like a bird taking flight across the middle of the face and the nostrils were so big that Blain had the urge to stick pebbles into them. This guy looked at him with deep-set round eyes and scratched the hair on his forearm. Blain started to sidle past and when he was abreast with the guy, Scratch turned and began walking with him. After a while Blain liked the company. Scratch would walk side by side with him or lead. Scratch would rub his head and show Blain how to think, remember, and then eat a memory. Licking, then savoring it, turning a seventh grade basketball shoe into a four course meal. From Scratch, Blain learned that memories had

tastes. Good memories tasted good. Bad memories tasted bad, and memories that were without feeling tasted that way. The only thing Scratch forgot to teach Blain was that memories should, for the most part, be saved.

Walking into the dead forest, Blain thought, “The world of the dead would have to have a dead forest. Wouldn’t possibly be complete without one. This is just fantastic. Fan-fucking-tastic.” Blain didn’t mind being redundant in his thoughts. He realized one day he would have to eat his memory of the word ‘fuck’ so he wanted to get the most out of it while he could. As they entered the forest, Blain reached out to touch the bark of the first tree he walked past and was amazed at the way the bark was crisscrossed with what resembled varicose veins. The forest trees carried no leaves, but occasionally, little oval shaped green ones winked up from the clay earth, which made absolutely no sense. But then again, neither did the birds which sat on the branches and cawed with eerie love. When one from a nearby tree took flight Blain was certain it was a cardinal and it creaked on beautiful but broken wings. Blain watched it fly off and tried to remember birds, all kinds of birds, even boring ones like ducks. He liked eggs, he liked breast meat, he liked giblets on occasion. But he had forgotten any other type of domestic fowl, what they looked like. All he could recall were ducks. The others were probably memories he had eaten. Lese had lived on a farm, had animals. Blain still remembered the cows and ducks, Lese’s face like a painted doll, but no other large birds. There were holes in Blain’s memories, blank spots, and blackouts. It was beginning to be disturbing. Blain thought in detail about ducks, Lese’s ducks. She had named her’s Duck, and Blain had named the other Blue. Although names were useless because the ducks looked identical and when they were fully grown and shitting all over the front porch, Lese’s father took them into town and dumped them at the park’s

pond. Blain thought about Duck or Blue, and before his face a foggy white duck appeared. Blain elbowed Scratch who looked at the duck with interest, like he wanted to touch it but was afraid the memory would shatter. Blain smiled at Scratch, thinking ‘this is a duck. This in particular is Duck, or maybe Blue. Lese loved them only when they were little.’ Blain then looked back to the memory, pulled it from the air and inhaled, hoping that with this memory he was only eating the memory of Duck and not the whole duck species.

Blain looked back over at Scratch who had been watching him intently. Scratch’s memories differed so wildly from Blain’s. Scratch ate leaves, small rodents, and a whole variety of insects Blain had never before seen outside of drawings in science and history books. Once, Blain even saw Scratch eat the Moon. Scratch had looked forlorn about that, but Blain still found it interesting because for Scratch, the moon memory was in amazing detail, right down to the patterns of rifts and valleys. Scratch took an equal amount of interest in Blain’s memories. One of the first memories Blain chose to eat was the river. He’d lived by it for the latter half of his life, so his memory of it snaking its way along the landscape was detailed and he sucked in its length like spaghetti. Scratch had watched the foggy memory from his deep set eyes and pointed his finger at the river then pointed that finger towards the horizon, what could have been north. After Blain had finished eating the river he started to follow Scratch north across the red clay plain.

Farther along in the forest, Scratch had sat down beneath a dead tree and closed his eyes. He looked almost happy or sun drenched, which was incredible considering this world lacked a true sun. Blain wondered if his memories would sustain him forever. Scratch was ancient. Old order of the species. Homo Erectus, Homo Sapiens something or other. Yet, he was still here, eating one leaf at a time, probably dying of hunger. Bad phrase. In agony from hunger. Blain wondered if he would have to eat through his loved ones and his life,

just to stay in some form of existence. And then, when he had eaten all of himself, his soul or what was left of it, what would happen?

Blain looked up into the blue sky. Here there was no Sun and no Moon, only light and endless blue sky. It was easy to lose track of time and perhaps they had been walking for days but even in death, no one could walk for days. Blain knelt down on the ground a few trees away from Scratch and raked his fingers through the soil which was still mostly clay.

When the hunger pains started, Blain thought once about Lese's face, but didn't want to eat her. He didn't want to eat anything and so shoved a handful of earth into his mouth. The red orange clay of it stuck to his teeth and smelled strangely of hay. It filled the back of his mouth and glued itself to his molars. There was no way he could swallow. He looked up into the barren tree branches then down at the trunks rising from the forest floor, chewing all the while. When Blain couldn't take the taste of it anymore he spit the dirt out into his hand. The surprise was that the earth had formed into a little figurine in his mouth. A tiny person shaped sculpture now stood in his palm. It looked like a child. Probably someone Blain knew, but the face was too small to pull out a resemblance. It was lovely though, and Blain couldn't help but wish to make another.

Blain spent some time eating earth and turning it into statues in his mouth. He had quite a collection by the time Scratch opened his eyes and moved. Scratch was curious about all of the little people and animals Blain had set up on the dirt. Blain had positioned them as if they were playing soccer, people in the sidelines cheering. Children versus adults on the field. The animals (horses, sheep, cows and a dog) set up at a short distance, also watching. Blain imagined the children to be winning the game. He kept eating dirt to see if

he could make a soccer ball, but he had no control over the statues his mouth chose to make.

Scratch messed up the soccer game by pulling figurines out one by one to look them over and smell. “They smell like hay,” Blain thought but didn’t say. Scratch seemed a little horrified with Blain for eating dirt, so Blain began shoving all of the statues into his pockets. Scratch looked at Blain, shrugged his hairy shoulders with a hint of sadness, and began to walk off down the path into the trees. Blain followed.

It wasn’t long before hunger was all Blain could think of. The dirt hadn’t helped at all, if anything it had made him hungrier and it hurt not in his stomach, but in his head. Things spun. Blain leaned unto a dead tree for support and threw a little statue at Scratch to stop him from walking away. Blain pulled a twig off a nearby tree and slumped to the earth. He would not eat his memories again and looked at Scratch for confirmation. “I’ll eat every fucking tree before I eat another piece of my life,” he thought. Blain chewed on the twig but had as much trouble swallowing as he had with the dirt. When he spit out the remains, it hadn’t formed into statues, and instead just lay in his palm as pulp. Blain wiped his hand off onto the bark of the tree behind him and continued following Scratch through the forest.

Paths skirted out through the trees in every direction, but Scratch had his own course and never seemed to waiver in it. Yet Scratch wasn’t a determined walker, he sauntered and strolled. Scratch’s actions belied that this place lacked danger and tension of all kinds. The landscape was harmless, stretched on forever in reds, browns, oranges, and blues. Frightening animals were nonexistent. Perhaps they had their own dead world; perhaps this one was only for people, birds and trees. All the things that cohabitate.

Never in all his life had Blain been really hungry. Food was easy to come by, and large quantities were never considered a luxury. In life, he knew he was lucky. He

remembered the way his Mother would lecture him about starving children in third world countries and because he was once a good child he had thought about those starving children and pitied them. In death, Blain didn't pity them, he was sure his hunger was of a different variety. It wasn't of the body, it was a pain that brought him to his knees and made his eyes water. It was as if his brain was pulsating or suffocating or being cinched with a tight belt. It was a very odd feeling. Blain ate his toes as a form of distraction.

At some point, weeks or years into death, Blain and Scratch reached the dead river. Blain hobbled (his movement had been impeded for some time by the lack of toes) to the edge of the river and touched it with his hand. The green water enveloped his fingers and gave reluctantly. It had the consistency of cake batter but Blain could feel a current and he looked at Scratch in bewilderment but Scratch was busy observing other people. The river's edge was crowded. Gray bodies moved around on the shore and at the tree line, pacing busily. Blain could image them all in a market or those other shopping places whose names he had forgotten. All the dead people were oblivious of the others walking next to them: no eye contact, complete silence. The silence was what Blain found disturbing. No one ever spoke in the world of the dead and even the river moved silently along.

Perhaps everyone was too busy eating their memories. Perhaps memories of noise could be eaten and sound became nonexistent. Blain wondered for a moment if he had eaten sound, but realized he couldn't have since it was a concept he still remembered. Yet, even with this consolation, his memories were fast disappearing. His hunger had been too painful.

Blain pulled out one of the figurines he still carried in his pocket. He set it on the water and it floated off, breaking certain laws of physics. The statue was of a dog and it

seemed to bob and wag its tale as the current carried it out. Blain emptied his pockets and sent other figurines out to float, some of things he could no longer name: exotic animals, people who might be family.

When Blain finally looked up, he noticed something strange. Out of the pack of pacing dead people Lese appeared. She, definitely living, the only truly colorful thing for miles, was walking over the shore to him. Everyone noticed her, flocked to the shore and looked at her with faces searching themselves for recognition. As she passed, the people leaned towards her and fell in her wake like a reversal of the Red Sea parting. They lay on the shore throwing their hands and memories into the air, a silent and chaotic scene.

Lese walked straight up to Blain, grabbed his hand and babbled. Her other hand moved like a little windmill around her face. She cried that she loved him, that she had gone through hell to get here, that he should come back with her, that it was a real option. He could do it. All those things in fairy tales and Greek myths were real. Death was impermanent, easily reversible, a big fat joke. Over Lese's shoulder Blain could see Scratch sitting on the shore about to stick his foot in his mouth. Blain thought he should go stop him. Scratch would miss his toes. But, Lese burst into tears which Blain found familiar, though he had forgotten why.

Lese and Blain had been thrown together by friends and the bad choices made when drunk. The first time they had sex there had been no planning and no condom. After telling him she wasn't on any sort of birth control, Lese twisted beneath him and begged. "Please. Please. Come all over me." This was the memory of Lese that Blain could never eat, although he had managed to eat most of their life together.

Lese looked like a thousand pictures of women crying and Blain really wanted her to stop. He could imagine all the things he wanted to tell her. He wanted to tell her how far he

had walked. He wanted to tell her, but not show her, that he had eaten his toes. He knew she would love the little clay figures. That if she held one she would immediately stop crying. Blain took the last clay figure out of his pocket and opened his palm and his mouth to speak to Lese. To begin telling her all the things he had imagined saying to someone, anyone living. And to express his uncertainty of going back to life without his toes. He missed them already. But Blain hadn't spoken a word since he got here. His mouth didn't know how to work right and when he opened it residue of memories, clay, tree bark, and his toes fell to the ground in front of him. Blain threw up at Lese's feet.

THE MAN WITH A LONG TONGUE

It was in those, the first five moments of rest that the man opened his mouth and let his tongue fall out. It unraveled and hit the asphalt with a smack two feet from the tips of the man's shoes.

The man with a long tongue squinted at the position of the sun and made himself more comfortable on the stairs to the back door of the Wal-Mart. He breathed deeply and taped his fingers on the concrete steps. After a pause, he reached and picked up the tip of his tongue, wiped the dirt off, and began to roll it back up. He rolled it quickly with expert fingers then shoved the pink ball into his mouth. The man then continued picking up trash in the back parking lot and periodically checked the position of the sun because he couldn't wait to go home even though nothing was there.

Once inside his front door, the man with a long tongue opened his mouth and let his tongue unroll. He got a beer and sat in his recliner to drink with a certain skill in open mouthed imbibing. The man watched TV and never breathed a sound. He couldn't talk. When his tongue was inside his mouth, he could barely say anything and when it was unwound, hanging to the floor, the lisp was so bad few people could understand him. Also, explaining the length, width, flatness, uselessness, and unexplainable reality of a four-foot-long tongue was difficult, so he didn't even bother to talk. He cleaned the Wal-Mart parking lot, drank beer, and that was it.

Sometimes when the man finished a thirty pack, he felt like dancing. So he danced around his living room with his tongue standing in for Ginger Rogers. Other times, he didn't feel like dancing and he tried three times to hang himself with his tongue. It never worked, but the man liked the irony of hanging by the tongue and laughed demonically all

the while he made his noose. Mostly though, for safety's sake, he stopped drinking at ten or eleven beers and just slept the night through in his recliner.

One night, after twenty-five beers, he couldn't really see and felt like neither dancing nor hanging. He went instead to the kitchen because he felt like eating. Once there he had an epiphany over the cutting board, because never, in all his life, had he thought about cutting out his tongue. Laying it out on the counter he chopped it into sixty-two pieces along with missing a few times and hacking away at his fingers, mangling his forearm to red muscular shreds. He bled to death long before dawn.

THE MOTHER SEA AND THE MOON WITH WAS PROBABLY FULL

Rob knew the pond was deep, endless, bottomless. When he was twelve, he watched his friend get sucked below the surface and leave not even a bubble. Rob also knew the pond fooled people: it looked tame and conquered with its stone shores and white cemented sides, but those sides didn't last forever unlike the water itself. The pond was pushed between buildings and a sign that warned away swimmers. But people fished there catching delightful things. Sometimes the fish were normal, sometimes exotic; sometimes they were downright otherworldly with translucent scales and no eyes.

When he was younger Rob would find the longest pieces of rope imaginable. He'd tie a rock to one end and let it drop just to see where it ended, if it ever touched bottom. But it never did. The rope always ran out and Rob one day gave up trying to find the depth and instead started trying to fish out his friend or the truth. Everyday Rob visited the pond. It became his job, a way for him to earn his keep and make people forget his horrible talent/affliction. Rob fished and sold his catch at the butcher shop next door to the pond. In order to not turn people into ladybugs, he held up signs warning away those who were curious and wishing to swim. Deaths and disappearances dropped dramatically. Life, for a while, was good.

The day Rob met Gina she was sucking on a cough drop and wearing a silver dress with a slash across the center. Her belly was as pale as the underside of a fish. Rob held up his notepad that read *Stop! This is a pond of evil proportions!* She just smiled and said "Hi." Finally, Rob couldn't help it, or write it down on his notepad fast enough, and said "you are a translucent fish girl?"

She said "Actually, no."

“Not a fish?”

“No.”

Rob then told her about the dangers of swimming at this particular pond. He pointed out all the signs which he had made. The original sign said *swimmers beware*. Rob’s signs listed the names of disappeared swimmers and the types of strange fish and objects which had been caught there. At the bottom of each sign little letters in red said, *You can’t really want to swim Here?!*

Gina said she never had any intention of swimming in the pond. Apparently she thought it was unnatural for a pond to be sandwiched between two buildings and have stone sides. When Rob asked what was natural for a pond she said dirt and bottoms. That day Rob caught first a leather and sheepskin hat, then a fish that had legs. Gina begged to keep both and Rob gave in only when Gina promised to share.

At Rob’s home Gina hung the hat on the balcony to dry and then she and Rob poked at the fish with legs as it stood helpless in a bucket. When they ate it, they couldn’t stop commenting on how much it tasted like grass.

Every morning Gina threw a sip of tea into the air. She liked the way it caught the light when headed both up and down. She told Rob that she did this because it was a sign of thankfulness for the earth and Rob refrained from pointing out that the tea would never actually get to the earth. It fell on the concrete of the street, and would most likely evaporate. Or if it was lucky, it might run off into the drains (metal) and flow to a stream (cemented path) and eventually make it to the sea (far from natural). Every night Gina would tell Rob facts about far away places; the Gobi desert occupies 400,200 square kilometers, Housgul Lake is 2,621 square kilometers and is called the mother sea, the highest

peak is Tavan Gait at 4,374 meters above sea level, and the far away fabled high plains were a generally sunny place with 260 days of clear skies. Gina would say that all she really wanted was to somehow get there. She'd never been.

Rob would tell Gina that when he was little his mother would tell him being gifted was a blessing. Each time he came home from school crying or bruised she said 'you are blessed!' But Rob felt particularly unblessed, and he didn't feel like it was his fault for being born with a talent/affliction others couldn't understand. Rob turned people into giant ladybugs whenever he talked to them. On the playground and at the dinner table, they turned into giant intolerable bugs. Garishly colored, the blacks and reds radioactively bright. The characteristically convex shell, its pleasing hemispherical shape. It was all pretty fucking scary to a toddler (which was when Rob first became conscious of his powers) and it didn't get any better or easier to deal with as Rob progressed to, then passed through, adolescence.

Rob told Gina that he loved her the moment she never turned into a giant ladybug.

At some point, Gina moved in with Rob. She carried all her belongings in a wheelbarrow through the streets to Rob's building that sat two blocks from the pond. They lived together on the second floor of that apartment building in the shape of a giant octagon with the middle missing. It resembled a geometric donut from the air. It was eight stories high, with one octagonal acre in the center, where a wheat and barley mix called whearly was raised. A family on the third floor farmed it.

On the eighth floor of the apartment building lived a new couple who had just moved from god knows where. They threw parties constantly and seemed rich and fabulous. Rob avoided talking to them at all costs. When they passed on the stairs they would smile brightly, say hello or comment on the weather and Rob in turn would smile and

nod, being careful not to speak. Others in the building had become acclimated to Rob's special powers. They didn't seem to mind being turned into giant ladybugs while they spoke to Rob, mostly because they realized their altered state was only for a short time. But the new people probably wouldn't get it. They were incredibly popular and floated around the building and the dirt paths of the whearly field chatting up the neighbors. When they threw parties everyone in the building was invited and the new people's friends were gorgeous, sophisticated, and powerful. They were rumored to have come from the other side of the city, the side no one could ever see because the haze in the sky obliterated the view. But it had to be great over there, on the other side.

The night Gina decided to attend one of the new people's parties Rob knew it was going to be trouble. Gina had sat in front of him in a black dress with the black shawl Rob had fished up from the pond and said she was going to the party and would be back soon. Four hours later the next thing out of Gina's mouth was, 'they took the credit cards, they took the shawl, and they took my Eisenhower silver dollar!' Gina was angry, crying and stomping on the tiles of their bedroom floor.

"We call the credit card company. I'll fish you up another shawl."

"But the Eisenhower silver dollar?"

This time Rob tapped the tiles. He had fished up that silver dollar for her. Why on earth had she taken it to the party with her? "Why did you take it?"

"It's good luck. Listen, babe, they took it all while I wasn't looking." Rob could smell liquor on her breath when she stood close to him trying to sway his reserve with her body. "I told them if they didn't give it back you'd go change them into insects. Come on. Please."

Rob was confused; it didn't work like that, his powers.

It seemed to take ages to climb the six flights of stairs. Rob sighed repeatedly. At each landing he walked over to the guardrails and stared out onto the whearly field which bent every which way from the downdraft's sporadic winds. He knew that this task would inevitably suck.

Noise and light leaked out of the new couple's apartment door which stood slightly ajar. Rob snuck in and headed for the hors d'oeuvres table. He had no idea what to do and he was hungry. For a while Rob stood there next to a man in a black suit munching on whearly bread, smoked pond fish, and drinking Shiraz.

"This is lovely bread isn't it?" The man eventually spoke.

Rob shifted uncomfortably but he was there to do a job. "Yes." When he opened his mouth the man transformed into a giant ladybug.

"So delicious" The ladybug munched on whearly bread with goat cheese and held his wineglass by the base, the showoff.

"It comes from the bakery in the basement. The grain is grown in our courtyard."

"Amazing! God I love the country," the ladybug said while he tore off more bread. Rob just looked at him wondering how long it would take him to notice his condition.

"Yes, they are very resourceful here..." A woman jumped into the conversation transforming into a giant ladybug as Rob mumbled "yup." Soon a whole circle of people had gathered around and then transformed into ladybugs all the while talking about the wonders of the country. Rob didn't even have to do anything but mutter "ah yes" occasionally. Then feeling his work was done he moved on. Just walked off. No need to say excuse me to a bunch of giant ladybugs.

Rob's neighbors stood in a corner looking horrified. They shook their heads in unison, wide-eyed, almost angry. But Rob didn't stop. He began to take joy in this job of turning everyone into giant ladybugs. He walked up to all the fabulous folks from the other side of the city. He said hi, how ya doing? And they transformed. Soon the whole party consisted of giant ladybugs with the exception of the hosts and the neighbors. The neighbors filed out shamed, and Rob headed for the jackpot, the hosts, the stealers of silver dollars.

In a corner, the new couple stood deep in conversation. Rob thought they looked in love, but as he moved closer he knew they were fighting because of the woman's tensed back and fisted hands. Rob stood behind them and cleared his throat.

The man moved in front of the woman and asked how Rob found the party. "Brilliant" Rob grated out and enjoyed how the man turned into a ladybug. The man put a little black leg on Rob's shoulder in a grasp of friendship. He talked of how they needed to fish together some time. He then tried to say something about Gina's visit and subsequent intoxication. Rob looked at the little black leg resting on his shoulder and knew he could snap that thing in half. It always amazed him that such tiny legs supported so much weight. Ladybugs were spectacular things.

Rob looked past the ladybug in front of him to the hostess and saw that she noticed. She looked frightened and vulnerable in a room full of giant ladybugs mingling, holding their wine glasses by the base, with their bug juices clearly oozing from their segmented bellies. Rob looked directly in her eye and said 'boo.'

As a ladybug she screamed and screamed, she brushed her legs over her body, taped at her pronotum, probably wishing she felt hair or had fingers. With the scream, everyone seemed to notice her and their own state of being. They shouted and many secreted a foul

smelling odor like ladybugs often do when distressed or threatened. Rob, meanwhile, ran away, down the steps, and into Gina's arms.

He felt powerful. He wished those ladybugs would stay ladybugs forever, but even now they were probably turning back into themselves. Were probably screaming for his blood or his head on a platter. Gina agreed and they listened at their window for the sound of their building in an uproar. When they heard the emergency sirens and the sound of blunt objects being beaten against the stairwell walls they knew they were in trouble. Gina asked Rob if he had retrieved the Eisenhower silver dollar and Rob shrugged his shoulders, his euphoria suddenly gone.

Gina took out the sword Rob had once fished out of the pond and told him they were leaving. They escaped from their balcony, thankful they lived only on the second floor. Once in the street Rob realized Gina was crying, again. From a first floor window one of their neighbors leaned out and whispered why Rob had to go and turn powerful, excitable strangers into ladybugs. Rob looked at the old woman and she sighed saying, "just go."

Halfway down the street Rob looked at Gina and asked where they were going. "The pond" Gina answered and pushed Rob through the night in front of her.

The pond reflected the moon, which was probably full, and it gleamed in the dark water. Floating near the reflection of the moon a single shoe bobbed on the surface.

"What do we do now?" Gina asked, still trying to catch her breath from running. Rob wanted to tell Gina that this was all her fault, that none of this would have happened if she had just left the goddamned silver dollar at home. When he told her just that, Gina jumped into the pond, sword and all. Rob leaned over and looked in, wondering if she had been sucked down, but she surfaced.

"Listen, I'm sorry."

Rob crossed his arms.

“Come in the water.”

Rob pointed out that this would kill them, but Gina said she thought it would be ok and that it would actually be very good. When Rob asked why, she said she was convinced the pond would suck them down to someplace better and that all the things Rob fished up in the pond had to have come from somewhere. Rob looked up to the moon which was probably full and wished the pond had a bottom. What Gina said was possible, but Rob would rather have safely tested the theory first. Somewhere out in the streets the people were looking for him, screaming and in hysterics. From the sound of it, they had grown into a filthy mob. Rob looked down in time to see Gina’s flailing hand disappearing into the water and without a second thought he leapt in after her.

Not since he was 12 had Rob been in the pond’s water. When he jumped in he landed practically on top of Gina who was disappearing quickly into the depth. He touched her arm and then the sword but could grasp neither. He could feel the water dragging her down, but it didn’t seem to want him. Rob went to the surface, took a breath and descended again, his arms spread out willing to grasp anything they touched. His fingers found Gina’s hair and Rob grabbed onto it, the sucking began to envelop him too, and pulling her hair, Rob followed Gina down.

THE EARTH IS FLAT

I should've died then. That morning when he told me his name. It would've worked, been prophetic, ironic, and clean. He'd tell me his name was Death and I would have died. Just like that. Like a bad fairy tale. But it didn't happen that way. Instead, AZ is pacing around with a kitchen knife calling me a cunt for spitting my food out onto the table.

After I found out AZ's name, and then some other things about him, he cooked me dinner in the evenings as a form of penance. He cooked really good things. AZ would come home with a large bag of groceries. He carved the pulp out of grapefruits and stuffed the empty skins full of white rice mixed with cooking wine and bits of vegetables. He bought two deep blue dishes so that he could arrange raggedly cut meats on them in ways that brought out all color. Occasionally I would eat the food, chew it, and spit it out; sometimes on the plate, sometimes on the table, sometimes on him. I told him cows did this. He said cows chewed their food and kept the cud in their first stomach to re-chew at a later date. He said I was doing what babies do. I told him cheap shot, not at all accurate, I had aim.

After the first week of knowing AZ, I turned to face him while the sunlight pooled on the bed. I stretched in that sunlight, let it shine on my dark hair, and smiled.

“You haven't told me your name yet.”

“Perhaps I can't.”

“Everyone has a name.”

“Call me AZ then.”

“Ok.” I smiled and looked out the window into the morning and the yard. It was a fine day out there. A little street, some people walking, my tomato bushes growing in pots on the fire escape. I loved tomatoes. Fresh and red.

“What does AZ stand for?” I couldn’t help asking.

AZ sighed, and I thought about how strange it was to think of him with a name instead of as just ‘the man’, or ‘the man with a pale beard.’

“I don’t want to tell you.”

I pouted. In play. Stuck my lower lip out, turned down my head, widened my eyes for him. I didn’t even say a thing.

“Stands for Azra Death. Happy now?”

But No, I thought. Most definitely not, I thought. That was a very bad joke, I now know.

At the beginning of that first week, my life was constant and quiet. I was lonely though. People called me beautiful. I met AZ after work as I walked down the street. I didn’t think you could meet real people this way, but he sat on a stone doorstep. As I walked past without glancing he said “how can something so beautiful be so cold?” I glanced then, and stopped. He got up and walked with me to a café.

For pretended privacy, cafés are nice. We drank coffee, exchanged few words, but then, speaking is only a fraction of communication. Beneath the table his knee brushed mine. Above the table his hand lifted the small pitcher to pour me milk. I told him I didn’t drink coffee with milk. Turns out he didn’t either.

When leaving, I thought he might be homeless or at least poor. After all who sits in stone doorways? I took my coin purse out to pay. He let me; then followed me home.

In my flat I made more coffee, because I didn't know what else to do or what else to offer. He stood in the doorway of the kitchen, while I made a great show of how well I wielded a knife as I cut an apple for us to eat. After this, we sat on the fire escape with a tomato plant between us drinking coffee, sharing apples. It was only when he moved the tomato plant that I noticed how pale his beard was, and how dark his eyes were. His fingernails were pink. His hands were the most elegant I had ever seen.

For some reason I told him how as a child I strapped wood boards to my feet for sandals. I should have said more, said *this was how the authorities found me, realized I had no home, or it was only when I wore boards that I discovered how much I missed my family.* But I never said the straightforward things. Nothing I ever said made sense. That is why when it was dark and I was tired, I threw an old sheet and a pillow on the floor by my bed and stretched out on the full width of mine completely clothed. I said 'Here's these. Goodnight.' I should have forced sounds through my mouth. I should have said *remember how I worked with knives? Sleep on the floor if you sleep here at all.*

The next evening I sat beside him on the fire escape, our legs dangled into air, three stories below us was the street. There was little noise on it, no shoes clicking on the stones, no voices. Perhaps he should have taken a cue from the lack of sound, but he spoke saying 'I too wore wood boards as a child.'

Now of course, I don't believe him. Now, I have a little more practice with lies, but that night I threw nothing to the floor for him, instead I made a great show of how wide my bed was, of how little room I took up on it.

For a few weeks after I met AZ, I went to work every morning thrilled. I hummed while I spent my days attaching wires to buttons that would later be installed in cars to open

windows then close them. I even began talking to the middle-aged women during the lunch breaks, in which I ate food AZ had prepared for me, healthy things; lean meats, vegetables, and yogurt.

Those women talked sparingly, chewed their lunch with care, laughed slowly at dirty jokes. When I began to join them for lunch they made a slim place for me and my folding chair at the table. Eyeing me, they said I glowed. They asked if he made me smile. I shrugged, supposing he did.

But then, because there is no life without beauty and no beauty without pain I decided that it was the natural progression of things when one day AZ began punching himself in the head while I was on my knees with his dick in my mouth. He used both hands. I could hear the knuckles cracking. It's hard I figured, so I knelt for a moment, motionless, before I reached up to pull his arms away, then realized I had to fight him to the ground where he began to cry. I smoothed his hair and rocked him in my lap and wondered how half an hour before he had turned to me and said 'question.' I had nodded; our faces were inches apart.

“Let's pretend for a moment that the earth is, in fact, flat. Would you be brave enough to jump off the side? And if you were and did, which side would you choose?”

I wondered, then asked. “Does this actually matter?”

“Very much so. Or at least the side you jump from does.”

When he grinned at me his face was sweet and clean.

Each day I took the train to and from work and would spend my time looking idly around the carriage noticing things. People on trains are a combination of all things. I was amazed by noses; so much variety in only noses. I could build a museum exhibit about all

the different types of noses found in that train carriage. Noses of people. People who were sweating, shifty-eyed, sleeping, reading, staring out the window, putting their feet on chairs, looking at other people in the train, having animated yet muffled conversations...I wished to know the conversations they were muffling. Then the memory of AZ crawled from a nondescript nose and I worried because I knew less about AZ than I did about lip reading. There may have been as little to know as AZ claimed, but loving him was licking my own skin. Pointless. Self satisfactory.

AZ and I don't talk about certain things. We don't talk like normal people. In fact, we don't talk much at all. When we do speak, our words are borrowed and full to bursting. That day I came home from work and leaned in the kitchen doorway, waiting for AZ to do something, whatever that might be. I had learned to take my cues from him.

AZ turned to me, prompting, "My eyes are enormous, no?"

"What big eyes you have." I confirm.

"The better to see you with."

"What big ears you have." Catching on.

"The better to hear you with."

"What big teeth you have."

"The better to eat you with."

I had known since the second 'the better' what would happen, so I was prepared to sprint. Started even before his last line. In my small flat, extravagant chases were impossible. AZ let me escape several times before he grabbed me. Then I went through the motions of evasion while he went through the motions of suppression and when he picked me up, dropped me on my head, and therefore gave me a black eye, I was not immediately

surprised. AZ swore he didn't mean to do this, said things like, "you do not understand the previous relationships that ran through my life and then ruined it."

I said, "Sleep on the floor." I thought, *really, what the fuck kind of excuse is that?*

By now, I have tried many ways to kill AZ, but the bastard has nine lives. I have poured cleaning fluids in his coffee. I have taken parts from out of his car. When he stands too close to the fire escape I push him and when he doesn't plummet, screaming, over the rail I pretend it was all play. I also try small things, little ways to annoy him. I give him wrong phone numbers, incorrect times, bad directions. On cold mornings I get up early just to go to the toilet and sprinkle cold water on the seat so that he gets a rude surprise when he sits to take his morning shit. I shred his magazines, throw his CD's from windows, delete voice mails intended for him. Once, I almost cut his pointer finger off when he reached for a piece of red pepper I was cutting. Even though he was standing there bleeding, I refused to drive him to the hospital.

Eventually, he'll get tired of me, move on to another doorway. I already see him falter. But the best thing, by far, would have been for me to die then, when he told me his name. He'd tell me he was Death and I would gasp, my eyes would widen like I couldn't breathe, like I was being suffocated in a way someone should paint and label *love at the conception of understanding*. I would fall forward, or backward, my dark hair gleaming in sunlight. I would never sing again.

QUEENIE

Nobit is an idyllic place where children catch crawdads in creeks and everyone belongs to a church. The residents are all charmingly eccentric; an old woman who watches her neighbors with binoculars, an old man that has a unique sense of electricity and invents machines that make his job moving tables easier. There is drug store with soda fountain, a diner with red counters and checked cloth. Children commandeer the streets on bicycles. They even play kick-the-can. In more prosperous days there was a pool table factory on the edge of town where the concrete met the fields. The water tower next to this factory was painted a giant eight ball, which was later painted light blue, then painted back to a giant eight ball.

Nobit has one stoplight and the one, before mentioned diner where all of the old farmers went to drink coffee mid morning and gossip as if they were old women. Every year a town festival is held that celebrates a civil war general who deigned to bless the town with his presence for weeks, when in fact, he should have been fighting elsewhere. No one remembers which side he was on, and no one really cares because it is a strikingly homogeneous town with only two types of people. White people that matter and white people that don't.

There isn't a movie theater anywhere within forty miles and the high school kids make their own fun. They drink six packs and drive the endless gravel roads for hours and hours until they end up three counties away from where they started. They drink twelve packs then run screaming at midnight through abandoned farmhouses that are rumored to be haunted. They drive a mile stretch from one end of town to the other and gather in a parking lot to drink hard liquor out of styrofoam cups. They drive out to graveyards from

the last century and sit with their cars off for five minutes without talking until handprints become visible on their windshields. They also torment Queenie.

Kristin, short, stocky, ample backside and dark hair, stands in the high school hallway telling a group of girls all about Queenie. Kristin is the undisputed authority on the subject because she is the one who actually went and knocked on Queenie's door. Queenie came running out of the house naked, with a shotgun, and Kristin swore up and down, sideways and back, that Queenie shot at them as they drove away. But some doubted considering Kristen's tendency for exaggeration.

Queenie was a phenomenon, and there was endless fun in tormenting her, or just driving by her house swearing later that a voodoo doll was in the window. Kristen told and retold Queenie's story with relish. Queenie had gone to Nobit High School back in the days. She had been popular, dated the football captain. At prom, that all-important event, Queenie had been ditched by her boyfriend for her younger sister and after that Queenie went understandably crazy. She never took off her tiara or left the house. She had become the town's Mrs. Haversham, wandering around in her farmhouse instead of her mansion.

For a whole school year the fun had been to drive by Queenie's house. To get drunk, run up and knock on her door or peek in her window. Besides the shotgun incident there was nothing more to it than that. In the spring, it was rumored that she had went to a sanatorium and all the fun ended. In a year everyone had forgotten. Those that remembered just kept it to the facts. "Headed south on that gravel road out by Alana's, there lived an old woman in a falling down white farm house. We called her Queenie and liked to bother her...I forgot why."

BODY NOSTALGIA

In my life, I have bought only three packs of cigarettes. These are Marlboro lights, long and on sale. The moon is a crescent next to the steeple which sticks like a knitting needle, into the roof of the Baptist church next door. It's almost romantic sitting here on the back porch with my cigarettes and gin and the paint peeling off the porch stairs. The sky is blue with a streak of gray shading the moon. The leaves have fallen off the tree. The church has six air conditioner units. I'm thinking about a boy named Scott who whispered he was falling for me one night as he rubbed my naked back while I pretended to be sleeping. When I finally fell asleep I dreamt I pulled my spinal cord out of my body like I was gutting a fish. The doctor of my dream stared at it judiciously, said 'it's cancer' and I cried.

ME AND THE GOLDEN SNUFFBOX

When I decided I must see the world (because I had read so much about it in books) my parents gave me a present of a little golden snuffbox. However, I do not think that they knew it was a snuffbox, because they wouldn't have approved. Standing in our driveway on a warm American morning with the trees shading our faces, my mother said it was just a handy little something to carry around in my pocket. "Besides," she said "your great uncle bought that in Europe during the war and carried it around in his pocket."

All through the plane ride I would periodically take out the little golden snuffbox and look at it. Actually I need to say that it wasn't even a golden snuffbox, just a wonderful gilt imitation. My family is very superstitious and I am known to have peculiarities myself. I was half expecting the golden snuffbox to be magic, or at least be dented from a bullet that it heroically saved my great uncle from receiving full in the chest. However, it was not magic or dented and I think my mother gave it to me because of the mirror on the inside of the lid. She knows how I always worry that something is in my teeth.

In Europe, I carried the snuffbox on my person at most times. It was thin and slipped quite unnoticed into pockets. In the golden snuffbox I carried aspirin, folded forint bills, or safety pins. It was never used to hold snuff, except for once in Germany. I was sitting in a bar hitting on my friend Daniel after the consumption of two and a half beers. An older gentleman and I mean gentleman, because of his suit, his voice and his neatly combed hair, began to take interest in Daniel and myself. He sat down at our booth, drank beer with us, and offered us snuff. In delight I showed him my golden snuffbox and he filled it out of courtesy. He then began telling Daniel that he looked like Apollo. I had to

agree. Daniel did look like Apollo. The following day at another bar, I opened my snuffbox to see it filled with snuff and marveled.

Daniel loved to travel and convinced our group to go to Romania. We rented a car and once over the border stopped at the first town to use a cash machine. There were five of us students packed into the box-like car. I sat mostly between Daniel and Luke in the backseat. We shunned seatbelts, and sat with our shoulders and knees touching. As we walked through the streets of the border town Luke, who was already drunk, gave some money and a beer to a thin, brown haired, Romanian boy. The boy came back with a sandwich and a half dozen other children.

They were beautiful children, the girls with colorful rags in their hair, and the boys with eyes brown and luminous. They tailed us through the streets as we emptied one ATM after another. We extracted about 30 American dollars, a Romanians monthly paycheck. The children gathered around us clamoring and pulling at our clothes. Amelie, sitting on a bench, was spontaneously kissed on the cheek by a little boy and Daniel took a picture. They did it good-naturedly, young beggars. They believed we were kind and rich. A little girl with a blue and gold handkerchief on her head took a liking to me and I gave her some Hungarian coins from out of my golden snuffbox, then I gave her all the change in my pocket.

She made the sign of the cross and beseeched me for more money. I looked at her like she was one of my little cousins and spoke to Luke and Kevin about her. "Look how pretty she is. Look how kind she is." Kevin shrugged his shoulders and we walked back to the van. The little girl took my hand and walked beside me; we skipped. At the car I milled around waiting for others in the group to get there. The little girl spoke to me like I knew

exactly what she said. I smiled at her, and then she rolled back the sleeves of the brown sweater she wore over her dress. Huge red sores covered her lightly browned arms. Several of which looked aggravated from the rough sweater. I gasped, lost my smile, and took an involuntary step back...how could I not? I rubbed my hands on the sides of my jeans and wished for the girl to roll down her sleeves. The rest of the group soon arrived and piled into the car. The children stood at the door of the car begging. Kevin and Luke in exasperation handed the little girl something and shut the door. I could see her look down at her hand in delight. We (she and I) realized at the same moment what it was, an empty wrapper of the Mars bar that Luke had been eating. I could see her face dissolve when she realized that she was holding our trash.

I want to say that I did something brave and important at that moment. I want to say that I hit Kevin and Luke or at least told them they were fuckers and then pulled open the car door and gave the girl something, but the only thing I had in my pocket was the golden snuffbox, so I didn't do anything. I continued to sit in my seat as we pulled out of our parking spot on a side street, underneath a leafless tree. I continued to watch the girl as we pulled away until Luke's vast head obscured my view.

This is not where I stopped thinking about the little girl with a blue and gold handkerchief on her head. When I was standing on a frozen hillside watching the early morning sun pull itself over the Carpathians and into the sky, I thought about my footsteps in the snow. I thought about the miserable tracks I left. Eaten up by guilt I was vainly searching for something to give to that girl. I wanted to stop in that same town on the way back and walk the streets until I found her by the red sores on her arms. This was not possible.

In a town further on, we frolicked in a clock tower with revolving wooden saints in a mechanical clock. From the top of the tower I traced with my finger the outline on the horizon of the 11 towers of the city walls. Daniel and Amelie, in their wool hats and wool gloves leaned on each other in the streets and kicked up their heels in glee. In a half-hidden courtyard we found a wine cellar where I bought a small bottle of plum brandy. I loved the smell of that cellar. Daniel, Amelie, and I lingered there, tasting brandy and talking to the owner. In the courtyard, an old woman watched us from a window, a cat looked cold sitting in a wooden chair, and what looked like mold grew on the stones.

Back at the car I sat on the curb of the street and made a sandwich on my knees from bread, meat, and cheese. Seven and eight year old children began to seek us out again. I gave them the rest of my meat and cheese, then the rest of my bread. One boy with short-cropped hair put both his hands on my knees and looked me in the eye. There was something of disdain and curiosity in it. He looked at me like the first European explorers must have looked at the incomprehensibility of the platypus, or the llama, or the fish that live so long in caves they are translucent. To him I was that. And to this boy I gave my golden snuffbox.

Later that night, I was curled under blankets with the wood stove close to me pumping heat into the rented room. I was awake and afraid to go to sleep because I might snore. I was also unhappy because I didn't have my golden snuffbox. When I gave that boy the golden snuffbox, he looked at it and then opened it. He pocketed it without comment and then walked away, shuffling his feet as he went. As we drove away I could see him sitting on a stone stair watching us go.

LUKE AND THE RIVER OF GOLDEN DREAMS

As a young man, Leda's grandfather crossed his river and a yellow prairie to meet a woman who seemed to grow out of the ground, inseparable from the soil and yellow grasses. Her family lived in a house with so many holes that she was always more comfortable in the outdoors. Leda's grandfather, a tall thin man, the bones of his face protruding, looked so out of place among them, people who had been staring so long into the sky and grass sea that they were unable to remember any other past.

They made an unlikely pair but were married and when the dust storms hit in the night Leda's grandfather wrapped his hands around the waist and into the hair of his wife as a way of knowing the unfamiliar. Eventually, they moved back to the rivers, had seven sons and two daughters, the first of whom lay on a pillow and died days after her birth because a piece of her spine was missing. In all this, Leda's father was the sixth son, and in his youth crossed two rivers to meet a woman who was more water than he was. They were married and had two children, the first of whom, Luke, was perfect except for occasional debilitating fits of hiccups, and the second of whom was Leda.

From birth, Luke could naturally swim and save things. He was the most careful and graceful child anyone had ever known. Hiccups were his only downfall. When a neighbor boy, who had been playing with matches, caught his shirt on fire, Luke ran to him, enveloped him in what looked like a hug and rolled him in the grass until all that was left of the flame was a scorch mark on the shirt and a burn on the skin beneath it. When a rabid dog growled at and began chasing a group of kindergarteners as they walked home from school, Luke distracted it in a delicate dance and even hit it with a piece of wood when it

lunged at his throat. But when the vet put the dog down because there was nothing that could be done for it, Luke shed an unmistakable tear.

Luke taught Leda to swim in the pond behind their grandparent's house and built a raft out of dead logs for her when she gave up swimming for Lent. After that was over they attached one end of a rope to the raft and the other end to a rock and sent the raft to the middle of the pond. Leda spent hours reading books on the raft and watching the snakes and fish swim just beneath the surface of the water. Luke swam as good as, and perhaps better than, a fish. Swimming was just something he could do. Most things were something Luke could do and often he tried to do all of them. Once in high school, he was in the honor society, student government, Science club, Math club, football and track, just to name a few. His room was awash with medals.

The first night Luke swam across the river he did it because a beautiful girl was on the other side and the closest bridge was 20 miles north. When he came home the next morning tired, wet, leaving puddles wherever he walked and told the family at breakfast that he was in love and had swum the river, no one was really that surprised. Leda's mother threw a fit about the safety of it all considering the spring rains, and snow melt from upriver and the notoriously evil current. Leda however, wasn't a bit worried because Luke was, well, gifted, and possibly superhuman.

Night after night he swam the river to get to the girl who waited for him on the other side with a blanket and a thermos and other things no one watching could see from their side of the river. People from town began to show up just to watch Luke swim. Graceful to the end, Luke permitted their presence on the beach as they stood illuminated by bonfires, bringing beer, lawn chairs and bug repellent. They cheered him on and shouted cheap suggestions about his time with the girl on the other shore.

Right at dusk when the winds died down and the girl showed up Luke would strip down to swim trunks and wade into the shallows. Towards the end of summer people may have gotten tired of the show, but by this time it was habit and the crowds brought marshmallows and swelled the shoreline. Luke's nightly excursions seemed only to increasingly exhaust him and he taught Leda to drive the truck so that he could catch a few extra moments of sleep on his way to the river and the girl.

On the last night's drive, Leda picked up her cousin Jake while Luke lay sprawled out in the bed of the truck, pale as the belly of a fish. Jake said "wouldn't it be cool if we just drove Luke to the other side?" Leda agreed, but it was forty miles one way, and besides, Luke seemed to like the swim even if he was looking worse with each successive night. At the river, Jake and Leda helped Luke from the truck, one on either side of him, the tops of their heads only reaching his shoulders. Leda said, "Luke, I can drive you there" after they took a lawn chair from a townie and sat Luke down in it. Jake pulled Leda aside and said, "I'm worried about him. He's cold as ice and a little slimy." Leda answered that she thought the girl on the other side might be a succubus or a river demon who was slowly sapping all Luke's energy. Jake said that was dumb.

While they weren't looking, the townie gave Luke a beer to bolster him up because he didn't look like he could stand let alone swim. Luke drank half the bottle with one gulp and then stood up because the girl had come out of the forest on the other side of the river. Everyone could see her mag-lite and a few pulled out their binoculars. Luke stripped to his swim trunks and waded into the shallows. Leda and Jake picked up his t-shirt and jeans, clapped him on the back and retreated to fold his clothes and watch. Before Luke dove into the water Leda could see the hiccup in his back, the violent rise and fall of the ribcage, then he was swimming and Leda could do nothing but watch. Luke made it to the middle of the

river before the hiccups overcame him, and Leda spent a terrified minute watching the water for a break in the surface, and inexplicably, Luke did emerge, near the other shore, with fins, and silver scales, a fish.

EMERGENCY DISTRACTION

In this city we hold ballroom dances in the midst of earthquake rubble. It's called emergency distraction and it is the natural reaction to traumatic situations... Or at least that is what it said in a book I once read. I was glad when I read this book and realized that we weren't heartless for having these dances, just incredibly sad.

At the dances people move over and around the rubble. We cry the whole time. Andrés and I dance for hours together. Feeling his tears on my skin I think about us, the things we always would do together. Every Sunday we went for a boat ride in the bay. Indisputably we were there, watching the water and the city towering in shining metal, in the distance, on land. We watched, knowing pieces of it would someday shiver, crumble, then fall. This last earthquake was by far the worst; buildings slipped into the sea, and people slipped into the cracks created by the disappearing buildings. Neither to ever be seen again.

But Andrés. He knows my head, my heart, every inch of my skin. Mostly my skin. He knows who I idolize. He keeps secrets from me and I didn't know this until at the dance, Andrés pulls his cheek, wet from tears, away from mine to tell me his uncle, the great writer, is standing on the edge of the dance floor, leaning against a fallen support beam. I ask to be introduced. Andrés shakes his head, lets it fall, looks sad. I leave him standing alone among the dancing couples, this in itself an immense betrayal, and make my way alone to the great writer, intent on introducing myself. But when I am face to face with him I don't know what to say, so blurt out, "Your book changed my life." And I stand there desperately hoping he will understand, but I said it all wrong and he doesn't understand. I can tell because he looks somber and then his mouth smiles, but only enough to show his teeth. He didn't like me at all. It was as if to say, "you stupid, little girl. So stupid with the

world in front of your face, the sadness of it crowding all around you, brushing against the backs of your knees and the inside of your elbows...and it was only my book that changed your life?"

FIREBIRDS ARE BEAUTY AND LIGHT

For most of an eon, Natasha toiled away at life in a barren landscape of snow. One day she was visited by a man from the east who was amazed by Natasha's wonderful stoic qualities. She was a tired old woman by this time and as a reward for her hard life he changed her into a firebird more splendid than the sun. He then captured the firebird and put her into a golden cage that hung from a tree limb in his garden. The light from the firebird's feathers kept the garden in perpetual spring and the man never lacked flowers and oranges, even in winter. Natasha thought that this life was not so different from the last and would sing mournfully from her cage. But firebirds are beauty and light, not a good voice, and the man would throw orange peels at her to make her quiet. Eventually, two little children of the house felt sorry for the firebird. A little girl and boy, so poor they were in rags, crept to the cage and broke the latch. Natasha in her thankfulness gave each a feather from her wings and the children forever carried these feathers of light on strings around their necks tucked into their shirts, resting against their suntanned hearts.

HELLO!

Besides bars, they spent a lot of time in coffee shops. Some days she would ask off work just to spend the day with him. They would go to a museum or a movie and once they spent an entire afternoon slowly strolling all the way from one side of the city to the other, checking out women. By listing off movie stars of both the east and west, she discovered his preferences. He couldn't get enough of petite painted girls. She understood this, and was even supportive of it. They were beautiful, colorful, wispy, floated around on the streets like marshmallow candy. And they checked them out, rated them, thought up lists of their favorite body parts, pointed out the visual examples of their fetishes. This was not a new pastime for her. She was often with men who watched women in the streets. It was a fact of the gender. Women were for watching. Slim waists and calves. Slender ankles were her favorite. These men, her friends, pointed out thighs, asses, breasts with a detached sense of lust. With their combined tastes they pointed out every piece of a beautiful woman. Right down to her hidden cunt. 'She'd have a sweet pussy.' 'Yea, she'd be tight.' Everywhere she seemed to be watching women, giving approving nods, suggesting to her male friends, 'you should hit that.' Once, far away, in America, she sat in a row of lawn chairs, sat out on the curb, and with four other boys, drank beer and watched people drive through the neighborhood. If a girl drove by and was good they held up signs with varying degrees of approval. Everything from 'drive on' to 'Hello! Stop for a beer?' She once tried to hold up a sign to a guy but was given disapproving stares, a 'not when we're around' look. So she went back to rating other women. It was conditioning. A lifetime of it. Besides, men were not made for watching, but sometimes she thought about it. Wanted to make it a very common

thing. Wanted to give them cat calls in the street, check out their package, look them up and down and let them see her disappointment.

ONE-O-FOUR PERFECTION

In a forest, an eagle once hatched from an egg that felt like wet skin. The baby eagle sat in a nest on the ground and cried from loneliness and hunger. No other eagle ever came and the baby eagle continued to cry with the sound of the earth when it is too full of rain. The worms of the ground heard the cry and came to the surface and lay on the grass. Throughout the forest, the pink, slick bodies of worms twisted on the ground looking like the glowing buttons of a telephone switchboard. The baby eagle ate the worms until he was no longer hungry, but his appetite remained and for his entire life he had the cry of the earth when it is too full of rain.

The baby eagle continued to eat until he was a giant and there were no worms in the forest as well as no fish, no rabbits, and no small birds. The eagle ate and grew until he was the size of a car, a 1980's Cadillac at least. He tried to perch on the branches of trees and broke every single one until the trees looked like toothpicks standing. At this point the forest was over hunted, over used, and the eagle didn't know what to do. So he sat on the ground between the toothpicks and cried his cry of the earth when it is too full of rain. But this time nothing happened.

Later, much later, the giant eagle escaped. He took flight in the middle of a day with a sky the exact color of lake blue 104 (the color of sweaters and cars and blueberry hard candy). The giant eagle, a Cadillac sized beast of prey, went into the lake blue 104 sky and began ripping the clouds to shreds. He cried with the sound of the earth too full of rain and with his talons and beak tore the sky like a canvas painting, leaving large gashes in the lake blue 104.

From the ground, among the animals, a boy looked up and saw the giant eagle tearing apart the sky. He, a little wisp of a boy, put a rock in his sling shot, took aim, and brought down the eagle in one shot. The eagle died. And the boy thought he had done a great thing. This left him with bad habits, and for the rest of his life he took to killing birds; sparrows, robins, goldfinch, and kingfishers.

A moment after his death the eagle had a dream of colors. He dreamt that all the colors of the world were passing him by on his race to the ground. The last color to go by was lake blue 104, but the eagle thought of it simply as sky blue. The eagle hit the ground with an almost tremor and made a crater that is now a pond for cattle. The boy began shouting and hooraying himself, and the sky began to placidly mend itself as it would have done anyway, regardless of boy or eagle. It turned back into seamless lake blue 104 perfection.

RENAISSANCE HAIRCUT MAN

Renaissance haircut man walked out the front door of his duplex and stretched in the morning sunlight. Looking around in the dawn, he couldn't help but feel that it was a day of great things, even though he was fairly sure he could feel the progression of a blood clot working its way up his leg. He was reasonably certain he was too young for such ailments, but he'd have to Google it later just to be sure. For now, he only needed coffee and perhaps a morning paper.

The street renaissance haircut man lived on was short and crowded. The road very narrow and the houses mostly brick with the majority only two and a half stories high, their value greatly diminished by that odd half story. From his duplex porch he looked in the direction of her window and started to walk towards the middle of the road to get a better view of her bedroom, although at such an hour he knew she would be out of sight, horizontal, sleeping. Hers was a room or possibly a whole floor on the second story of a little brick house where sometimes it seemed the second and a half story was inhabited. She, the second story girl, never pulled her drapes, although from careful observation renaissance haircut man guessed she changed clothes in her closet, just out of sight. Someday he hoped to meet her in the street, compliment her skirt or the book she was usually hiding behind, short sighted and aloof.

Renaissance haircut man prided himself on enjoying the small drinkable pleasures in life and as he cut through a parking lot and climbed over the railroad tracks, he wondered about hot or iced coffee. This decision was made far easier when he realized that a portion of a downtown building was on fire and surrounded by a cheering mob. Definitely iced. Renaissance haircut man hurried down the slope upon which the railroad tracks sat and

across another parking lot, a road, and a tree to come to the edge of the mob, most of whom seemed shaken from sleep, while a few wore clothes that gave away the fact that they'd not yet seen their beds.

The building being burned (and harbor no doubt, this was not an accidental fire) was no other than his breakfast place. It was definitely a tragic turn of events until renaissance haircut man saw the second story girl standing in the thick of the mob wearing a flashy skirt, sandals, glasses, and a book tucked into her skirt's waistband. He sidled up next to her and asked the only thing he could think of, which was simply a question of what was happening. Second story girl said it was a burning because 'everyone had just had enough.'

'Of what? Coffee?' Renaissance haircut man thought, but didn't ask, because he was euphoric at being beside this girl with platinum hair, reading glasses and Bulgakov peeking out over her waistband. She smiled at him sweetly, and in that smile Renaissance haircut man could see a whole future laid bare for them. It was one of those kinds of smiles, and he knew that he would actually be in second story girl's room, could watch her change in the closet or maybe even pull the shades and watch her change in the room. She'd stop reading books and pay him more mind. He meanwhile, would take up a pipe.

Renaissance haircut man was brought to the edge of ecstasy when second story girl linked her arm through his and said "we've been together all night." Although it took him a minute to realize she wasn't talking to him but a police officer with a notepad and a billy club. "Well, now that this has burned where should we go for coffee?" Renaissance haircut man asked of her, ignoring the officer who was simply butting in on his happiness. "Oh, doesn't matter in the slightest." She answered with a smile. And it really didn't, because little did Renaissance haircut man know, or at the moment care, that she was the kind of

person who smiled at acts of vicious retribution, although someday this, and a comment about his hair, would really hurt his feelings.

THE SPLIT SOUL BUSINESS

When young I was told that in leaving your homeland you leave a bit of yourself, a piece of your soul. And then, in those other, far away places you are never quite comfortable. The problem though was that I was never quite comfortable in my own homeland. At the library, I would finger the old covers of fashion and news magazines and wonder about the world beyond our islands. Perhaps the idea of those far away places took part of my soul and now I live a split life; one foot in a world of magazine pictures and the other in an island that sank below the sea.

On our islands we used to hunt sea mammoths. The animal never got a true name because they came too recently, only a few hundred years ago, and it takes more than that to study and properly name an animal. We simply called them sea mammoths because of their size, and we hunted them at dawn when they rose to the surface to fill their lungs with air for the day. When we saw their snouts kissing the water surface, we killed them with spears and later with guns. They were hardy creatures to the end and it took several spears to kill them and usually more than one bullet.

Even though we couldn't name them properly we had a story for where they came from which I never truly believed until I found one in my vegetable garden. I named him Digger. We said the sea mammoths came from land, that they were once buffalo and had moved west in hopes of more land, better grasses, and fewer people or trains. Every herd needs a leader, and theirs was Digger. He led them right into the ocean when he found that the land stopped. Led them through holiday makers picnicking under beach umbrellas, who were so stunned they only panicked afterwards. It made sense really, those Great Plains were an ocean. I saw magazine pictures of those high grasses pitching and swelling in the

wind and felt that I could swim through it. The buffalo, they just walked into another sea and adapted easily. Their fur turned to soft grasping tentacles that trapped the plankton and tiny organisms which the buffalo licked from each other for sustenance. Their hooves flattened and broadened allowing them to both swim through the water. But the greatest change was their lungs which expanded so that they only surfaced once a day. They were surprisingly suited to life in the water and roamed the whole Pacific until they found us and our islands. We welcomed them because they tasted good.

Our islands began sinking when I was still young. Sometimes floodwaters covered most of the land and other times a burst of sea water would come up from the ground. The salt water was saturating the dirt and our crops died because brine withered their roots. When we started bringing in canned food by helicopter, I got my first inkling of distrust for the world beyond because their canned food was shit.

Even though our gardens so often failed, we still tried to grow things, and pull a little life from the earth. I knew that someday we would have to leave, but to be able to grow our food seemed important, and not to do so, an admission of failure. So, the night I found Digger beneath my garden, eating the roots of my vegetables, it was only natural to cut off the horn that poked through the surface of the soil. Our president, who'd studied abroad and believed in reason, thought it was perhaps someone's sophisticated joke. And for someone who had left his homeland he had willfully forgotten about the split soul business. I knew exactly why Digger was in my garden, he was hungry for things grown on land. And maybe with all the floods he was reclaiming a bit of land for himself and his herd.

Eventually, a plane took us from the islands and looking out the window I could see the tiny archipelago of our islands dotted with empty houses and yellowing vegetation. We

were allowed one suitcase each, but I only took a change of clothes, a bottle of dirt, and Digger's horn. Sometimes even now I put that horn to my head and feel that Digger's life is my own.

YOU COULD NEED SOMETHING THAT ISN'T REAL

For G the orchestra played softly. It appeared mostly at times of reflection or wonder. When walking through the streets on her way to work, members of the orchestra perched on balconies, in doorways, and in bicycle baskets playing softly, shoring her up for a day of carving shoe soles.

G had been hearing and seeing the orchestra every since the night she had been beaten during a riot. That night, G and a group of young people had been listening to illegal radio broadcasts in a brandy cellar. From that vantage point they could see nothing, certainly not the mob approaching. They could only feel the vibrations and hear muffled shouts. It was not until they went up in the street that any of the group noticed the blunt objects and realized the angry shouts had nothing to do with them and their illegal radio broadcasts. But at that point they had run into the middle of an angry mob and G wasn't the only one who came out with bruises. She was rather lucky that all she got were a few cuts and what she assumed was a particularly nasty concussion.

After six months of having the orchestra, G went to the library and looked up all the instruments she was seeing. Never in her life had she heard or seen an orchestra. Music was as widespread as pickpockets and many carried radios, even though they were ungainly and cumbersome. Since it was because of a radio that G had been beaten, it seemed fitting that an orchestra would be her reward. But still, a band isn't an orchestra, and the instruments she was seeing had long since been deemed archaic.

G's was a full orchestra and the instruments dark and refined; the music pulled from them heartfelt. G would have loved to actually see the players and study the looks on their faces. She imagined them in ecstasy, wrapped up in the music. She wondered if they were

mostly men or mostly women. She wondered if they wore black, like in the pictures. As it was, all G could see were the instruments themselves. The players seemed to have been erased or rubbed invisible and the instruments stood suspended in air. Yet none of this diminished the passion with which they played.

For the longest time G had kept the orchestra a secret. Even in a society of constant earthquakes and social unrest, seeing and hearing things others couldn't was not considered ideal. G knew well what others would think, they would believe that the blow she took to the head had addled her brains. She hadn't wanted to be thought of as crazy, so she simply didn't tell anyone and instead took all her questions and wonder to the library. And a great deal of wonder came with the orchestra. It was a rather amazing thing to walk to work and the whole way be accompanied by song. Also, the places they showed up, the music they chose to play... it was undeniable, the orchestra had a definite sense of humor.

Only a few days ago, the humor of the orchestra had taken G over on the street. Late at night, on her way home from a gathering, the orchestra had chosen to play a ridiculously fast song. The thing that had made G double up with laughter though was the violins, perched in a row on a barracks rooftop, the bows sawing away and producing smoke. Smoke! And the music itself, tripping along like drunks or children. G had laughed herself silly, and when guards from the barracks had come out to poke her with a stick and ask if she was ok, G had just laughed all the more. They'd thought her intoxicated, wrote her up, and sent her on her way with a last jab in the ribs and a threat. The next day by noon everyone had read about the incident in the morning news and her friends scolded her for being 'possessed by laughter' and out late alone. Roth was particularly scathing with her, refusing to acknowledge her presence in the kitchen and sending her to work with a mean look and a slammed door. That night he'd apologized and asked what was wrong, saying she

hadn't been herself since that night of the riot. Because the weight of her secret was heavy, G confessed and told Roth all about the orchestra, who incidentally, were playing at that moment a sad song.

“Oh Roth dear, I know it seems absurd, but I hear an orchestra.”

“Come again?”

“An orchestra. One of those things from the last century that consists of about 60 musicians all working together to play a piece of complex and rather mathematical music.”

“Do you hear them right now?”

G looked down at her hands then said “yes... But I don't know what they're playing. It's sad though.”

Roth gave her an enigmatic smile that G took to be encouraging.

“What's truly funny though is seeing them play. Last night during the infamous ‘possession of laughter’ violins were sawing away on the barracks roof. They were smoking.”

“You see them?” Roth's confusion was palpable, morbidly overt.

“Not really...” G was pleading in her mind for Roth to understand, she needed it so badly. “I only see the instruments, the players are invisible.”

This was probably the point at which Roth had heard enough. He took both G's hands into his own, like he was protecting them and her. Tears formed in his eyes, but he didn't shed them, instead he put her to bed, tucked the sheets around her, and kissed her forehead telling her everything would be alright, alright, alright.

“I know,” G had answered. She was then subjected to the horrible spectacle of Roth practically running from the room and then his muffled sobs a few moments later.

The full extent of his betrayal wasn't evident until the next day, when on her way home from the shoe sole factory the orchestra played a tune that left G agitated. She ran through the streets to her building and once there noticed the men in white uniforms and the state vehicle parked in front. Roth had betrayed her and so she had to run off straight away. As she went she hoped, in anger that Roth would know he'd pushed her to recede into the distance, leave him, and never look back. G found his lack of perception and grasp really astounding. The orchestra wasn't his, it wasn't crazy, and she wasn't crazy. It was just a little orchestra that was beginning to make G happy, make her life beautiful. Besides, Roth would never know that you could love something that didn't exist and you could need something that wasn't real.

G hoped that one day, preferably sooner rather than later, this realization would hit him and he would choke on it. And if he didn't die he would come and find her. G would be waiting, listening to song.

PEOPLE CALLING OUT TO US

The first time I was touched on the train I was wearing a skirt. During the morning commute, faces I saw everyday never materialized into something with solid features. No one ever talked. Eye contact was avoided. People were pushing into all sides and everyone was sweating, miserable, tired. So there was a certain kind of impossibility in complaining when something (briefcase edge or perhaps an umbrella handle?) pushed into my hip, then sliding, moved to my derriere. It was only when a hand settled on my waist and the faceless man behind me used the natural sharp curves of the track to fall into me with rhythm that I realized what was going on. But then it was over and later I would question if it had even happened at all.

ISN'T TECHNOLOGY GREAT

As a child, Dennis had terrible eyesight and for years didn't realize it wasn't normal, let alone safe, to only be able to see three feet in front of his front bike wheel when riding. Apart from this, he led a rather idyllic life. The seventh child and the sixth son he had hand-me-down bicycles, books, and clothes. He had nuns for teachers, a railroad track at the back of his yard, and a yellow 7 pool ball that his father had once, without explanation, brought home from the factory.

Many years ago, the winters were perhaps colder or, at least in memory, the ice on lakes and ponds thicker. One Saturday in blistering cold, Dennis, his younger brother and two other boys decided to go ice fishing in a lake about a mile off. Unfortunately, the owner of this lake was notoriously bad tempered and selfish; he never let anyone fish in his place. The boys, however, didn't let this stop them and on such a cold day didn't figure the gentleman would be watching his lake too closely. They threw on hats, coats, gloves, and thicker boots, acquired their tools and set off through the deep cold.

The fishing turned out to be rot, but the joy of it really was using a hatchet on the ice. They sat on their haunches around the jagged hole happy for a while. Yet, as the afternoon wore on they heard the unmistakable sound of footsteps and barking. This far out on the old grouch's land the boys new it could only be one person and one vicious dog. (And oh, this dog was vicious, known for biting arms and bike tires. Half wolf according to rumor.) The boys threw away their line, grabbed their things and ran. They headed off across the frozen surface of the lake, Dennis at the tail end with the fishing pole and the hatchet. At the edge of the lake, Dennis accidentally slipped and splashed in the broken ice and water at the shore, drenching his pants. The others escaped ahead of him into the trees

and behind him he could clearly see the dog and its master on the other shore, one shouting, one barking. With deliberate motions the bloodthirsty old grouch siced his dog on the boys. Dennis ran.

With a head start, youth and adrenaline, a mile is nothing, almost comically short. The boys, like deer even with all their baggage, jumped gracefully over fallen trees and low bushes. Dennis smiled as the landscape passed him; the trees, the rocks, the dry frozen creek beds. He was so unconcerned that it took a dangerously long time for him to realize the progressing rigidity of his jeans. At last, he looked down and saw the crystalline sparkle of ice forming in the weave. The lake water which wet his jeans was freezing them in the continuing cold. They were stiff, and slowing his graceful running. Ahead he could see the rise of the railroad tracks and beyond that, he knew, was a small field and his home. The other boys and his brother were one by one leaping over the tracks and then the barbed wire fence surrounding the field.

Dennis took one moment to look over his shoulder to see if the dog was still pursuing him. It was, although half-heartedly. This triumph and the safety of the field pushed him over the tracks and he prepared for the jump that would take him over the barbed wire.

In the cold air, all sounds were clearer and small sounds seemed magnified. Dennis could clearly hear the exhausted bark of the dog and just under this sound wave the sharper trill of something shattering and then the thud of his own body as he fell, his pant leg having grazed a barb in the fence. He landed on his face in the frozen earth, spread out but still clutching the fishing pole and the hatchet, which thank goodness was in its sheath. Dennis lifted first his head, and then stood up to see his friends, at a short distance, laughing at him as he stood in his underwear in the field. All around him he could see the pieces of his jeans

which had shattered like glass. In a hurry he picked up these pieces and ran the rest of the way home.

Inside the house, Edith, his mother took the pieces from him as if this were a normal thing. After 9 children nothing surprised her. She told him to go put on another pair of pants and took the ones in her arm to the basement where the newest, grandest purchase stood on a little platform of two by fours. She put the pant pieces in the clothes dryer and ran her hand along its metal edge. What a pair these two machines made; square boxes that condensed and lessened the work load she had hated for years. She flipped the timer to a 20 minute cycle and went back upstairs to her reading. When the dryer bell chimed she sent Dennis down to retrieve his pants, whole and warm, from the belly of the machine.

YES. UMM. PLEASE.

The City Park stretches itself over a hill that jumps up out of the earth. It is the most striking geographical feature within a five-mile radius; high hill, surrounded by low flat land. The park's west side borders the highway and there is a waist high stone wall topped by a wrought iron fence. Together, wall and fence look like they are holding the sides of the hill in by force. They aren't really. It is just the architecture of a very old city that has for a long time been telling even the dirt what to do. Inside the park are ornamental trees, sculptures, and homeless kittens that live in cardboard boxes someone kind has provided for them.

In the morning, Ava looked out the window of her apartment and the sun was shining, reaching all the way down between the tall buildings to touch the wet sidewalk, the cars, and the people walking to get their groceries. The sun spilled onto the faces that weren't smiling and the wind blew the heavy spring coats around ankles and thighs. Ava spent the early morning in her kitchen drinking coffee and eating scrambled eggs. When she went out, she was surprised that it was colder than it looked from the window and that the puddles on the pavement were somehow slipping into her bones, which was extremely perplexing since she diligently side stepped every goddamn one.

Ava lived on the industrial side of the river without any pretty shops and designed by an architect with a good eye for tacky streets. Nothing looked like it belonged there. The apartments had uneven floors and graffiti covered the sides of ugly buildings (which were many). Ava called into the café she waitressed at and said "I am sick, I am sick." This did not happen often, so they were lenient and said, "Well... all right." Her little café was on

the other, touristy side of the city and there was little chance she'd go to the side, so they wouldn't be seeing her today and she was free to go to the City Park to feed the homeless kittens.

The red butcher shop down the street sold small paper bags of meat scraps for next to nothing. Bone and fat. Ava pushed pieces of this through the wrought iron fence while her fingers became more and more greasy. The kittens sat eating the scraps, purring. Ava petted them with a greasy hand and their fur became slick with animal fat. This was Ava's day off ritual; she walked in the morning to this same spot at the park fence, fed the kittens, and watched the man she was secretly in love with. But it wasn't real love; it was the attraction of something she never had to know the nasty realities about. Ava liked the hat he wore, the way he moved his feet, his coat and his smile. He looked dignified and clean and was something apart from her on the other side of the fence. He probably took the walk through the park before going to work, taking his time walking amongst the trees.

That morning he was not there, but Ava had been disappointed before and so soon forgot the man's absence. Paul walked along the sidewalk up to her. She had noticed him from a block away, but wouldn't turn around and acknowledge him. She was pretending he wasn't even there. But now, with her hand on the arched back of a cat she sent Paul a smile that showed all of her teeth.

"Good morning," she purred for no reason. Paul looked at her and then down at his brown leather shoes sneaking out beneath his slacks. Paul dressed well and looked like some sort of traveling saint or gigolo. He had one of those wide smiles. He was beautiful and Ava would sometimes tell him this when she was drunk.

Paul fingered the strap of his guitar with one hand and wiggled a finger at a cat with his other. "Kid Liv, I've been behind you for blocks."

“A block,” she corrected.

“Whatever,” he answered. “Don’t you have to work today?”

“Called in sick”

“Will they mind?”

“Didn’t sound like it.”

“Well good then. We can spend the day together.”

“Humph.”

“It will be fun. I promise.”

“What will we do?”

“Enjoy the grand city we live in.” He stretched his arms out, crucifix like, swallowing the whole city in his embrace. “I’ll take you out to breakfast...or brunch.” He squinted up at the sun that couldn’t be seen.

Paul and Ava walked back the way they came. Ava crumpled up the paper bag bereft of the meat scraps and threw it down into the gutter. She made it a point to walk a few steps behind Paul watching his silly travel guitar bump into his body. A tiny triangular thing that he was getting quite good at. He spent all his time playing that guitar and hanging out anywhere he knew people, which was all over the city. She would see him: in the subway, at cafés (never hers), in parks, on the steps of apartment buildings, in front of the temporary job service. Always surrounded by people or dodging the police. He was so beautiful that sometimes she wanted to eat him. She wanted to shrink his whole body down to a reasonable size and then devour him whole or let him sit in her mouth and melt. When she was drunk she would always come close to telling him this.

Paul knew how good-looking he was, standing there in the street calling attention to himself. Stopped on the corner of a side street full of little businesses, they loitered in front

of a copier shop. The smell of paper and ink. The two first looked at their reflections in the glass store front and only later watched the people working behind it. Paul watched his reflection while slipping his hand into the pocket of Ava's jacket. He then coaxed her down the side street. She followed him like a pilgrim to the apartment he was borrowing. They walked up the stairs that wound around the courtyard of the building and Ava felt like she was in a trick drawing. Everything was so perfectly symmetrical and an old woman dressed all in black was walking in the courtyard spitting into potted plants.

Inside the apartment they stood in the kitchen cooking sausage and drinking wine. They were drunk by noon and amused themselves by trying to walk a straight line through the very small apartment. It was split level and the only windows looked out onto the courtyard. They ended up lying on the thick rug in the living room drinking wine straight from the bottle. Ava was on her back looking at the ceiling, telling Paul about a dream she had in which six babies were covered in sugar and cheese cloth, lying dead in a large tub that had once been filled with soda. "I had drowned them in soda, and they were somehow my family. It was one of those dreams in which you wake up and thank God that it wasn't really true."

"But maybe it was." Paul looked at her with a flush in his handsome cheeks.

"Don't be a nitwit," she said before realizing how stupid it was to say 'nitwit.' But Paul just laughed and kissed her little finger. "As for you?" she asked.

"I spent last week in a work house because I didn't run away from the police fast enough."

"How could you not run away fast enough? They are terribly fat."

"I was drunk."

"Oh. Did they make you listen to tracks on social obligation?"

“Yes.”

“You didn’t taunt them this time, did you?”

“I have no broken bones do I?”

This time it was Ava’s turn to take one of the fingers of his hand and kiss it. The finger of the hand, of the arm, that was broken last year in a tussle with an angry representative of the law. They regularly broke the arms of the homeless and the jobless. Poor men walked the streets with deformed arms, too destitute to pay for medical attention. Last year Ava had paid for the doctor to set Paul’s arm straight.

They stayed like that for hours, prostrate on the sheepskin rug. Ava stopped drinking wine, but Paul continued and halfway through a perfectly chill spring afternoon they had to leave the apartment to walk three blocks to a liquor store to get a few more bottles. On the way out of the shop, Paul darted across the street to talk to a friend. Ava followed, and she followed through a string of apartments and mid afternoon gatherings and dark little cafés that they snuck their bottles of wine into and drank with secret sips when the waiters weren’t looking. They were sly and drunk. They had time to waste.

The city park is vast and full of clean little blacktopped roads beneath overhanging trees that give the impression, if Ava tries, that she is walking in a rich country estate, headed home. If Paul hadn’t been drunk and hanging on Ava’s arm trying to cover her with his coat, she would have been able to imagine this. But he was shivering and his teeth were chattering. Ava didn’t feel sorry for him, the lucky bastard. She wasn’t even drunk. They walked out of the overhanging trees into the clearing and carefully trimmed landscaping of the city dance hall. A huge stone building of a hundred years ago when they had things like

debutante balls. There were dance floors and high ceilings and wide stone stairs leading up to huge doors.

It was at this exact moment that Paul ran to a nearby tree and puked into the mulch at its base. Kids were mulling around on the steps and by the shrubbery. People were laughing and puking and peeing in the bushes because they couldn't wait in the extravagant lines for use of the one toilet added decades later to a building that was built before indoor plumbing even became a novelty. Ava fished Paul out of his position, slumped martyr-like by the tree.

"You never take good care of me when I'm drunk. I'm so lovely to you when you've been drinking," Paul slurred his accusation. Ava snorted but loosened her grip on his arm. She even pulled up his shirt to get to his undershirt to wipe some pink dribble at his lips. She smiled at Paul, stood him up straight and took a step back to look at him.

"Oh, my handsome," she crooned.

"Knock it off," he slurred back.

Ava frowned and then smiled. "But I'm trying to help." Paul began to look contrite and threw his arm over her shoulder. They walked toward the dance hall and Ava helped Paul navigate tricky wide stone steps. The doors of the hall were already open and they paid their entrance fee, checked their coats, and got the first of their drinks, cheap wine mixed with soda. There were two ballrooms separated in the middle by what would have once been a large entrance hall but was now covered with makeshift bars. To the right was techno, to the left rock. Huge windows stretched from floor to ceiling and kids were opening the windows and slipping out onto the back lawn to go relieve themselves in the bushes. Ava was standing in the middle of the tiled dance floor, not dancing, holding her drink and staring out the windows. Paul grabbed her arm and pulled her out of the ballroom

and down the stairs to the third and tiniest dance floor that was never, ever, meant for dancing. It was a utility room covered in graffiti, with cords to the music equipment taped to the floor. More of Paul's friends lounged in a corner. They looked Ava up and down and were dissatisfied. She left Paul to them and moved to another part of the dance floor cum utility room. Paul talked, snorted, and eventually came to slip his hands into Ava's back pocket only a little lewdly.

Ava watched Paul snort again from the back of his hand. He saw her watching him, and explained himself badly. "Just something to make me happy, baby." But she didn't see how it was going to make him happy, baby. Especially when she then spent a long part of the night sitting in mulch beneath the protective branches of a tree holding Paul while he shivered and worked through a hit, or perhaps an excess of intoxicants.

Before dawn, police began combing the park looking for leftover partiers, vagrants, or the homeless. Just looking for someone to torment and beat. Ava pulled Paul to his feet, but he went back to all fours, and she pushed him through the undergrowth to the edge of the park. Paul's face was still in pallor and he puked into the grass and then crawled through it. Ava ended up pushing Paul over the wrought iron fence and smirked into the surprised faces of commuters passing on the highway. They looked shocked.

Paul and Ava were witnesses of the early light and highway congestion. Last night Paul had sung like a bird in delirium. This morning he was covered in vomit that crusted over his clothes and Ava was still working to force him to his feet. "Walk straight. Look sober." They turned left onto a street that took them to the seediest side of the city, their home. The sun shone down lovingly on rock. The puddles of yesterday were dry and if she wanted to imagine, Ava could make this day something out of a novel from long ago. In her

imagination it was a historic street paved with stone and neither Paul nor she would talk. In Ava's novel they are in love, but here, in reality, she must hate him.

On the street, starting from the church, a funeral procession headed out the doors, not an uncommon sight in a dying city. The participants were dressed in black and carried icons and flowers in their hands; the casket placed into a hearse that they all follow on foot. Ava stood respectfully on the street until they passed. She held Paul that way too, and when he weakly protested, she shook him slightly. After the procession left them, Ava stopped holding Paul upright, and began to cross the street. Paul yelled out something but Ava didn't even stop. In the church entryway, she signed the funeral registry with a false name, picked up a prayer card, and hurried off towards the side door of the church, making her escape into the opposite street. Paul wouldn't follow Ava. He had moral problems with churches and she hated him even though he didn't know it yet.

WEATHER SYSTEMS

On the last day, it was still raining and my brother and I took all the things worth taking from the banks of the flooded river. We even took the girl who was floating on a log in the shallows. When we got her to our barn and sat her on a stool, she cried little minnows we collected in a bucket. She said it was because she'd been too long in the water, but we knew it was because of the woman who made it rain. And we imagined that perhaps all women were really water and that their insides were just an extension of rivers and oceans. So we stuck our fingers in the girl's ears and mouth. We pulled her tongue until she cried real tears, but that was still water and salty too. My brother told the girl about the woman who made it rain. About our father, a drinker, who'd killed that woman's husband. About the rain that followed and wouldn't stop. My brother told me that we'd give the girl to the woman then the rain would stop and the world wouldn't flood. But it didn't happen that way. The woman chased us with a baseball bat when we dumped the girl on her front porch. And that night, while the woman slept in front of the TV we crawled in her window, leaving minnows in our wake, and in the vents, the silverware drawer, the shoes. We dropped them in her ears and they wiggled in determinedly, quickly, faster than anything without legs should. Back to the living water, mossy banks, people who'd not forgotten their oldest instincts, their primordial fluid parts. She never even stirred.