

IN THE COLONIES

A Thesis Presented

by

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ABSTRACT

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In the Colonies is a work of fiction. It tells the story of a young German harpist, C—, who is seduced into a life of luxury by a venal American, Sansone. She is invited to spend a year at his artists' colony, where she works on composing a transcendent work of music and, in the process, realizes that she has lost sight of the material realities around her. Ultimately, she comes to realize that her single-minded pursuit of an ideal Beauty has driven her away from the very ideals she aspired to in the first place.

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INTRODUCTION

Writing is an unusual subject of study. It doesn't entail the mastery of a set of facts or procedural orthodoxies. During my first few years of the MFA Program, I told friends that the function of the program was to provide artistically minded people time to generate output, and not to teach its students anything about writing. How, I thought, is it possible to *learn* the craft of writing? There are no fixed rules. Either you are a good writer or you are not a good writer. If you are a good writer, you must experiment. Sometimes your experiments will be good, and sometimes they will be bad, but you cannot change your underlying level of ability.

False.

Looking at where I was when I entered this program and where I am now, there is no question that I have changed as a writer. These changes have been neither trivial nor incidental; I owe them to more ambitious reading, more ambitious writing, and more ambitious thinking, all of which have come at the invitation of my generous peers and professors. While the strides I have made in the last four years are exciting, what is perhaps most exciting is the assurance I've received that the work is never done. I am a better writer now than I was at twenty-three. I will be a better writer at thirty-one than I am now. In our youth culture that so loudly identifies time as our antagonist, this is reassurance that in fact we continue every day to build ourselves up.

Of course, to come to the end of four years with nothing more than a vague and self-congratulatory sense of growth is hardly an accomplishment, and so I will try to be

specific about where I have seen development. In particular, I see three concerns reflected again and again in my work in this program: process, language, and excess.

When I entered the program, I thought that talk of a “writing process” was vaguely masturbatory. What’s to discuss? You have a story to tell, and you tell it. My own process—much as I would have bristled to use that term at the time—fell in line with that outlook. I began at the beginning and ended at the end. I rarely revised. The plot—the sequence of events—motored every piece of writing I did, because the narrative logic was the foundation upon which I built the story; once I had built, I could never be brought to dismantle. This approach resulted in tidy, sequential stories with straightforward dramatic arcs. I saw no problem with this and, indeed, I suppose there is no problem with this; I was not dissatisfied with my output. My first novel, *Shooting Angels*, was an exercise in traditional narrative. I wrote it in serial, event upon event, until I reached the end, and then I found a publisher for it. I thought this was how one wrote a novel.

However, pounding out plotlines is *a* skill of *some* writers, not *the* skill of *all* writers. When I submitted the first 100 pages of my second novel, *The Calamari Kleptocracy*, for workshop, I received feedback that surprised me. These pages would not work. Or, rather, although they would work from a mechanical standpoint, no sane reader would voluntarily read them. They plodded. My storyline was fine; it was everything else that was wanting. The characters were cartoons, the jokes were obvious, and the prose was flat. The excerpt was competent, but competence is a prerequisite, not the main event.

Already 100 pages into the novel, I was loath to scrap it entirely, which meant that necessity impelled me to do what I had never legitimately done before: revise. And so I revised, by cutting and reordering and fleshing out. I trimmed out repetitions; I replaced clichés with more idiosyncratic creations, sometimes even overturning syntactical logic; I ripped away my characters’ tired psychological justifications, allowing actions to stand as they do in life: stark and incomprehensible. In short, I let my writing get messy, and the result was far more interesting than what had come before.

Greater freedom with the writing and revision process allowed me to take notice of something that had been underlying my writing all along, politely unnoticed: the words. My initial brick-by-brick approach to narration kept me focused on the events of the story. “What will happen next?” was consistently my most pressing question. Words were merely the vehicle in which the plot moved forward. As a result, I wrote sentences that mimicked the overall architecture of my story: clean, logical, and expected. Words never held double meanings—or, if they did, it was thanks to happy accident—and ambiguity was an enemy rather than an asset.

In cracking open my plots to the wild of illogic, I found that I had to allow my language to follow suit. The respective first sentences of *Shooting Angels* and *In the Colonies* reflect this shift. *Shooting Angels* begins, “Arlo Saunders set out to survey his land, beginning from the western edge of his property just behind his one-story ranch house, and walking due east through the bristly grasses of east Texas pastureland.” This long sentence establishes narrative facts. Clearly denotative, its function is to give the reader a character, an action, and a setting. In contrast, *In the Colonies* begins, “The pleasure was not pleasure, but neither was it pain.” Immediately self-negating and

operating on the level of abstraction, the sentence withholds factual data. Its function is to introduce the reader into a way of receiving the narrative, to establish mistrust and duplicity, and to assert that the novel will obey an idiosyncratic logic. Over the past several years, I have become as concerned with a sentence's sonorous qualities, cadences, and unexpected pleasures of abutment as with its traditional sense.

These new considerations are particularly helpful when representing moments of emotional surfeit in which straightforward reportage is not just uninteresting but stilted, besides. For example, in a story that I held to be the apogee of my undergraduate career, I wrote expressions such as "I bite back my racing pulse with a shudder and steel my gaze"—an unassuming configuration of anger, because it obeys the same logic as any other humdrum moment. "I take a bite of the sandwich with satisfaction and wipe my face with a napkin" would work just as well. More and more, I have been trying to allow the emotional timbre of the moment I'm writing to color its expression. Thus, in *In the Colonies*, the protagonist, C—, greets her frustration with the constraints of civilized living with "Better incomprehensible to shimmer, puddles, to dribble vowels as slugs dribble slime." The absent subject, the nonstandard word order, and the lack of conjunctions to link "puddles" to the rest of the sentence might have struck me once as difficulties to be ironed out. Now, I enjoy the phrasing's oddness, its openness, and its balance of syllables. Properly reconfigured, it would read, "Better for us to shimmer incomprehensibly as though we were puddles, or to dribble vowels as slugs dribble slime." The correctness would diminish the sentence's fluency.

The two considerations I have thus far touched on—process and language—have substantially figured in the writing of *In the Colonies*. The project has gone through many

stages. I first conceived of it during a summer in Morocco. I found myself in a desert outpost with only one book to read to escape the heat: Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. Dehydrated and cranky, I at first despised the book. It struck me as self-important. I rejected the relentless name-dropping and Stein's decision to write herself into the narrative as the artistic center of World War I-era Paris. It wasn't until later that I considered that her self-portrait might be tongue-in-cheek. At that point, it all began to seem rather fun: to reinvent real-life figures along the lines of your own preferences, to write yourself as a player in your own narrative, and to adopt a high-minded tone that equated art with the world and aesthetic trespass with automatic scandal.

With Stein's novel as something of an inspiration, I fleshed out my own international artists' gathering in a short meta-fictional story, "In the Colonies." I rushed through this piece in my usual style: beginning, middle, end. I submitted it to workshop and was unsurprised to hear my peers' feedback. I received encouragement as to the premise and the overall motion of the plot, but the story felt hurried; it was a novel packaged as a short story. Thankfully, I didn't fear revision. In fact, telescoping a short story into a novel was a satisfying process. The skeleton was already in place, and so the energy that I usually devoted to figuring out the plot's logical next step could be devoted instead to the motion between plot points, the expressiveness of the sentences, and the thematic content. I always knew where I was going, and so my pleasure in writing came in the diversions.

As I wrote, I was influenced by the ideas I was reading. In particular, I found myself affected by the literary theory I encountered in one of my graduate seminars.

Something that had drawn me to the subject matter of this novel was my reaction to what I viewed as the frivolity of insular artistic communities such as the one represented in Stein's book. The perennial question "What is art?" had always struck me as uninteresting; little can be said to hinge on the answer. It wasn't until encountering the school of New Criticism that I came to understand that there is a moral dimension to this question. If we treat art simply as that which is beautiful or moving, as the New Critics do, we risk obscuring the material realities that gave rise to the work in question. A community based only on pursuit of transcendent art began to seem more sinister than frivolous. If we imagine that artistic generation can exist outside of time and place, then it is easy to overlook how art whose only goal is beauty serves and reinforces the dominant tastes—and, therefore, the dominant social structure—of its era.

As a foil to the New Critics, I gravitated towards the Marxists. These critics focus their attention less on the fictional sphere hewn out by a given literary work and more on what that fictional sphere hides or excludes. Every novel, while declaring a world, tacitly declares that the world will not be otherwise. It is this "otherwise" that interests me. In order to tell a story, whose language will we use? Whose values will predominate? Whose experience will we hold up as an object of importance? And whose will we not? The single-minded pursuit of artistic expression, then, can be an act of territorialization; to say anything at all is to take up space in somebody else's consciousness. How, then, do we wield this power responsibly, if it is possible to do so at all?

This is a question I have been working through in *In the Colonies*, and while it is an interesting and worthwhile question, it is also a messy and difficult question. The plot-centered construction of my previous novels has left little room for untidy ideas. With the

current project, I have felt greater liberty to toe theoretical waters. Of course, freedom brings with it the risk of anarchy. In composing this novel, I have had to work carefully to keep utter formlessness at bay. Additionally, I been ever mindful of the role of the third of my main writing considerations: excess.

For years, I have been interested in the idea of excess and melodrama in writing. *Moby-Dick* was one of my favorite novels in college—and remains so—and I was astonished by the confidence with which it ranged across any number of topics and styles, never questioning the right of its subject matter to a larger-than-life presentation. Melville's chutzpah so charmed me that I started to see creative excess as a good unto itself. Anything less than too much seemed timid. I crammed my work full of characters, fantastical scenarios, and unlikely plot points, confident that if the reader couldn't or wouldn't follow along, his or her want of creative intrepidity was to blame. Initially, this was probably a lucky outlook for a young writer to have, because it is undoubtedly easier to rein in excess than to inculcate a love of creative risk-taking in somebody that has no taste for it.

However, indiscriminate excess is in fact no great good. One of the biggest issues I've been working on in my writing is the boundary between useful excess and excessive excess. This is a conversation that has been ongoing in my work on *In the Colonies*. Certainly, there are numerous examples of creative wildness in the book—talking horses, wanton anachronism, and a nightmarish Ayn Rand—but though I have embraced much of this excess, I have also been fighting to cut down on it where it is not fruitful. Particularly, I have been working to balance the language. Because I have elected to write this project in an elevated, pseudo-aristocratic tone, I have found myself too often

tempted by unnecessary flourishes. A tiny example: in my initial draft, I had written, “That evening, I returned to the conservatory by moonlight.” On the surface, there is nothing particularly irksome about this sentence. However, the Gothic touch of “by moonlight” adds little, especially in a novel that is already saturated with mannered prose. One “by moonlight” is fine, or two, but where is the line past which an abundance of tonal touches becomes tiresome rather than invigorating? Excess is great fun when it is novel but tedium when it provides nothing but syllables. Weeding out the “by moonlights” allows the truly idiosyncratic to shine forth.

All this is not to say, of course, that *In the Colonies* is not still very much a work in progress. With more time, I hope to neaten the last third of the book. The dissolution of narrative structure towards the end of this draft is intentional, but it could be handled in a less arbitrary way, with a stronger sense of consistent ideological purpose. A good deal of cutting remains to be done in order to give more immediacy to many scenes, especially in the book’s latter half. Some repeated images and words need to be replaced with more varied, more interesting sensory descriptors. There are still too many tears, too much moonlight, too much cold that rips, too much wind that howls—and once those stock gestures towards mood are excised, I will have more space for fresh invention.

But overall I am happy to present you with *In the Colonies* Version 1.5. It has been more exciting to write than much of my past work, and I hope that it will not be unpleasant to read. I am grateful to each of you for giving so generously of your time to serve on my committee, and I know that your feedback will be invaluable in helping me make sense of this project and wrest it towards its final form. Without further comment,

then, I will get out of the way and allow the work to speak for itself—or, more accurately, I will continue to be in the way, speaking for myself through the work.

OVERTURE

The pleasure was not pleasure, but neither was it pain. The days were music and the nights were drink. I grew used to second courses, and then to third. Champagne grew bitter, canapés overmoist. The company launched verbal darts at one another—well-varnished *bon mots* that hid savagery behind smokescreens of apathy. Gertrude Stein babbled incoherent redundancies, while the most eloquent of Macedonian warhorses, the least bestial among us, keened and whinnied over his rent heart.

All the while, Sansone observed, bending us into the creatures he wanted us to be.

My English became ever more precise, ever more florid, and ever more disingenuous. The more words I owned, the more I used them only to lie. I thought now and then of Papa, alone and distant in his Black Forest butchery, but I could no longer conjure his image. My German homeland dissolved into fiction; an equally artificial America lay claim over my soul. Sansone's chateau was nothing more than the stage setting for our drama, and we were just players endlessly spouting our lines in the hope that more chatter, more language would transport us. For naught. Our words stank of cynicism, and our vain efforts to immortalize ourselves through insubstantial quippery ended only in desperate intoxication and hurt feelings.

What constituted reality there in the colony? Reality was the one frivolity we were not permitted to desire.

Music, then, bodiless and unreal, was the pleasure I was allowed. I spent the days seated at my harp, weaving my fingers among the strings, attempting to tweak a moment of purity. The sunlight from my bay windows cast illumination on the dust specks that

sailed, weightless, through the air. I labored to match the sunbeams' insubstantiality, to strike a chord that could resonate accordingly with the vibrations of the human spirit.

Such transcendence occurs in fantasies alone.

In reality, harp strings grate on the fingers. Eight hours of practice produce cracked and bloody fingertips. The most effervescent *cadenza* requires the thickest calluses. I composed to exhaustion. My music became as ugly as my dinner conversation.

And Sansone. He floated in my rehearsal room as an ether, complacent in the face of my enslavement. I was a foolish young lady: Never did I suspect that the artistic project in that room was not my music. In fact, the project was I; I was the canvas, Sansone the master. Through my work, he worked on me.

One year later, I am now a finished product. I am now the woman that Sansone made much of. I am now a social creature without the slightest shred of mercy.

For the opportunity to pursue my livelihood, I owe Sansone—or at least Sansone's largesse—a world of thanks. For everything else pertaining to that barbarian, I reserve my loathing. However, if I've learned to bite the hand that fed me so much for so long, it's only because I've surpassed my tutor in the will to dominate.

If Sansone has taught me to speak with his forked tongue, he has overlooked a simple fact: that in doing so he has handed over all his munitions to me. Therefore, it is with forked tongue that I will exact my revenge, and it is with forked tongue that I will create my creator in his own image.

Yes, I have built him up only to destroy him with his own arsenal.

CHAPTER 1
CONCERTO IN G—

I was on the brink of adulthood, living with Papa in the Black Forest village of G—, when it arrived. A snake of a missive, Sansone’s offer slithered through the mail slot and pronounced its venomous intent in wide, confident cursive:

The First of March

Dear C—,

In recognition of your rare talents, I am extending an invitation for you to join me at my artists’ colony in America for the length of one year. For the duration of your stay at my chateau, you will be compensated at a rate of US\$5,000 per month. Return fare across the Atlantic is, of course, included. In exchange for your salary, room, and board, you will be expected to perform at a minimum of one public and one private event per fortnight, culminating in a showcase that will highlight your development as an artist. If you accept my terms, as I expect you will, my manservant, Skylark, will conduct you here. In fact, I am so far assured of how amenable this offer will be that I have already dispatched him to collect you.

With admiration,

N. Sansone

America! A country of mountains and deserts, of yachts and cinemas.

I fought for breath. I told myself it was a hoax, but I knew better. The swirls and dips of the Ps; the firm rigidity of the Ts; the sinuous sensuality of that unthinkable “US\$”: all bespoke a man of means. I held the letter to my breast. I pressed it to my nose and tried to sniff out the character of the man who had sent it. I sat with it on the kitchen floor, amidst the sawdust and animal shreds, and cried hysterical tears.

Papa came in, soaked with the blood of a newly hewn lamb shank, and rushed to me, pausing only to set his scrap chopper before the fireplace.

“Meine Tochter, meine Tochter,” he said. *“Warum weinst du?”*

I could not stop myself from sobbing, so I smiled through my tears and thrust the letter at him.

America!

Papa wiped his hands on his apron before grasping the offer and holding it to his nose.

“Ich verstehe nicht,” he mumbled, as though the English language were a booby trap purposefully laid to dismember his comprehension.

I shuddered, striving for calm. My father looked at me, his russet eyebrows pinched together in confusion. With uncertain affectation of poise, I plucked the letter from my father’s hands and began with false confidence to translate. Eighteen and educated, I fancied myself a fully formed creature, mistress of erudition. I possessed knowledge that my father lacked. My voice quavered, but I forced it to stay the course until the entire letter had been transmuted into our familiar German tongue.

Papa's eyes bulged while he stared at the foreign language, as if doubting that such good fortune could come swaddled in such impossible words. His breath betrayed his wonder as he tried and failed to comprehend the size of the world beyond G—.

When he finally looked up at me, it was as a glassy-eyed child. A single word spilled from his mouth with an odor of rye bread and meat:

“Amerika?”

I kept my hands steady as I nodded, already fantasizing about how quickly I could be on my way.

America.

From earliest childhood, I had been raised in the expectation that I would transcend my origins. My mother was a ghost before I could know her as anything else, and my father must have felt that blaming his poverty for her premature death was less horrifying than conceding that death happens regardless of social circumstance. Feeling, then, that he had obliterated one woman, his method of childrearing was to shield me from the reality that had been her undoing. Papa tried to keep me out of his butchery. When he was occupied, though, I loved to sneak in and play with the gizzards, the distended bowels, and the rubbery bladders that I could inflate like balloons and send sailing across the room. Once Papa caught me with a pig's trachea dangling from my mouth, and he whisked me to the wooden washtub behind our hovel. He cursed me as he heated the water that he would use to scour away my transgression, and I wailed, unconvinced of the gravity of my sin. As he scrubbed my mouth with soap that had been rendered from the fat of some other of his kills, I saw no fury—only hurt and self-hatred.

My father's boundaries had not been raised to protect me; their function was to protect *him* from the threat of failing me, and so I strove for greater obedience.

I grew and, as I did, my father's ambitions grew, too, beyond a mere desire to cushion me from the grisliness of his trade: He wanted fully to *launch* me away from it, building me into an aristocrat. I learned to read, to write, and to snub those who could not. Fastidiousness was an end unto itself, and I courted it at every opportunity. Courtly as I was, the people of G— saw Papa's project as a harmless practical joke against nature. The saying in our village ran, "Better for the butcher to keep a spoiled daughter than to keep spoiled stock," and Papa laughingly bore his reputation as an indulger, unable to imagine that single-minded pursuit of social cachet could have any other than unambiguously positive results.

Unfortunately, the only effect of Papa's kindnesses was to instill a taste in me for a lifestyle that we could ill afford. The English lessons, the second-hand dresses, the dances: All were approximations of a social standing that lay beyond the grasp of a butcher's daughter.

When I was fifteen, a motorcade roared through town, the wainscoted reality of the capital colliding for an afternoon with G—'s roughcast day-to-day. The men of the automobiles parked in the middle of town and allowed the local children to swarm around their machines. The visitors wore suits that had never understood sweat, and monocles of crystal clarity. They jabbered to one another in a language that I suppose was German but that was not my German. Their words were more certain, more singly defined. While those of us in G— drawled honey-rich, our fuzzed thoughts spilling into permeable streams of sound, the city-dwellers packaged ideas in discrete units whose boundaries

were iron silence. I wanted to imprison myself in one of these words, to spend a lifetime inside a single “*Ich*” and come to know it.

“*Willst du?*” asked one of the motorists, opening the door to his motorcar and inviting me to slide into the driver’s seat.

While the other boys and girls probed the exteriors of the alien machines, I alone was allowed inside. My feeling of possession was a sudden, visceral thing. The seat was covered in leather, but this leather had nothing to do with the hides that hung in my father’s butchery, still soaked through with an animal’s blood and fresh with the reek of spasmodic death. The leather of the automobile was no animal remnant—nothing that had ever been forged in struggle. It was a smooth, perfect skin that held my body as I settled back and surveyed the dials and levers that gave the driver impossible power.

“*Es gehört mir,*” I whispered, already besotted with ownership.

All the more painful, then, when the men from the city blazed out of the village again, and I was left in the dirt of the road with the uncultivated offspring of masons and farmers, all of us agog at the miraculous, unrepeatably visitation that had momentarily parted the curtain of mystery that hung around the fringes of our understanding.

The harp was Papa’s last best effort to cultivate my sensibilities beyond my birthright.

Six feet high and wide bellied, the harp materialized on the eve of my eighteenth birthday. It occupied half our house’s main room, its scrolled golden frame straining the limitations of the ceiling, its forty-seven strings glistening in the low light of father’s wax candle stubs like incandescent ripples in a starlit pond. Bliss! I knew nothing of beauty

beyond that which is immediately accessible to the senses, and so I felt compelled to run my hands along every contour of the harp's body. I memorized the sensation of plucking each note in turn, from the low C to the high G. My father sat at our handmade table, twisting his carving knife about an invisible axis, transfixed by the light playing on the blade. He could not understand my joy, and so he did not feel entitled to any part in it.

“Papa! *Es ist schön!*” I cried, embracing the monstrous instrument.

He looked at me from under his dark, uncertain eyebrows, his knife continuing to rotate in the dusk. His smile suffered guilt; his eyes welled.

I unclasped my harp—my sudden passport to a world of wealth and taste—and rushed to my father's side. My arms encircled his torso. My lips fired kisses against his frowning forehead.

“Oh, Papa!” I said again. “*Es ist sehr schön.*”

“*Ach,*” he muttered. “*Es ist nichts.*”

Papa dropped his knife and held his hand before the candles. He was reading the lines in his palm, and I tried to do the same. The lines told him that he had a beautiful daughter. The lines told him that his daughter was fated for brilliant and breathtaking talent. The lines told him that gold would well up against the doors of our home, would clink down the chimney, would carpet our floors, and would blind us with magnificence. The lines told him such wonderful things that I couldn't understand why his doleful eyes began to shed butcher's tears just when they most should have gleamed with future prospects.

Of course, he wept for my loss. I had already sailed beyond his reach.

When handed a harp, one cannot intuit excellence. The space between forty-seven strings allows sufficient room for aesthetic catastrophe. Art must be cultivated, and so it was with a strong sense of duty that Papa spilled his earnings into the conservatory training that promised to unshackle my talents.

My instructor, Frau Schreiber, was a diminutive acorn of a woman whose tiny head nevertheless provided ample ground for an entire ecosystem of neuroses. Schreiber, the child-sized tyrant of the rehearsal room, governed by means of howls and swipes.

“*Ach!*” she screamed upon my first attempt to pluck the scale. “*Das Entsetzen!*”

Wrath distorted her prematurely aging face. Schreiber was a victim. Year after year, season after season, pupil after discordant pupil, she was forced to stand by as her beloved, art, was twanged at and bullied. She parried my aural assaults with the only defense in her stockpile: the smooth, rigid baton of discipline that became the first nemesis of my young life. I felt the sting even before I heard the crack of the rod splitting the air, and a vicious bruise spread over my sense of trust, which had never before met with an opponent.

Knuckles still aflame with the memory of my castigation, I bawled home to Papa. He hugged me, his hands reeking of sow’s blood, and I railed against music, against artistry, and against the people who had leisure enough to hold opinions on such nonsense as how a harp scale ought to sound. Papa’s arms tightened. I read panic in his face. He, as I, had thought that ridiculous expenditure alone would suffice to elevate us.

“Oh,” I said, and forced a smile. “*Es ist nichts.*”

As I wormed out of my father’s protective embrace, I was gaggingly conscious of the slick, bloody handprints he had left on my shoulders. The leather-and-metal smell of

father's workshop was no future for me. In order to honor my father, I must hate his lifestyle enough to flee.

That evening, I returned to the conservatory. Frau Schreiber had retired to her house. In the empty concert hall that G— had birthed from the carcass of an old barn, I sat at my harp, plucking B over and over and over. At first, I produced senseless noise, but I scolded myself. I called myself talentless. I cursed Frau Schreiber for not striking me hard enough.

“Regelwidriges Tier,” I called myself. *“Schmutziges Monster.”*

The B clanged. The B whined. The B blatted.

As first dawn glinted through the chinks in the wood slats of the barn-cum-concert hall, I considered my ragged summer dress. The white checkwork had gone gray from my years of stoking the cooking fire, sweeping up the scraps of father's butchery, and fetching wood from the Black Forest that surrounded us. Streaks of blood and offal imprinted the shame of impoverishment upon me. I pictured myself in a clean silk gown and found the image false. The rich world's beauty was not mine, and yet I could not afford to believe this.

“Du,” I said to the harp, shaking my head. *“O, du Harfe.”*

Within every flourish of the harp's muscular body lay a future I must hope to reach. In order to elicit the harp's friendship, I must learn to be the sort of woman the harp would want to sing for. Together, we would soar.

“O, harp,” I said, cloaking myself in English. *“You are the more harp.”*

I tried my hand at seduction. I stroked the harp. I ran my fingers through its strings as through the hair of a spent lover. I rubbed my cheek up and down its frame, murmuring soft nonsense.

“Me am music. You am music. We will us together music.”

I envisioned my hands laden with rings and scented with perfume. These rich hands floated to the B and made it quiver.

“Yes,” I coaxed.

My hands vibrated in time with the string. I allowed the string but a whisper of sound before strumming it again. By cautious degrees, I lured the B into spilling its music. Bit by bit, a note of stunning clarity filled the space.

Breathless, I moved my left hand onwards to C while my right hand continued to tease B. My harp soon spoke with two voices, and then with three. With my fingertips, with my ears, and with the exacting patience of true elegance, I revealed all forty-seven of my harp’s hidden notes.

When Frau Schreiber arrived, she found me seated at the harp, ready. My chin was raised in arrogance, my elbows parallel with the floor.

“*Guten Morgen, Frau,*” I said.

“*Guten Morgen,*” she replied with distinct displeasure. She held her rod defensively. She nodded for me to play, her face already twisting in preparation for her certain anguish.

I tossed my hair over my shoulder, allowed my eyes to twinkle, and raised my hands to the strings. In the next moment, I lost myself in the harp’s secrets. I performed. Underneath the music, I couldn’t hear Schreiber’s rod dropping to the floor. It wasn’t

until I had finished playing that I looked up to see the Frau standing astonished with her implement of discipline forgotten at her feet

“*War es gut?*” I asked, with the first earned smirk of my life.

Schreiber’s gaping mouth said nothing, but her tears bespoke her confidence in my ability to create something others could recognize as beautiful.

“*Na,*” I said, my smirk growing comfortable in the muscles of my face. “*Ich will es besser machen.*”

Schreiber sat on a stool beside me and put her ancient hands on mine. Together, we explored the harp’s every possibility. We asked beauty of it, and it thanked us for our requests. The fact that this was my father’s project floated into inconsequence. My harp and I had begun our ascent, and the glory of victory was blossoming selfishness; what I wanted, I wanted for myself.

In the following weeks, I learned that one cannot rely on momentary satisfactions. To pluck an honest note is admirable, but that isolated action cannot sustain an audience’s notice or an artist’s career. In order to succeed, one must be certain of her ability to remain consistently excellent. When discrete beauty is extended into habit, the result is elegance of manner.

I rarely made my way home. I lived at the conservatory. The harp was my mother, the rod my father. I taught myself and Schreiber. I became aware of the possible.

Meanwhile, my diligent application to the harp inspired my diligent application to English and, what amounts to the same thing, to coquetry.

“You are being mistaken,” I told Wilhelm, my blue-eyed deskmate whose facility with language far surpassed my own and whose disdain betrayed his belief that a ragged girl could possess no wonders. “Talent I own.”

“You are mixing your word order,” said Wilhelm. “Please be less disgusting.”

“Disgusting is not me,” I shouted at the priggish, blonde-curled nuisance whose attention had already turned back to his penmanship exercise, his fingers coaxing forward a stream of Qs.

I moaned to Schreiber that the doubts of my classmates troubled me. The self I sought was relational. I could not simply nurse my own phenomenon: In order to be invented as a woman of grace and culture, others must recognize me as such. Talent is not talent if confined to an empty barn.

“*Ein Konzert!*” Schreiber suggested.

“*Ein Konzert,*” I said, rolling the thought on my tongue. “A concert,” I said, and the idea sounded still lovelier in the language of money.

We put together a program. Schreiber neglected her other students as she introduced me to Ravel and Albrechtsberger. My hands found the trails that other harpists had trod. My ghostly forebears guided me through muscular exertions that somehow conveyed meaning. My successes were few and my anxiety high, but I continued to work, Schreiber howling all the while about the insufficiency of effort alone.

My father watched my preparations with confused tenderness. When I came home at all, evening was already deep. Nonetheless, whenever I happened in, I could rely on a candle, a matchbook, and a portion of stew set out for me. Nights at home, I would

burrow into my straw cot and fail at sleep, unable to drive Jean-Baptiste Krumpholtz's *Recueil de douze preludes et petits airs* from my humming head.

As the proscribed date drew nearer, I sent notices to the newspapers, I plastered the town with posters bearing my name, and I utilized every tactic of persuasion to coerce my schoolmates into promising their attendance.

"You good play it harp?" asked Konrad, a simply wretched young man who began to take an interest in walking me to the conservatory after our English lessons. Acne dotted what little of his face was visible under his monumentally shaggy hair.

"I'm best," I said.

"You would appear like opera star?" he asked. "In the *scharf* dress?"

Konrad's smile implied that he took my nauseated silence as affirmation.

My classmate's adolescent curiosity cast an unexpected perspective on the task ahead of me. A performance would entail more than mere mastery of my craft. My entire self was to be on display. Just as my playing had to be perfect, so had to be my poise, my deportment, my grace. In bearing, in manner, in tongue, in attitude—in short, in all but pocket—I must become wealthy. Otherwise, what would I be but a pauper with a parlor trick?

That evening, I appraised myself in the shard of mirror wedged in the corner of the conservatory. I saw the outline of a waifish girl. I saw knobby knees and torn linen. I saw hands ill-fitted at the ends of scabbed and bony arms. I saw unwashed hair and an unpracticed smile. I saw a butcher's daughter whose father had wasted unthinkable money on an instrument that had never dreamed of such a handler.

"*Komm mit,*" said a soft voice.

A hand on my shoulder caused me to turn and behold Frau Schreiber, backlit by the setting sun, head erect, shoulders gently sloping down to tapered fingers, in possession of a glory more profound than I had thought within her capacities.

Schreiber must have known why I was fretting, because she grasped my hand and led me into the surrounding farmland. By the light of the rising moon, she showed me how to walk, barely lifting her feet from the soil so that she gave the appearance of gliding. When I stepped amiss, she grasped my shoulders and, with a tiger's strength, set them to rights. While I trod the empty fields, Schreiber sailed beside me, one hand on my back to remind me that I was to trust its support. My arms flailed, and Schreiber struck me once with her rod. She pulled back again, the rod an extension of her miniscule body, herself and her weapon composing one fluid entity in the silvery ether of early evening, and I gasped at her unnatural beauty before the rod once again made shattering contact with my ungainly limbs.

Ecstatic majesty of violence!

As my playing grew ever more practiced, my presentation grew ever more problematic. Some days, I was a gargantuan freak whose stumbles crushed armies; others, I was a twitching mouse whose face bore a hideous lack of proportion. I could not occupy a consistent body from day to day. My physical frame cleaved to my insecurities, and my insecurities speared every inch of me. I told Schreiber that I should never appear in public. She shrieked that if I could not master the art of subtlety, she should never let me. I wept, and Schreiber's corporal remedies failed to provide consolation.

I begged Papa for new garments, but what was to be done? The money he had saved for the harp and for the lessons had all been spent. Food was scarce. Vanity was an expensive luxury.

Anxiety and I became inseparable. I lost sleep and weight. The boys at my lessons called me “*Stengel*.” Meanwhile, time galloped, and I regretted the fixed date of my showcase.

On the evening of the concert, Frau Schreiber frowned outside the performance space. I was entirely atremble. I peered through a chink in the wall of the barn and tried to count the audience members. Twenty, maybe thirty, of my fellow citizens hoped to be entranced by my music. Their ears would understand my beauty, while their eyes would analyze my every imperfection of manner and find me a repugnant pretender.

“*Ich kann nicht*,” I told the Frau.

“*Sie müssen*,” she said in a ferocious tone that allowed no contradiction.

I flexed my fingers. I forbade them to disappoint. I hid myself behind my eyes and wished for catastrophic fire. A steady force guiding me from behind was Schreiber. She pushed me into the barn and into the new existence I had foolishly chosen.

I kept my eyes downturned as I made my way along the aisle from the back of the house to the stage that had been cobbled together out of old crates, but I could hear the low murmur of the audience’s anticipation fade into expectant silence. I—I!—was to pour myself into that silence.

I ascended the stage. My eyes met harp strings. I breathed. I imagined myself a harpist. I dismissed the terror of judgment. I sat at the stool, by now a worn and

comfortable friend, and allowed my fingers to find their way to their familiar starting posts. For the spectators, I was master of the future. If I waited, they would wait. If I played, they would listen. If I took flight, they would pity.

Daring a glance at the audience, I caught my father's nervous eye. He held a limp bouquet of dandelions and a flimsy program that he had crushed into a wad. He shifted on his bench. Beside him sat one of my classmates whose face bore a perpetual yawn. At the back of the audience, Frau Schreiber stood atop a bench, half-illuminated by the barn's wan torchlight, her arms crossed and her expectations dire.

I plucked a C before I meant to, and the note sank. A collective murmur of disapproval incinerated my ears. I dared not look up.

Humiliation kindling in my cheeks, I held out a finger to the crowd as if to say that I had not yet begun in earnest. I dried my sweating hands on the hem of my threadbare skirt.

Although I had practiced *Chanson de la nuit* often enough to imprint the notes on my fingers, I found myself unable to remember its melody. I put my hands on my harp once again, trusting my fingers somehow to find their way back to the path my memory had painstakingly constructed. Such trust proved groundless. A failed flat and a hideous run of disconnected phrases shamed me. I lay my hands in my lap, defeated and poor.

The audience rustled as the people of G— hoped for a swift end to the program. I hoped Schreiber would assist, but when I turned my eyes to her, I despaired to see her simply shaking her head, despising my failure.

The torches onstage roasted me in the hell I had chosen. A German Icarus, I had invited ambition hot enough to melt me. Better that I should decay for a lifetime in the

necropolis of my father's butcher shop, shaving beef and gutting fowl, than that I should publicly expose myself as a vulgar tramp scraping at the door of urbanity. In the front row, Wilhelm chuckled silently behind a program.

I could either begin again or end it all. My eyes wandered the audience, pleading for sympathy. Other than my father's impotent concern, I found no encouragement. With a sob, I stood, ready to declare my retirement from music, from G—, and perhaps from life, when my attention was compelled to roam towards the poorly lit rear corner of the auditorium.

From there, I felt a stirring.

My breath caught. I couldn't see into the auditorium's back rows, but—a presence there—I knew—I felt—I was being watched by a pair of unseeable eyes, and I understood—was certain—those eyes—that they—simply that they found pleasure in what they saw.

I sat.

“Ich werde beginnen,” I cried. “Again I begin.” The faces of the audience chattered, but I heeded only the calm scrutiny of the man—may I call him a man?—I could not see.

The fervor of an unknown presence shot through my bones and across my joints, stirring my fingertips to unaccustomed dexterity. My fingers twitching, I readied myself as calmly as I was able. I allowed my shoulders to slide into comfort, and I pierced the silence with a resonant note of surprising purity. I had no chance to gauge the audience's response, because I was already on to the next note, and the next, each one hastening upon the other's heels. The fortes swelled and splintered the wooden walls of the barn;

the pianissimos whispered beautiful secrets to only those ears delicate enough to capture the tinkling footfalls of my *pizzicato*.

My hands were not their own masters. Every pluck and every strum was a symbiosis of my own will and that of the dark presence that guided me from its place in the back row. Every hollow, every crest, every tonality was authored jointly by my hands and the hands of that other. My fingers fled across the strings, pursued by his presence, and yet the chase was exhilarating. I raced through quiet copses and along the muddy shoals of forest streams. I scaled the clouds and mounted the breeze, but he maintained his pace behind me, spurring me forward to the unnamable, to the molten center of the Sun itself.

And then, I stopped.

My fingers had run out of notes. I had reached the end of my sonata. The chase had concluded, and I was no longer breathless.

A dull clatter of applause returned me to unspectacular reality. Before me, the round faces of G—'s working class were pink blobs in an underlit auditorium that used to be a stables. The floor was graded dirt, the ceiling rotten boards. The barn was so capacious that the weak sound of the audience's disparate clapping sank to the ground without travelling any distance. I was not a beauty, not a Daphne, not a golden sylph sailing skyward; I was an awkwardly proportioned girl in a secondhand dress.

I could be brilliant and it would mean nothing.

I strained to see the shadowy form in the back row, but the force that had been so potent just moments before had dissolved, leaving me nothing but banal, tangible certainties.

I dropped into a listless bow. A tuft of limp dandelions landed at my feet, courtesy of my father. I took another bow.

Before I had stepped down from the stage, my fellow villagers were already shuffling out of the auditorium, muttering to one another, more likely about their gardens than about my *glissandos*. I sought anybody with enough discernment to have been the presence that goaded me throughout my performance, but I saw only farmhands, pensioners, and the chuckling familiars of my unremarkable G—. The man who had animated me—assuming, of course, that he had been a physical presence at all—was no longer among us.

My father lifted me off my feet. His earnestness stung.

“*Das war sehr gut,*” he said. He set me down, and there I was: a girl in a dress in a barn with no possibility for anything more. I sniffled.

Father, thinking that I was disappointed in my performance, set his hand on my head. He didn’t trust himself to judge aesthetic matters, so he accepted what he thought was my own assessment—that I had played badly—and then he, too, began to sniff back tears.

That night, when I had achieved artistic satisfaction beyond what I had expected, when I should by rights have known victory, when I had released enormous music into a tiny barn, my father and I clung to one another in sadness, unable even to communicate to one another the nature and depth of our respective disappointments.

Schreiber, jealous, snapped a curt nod. *See?* her eyes said. *All this beauty amounts to nothing in the end.*

She was wrong, of course. All this beauty amounts to something far uglier than nothing in the end.

CHAPTER 2

BRIDGE

A churning ocean separates Germany from America, and I allowed that ocean to toss me. Being at sea for weeks discombobulates: You sleep, you dine, you walk and talk, but any disruption of the dyspeptic water beneath you reminds you that you have your foundations in fluid—that nothing solid sustains you as you commend your trust to unseen currents. I set my life loose upon these currents as I steamed towards Sansone. The summons he issued after my concert was nothing but a scrap of paper scrawled with ink, signed and stamped and carried to my door, but in spite of its flimsiness I did not hesitate to stake my future hopes on that single document. Words flattered my vanity, and it was at the behest of words that I committed to overthrowing my life in G— and sailing into mystery to continue my development as an artist and, more importantly, as a woman of high-class bearing.

Waves and words and aspiration conveyed me to an uncertain future.

Long before Sansone's manservant arrived to carry me away from G—, I had already departed. As soon as I received Sansone's offer, Germany began to unmoor me from its realities. At the conservatory, Schreiber became fire-eyed with jealousy. She brusquely and repeatedly inquired as to who this Sansone character was, and why he was interested in a provincial butcher's daughter still unschooled in the basics of the Salzedo method.

“*Schliff ist nicht begabung,*” I replied, chin proudly parallel to the floor, elbows stiff, as I teased out the opening harmonies of Spohr’s “Variations in E.”

“Polish must not be confused with talent,” my eyes told her. “Polish will come in America,” I told myself.

Schreiber pounced on my every fumble, greedily relishing the opportunity to confound my self-confidence. When a note went awry, she positioned her hands over mine and forced them into place. I grew weary of her and stopped attending lessons. I practiced at home as my father dreamily stirred the fire, his eyes set upon a fantastic vision of America: cowboys in castles, street musicians in tuxedos and ball gowns, money cascading from the windows of skyscrapers, enormous desert plains with camels and surfers, and cunning automobiles capable of speech and thought that sip oil from crystal goblets and excrete incense through golden tailpipes.

At the central market, I became the object of pregnant glances. Some hated me for my opportunity. Others feared me for my greatness. Everywhere, I was watched, and I continued to build myself into a consummate performer. No longer simply C—, butcher’s daughter, I was now an international sensation. I was a commodity responsible for its own branding. I learned to smile magnanimously at the people who stood in awe, but I didn’t yet have the tools to deal with resentment. I overheard Frieda, a busty young classmate whose dimpled smile oozed more star quality than my own, refer to me as an affected chipmunk, and days of self-abnegation couldn’t soften the barb of her judgment. I continued cringingly about my errands, my unconvincing smile an inadequate companion, scalded by the naïve impression that if someone bore me ill will I must in some measure have acted to deserve it.

Who was I, really? Some child thrust into adulthood? Some provincial German asked to suddenly savor wealth? Some performer who assumed herself talented because she had no proper benchmark?

I juggled insecurities as I selected fruit and bread for our lunch. When I returned home, I realized that I had brought back a basket of rotten apples and wormy loaves. My father made no rebuke but eyed my distraction with concern.

I continued to wait for the arrival of Sansone's envoy, uncertain whether it would occasion celebration or regret.

Skylark, that writhing manservant with the watery handshake, issued a weak knock on the door one drizzly Saturday morning. He wore a robin's egg jacket with a golden sash, and he held aloft a massive umbrella. His gleaming brown shoes scraped and pawed the patch of dirt before our doorstep. He massaged his knobby knuckles as he let his milky eyes roam me.

"You," he said, pointing as if afraid. "You come to America?"

His words were loud and well-articulated—a theatrical English designed for the slack comprehension of a non-native speaker.

The shadow of my father fell on me from behind. At my back, a lumbering butcher mourned my imminent desertion while an eely man before me wrung himself. Was I to leave the honest stolidity of my homeland—a land where the unremarkable stomped from meal to meal, rough with work and dumb with affection; where men and women thrust wildflowers at one another in wordless courtship; where slices of black bread fell off the knife and beer served as sustenance rather than tranquilizer; where

nobody lived with the pressure to be noteworthy—in favor of a country that manufactured Skylarks? A country in which a man’s value was measured by his inability to weather the elements; in which perfumes and pomades kept off the odors of stagnation; in which the fear of death lurked fanged and ferocious among the display cases of every dedicated collector of frivolities; in which wrought-iron gates kept out the howling predators—or kept them in?

Yes. Such was the draw of so-called civilization.

Papa gripped my shoulder from behind as he stared quizzically at the sports-coated fop who had come to spirit me away.

“I,” said Skylark, pointing at himself, “take your daughter.” He swiped the air in vicious pantomime of the act.

“*Was sagt er?*” Papa asked me.

“*Ich muss gehen,*” I said.

“*Ach,*” said Papa with bowed head.

Meanwhile, Skylark listened to our unfamiliar language, open-mouthed and wide-eyed as a frog. He hiccupped in terror.

“You come?” he asked. “Play harp. America. Sansone.”

I extended one finger to request a moment, not ready to hold my English up to the scrutiny of a native speaker. Skylark contorted his face into a smile of indulgence and issued a wriggling bow.

Before I could go, I needed to imprint my home upon my memory as a signal star to guide me during my year abroad. It did not take long to inventory the four corners of my bare room. I traced the grooves and crevices on the stones that bound our fire pit; I

rapped our iron cookware and nuzzled its reverberations; I stretched out on my hay-stuffed cot, bidding farewell to its stale, earthy aromas and the stubbly torture it inflicted on me nightly; I picked up a handful of the dirt flooring and let it trickle from my fingers.

And the harp? Was it to come with me? I embraced its bulky frame and graced each string with a kiss. I allowed my fingers one last stroll through its thicket of melodies, an aching farewell that rippled the air. I turned my eyes Skylark-wards as I played. He affected not to see or hear, feigning interest in the passage of the clouds through the churning sky.

“*Komm mit?*” I asked, playing on with one hand and pointing at the harp with the other. “*Meine Harfe?*”

“We have harps,” said Skylark. “In America. This harp, no. This harp is German.”

“*Ach, meine deutsche Harfe,*” I said, rubbing my cheek against the strings.

And then, having inflicted my love on my scant material possessions, there was nothing left but to say the *Auf Wiedersehen* that I had been delaying all this while.

Ach, mein Vater. Ach, mein wunderbarer Vater. Seine einzige Sünde war Unwissenheit. His only sin was his ignorant hope.

I wonder if he entertained the illusion that he would ever see me again. Ostensibly, I was to be gone for one year and then return, changed, perhaps, but the same C— I had ever been. However, the gravity with which he held my face in his hands and analyzed me, as if trying to commit to memory a puzzling melody that would soon be nothing but an echo, wrenched me. We both knew that the beginning of my life outside G— was the end of my life within it.

And so, rather than endure the moment, I jerked away from him and affected blasé. Faced with emotion, I fled to cool Americanism. I took Skylark's elbow and, holding fast to his spindly arm, strode into the grey morning without looking back. My heart was a gonging disaster. Sweat pressed through my skin. I had chosen my self.

Skylark proved a tepid coachman, and his loose way with the horses ensured that our flight from G— was a turbulent affair. I watched the houses and storefronts of my homeland pitch and cant from atop an expensive carriage. My mind processed nothing. Anxiety cloaked my senses in blur. Of my egress from the town I have but one remaining image:

Konrad, that pubescent maypole, had somehow heard of my departure and bolted alongside the carriage, hemorrhaging peonies from the bouquet he clutched. His cheeks bulged with exertion as, puffing and red-faced, he fought to share one last word with me. The carriage slid and dove as the horses bucked over the cobblestones. Ill, I looked down at Konrad. He pushed the remnants of his broken bouquet at me.

The boy's face, a wide-mouthed, contorted mask of straining helplessness, resembled that of a scarecrow made horrible with rot and rainfall.

That black, empty mouth, framed by those thin, dreadful lips, mouthed frantic ciphers rendered inaudible by the ferocious hoofbeats.

That! That was the stagnant void I had escaped.

And then we had passed the wretch and I clutched my knees, trying not to vomit, as Skylark waggled the reins in a vain attempt to smooth our passage.

What shall I remember here? What *can* I remember here? We raced across Europe and in our whirling haste jettisoned our memories. We screamed for hours and hours down roads of stone; roads of dirt; roads of sand; roads that were not roads, but rather traces of cow-paths long ago given up to the proliferation of weeds and wasteland; roads flanked by head-scarved grandmothers exercising entrepreneurship in the sale of bread and preserves; roads that wound up mountains before dropping off in sheer cliffs; roads divided by esplanades of palm and olive trees; roads choked with religious processions and military parades; roads scarred with pits and potholes; roads fresh and untrodden; roads teeming with children for whom horses were occasions; roads wide and narrow; roads that seemed never to end; roads that never did.

These snatches of memory are the treasures of my transition.

I do not think I slept—or, if I did, I dreamt of the journey. We chased the future, which remained ever beyond the horizon.

We soared, relentlessly towards *Amerika*.

At last, we arrived in that catastrophic port town of T—, the skyscape in every direction a gray snarl of smokestacks and corrugated industry. Black whorls of smoke drifted over the spent dishwater of the eastern Atlantic. Ships the size of villages split the ocean, their mossy flanks bulging with freight. Ant-sized humans laden with cargo and riggings swarmed along the bodies of the ogrish vessels, grooming the gargantuan beasts awesome enough to dominate the ocean.

Chill sprays of water misted my face as I pulled myself up the boarding ramp by means of a weatherworn rope. The waves thundered, the klaxon of our steamship issued its earsplitting farewell, and we had embarked.

Oh, that choppy and turbulent passage.

I spent my first night sequestered in my cabin, in the company only of my familiar threadbare valise that contained two dresses, a bar of coal soap, a pair of moth-eaten stockings, a battered English grammar book (many of its pages victimized by the penciled vulgarities of its previous owner), a silver looking-glass, a map of Stuttgart, part of a railroad spike that Papa had once discovered in the stomach of a calf, and a rusty daguerreotype of *The Ancestors*, an unsmiling group of hard-edged Saxon pioneers whose stolidity beamed from beneath the brims of bonnets and felt caps.

New to seafaring, I whimpered and clutched my bag, crumpling myself into a tiny ball on top of my bunk. Even my seemingly stable bed bucked and lolled as the ocean urged us first this way and then that, and the more I sought stability, the more I fell victim to the lurch of open water.

I cried and shrieked and scabbled against the wooden plank of my bunk. I spoke to *The Ancestors* in hurried, regretful German, sometimes deploring the vanity that had brought me here, sometimes just begging them, "*Helfen!*" The daguerreotype stared back while I was lobbed against the walls of my cabin, never certain how I would next be thrown. *The Ancestors* stood rooted in their fixed existence.

Sometime deep in evening, Skylark knocked on the door.

"Please don't scream," he whined. "Please. Nuisance. You. The passengers. Sleep. Their sleep."

I screamed and blubbered and cowered under the bed, unable to trust a man who seemed comfortable with nothing supporting him but agitated water.

The next afternoon, overwhelming hunger impelled me to creep from my cabin into the corridors in search of food. I kept low to the ground, practically crawling, and held on to the furniture for support. Underfoot, the first carpet of my life seemed a waste of fabric, serving no function but obfuscation of the wood that actually constituted the floor. Framed watercolors stared at me from the walls.

As I navigated the narrow halls of the ship, I saw my fellow passengers strutting, far more surefooted than myself. Women with hats sprouting feathers, men with unblemished white gloves, even children in their miniature suits and miniature dresses shambled happily, walking on water as easily as on *terra firma*.

I wondered at their supernatural skill until I was grabbed roughly around the waist by an ostrich of a woman who lowered her beak to my ear and bugled, “Lost?”

A sweet cloud of gin shaded her words.

I burrowed into her. However unknown, she was at least an anchor.

“My love, my love, my love, my love,” she gargled. She pressed me against her, the unyielding pearls of her necklace grinding my cheek. “Gotta get your sea legs. Gotta learn to walk. C’mon.”

She yanked me all over the ship, and I passed alien visions. Dapper young men launching ash from their cigarettes into the open ocean. Sharp-eyed seagulls terrorizing children for their crumbs. The motorized hell of the engine room, where everlasting flames blanketed every surface with a sooty veneer. The whale of a kitchen, where I

thought to grab a discarded bread crust to gnaw as we continued our tour. The carefully crescented fingernails of the idle rich.

As we pressed on, my captor's slurry of English lost its thread and devolved into disconnected torrents of noise. I think she was telling me her history, but I retain only this: With an impatient nudge, she forced me against the railing of the upper deck. I looked for the firm, steady line of the horizon, but every time I thought I had fixed it in my vision, it bobbed and reoriented, and I was once again set adrift.

"This," barked the ostrich. "This is our freedom! Our liberation! Great and glorious and ..." She hiccupped, and she bent her hiccup into something that was either a scream or a drawn-out peal of laughter, and when I turned away from the unsteady horizon in the hopes of pinning my bearings to her face, my attention adhered to her mouth. A chasm as dark and repugnant as Konrad's, her bleating mouth was a ruined cave guarded by the stalactites of fractured teeth and stuffed with the worming mass of her tongue.

As with the past, so with the future. Perhaps the land I was blazing towards was not so different from the land I had forsworn.

And then, suddenly, I was alone. Where had my guardian angel fled? I perused the deck, but in the shifting blur of my aquatic passage, I saw only colorful dollops that might have been people or might have been the machinery of the steamship and, gone hopelessly dizzy, I at least had sufficient instinct to turn, grip the railing, and lean over the water before I began wet-heaving my bread crust into the sea, an undigested offering to the Atlantic.

As days passed, I grew steelier against the waves' rude conduct. I forced myself to eat, and with effort I retained the food in my stomach. I intersected occasionally with Skylark and, when I did, he sputtered for minutes at a time before fleeing me. I surrendered myself to the ocean. I gave up the conviction that I had any control over my own circumstance. When the seas grew rough, I flopped. When the seas grew steady, I stood erect.

I measured time by the onward march of impressions.

The quiet hiss of midnight waves along the keel. Schools of luminous jellyfish pulsing like alien bodies in our wake. The mouth of a new dawn yawning at my back, as the steamship plowed West, West, West across the Atlantic, and Skylark made sick over starboard. The galley, arrayed in crystal and chandeliers, and the epauletted waiters whose gazes lingered too long, too lupine, on my immature body. The blissful blindness that kept me unaware of their animal intent.

And then: the rising glass monoliths of Manhattan Island as we sailed into the arms of a new continent, into Sansone's manufactured nation.

Skylark and I rumbled down a thin Manhattan avenue in a hansom—mad mariners, we, skirting Scylla and Charybdis both—and through a sickly park, the great city's black aneurysm. The manservant twisted in his seat beside me, visibly uncomfortable. On the ship, he had been able to abandon me to the collective goodwill of the other passengers, but in the bouncing carriage he had no choice but to acknowledge my presence.

“Do you understand?” he asked, again and again. “Do you understand my English?”

With my every affirmation, his agitation increased. He would stare at me in undisguised horror until I caught his gaze, which prompted him to shift uneasily and point out some noun or other.

“A bird. A person. A building.”

“I am having been studied English many years in a kind of school,” I said, my accent not yet sanded off by sophistication’s abrasions. “English words these things, I know.”

“A rock. A fly. Ten geese.”

“I understand perfection,” I said.

“A bum. Some grass. Another rock.”

“Skylark,” I said, and grasped his sweating hand in mine. “You are not need to being afraid of me. I am to be music in America, elegant woman German.”

His eyes wide and oozing apprehension, Skylark twitched his hand away. For a moment, I thought my merciless manipulations of the language had rendered me incomprehensible, but I knew that Skylark understood when he raised a crooked finger to his nose and said, “This.”

Our hansom howled out of the park and into city streets. Manhattan unreeled itself behind Sansone’s milquetoast of a hired man.

“This,” Skylark repeated, his lips going sere faster than his tongue could remoisten them.

“This is my nose.”

Manhattan, like the steamship, was a protean space whose liquid character could be experienced but not comprehended; it was in the green farms and forested thickets, the manicured roadways and palatial houses of the country's interior, that America declared its intentions. Here, land was apportioned and packaged into saleable chunks, and anything that could be touched could be owned. The country was not a country, but a series of abutting properties, all relationships untangled, all things subject to order. I gazed at my new homeland and tried to memorize each home, each fencepost, each tagged cow.

If the passage from G— to America was a breathless scramble, fleeting sensations weightless enough to leave only the barest impressions, time sagged as the city dissolved into the countryside's checkerboard of possession—into the land of Sansone. It has been said that objects of enormous moment sit heavy upon the fabric of reality and distort the space and time around them. Sansone was just such a Jupiter. As we approached his estate, the very minutes and seconds of my existence bent into his sinister vortex.

When the hansom drew up to the wrought iron gates, my senses drew themselves into acute attention. Sansone's horticultural marvels were in full flourish regardless of the season. The perfume of the lilacs and lilies inexplicably thriving in the rich March soil met me first, but was soon overpowered by the sharper scent of oleanders, morning glories, and peach blossoms. I remember how odd it seemed to see plants of all different climes and seasons springing forth together, obeying no principles of nature. I remember the creak of the gate as Skylark pulled it open, and the flutter of wings as our approach startled the doves out of the cherry trees. I carry within me the living image of every

individual spear of grass on Sansone's rugged lawns, of every creeping beetle and ladybug that clung to the verdure, of every cloud smeared across the firmament. I remember my quivering knees, my restless hands, my twitching eyes. Skylark continued to aspirate nouns, and even these I remember. Anther. Stamen. Girdling root.

We rolled over the smooth dirt carriageway, and Sansone's mansion dawned before us. It crawled with gargoyles, ivy, and golden ornamentation, a confection of magnitude unified by its brash overabundance. Sunlight danced off its peaks and pinnacles.

"Skylark," I said. "I live here?"

Skylark stared cross-eyed at a honeybee that had landed on his nose.

As we drew near, the mansion continued to unfold, its wings and turrets blooming to reveal wings and turrets of their own. The structure spread ceaselessly across the landscape, giving way to the gardens and orchards and allowing nature's tendrils to creep over it. Tall, arched windows revealed plush draperies. My hand crept to Skylark's knee; I gripped him, feeling the need for verifiable touch. The mansion was too large to be real, too magnificent to be tangible. I flinched from the steady stream of sunlight shining forth over American splendor. To think of my miniscule home in G—! In the face of Sansone's extravagance, could such a hovel as ours have ever actually existed? Neither world seemed true, and yet I knew no others. How had I arrived here? How was it that a single Earth could give rise to such divergent outcomes?

I moved my lips to assure myself that I still could. In an enormous universe, I was empty space: a receptacle for dreams and memories; a conduit between the unreachable past and the unreachable future; a body incapable of substantial action, yet capable of

being acted upon by the caprices of chance. To keep myself from spinning into irrelevance, I had to shrink my surroundings by means of idle conversation.

“How many rooms has this house?”

Skylark let out a noise between a whimper and a shriek and clapped his hands to his nose. He’d been stung.

Pale-faced and swollen-nosed, he glared at me as though I were responsible for his wound.

“Y-y-y-you,” he said, nodding emphatically. “Us. To guest cabin. To your quarters. Then Sansone.”

Sansone. The name stuck in my mind as we rode along the perimeter of the mansion and into the citrus groves adjacent to the horse pastures. Sansone. Inseparable from the moment of triumph in the barn, that febrile artistic passion. Empty and unreal as those memories of Konrad and Wilhelm, of animal scraps and horse dung, of Schreiber and beef stew now seemed, the feeling that had fired me during the performance—that absorbing, relentless sensation of being fully engulfed in the unseen materiality of some other being—was a throbbing reality. Was this reality mine, or was it his? Could we both claim ownership over the same sensation?

Skylark reined in the horses in front of a grandmotherly bungalow larger than my home in G—. We were in a small clearing, surrounded by dark oaks and sumac. Squirrels and woodchucks rustled the underbrush. The cabin itself was rustic but immaculate. The walls were of cherry wood, and broad windows welcomed the spring sunlight. With the aid of Skylark’s tremulous arm, I disembarked from the carriage and stood before a new home that seemed to have been built just for me.

“Nice? Yes?” Skylark said, handing me my forgotten valise, the scant mementos of a vaporous past.

I crossed the threshold and found myself in a spacious haven. The cabin, though a single room, possessed the vaulting verticality of a cathedral. In contrast to the excesses of Sansone’s mansion, my cabin was decorated with an eye to restraint and elegance. Scrolled shoe molding billowed along the baseboards. The pendulous crystal chandelier above my *escritoire* entangled the light from the bay windows and splayed it in rainbow patterns onto my eggshell walls. The floor was of sleek hardwood, and every niche held a taper.

Most arresting, however—most enchanting and alluring—was the object whose magnetic opulence drew my eyes, whose towering majesty lay me prostrate before it—the object I longed immediately to touch, to engage in the intimate conversation of caress, to explore and to love—the object, which, in fact, I found I already loved, which contained within it all classical ideals of proportion, which was, in fact, the Platonic expression of beauty—I should say, *the manifestation of the thing “beauty” itself*, while all other like objects were merely mimics of its outward form; in a word, it was—oh—in a word, it was, oh, it was oh that harp.

“*Harfe*,” I gasped.

“Harp,” said Skylark.

“*Harfe*,” I cried.

“Harp,” said Skylark, shifting his feet.

“*Ha-ha-ha ...*” I panted, tearing across the room to grovel at the instrument’s feet. My harp in G— had been a rough-hewn cudgel. This harp was a crafted glory. Tiny

sculpted homunculi danced along the column of the solid gold frame, while fat-cheeked *putti* puffed on soundless cornets on the shoulder. Most remarkable, however, was the figure that took shape at the harp's crown: a beautiful praying woman, wrapped in leaves of gold, arching swanlike out of the frame to serve as the figurehead on the prow of my musical journey. I touched her face and felt the shiver of ghostly fingers running across my own cheek.

“We must go to Sansone,” said Skylark.

“I must make,” I said.

“Rehearsal later. Sansone now.”

“It is once now. Short times,” I said, heedless of my English.

Settling onto the purple velvet stool to the side of the harp, I tempted my fingers to graze the strings. The air warmed with a pure, resonant A and thickened with the introduction of a pitch-perfect D.

“Oh!” I cried, because I thought I had heard myself speak.

“Madame,” said Skylark.

I played on, enwrapped in the sensation of my own music. I played on, now an American, glutting my senses. I played on, delighted with the harp because it was under my command. Luxury alone could not serve as my goal. By striving after only riches, I would become nothing but a clod in the company of beautiful things; it was through the creation of beauty that I could escape want altogether, surrendering myself to the ecstatic plane of the ideal. Art could, would—must!—transform me into mist.

Skylark cleared his throat with a grinding, mucous snort that stilled my fingers.

A shy smile crept across his face, though he tried to hide it.

“Madame,” he said once again. “You must meet the master.”

Taking a moment to allow the echoes of my music to stop twinkling in my ears, I smoothed my dress and carefully swept my hair into order. With a happy, nervous smile and a new sense of purpose, I rose.

“Well,” I said. “I am ready.”

CHAPTER 3
PERFORMANCE OF CONTRACT

Poised. Confident. Charming. Selfish. Sadistic. Dishonest. Xenophobic. Exhilarating. Certain. Alluring. Alarming. Dark. Strange. *Übel*.

While Skylark taught me nouns, Sansone would teach me adjectives.

In that mansion, tiled floors and marble fonts encased us all in a lavish sarcophagus. The ferns in the vestibule betokened a forgotten paradise. Skylights provided glimpses of an unattainable heaven, while a crushed-velvet staircase promised the possibility of a fall. How little of this I perceived on that transformative day in mid-March. Instead, I trusted opulence to signify virtue, and I trusted that most opulent of men, that singular Sansone, as he kissed the back of my hand to welcome me into my undoing.

“It’s an uncommon pleasure to make your acquaintance at last,” said Sansone.

I could only stare and desire and envy.

“She knows some nouns,” Skylark volunteered.

“Welcome,” said Sansone.

“She sometimes speaks,” said Skylark.

“I hope that you will make yourself at home,” said Sansone. “And you need not speak, so long as you play.”

I stood mute, the hem of my skirt in one hand, frozen in the approximation of a curtsy.

Skylark panted and twisted, leaving muddy scuffs on the white- and black-tiled floor. Conscious of his own awkwardness, he romanced an oak hat rack with his moony eyes.

“Deportment,” said Sansone.

Skylark squirmed into a simulacrum of posture.

“What’s to be done with this clod?” the master asked me. “What’s to be done with this dishrag?”

“I ...” said Skylark, dropping his eyes and straightening his spine. “What’s to be done with me?”

“Did you know,” said Sansone, unconcerned with the panic and confusion in my wandering eyes, bringing me into his heartfelt confidence, “that I found this man? Of course, when I found him, he wasn’t a man at all, but an entirely abject specimen.”

“He made me,” Skylark said with vigorous gratitude.

“He’s still unformed,” said Sansone. “He’s a nasturtium in coattails. He lacks philosophy.”

“I lack *upbringing*,” Skylark said, banging his chest with a proud fist.

“But this is a creative colony,” said Sansone. “This is a colony of art and culture. In a country of consumers, this is a bastion of production. And what do we produce at the artists’ colony? Not goods.”

Sansone, the charming monster, removed a crystal swan from a nearby shelf and stared it in the eyes.

“A swan,” Skylark explained.

“*Ein Schwan*,” I said, helplessly, still paralyzed in the middle of my curtsy.

Sansone dashed the crystal figurine to the floor and shrugged.

“Material goods,” he said, “are brittle. Here, we create that which endures. We create transcendent beauty.”

“We create men!” said Skylark.

“Yes. And women, too,” said Sansone, and with a smile stared into me, seemed to know me. He had heard my music, he had seen my confusion, and he knew who I was and who I wanted to become. He had the knowledge that I hadn’t, until that moment, realized I lacked. The knowledge that I suddenly, hungrily, desperately, needed to grab hold of.

Blind assertions raged as I considered Sansone: I will play the most beautiful music. I will earn a place here, in your colony. I will find out what you are, and how I might share in your clarity of vision. I will wrest your understanding from you, if I must, in order to have it. I will see all.

I dared to smile at the master, whose smile glowed in return.

“I am much pleasure,” I said.

“You *are* much pleasure,” said Sansone.

“One swan,” said Skylark, holding up a finger. “One broken swan.”

Sansone turned to Skylark and laughed. I didn’t understand the humor, but I laughed as well. Skylark did not laugh. He shifted.

“You’ll attend to the damage and accompany us to the banqueting hall?” Sansone asked Skylark. “We cannot leave shattered crystal in the vestibule. It’s unseemly.”

“Most!” said Skylark, nodding vigorously, beseeching me to agree.

I laughed and nodded, my head swimming, and Skylark bowed gratefully before retreating.

Sansone placed a hand on my shoulder.

“You,” said Sansone, bringing his mouth to my ear, “must meet the others. We will dine and celebrate. In this house, we honor that which is most beautiful, most pure. We are perpetually creating the world in a state of beauty. Are you ready for your first performance?”

I did not trust myself to answer.

His hand grazed my cheek.

“You are ready indeed,” he said.

I found myself staring at the wreckage of the swan. The setting sun streamed through the lunette above the front door and caught the fine shards of crystal.

“We must dine,” said Sansone. “Will you come?” he asked, and I couldn’t come.

“Follow,” he said, and I could follow.

That night!

Skylark threw open the stained-glass double doors leading to a reception room covered in an intricate Persian carpet. With Sansone supporting me by the crook of my elbow, I quaked, overwhelmed by the sight of banquet tables adorned with fruit bowls and cocktails, step pyramids of fine Swiss chocolates, and rows of broad-shouldered champagne bottles. Interchangeable manservants flitted between the tables, rushing *hors d’oeuvres* to the hungry and pouring merlot into thirsty goblets. I passed rows and rows of faces as Sansone ushered me forward. Feasting colonists clapped and cheered as I

moved along, and I tried to bow and smile as I walked. Here, perhaps, were my people—those who, with me, devoted themselves to the attainment of a world saturated with otherworldly pleasures.

Skylark darted ahead to a table with an empty place setting and pulled out a chair with an embarrassed flourish. Seated at the table were a short-haired woman in a fashionable knit sweater, a glum man of Scandinavian aspect, and a magnificent warhorse, which was remarkably clutching a wine glass between two hooves.

“My esteemed colonists,” said Sansone over the din, “I present to you our newest musician-in-residence. Though an unpolished, grasping German”—he squeezed my elbow at this—“she is to be welcomed among us, not as a representative of her benighted country, but as a representative of one who has had the good sense to leave it.”

“Bravo!” cheered the warhorse.

“A German?” asked the woman. She scanned me, head to toe.

“A harpist I have an interest in,” said Sansone.

“A musician and a German,” said the woman, pulling out a thin cigarette and burning it into life with a silver lighter. “How traditional.”

“How uncouth,” said the blonde man, eyeing my dirty stockings.

“I’m sure she’s charmed by your judgment,” said Sansone.

“Welcome!” shouted the horse, his eyes glinting and his cheeks roan. “Would you like to make the acquaintance of the table?”

I nodded. I had no sense of the question. I had a sense only of the arched marble ceilings, of the enormous windows at the end of the room, and of the gardens beyond; of the grace with which the warhorse caught up the stem of his wine glass between his

hooves and raised his drink, almost daintily, to his equine lips; of the lightning bolts running through Sansone's fingers and halfway up my arm.

The woman stood and walked to me. She was short but pretty, and she shoved her face at mine with unforgivable bluntness of manner.

"She smacks of shyness, shyness is what she doesn't lack, lacking shyness would be an obstacle for this one. One does not lack shyness when one is one," said the woman. Her scrutiny trailed to my hands—mannish and worn from picking the strings of my harp. "One, one, one."

"Are you intimidated?" Sansone asked me. "Don't be. We spend our lives in celebration and contemplation."

"And the elation of generation," said the woman.

"And inebriation," hiccupped the warhorse.

"Peace, Bucephalus," said the Scandinavian man. "Hold your tongue."

The man then turned to me and, with a thin, unconvincing smile that failed to lid his bottomless sorrow, said, "My name is Edvard Munch. I am one of Squire Sansone's artists-in-residence."

"He has troubles," Skylark whispered to me.

"I have troubles," said Edvard Munch.

"And you?" asked Sansone, turning to the woman who had been scouring my entire body with her judgmental eyes. "Is introduction too pedestrian to bear?"

"Knowing it is loving it is knowing it—and, loving it, I know it," said the woman to Sansone. I couldn't make sense of her words, but her voice was wrathful.

Turning a sweeter face to me, she yanked my hand from my side and said, “*Je m’appelle Stein.*”

“C—,” I breathed.

“I revolutionize writing rightly nightly,” said Stein. “I write by night and by right. Writing right write right night.”

“According to Gertrude, traditional sense is the enemy of art,” said the warhorse.

Stein jerked her elbow at the horse, her grip on my hand growing ferociously tight.

“Quoth the Macedonian,” she said.

The horse, with a colossal upturning of legs and hooves, toppled off his stool.

“Barbarous drunkenness,” said Sansone. “Even for a Macedonian.”

“I’m a smash in Skopje,” groaned the horse. Its legs twitched in its effort to right itself, but it only succeeded in upending several bottles of champagne.

“Shall I fetch you a drink?” Skylark asked me, twisting and frowning. His gaze rested not on me, but rather on the spilled champagne seeping into the carpet.

“Pish!” said Edvard Munch. “Not another word about Skopje! Skopje is an embarrassment! Pish!”

The horse stopped struggling and lay still on the carpet, a heap of hide and hair.

“The cave monasteries of Ohrid, though?” the horse asked. “Macedonia’s crown jewel? It is a far more forgiving country than this, your America.”

I wasn’t aware of having answered Skylark, but I must have, because I found Gertrude Stein handing me a glass of port and helping me lift the drink to my lips.

“Anesthetic,” she whispered. “Strictly necessary.”

“The horse gives a wretched first impression,” Edvard Munch said to me. He plucked a chocolate from a golden tray and considered it between his thumb and forefinger. “Bucephalus cuts a tragic figure. Tragic.” Frowning at the chocolate, he replaced it and shook his head.

Skylark and a mustached colonist who had been attracted by the clamor flanked the horse and clumsily attempted to set him aright.

“Do you ever consider what sort of a creature you are?” Sansone asked, as Skylark wrenched one of Bucephalus’s legs from underneath the banquet table. “You moan and you wail about Hephestion and Alexander and how unfair it is that man should be so fickle, but maybe you lost your lover because he was sick of canoodling with a besotted bronco.”

“I never drank in Macedonia. Never!” moaned the horse. An acidic yellow foam surfaced on his lips. “If I’m a—pardon”— and here he allowed a mouthful of froth to spill over his muzzle—“an inebriated wretch, it’s entirely your doing.”

“My doing?” said Sansone. “You can lead a horse to claret ...”

Gertrude Stein continued to prompt me to drink at an alarming rate. I tried to slow her, but she manipulated my limbs with authority. A peculiar warmth radiated in the space behind my eyes as I watched Bucephalus’s wriggling limbs. I choked back a dizzy giggle and tasted sour bile at the back of my throat.

“Little in life,” said Edvard Munch to an apple, “is sadder than the remnants of this stallion’s dignity.”

The mustached colonist managed to assist Bucephalus into a half-crouch. Skylark, unsuited for physical labor, stood by, stroking the horse's mane and watching him spit up onto the carpet.

"Dear horse," said Sansone. "If you allow yourself to be turned drunkard by virtue of my wine cellar, the fault is yours. Hephestion, I'm sure, has great enough strength of will to remain a hero in the face of a highball."

"Hephestion!" whinnied the horse. "How could you, Sansone?"

"Hephestion, I'm sure," said Sansone in a relentlessly cool, steady tone, "could hear the name of his rival spoken with equanimity."

"Equanimity," Gertrude Stein whispered, pulling a leather-bound notebook from the pocket of her trousers. "Or equine amity?" She allowed my arm a moment of freedom while she jotted the phrase into her notebook.

"The foundations of art are being laid here, brick by brick," she whispered. I hiccupped in return.

"Hephestion!" groaned Bucephalus. He lunged for the nearest champagne bottle. "I will forget him! I will forget him through Brut force!"

"Hephestion," said Sansone, and I realized with a thrill of ecstatic revulsion that his eyes had met mine, "is a solid and upstanding entity—a beautiful man, and a prize for any young Macedonian general. But please. I've no desire to stand here and watch you disrupt the welcome of our new arrival with your degeneracy.

"C—," he said to me, and to me alone, "you are a jewel among this herd of debauched swine. Perhaps you'll be the one to lift us all out of this painful existence."

With a wink and an effortless wave, Sansone left the room with Skylark following crouchingly behind.

“C—,” said Gertrude Stein, her mouth so close to my ear that I could feel her warm breath on my cheek, “do not believe his lies his eyes his I’s his lies.”

Gertrude Stein’s warnings garbled into ambient noise in my ear, merging with the susurrations of the blood trundling through my capillaries. Port reached my lips, courtesy of my own reflexes, and I began to wonder if perhaps I, too, were drunk.

The spill of dawn onto my closed eyelids provided my first indication that the evening had ended. I rolled onto my side, my body hot against the cool linen of my bedding. A shipwreck had occurred in my stomach, and my head bobbed like a lifeboat atop my roiling nausea.

I opened my eyes and discovered myself in my cabin, lying prone on top of my rumpled bedcovers, fully clothed, though unshod and uni-stockinged. The chirruping of the jays outside my window expressed disapproval. A knocking on the door of my cabin echoed in the fissures rived into my brain by the previous night’s excess. In this new country, I saw, cordials are laced with poison.

The knocking continued as I coaxed my feet over the edge of the bed and onto the smooth wooden floor. I pried myself up into a sitting position, which upended the world and realigned it along the plane of horizontality. My stomach, now a goldfish, performed flips. My legs helped me to stand, and the hand I placed on top of my cedar armoire helped me to steady myself. All the while, I felt the pounding on the door as an earsplitting rebuke.

The twenty steps from bed to door were an arduous journey. I had visions. My high ceilings were the canopy of the Black Forest. The varnished floor beneath me was a snowy field. The rumpled bedding was the carcass of a beast slain by my father. My churning stomach was a cavern full of bats. I pushed open the door—a massive boulder meeting my arms’ impotence—to reveal a dapper Sansone and a slithering Skylark, a snake and his charmer.

“Good morning,” said Sansone.

“*Guten Morgen*,” I said.

“No,” said Sansone. With two strong hands, he scooped Skylark up by his armpits and deposited him into my bedroom. Skylark wormed his way to my bed and began to undress it, flapping the sheets with great ceremony. “Though this is an international household, this is an American colony, and so we must establish a *lingua franca* if we are to share in one another’s philosophies. Truth and beauty require no language at all, but our daily pleasantries require an assiduous attention to society’s forms. In other words, dear C—, our work must simultaneously transcend our world and exist within it. English only.”

“*Ach*,” I said.

“*Nein*,” he said.

The breeze created by Skylark’s aeration of my sheets lapped against the back of my calves. My legs took a chill while the rest of me burned with the toxic fever of hangover. English words couldn’t express the *Hölle* in which I roasted.

“‘*Ach*’ is an unacceptable interjection of exasperation,” Sansone said. “The *ch* fricative is a grindingly ugly holdover from the days of spear hunting and Teutonic

barbarities. Modern sophistication requires rounder, gentler expression. If you wish to communicate your dread, you may say, ‘Oh no.’”

“Oh no,” I said.

“Well,” said Sansone, scanning me with cruel humor. “It is a start.”

I turned to see Skylark reapplying my sheets to the bed. He worked with haste, spidering himself from one side of the bed to the other, creasing and smoothing with nimble hands. I felt humiliated to see this man doing the intimate work that I was perfectly capable of performing myself.

“Did you enjoy last night’s performance?” Sansone asked me.

“*Ein* performance?” I asked.

“Every moment is a rehearsal for the next,” Sansone said. “You’re unpracticed, but you’ll learn to navigate your liquor well enough in time. Jerzy Grotowski once wrote that the best performances are not those in which the actors put on their masks, but are rather those in which the actors remove the masks of their everyday. Who are you, C—?”

“Jerzy Grotowski,” I said, uncertain whether or not I was answering the question he was asking.

Sansone’s laughter brushed my cheek and lingered a moment in my ear. I was conscious of the dull thud of my pounding blood.

“You most emphatically are not,” he said. “Jerzy Grotowski was my guest last year. He is a Pole and a partier; both characteristics are anathema to your German prejudices. Perhaps, however, beneath your conservatism ...”

And I shivered while he grinned.

Something pulled forcibly on my scalp, and I leapt. I turned to discover Skylark yanking a gold-handled comb through my unkempt hair.

“Hold still,” he whimpered.

“*Ach*,” I said.

“Oh no,” Sansone and I said together.

I closed my eyes and submitted to the agony of the toilette. Skylark’s quivering hands tore open the knots in my tresses, dug out the mysteries in my roots, and transmuted my German profile into a well coiffed American head. I silently recited the examples from my English grammar so as to stave off my inevitable tears.

“A man runs,” I thought. “A brave man runs. A brave man runs quickly. A brave man runs quickly towards danger. A brave man runs quickly away from cowardice.”

A particularly forcible tug ripped through all my defenses, and I found myself crying and whining.

“Dog,” I babbled out loud. “Dog goes. Dog leaps. The dog goes and leaps. One, two, three, yes, no, America.”

My incantation proved successful. Skylark ended my torture and gave me a limp pat on the shoulder. I opened my eyes cautiously, uncertain whether or not more punishment was in store. I could feel each individual hair tingling with the residual pain of its discipline.

“Behold yourself,” said Sansone, and Skylark steered me before a small silver looking glass that hung on my wall.

I saw me, or at least what passed for me in that moment. I saw newly straightened blonde hair and teary blue eyes. The open neck of yesterday’s dress sat askew on my

shoulders. Red patches mottled my pale face. I smacked my dry lips and stuck out my tongue. I was repulsed by the sweet green-gray residue of last night's port wine that coated it. Never before had my chin looked so small. My eyes were bloodshot and my cheeks were swollen: A hungover monster was the American me.

"I must clean my mouth," I said.

"It is already seven," said Sansone, "and there is much artistic generation to be accomplished today. However, standards of hygiene and attire must be maintained. In your wardrobe, you will find a small selection of garments. Skylark will wait for you outside while you dress yourself. Once you have put yourself in order, he will conduct you to Glory-Anne, who is to be your personal hygienist for the duration of your stay. She will prepare you for the day, but do not allow her to keep you too long. I will see you in the parlor for morning coffee at a quarter to eight. We must discuss your manifesto."

"Yes?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "Come, Skylark."

The two men—or rather, the man and his snail of a manservant—bowed and made their exit. I remained staring at the mirror. It seemed oddly small and lonely hanging on the expanse of wall. My voluminous room, studded though it was with material objects, seemed cavernous. I must learn somehow to fill this space—to live with self-magnifying majesty, to transform luxury into habit. Had I given a performance the previous night? I tried to gather together the threads of my memory, but everything between the collapse of the warhorse and the sensation of dawn on my face had unraveled irretrievably. The strain of recollection proved too trying for my thrumming head, and so I turned to my present task.

I opened the wardrobe's doors to reveal a jungle of fabrics. The silks and gossamers meant little to me, but I suspected that the worth of my dresser's modest contents far exceeded the worth even of the rudimentary harp that Papa had bought for me in G—. My eyes were too swollen with the stale fluids of drunkenness for me to trust them, and so I allowed my fingers to palpate the contents of my closet. Seizing on a light blue blouse and a pair of plaid slacks, I crawled through the motions of disentangling myself from last night's dress and costuming myself in new garb. The new fabrics felt itchy on my sensitive skin, and as I examined myself in the mirror I fantasized about simply crawling back into bed. What would the consequences be? Stupid girl! To cross an entire ocean only to render herself incapable of performing the simple task of dressing herself! Was I permitted to miss my home? Was I permitted to long for the clear-eyed mornings of Germany? The sensation of bounding from bed, prime for healthy industry and resigned to my lack of prospects? But it is easy to romanticize the past, because it is past. What about the frigid winter nights spent miserable on the floor of the hovel? The blood and sawdust from which I could never scrub myself free? The resentment of my fellows and their haughty brutishness?

“Are you ready?” Skylark whimpered from the other side of the door.

I looked myself in my ruddy, throbbing eyes, and told myself to silence my misgivings. Whatever mistakes I had made the previous night would not become habit. I now had the wealth to create my reality howsoever I chose, and I would make good choices thereafter. I was a beautiful young harpist, and Germany had disintegrated in the sprays of the Atlantic Ocean. This was my home now, and I must learn how to inhabit it. I must be patient with myself and bold in my investigations. I must emerge.

“Oh, yes!” I called, ignoring the hot stickiness of my tongue on the roof of my mouth.

I flung open the door, imagining myself a beauty, and stared at Skylark with impertinent forwardness. I donned my most perfect American accent, and injected the breathless lilt of a cinema actress into my words.

“Do conduct me to future,” I said. “Bring me ahead into new place.”

My words seemed to be causing Skylark abdominal pain. He collapsed his torso and twined himself in his spindly limbs.

“Oof,” he said.

“I can want to know America,” I said, merciless. “I understand coffee for the purpose of manifesto. The future will be clean mouths and Glory-Anne.”

“Yark,” he said. With an aching smile spreading across his face like a bruise, he beckoned for me to follow him.

I continued to allow bold words to blast from my mouth as I followed him through the teeming woods and along a network of cedar-chip trails to the mansion. The sunlight of March warmed me and illuminated the masonry of Sansone’s luxurious lair. I craned my neck to see inside the wide, delicate windows that spread across the mansion’s walls. In one room, I saw sumptuous chaise lounges and wall-sized bookcases; in another, I saw golden figurines and marble columns.

“How many rooms is this house?” I asked Skylark, as we ambled around a pond that housed a freakish stone cherubim, water gushing from his egregious mouth.

“Nobody knows,” said Skylark.

“I will know,” I said.

Tufts of marigolds and daffodils flanked the path leading to the side door of Sansone's chateau. The porch was a granite affair, swept clean and encrusted in seashells. The figure of a lion with a hinged, lolling tongue protruded from the door. Skylark grasped the tongue and used it to issue a series of timid raps.

Within an instant, the door had been flung open by a short, muscular woman of incredible width. She clasped her cracked hands together and pumped them furiously over her head in a bicep-flexing effusion of victory.

"Oh, great Lord in heaven and all His storied miracles," she wailed, the whites of her eyes gleaming horrifically in her taut, leathern head. She spread her arms in a menacing V. "Jesus, the great redeemer of souls and worker of the Heavenly Father's divine will on earth! Who walks among us? Who?"

She blindly thrust her muscular arms towards me and began to prod me with her wriggling fingers.

I cast a frantic look at Skylark, but his terror clearly surpassed my own.

"This ... this is Glory-Anne," he whispered. "She will ... she will ... oh," and he shuddered. "I ... I ... well, you will be cleansed."

With a formless wail, Skylark fled. Glory-Anne yanked me inside her murky boudoir and slammed the door shut behind me. Dirt-floored and windowless, Glory-Anne's room reeked of tallow and mushrooms. A raging fire beneath a massive, cast-iron cauldron provided the only illumination and threw jagged, flickering shadows on the moss-begrimed walls. Glory-Anne was now a bulky shadow; the red firelight revealed a wide belt of sharp, triangular teeth ringing her black maw.

“Hello?” I whimpered, but Glory-Anne wouldn’t, or couldn’t, hear me. Glory-Anne was not a creature that understood language. Like a worm, she could feel the vibrations in her immediate environment. She could respond to stimuli but not to nuance. She could grasp and consume and ejaculate. And cleanse.

“The resurrection!” she screamed, as she lifted me from the ground and crushed me to her quaking breasts. “Salvation and heaven’s greatest glories! Born again through faith!”

I screamed as her spittle rained on me. Her callused hands raked my clothing clear from my body and dunked me into the cauldron of hot water. Her treacherous ring of teeth split and shivered as she joined my screams.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhh!” she howled. “The passion and the annunciation! The ministry of saints and angels!”

A rough, soapy pad sanded my body. Every pore yawned, expelling its filth of residual alcohol. Glory-Anne’s high-pitched wail resounded against the walls of her cavern of cosmetology. I felt myself wailing along, though I couldn’t hear myself over the stream of her ululations.

Into my howling mouth was thrust a fistful of mint leaves. Glory-Anne pistoned a toothbrush into the leaves while the bathwater seared off my impurities. The toothbrush worked with ferocity, scrubbing away the tint of last night’s wine. Glory-Anne was weeping.

“The passion!” she blubbered, the slime of her tears over her face catching the firelight. “The stations of the cross. The mystery. The Pentecostal feast.” She muscled the toothbrush under my tongue and along my gums.

I surrendered myself to the monster. In the horrid darkness of that cavern, I fought to enjoy my treatment. Roughly as she handled me, I had seen the gleam of Sansone's home; I knew that I would be given the same polish.

If Schreiber could have seen me then! If she could have watched me, naked and terrified, having my body organized by an incoherent Golgotha of a woman. The terror and the jealousy she would have felt. How she would have seethed and huffed, propping herself up on her tiptoes, aching to be taller, aching to be the harpist in the tub.

I screamed as a razor was dragged with cavalier efficiency along my legs, mowing off the down of my pubescence. Why did this beast wish to harvest the treasured promise of my imminent adulthood? With a graceless paw, she engulfed my wrists and wrenched my arms above my head.

"Hallelujah!" she screeched as she sheared my underarms. "Glory be to glory!"

I received a mouthful of water as my head was dunked once, twice, and a third time beneath the surface of the bathwater. I was then lifted from the tub and swaddled in a thick bath towel. Glory-Anne pounded the moisture from my skin, unwrapped me, and draped me in a loose, white gown. She twined my hair into a long braid and fixed it in place with a series of hairpins. She spun me to face her, and I peered into her infinite mouth as her serrated teeth spread into a lethal grin.

"On the road to Emmaus," she said. "In the company of heavenly ghosts."

And with that, I received a marshy kiss on the forehead and a rough shove out the door, into the sunlight of Sansone's yard and into the presence of the manservant. Skylark, bent into the shape of a question mark, snapped his frame back into an exclamation point before immediately beginning to slouch once again.

“You look new,” he said.

I turned to acknowledge the fiend who had authored my rejuvenation, but the door had shut behind me, walling Glory-Anne back into her den.

“There is a mirror?” I asked.

“No time,” said Skylark, pointing to his watchless wrist. “We must keep your appointment.”

I followed Skylark along the perimeter of the mansion. A gentle breeze fluttered the fabric of my white gown around me, and I remembered the elegance of the sharp-jawed woman at the previous night’s dinner party. I imagined myself posed astride the Macedonian warhorse with Stein on one side of me and Munch on the other. The four of us would create a picture of gentility among the plots and trellises of the gardens. Sansone would be present, of course, in the grass, in the sky, in the lilacs. He would be present in the angle of my chin, in the arch of my foot, and in the slope of my shoulders. And the harp? I would play music with my mind. I would work American miracles.

As Skylark led me to the front door, I peered in the windows, trying to count the rooms we passed. One: ballroom. Two: smoking room. Three: parlor. I would map the mansion. I would understand the layout of luxury. The thrill of the architecture would lie in its exploration. A voyager, I would number the rooms and bring them within the span of my knowledge; understood, they would become mine; being mine, they would constitute my wealth. Being an American of wealth, I would be a sort of Sansone.

And that Sansone—the real Sansone, if indeed he was real—was the energizing force that gave import to matter. A collection of rooms without a master soon goes to weeds, but under the cultivation of an owner’s refinement, its form becomes substance.

Sansone populated his manor. He papered the walls and tiled the floors. He stuffed his rooms with objects and with import. He made meaning out of stucco. I would join him, so I thought, in constructing a colony out of masonry and oak; in manipulating four walls into a room and a room into a living space; in building and in being built upon.

My thoughts had turned to Sansone, I realized with a startled inrush of air, because Skylark and I had come before him in the vestibule. I curtsayed instinctually, though I had never been taught to do so, and Sansone inclined his head.

“A gosling,” he said. “You’re now a gosling.”

“Yes,” I said. “Gosling, coffee, manifesto. It is such time.”

“It *is* such time,” said Sansone. “Follow.”

We wound through corridors. Sansone’s gait was fast but effortless. I stepped behind him, my white slippers padding quietly along the varnished floors, and my head ever threatening to float away. Skylark scabbled behind, clomping in continual imbalance. I tried to continue my count of the rooms as we passed, but between our quick pace and my hangover, I found myself able to remember neither the German nor the English words for the numbers. I glimpsed gadgetry for which I had no precedent: telescopes, autonomous pianos, dumbbells, flushing toilets, electric sockets, billiard tables, clocks.

Sansone pushed open a red door and welcomed me into a cheery, sunlit breakfast nook. The walls were papered with a flower-and-vine design, and the air throbbed with an unfamiliar smell: a smoky, chocolaty smell that draped itself soothingly over my cloudy consciousness. A small table, surrounded by four delicate, wicker-backed chairs, occupied most of the room’s space. Four place settings, each consisting of a diminutive

teacup, saucer, silver spoon, and cloth napkin, had been laid out, and a steaming samovar acted as centerpiece. A bowl of tiny biscuits sat beside the samovar.

“Please sit,” said Sansone, pulling out one of the chairs for me. I did as bidden.

As I arranged the pleats of my white robe over my knees, Skylark pulled out the chair opposite me for Sansone. Using a gleaming pair of tongs, he deposited a biscuit onto my saucer and provided the same service to Sansone.

“You may serve the coffee, Skylark,” said Sansone with a nod at me.

Cradling my teacup in his quivering hands, Skylark placed it under the spigot of the samovar and allowed a thick, ink-colored concoction to flow forth. I accepted my coffee with a murmur of thanks and filled my nose with the aroma of an American morning.

Once Sansone’s cup had been filled as well, he waved his hand at Skylark and said, “Thank you. You may go.”

A shaky smile wobbled onto Skylark’s lips, and he clicked his heels together. He stuck out his chest with pride, but his posture immediately dissolved once again.

“Thank you, master,” he whimpered before eeling his way into the hallway without turning his back on us.

“Now,” said the master, holding his cup up to me, “you must drink and enjoy.” He took a sip and grunted with manly satisfaction. “Coffee,” he explained.

I did as Sansone did, aping his grunt, and finding great pleasure in the ferocity of the coffee. It was a rousing monster, a boiling wonder. It demanded my strength and my courage. Unlike the port of the previous night, which sang me lullabies, the coffee was a

battle march, heavy on percussion and brass, storming my system with martial enthusiasm.

“Do you know the origin of this pleasure?” Sansone asked. “It comes from an island nation across a larger ocean than the one you traversed. In the mountainous regions of Java, warm mists infuse lush shrubbery with the moisture they need to nurture the coffee cherry. Green when unripe, the cherry matures into a deep, glossy red. Armies of harvesters shake these berries from the trees and collect them in hand-woven baskets. The cherries are bathed in purified water and dried under the scorching Polynesian sun. My envoys cull out the most promising and bundle them onto a silver aircraft that launches itself thousands of meters into the sky and cuts through the clouds as it glides towards the rich soil of America.

“My domestic servants carefully torture the coffee beans by roasting them over the fire and then pulverizing them. They run boiling water over the ground beans and thereby unlock their potency. What you now hold is the result of a process that stitches continents together; that relies on the collaborative ingenuity of men and women to cultivate the sensory pleasure that springs from a rude shrub that has its roots in the dirt.”

“Oh,” I said. Sansone had not sipped from his coffee all this time. He seemed to thrive on words. He shaped each one carefully and confidently, but with such fluidity that he did not disrupt the *legato* of his monologue. I tasted the coffee once again and pictured the entire world in my mouth: the soil, the sun, the harvesters, the aircraft, the great Pacific Ocean. What a life it must be to live as an American! To taste the universe as a matter of course! To own the world; to consume it; to let the dirt and rain of foreign lands enter your body and run through your veins.

“But I use coffee only as a metaphor,” he said, painting wide circles in the air with his spoon. “I mention it as a product of the exertion of human labor upon the natural world. I mention it as a sort of art.”

As an American, I sipped art and found it delicious.

“The production of coffee,” Sansone continued, “is a purposeful exertion of labor designed to achieve a particular effect. So must we all be in our endeavors: purposeful.

“Look there,” he said, and gestured to the lintel above the door. I noticed then that it was an ornate piece of carved stone. Three spirals provided the backdrop for three stern, large-eyed, catlike figures standing atop a dais and raising their gargantuan claws to the sky. Though the lintel was unobtrusive, its stonework was gloriously intricate. Every figure bore more figures; every carving bore more carvings; every symbol overlay another.

“What do you see?” Sansone asked.

“Much,” I said.

“Describe ‘much.’”

“Is *ein* cat trio of devastating frowns.”

“What does that mean?”

“Is artistic work.”

“Incorrect,” said Sansone, though he seemed pleased with my failure. “This is what happens to the secular mind. Everything is. Nothing means.”

“Is doorframe,” I said.

“And what else?”

“Is artistic work.”

“Still incorrect,” said Sansone. He carefully folded his napkin and placed it next to his place setting. He rose and walked around the table in order to stand behind me and behold the lintel from my perspective. I turned to observe Sansone, but he shook his head and pointed back at the doorframe. “You must concentrate,” he said.

“Do you believe in a god?” Sansone asked.

I had no answer. In G—, what would it have meant to believe in a god? The purpose of my existence was to continue to exist. Papa and I constituted a cosmos. We ate and slept and chopped wood. Were there a creator, would we not have done the same? How could anything so hopelessly unknowable be a question worth asking?

“Religion is no longer the style in our countries,” said Sansone. “We are humanists now. Our great artistic works now result from the fierce independence of individual minds; their purpose is the reassertion of the phrase that forms the Western tradition, the phrase upon which we insist so strenuously only because we suspect it is false: ‘I am.’ *Ego sum*.”

“This lintel is not *ein* cat trio of devastating frowns, in fact,” he continued. “It is a hand-carved nineteenth-century *pare* from the island of *Aotearoa*. It is an artistic work only insofar as it is aesthetically beautiful; however, its more substantial beauty arises from its more substantial purpose. In its original context, this carving would have stood at the entrance to the sacred *marae*. The three figures you’ve so radically misidentified as a cat trio of devastating frowns are the forest god, Tāne Mahuta, and his two brother gods. They stand on the Earth, and light and knowledge spiral from their upraised arms.”

“Yes,” I said, wondering if my ignorance had damned me to a swift return to Germany. “Yes, I see.”

“I’m most confident that you do not see,” said Sansone. “These symbolic representations are simultaneously invocations. If a member of the community were to pass under this lintel, Tāne and Rongo would be physically conjured to help him transition out of the turbulent domain of Tumatauenga—the god of war and hostility who reigns outside the meetinghouse—and into the peaceable interior of the *marae*. Every aesthetic figure calls into presence a history and a philosophy that transcends the momentary and the sensual.”

“Rongo,” I said, eyeing the fearful cat beasts. “*Ach*.”

“Be still,” he whispered, and I could feel the warmth of his eminence at my back. “Be still and concentrate your attentions on this *pare*. Can you hear it? Can you feel the embrace of Tāne’s lordly power? Can you feel the soothing energies flowing from the stone as they dissolve Tumatauenga’s grasp on your spirit?”

“Yes,” I gasped, feeling only the crush of Sansone’s power as he led me to the answer he expected.

Sansone’s laughter roared through the breakfast nook.

“No,” he said. He crossed back to his chair, and confused relief washed over me. “No, you don’t feel anything of the sort. My dear C—,” he said, and took his seat, “you have just committed the cardinal artistic sin: the sin of bullshit.”

“Bullshit,” I said. I picked up my cup of now lukewarm coffee and hid my blush behind it.

“You are no more Māori than I am,” said Sansone. “And we are no more Māori than we are Yoruba or De’ang. My *pare* is not a *pare*. It is a pretty piece of stone that I had my art procurer purchase for an exorbitant price at an Amsterdam auction house so

that my guests would have something attractive to look at while they drank their morning coffee. It once had greater significance, but now we are enlightened. We see that such meanings are primitive superstition. We know not to seek pleasure in anything that is not immediately available to our senses. We know that a thing means nothing more than exactly what it is. We are civilized that way.”

I did not know what to say in response, so I decided to look earnest. I pursed my lips and blinked my eyes. Sansone was unmoved.

“The anonymous stoneworkers who produced this *pare*,” said Sansone, “used their talents to call the governing forces of their world into being. They crafted both sculpture and community. Their purposes were unambiguous. The question now, however, is what do we do in the absence of Tumatauengas? In an age without Yahwehs and Muhammads? Without God and without Progress? Now that we are older and wiser and know that the only eternal is rot, why bother to decorate our doorframes?”

“For beauty!” I said.

“For beauty!” Sansone roared, either angry or jovial. “And what is beauty, my love?”

If German had been allowed, I might have been able to participate in this dialogue, but I could not speak, and so I was a lump of a person with nothing to show for herself but a face and a body, newly made American by Glory-Anne. I smiled at the master and stroked a wisp of hair off my brow. I imagined that my gaze had the power to seduce, but when Sansone returned my glance, I knew that I was held in thrall by my muteness. The man had already seen my physical allure and comprehended it; I possessed no further mysteries, and so what resources could I deploy to counter him?

“You must consider,” said Sansone. “As per the terms of your contract, I am entitled to one private performance per fortnight. This has been the first; your next shall be in two weeks’ time. By that time, you must develop a manifesto: a statement of purpose. If you are to enjoy my wealth for the span of a year, your artistic pursuits must have a reach beyond their own narrow boundaries. You must seek to create something that is more than it is.”

“Oh no,” I said.

“Oh yes,” he said. “Rest assured that whatever you strive to create, I will devote my resources to enabling you to do so.”

“I create beauty,” I said.

“If beauty is your only purpose,” Sansone said, rising and folding his napkin, “then I will help you to create the most awe-inspiring beauty imaginable. However, I recommend that you take the two weeks I am offering you to reconsider. I invite you to explore the mansion, to come and go with full liberty, and to ask whatever questions you would like of whomever you would like. I would like you to understand what ‘beauty’ means in this hedonistic country. Then, in two weeks, we will discuss this once again.”

Sansone bent low and grasped my hand in his. He lowered his lips to my hand, and I closed my eyes as the kiss suffused my blood. I opened my eyes, utterly lost.

“*Adieu*,” I whispered.

Sansone winked and touched his heart.

“*Adieu*,” he mimicked. “I shall see you in two weeks. Practice and inquire. Learn and prosper.”

Sansone then turned, walked into the hall, and disappeared, leaving me a soup of questions. I swallowed the last of my coffee, but, now nearly cold, it did not satisfy. Placing my hands on my knees, I began to meditate.

What did I hope to achieve? How would I inquire? How would I prosper? Who would I become? To what heights could I hope to attain?

Perhaps, I thought, as my eyes roved the papered walls of the breakfast nook, I should begin by getting the lay of the land.

CHAPTER 4

THE OBJECT OF BEAUTY

In the days that followed, as I traced the halls and corridors of Sansone's mansion along their capillary branches and stumbled into parlor after parlor, ballroom beyond ballroom, certainty unfolded in my mind: The mansion had neither beginning nor end. Every pantry bore a crawlspace leading to new marvels. I found myself lost among oaken galleries, oily portraits of stern patriarchs imposing their gazes upon me. I ascended stone staircases to luxurious garrets. Underground, a network of dungeons housed cobwebbed manacles and territorial rats. I glided from room to room, poking into corners, taking inventory with a snub-nosed pencil in a leather-bound journal, and finding myself unable to trace the mansion's fractal patterns in a way that could bring them within my ken. Every morning, after Glory-Anne had delivered me up into the world with a panicked benediction, I would set off, a German Theseus with my journal as my ball of string and Sansone as the voracious Minotaur whose appetite was tempted by my helplessness. My penciled sketches of the estate grayed with the scars of my erasure, but no matter how faithfully I retraced my steps from day to day, the mansion metastasized more quickly than I could represent it on paper. If I could render Sansone's world comprehensively, I might then be capable of knowing the man.

But I could not.

What my morning ventures earned me beyond an acquaintance with the master's infinity, however, was a glimpse of the teeming industry that vivified the colony. Skylark, though the privileged scepter-bearer of Sansone himself, was but one of an

entire platoon of cringing, sexless skylarks that polished, scrubbed, poured, and folded. These interchangeable creatures wormed about in every room, stammering greetings, and staring, gibbous-eyed and gape-mouthed, as I advanced my cartography.

In addition to Sansone's coterie, I discovered creatures of an entirely different ilk. These were the colonists. They massed in drawing rooms. They chewed their cigars. Their tongues lolled and their eyes danced. Their input was sherry and their output was theory. Bottles and viands vanished and, in their place, murals. Villanelles! Every day near noon, I would chance upon a luncheon spread and a group of people that I knew, from the ruddiness of their faces and the volume of their opinions, were the colonists. Bearish men with unshorn chins flung their arms over my shoulders and derided Klimt, while women forced smoke through their noses and nibbled cucumber sandwiches. In my first weeks, I did not know these people or their complex language, and so I dared not speak. I longed for a familiar sign—the glinting eye of my guardian angel, Stein; Munch's morose aspect; or perhaps a hoof, wobbling as it pawed indiscriminately for the nearest source of intoxication—but the supply of artists seemed as limitless as the supply of rooms, and I found myself nodding earnestly while jotting down the words I heard for later analysis. The mirror stage. Teleology. Fauvism. Imbrication. Perhaps these would find their way into my inchoate manifesto.

It was on these daytime peregrinations that I began to understand Sansone's objection to my use of "beauty" as a guiding principle. There seemed to be no agreement at all on what the term meant. I would be drawn to a workmanlike landscape painting, lush with color and detail, only to hear it derided as cloying sentimentalism or a flaccid foray into slavish literalism. A swipe of paint on a blank canvas would be hailed as

visionary expressionism. At first I thought that I simply needed to acquaint myself with the standards of the rich, but even the cultivated colonists themselves seemed to reach no agreement. The arguments grew heated as the art itself sat there, dumb, an impotent thing.

Indeed, I encountered some forms of beauty that were actively repugnant. One particularly nightmarish luncheon introduced me to objectivism. I had just skirted around a manicured indoor fishpond, ducked through a gilded archway, and found myself in an artificial rainforest biome encased within a geodesic bubble. Having never before encountered this arm of Sansone's empire, I stood amazed at the towering rubber trees and the automated humidifiers that blasted temperate mist into the air; being a stranger, moreover, to the very concept of a rainforest, I was aghast at the four bonobo monkeys who chattered about me in tropical tongues, clambered up me, and sifted through my hair in search of treasure. I could not tell if they were animal or man, so closely did they resemble both.

"Heavenly Christ!" I screamed, Glory-Anne's English coming by instinct.

"*Skriik-skriik*" shouted one monkey to another. He found a hairpin among my tresses and sniffed it. Inspired by his success, the others yanked loose the pins that made my hair coherent.

"I don't understand you!" I yelled, batting the monkeys from me. "You must use English!"

The monkeys leapt from me, screaming and hissing. One particularly bold representative waved his hairpin at me and peeled back his fleshy lips to expose his sharp, yellow teeth.

I wondered at the creatures. Long-armed and hirsute, they were as small as babies, but with the swift agility and sureness of movement of the mature-bodied. The authority with which they had pounced upon my body and taken my possessions for their own, however, assured me at least of one thing: If they were human, they were Americans.

Still feeling the repugnant imprint of their leathery paws on my arms and legs, but trusting that the bestial colonists, though eccentric, would bring me no harm, I bent down to address the one whom I assumed to be the primary innovator. Feeling the thrill of my boldness, I looked directly into the depths of his wild, chocolate eyes and held out my palm to facilitate the return of my hair accoutrements. My arm was straight and my gaze was demanding. I—C—!—was expressing my will. I was demanding respect for my boundaries and the right to private property.

“I have not made the pleasure to make your acquaintance,” I said. The bonobo’s eyes expressed no comprehension. His breath reeked of compost. “Pray tell me, *bitte*: Is your manifesto been motivation by realism or social mission?”

“*Hawwwwnk*,” said the monkey, and his colleagues concurred.

“*Nein*,” I said, thrusting my hand at my interlocutor once more. “*Nur Englisch*. English only,” I said, dropping my voice to a Sansone-style baritone. “*Bitte* return to me my hair apparatus.”

A brief period of consultation followed, in which the primary innovator glanced at the other three members of his council, seeking input. I looked from monkey to monkey, unable to read the expressions pooled beneath their bulging eyes. My coiffure, now dismantled, grew moist and mischievous in the artificial rainforest, and I had to withdraw my hand in order to bring it to my brow and draw away strands of hair. As though this

were the cue the monkeys were waiting for, they emitted a collective yowl—
“*Graaaanx!*” it seemed to be—and immediately set their plans into motion.

The primary innovator launched himself at my face and covered my eyes in darkness. The others quickly divided the remainder of my person among them as they set to work, slipping rings off my fingers, palpating the folds of my dress, and tugging my bracelets free from my arms. Whirling in my blindness, I wailed and screamed.

“Help!” I cried. “*Eine Katastrophe!*”

Innumerable limbs wound around my own as my warm blindfold tightened its grip on my face. I flailed and twisted, conscious that my dress must not tear, conscious that I was accountable to Sansone for the health of my possessions.

A ring of pain seared the flesh of my upper arm. Bitten! The gooey warmth of bonobo saliva on my bicep stoked my frenzy. I raised my arms, each with a monkey attached, and flung them blindly before me, hoping to make contact with a tree or a rock. I was enraged as much by the indignity as the pain. Such behavior on the part of the monkeys was not gentlemanly. It was not civilized!

I heard a crack and a screech, and the bonobo weighting my right arm flew off. A violent strike for victory! One monkey, clinging to my leg, raked its teeth across my calf.

“Department!” I cried. “Mind your manners!”

With a swing of my leg, I sent the offender careening into a stump. Unmoved by the whimpering of my wounded assailants, and now with one arm uninhibited, I set to prying the primary innovator off my face. He clung with animal ferocity, using my own hairpins against me as miniature lancets. Undeterred, I hit and pounded. I smashed and clawed. The wounded once again rushed to best me, but I kicked and lashed.

Just as I thought I lacked the reserves to continue the defense and grew ready to accede to the demands of the maladapted colonists, a woman's low, drawling voice rumbled from deep within the jungle like an extended, articulated belch:

"Hold off, peons. Hold off." My assailants hesitated, though they did not detach themselves. "*Squaaaaw!*" said the voice in the language of the monkeys.

My veil lifted, and I winced at the sudden inrush of light from the glass ceiling of the geodesic dome. The bonobos let go of my arms and legs and scampered off to a safe distance, perhaps fearing retaliation. I looked for the source of the voice, but I only saw dense thickets of cecropia and ceiba, with the hollow bodies of strangler figs weaving among them. At my feet, tiny red frogs leaped from stone to stone on the banks of a muddy creek. The monkeys disappeared into the undergrowth, but I could still feel their eyes on me, analyzing me and learning my patterns of movement. I heard the incomprehensible jabber of their gossip as they discussed how best to execute their next assault.

"Hello?" I whispered. "Who is there?"

For a moment, all I could hear was the soft plashing of the creek, the squawks of tropical birds high in the canopy, and the whispers of my simian antagonists. I mopped sweat off my neck with a flat palm, while the bite on my arm throbbed. Panic rose in my throat.

Slowly, slowly, I edged closer to the journal that I had dropped during the bonobos' onslaught. If I could figure out where I had come from, I could retrace my steps back to safety ...

“Show yourself before me,” came the low, awful voice that had dispersed the bonobos. Without moving my head, I let my eyes creep along the horizon, seeking the voice’s origin.

My journal ruffled on the ground. I fought to keep my calm as I bent my knees with excruciating patience. My hand inched closer. I was conscious of how foolish I must have appeared to the lurking monkeys. Why did I not just grab the journal and race away? But, alas, I was a stranger in that region. Could I risk a second assault?

“I do not want harming you!” I called, my voice shaking. Two inches more, perhaps, and I would have my map in hand.

“Ha!” bellowed a deep laugh that sent the teak trees atremble. “You could not bring me harm. Approach!”

And the verdure before me rustled as if by its own accord and parted to reveal an ebony table spread with fruit, bread, and cured meats, beside which sat an exquisite velvet divan, topped by a gargantuan woman with a strong chin, a haughty demeanor, and waves of flab rolling over her body. Two skylarks fanned her with enormous peacock feathers as she squinted her tiny, mirthless eyes at me.

“Come,” she ordered, stretching a sallow hand towards me. I besought the skylarks with my gaze, but both creatures smiled sympathetically and issued synchronous shrugs. My anger surged. Never in Germany would I have seen such servile mops. “Come.”

I snatched my journal and turned, but the bonobos had crept behind me. They formed an unsmiling wall. I feinted left, and they moved as a unit to block me. I feinted

right to no better effect. With a shudder, I turned to face the scowling young woman before me. She inhaled deeply and rammed a cracker into her face.

“Join me at table,” she said, her masticating jaws spraying the air before them with agglutinated cracker particles.

I approached the table, which groaned under the weight of its burden. As I stepped forward, I noticed the woman’s eyes following me closely, and I sensed the monkeys keeping in formation behind me. All the while, the skylarks fanned the gorgon and wriggled as though full-bladdered. Cautiously, I reached out to take a grape from the pyramid of fruit.

“Excuse me,” rumbled the woman. “By what right do you suppose to ransack my property?”

“I—” I said, neither advancing my hand nor withdrawing it. “You said to join the table.”

“Indeed, I did invite you to join me at table,” said the woman. “I did not invite you to make free with goods that don’t belong to you.” A fistful of cold cuts disappeared down her throat, and an acrid belch surfaced as a result. “The only sin worse than accepting an unearned gift,” she continued, smacking her porcine lips, “is offering an unearned gift.”

“Awwwwrk!” cried one of the bonobos.

I whirled to face him. “*Du!*” I shouted. “You must speak the English!” I turned once more to the woman, who was now nibbling on the gold trim of the divan. “What kind of colonists are these?”

“Oh, dear,” said the woman. “They are not colonists. Haven’t you heard of a monkey? They’re stupid animals that belong to men. These are mine. I own them. You!” she shouted to the one that I had identified as the head. “Bring me your treasure.”

The monkey, simpering, leaped onto the table and, giving a wide berth to the food, sashayed across to the woman and, with a flourishing bow, presented her with my hairpins, my bracelets, my rings.

“*Mein riches!*” I said.

“No, they are not your riches,” said the woman. Dimples engulfed her face as she smiled at the monkey and accepted his oblation. “They are mine. You’ve encroached on my property, and so I must take something for myself as recompense. It’s a mutually beneficial transaction.”

“Hairpins are belonging to Sansone,” I said, my eyes growing wide as I watched the woman open her mouth and swallow down every last hairpin. I tried to catch the eyes of a skylark for some assurance that my incredulity was not unwarranted, but both skylarks were busily examining the ground. “Why you eat this?”

A satisfied smile illuminated the woman’s face as she finished devouring the hairpins, and she patted the monkey on its head. She grabbed the peacock feather out of the hand of one of the skylarks and began to gnaw on it.

“Sansone and I have an arrangement,” she said. “He provides material security, and I provide ideas. It’s a mutually beneficial transaction. This is an artist’s colony, you know?”

“I know,” I snapped. “I am artist. I produce beauty.”

“Delightful!” said the woman. “I am also an artist, and I also produce beauty. My name is Ayn Rand,” she said, and she thrust her paw across the table at me.

I edged away.

“What is your philosophy?” she asked.

“Beauty only. Please let me away.”

She eyed me hungrily, her massy tongue working its way over and around her blubbery lips.

“Then you and I are of the same sort,” said Ayn Rand. “Nothing is worth making but that which is beautiful, and nothing is beautiful but that which is virtuous, and nothing is virtuous but that which is just, and nothing is just but that which entitles every man to the proper reward for his labor and the proper punishment for his uselessness. ‘To each according to his ability,’ I think the phrase goes. Nothing more beautiful in the world! I’m sure you agree?”

“I ...” I said. “I do not understand?”

“I see.” Ayn Rand nodded definitively. “You are stupid.”

“No.”

“Tell me,” said the monster, leaning forward, ropes of saliva creating a glistening web between her mouth and the tabletop. “Are you a freeloader?”

“I must go,” I said. “I must find which way is out.”

“So you *are* a freeloader, after all. You have devoured my time without offering me anything of value in return. You may go, but first we must settle our bill.” She took a monumental chomp out of the table itself, and splinters collected in the corners of her mouth as she ground the wood to bits. Another belch sent a cloud of sawdust into the air.

“I edified you about the greatest sin in the world,” she said, her tongue mopping up the fragments of table that were smeared across her chin. “Wisdom is a commodity. You have intruded upon my territory, extracted valuable jewels of philosophy, and now, having devastated my delicate ecosystem and seized my raw material, you hope to escape with your ill-gotten handouts. I have seen lice like you before, and I do not respond to your thug tactics. You will pay for what you’ve taken. Fair balance is the ultimate beauty.”

Rand’s hideous black eyes glared at me. Her cheeks shone like coins. I assessed the threat and my knees were done. The woman’s gluttony was endless, her sense of righteous anger without limit.

“I ...” I said, patting down my body in search of any form of payment that the bonobos had not already plundered. I had only my journal and my dress. I could give up neither. “What is price?”

Ayn Rand stifled a yawn. “The exchange rate for wisdom is high. What are your most valuable assets?”

I showed her my empty hands.

“I make art,” I said.

“Art!” Rand exclaimed with a contemptuous snort. She grasped the wrist of one of the skylarks. His eyes went round as Ayn Rand wrenched his hand dangerously close to her face. The other skylark trembled as Rand, with feline delicacy, brought the fingers of the first skylark up her mouth. “You do not appear to have the firmness of character necessary for the creation of anything of value. An artist must be unbending in her virtue.”

“Don’t eat him!” I screamed, too late, as Ayn Rand crunched her teeth down over the fingers of the whimpering skylark. The worthless manservant did not cry out in pain, but merely whimpered as Rand’s powerful jaws demolished his hand.

The screaming was my own, and the person swiping aside platters of *foie gras*, red caviar, and pomegranate seeds and crawling across the ebony table to wrest the skylark’s hand away from Ayn Rand’s unyielding mandibles was me. The four furry bodies that pounced upon me and tore at me with vicious teeth were the bonobos. My journal, my atlas, at the end of my hand, whipped back and forth, motored by a furious strength I hadn’t known I possessed. Monkeys, wailing, flew off my body, yelped, and pounced back on.

In the cyclone of fur and teeth and profiteroles, I managed to gain mastery over the skylark’s arm and shove him away from Rand.

“Go to safety!” I yelled, just as Ayn Rand caught hold of my leg. Both skylarks, one intact, the other sobbing silently and clutching the raw meat of his mutilated hand, cracked bones jutting from the skin of his palm like the legs of a starfish, cowered beneath the table.

“Aggressor!” screamed Ayn Rand. I tried to twist so that I could see her, but two bonobos maintained their grip on me. “We will finish our transaction. I will take what I am owed, either in dollars or in flesh. My exchange rates are fair.”

“I have nothing!” I said, feeling the hot breath of the monster on my calf. “I have journal. I have dress. Both are belonging to Sansone.”

“You own yourself and your labor power,” said Rand. “You own your flesh and your blood. I accept those forms of payment.”

Such was Rand. Such were her monkey henchmen. Such was her objectivism and her art and her beauty. Such were the wilting skylarks that lay bloody and faint on the rainforest floor. Such was Sansone's empire, and so must I be, too. I was a harpist, but I was no less a butcher's daughter. In the plane of art, I wanted nothing but beauty, but in the plane of reality, ugliness is unavoidable.

I rolled over and snapped one bonobo's thin arm. I sank my teeth into the shoulder of the other and incapacitated him with an uppercut. Allowing myself one isolated moment in which to feel the sting of regret, I paused before twisting onto my side, grasping my journal in both hands, and using it to club Rand on the side of the face. Her grip did not loosen, and so I raised my arms and bashed again and again and again.

"Sieg!" I screamed. *"Gute siegt! Sterben, Ungeheuer!"*

I ceased my assault on her face to bring the leather-bound journal down directly on her wrist joint. Her hand sprang open, and I wrestled my way to freedom, losing one shoe in a block of pâté. I bounded off the table, my journal still under my arm, and stole a final look behind me. Rand, clutching her cheek with one hand and swiping viciously at the air before her with the other, was a rubble heap of frustrated avarice; one paper-white skylark bled out onto the starched shirtfront of another paper-white skylark as they clutched one another beneath the half-devoured table; bonobos lay prone in the hollows of scooped melons and in tureens of bisque, nursing their wounds and issuing mournful howls; the heel of my shoe protruded from a wrecked brick of goose liver. A chill came over me, in spite of the artificial heat of the biosphere: Though the scene was horrid, it was my creation. How quickly could I flee this for the pure language of the harp? My fingers twitched at the thought.

Stein took a mirror from the desk and handed it to me. I did not want to look. I wanted only to curl up at Stein's feet like a treasured pet and watch her in the private work of her artistry. I wished to become bodiless, an ethereal sprite, the golden offspring of beauty and wisdom, a sort of transcendent vapor that might permeate and suffuse without ever condensing into a material substance capable of bearing a bruise—but I accepted the mirror and nevertheless beheld my own body.

By gracious, a fright, indeed.

My hair was an unpinned catastrophe, a maelstrom of free-flying locks. Streaks of dried sweat mapped out the morning's exertion on my face. Bonobo fur clung to my cheeks, and my upper lip was purple and swollen. Clotted cream, jam, and aioli sat in coagulated mounds in my hair and on my face. Glancing down from the mirror, I beheld similar horrors. Blotches of sweat and rusty brown blood dotted my dress, while lacerations ripped through the hem of my skirt. Dark red claw marks ran the length of my legs. One shoe hung from my foot by a broken strap; the other foot was bare and caked in pâté. The painful ring of the ape bite I had suffered throbbed on my upper arm. I prodded it with an exploratory finger, sending a shuddery nausea through my bowels.

“Oh, Stein!” I wailed. “*Ich bin eine kolossale Schiffbruch.*”

“I can't understand your gibberish,” said Stein. “Lucidity is essential, lucid essence, your essential gibberish. Speech is communication.”

I moaned and thrust my hands out before her in supplication. My tongue proved incapable of English, and even finding the German to express my angst was a quest I was not equipped to undertake. Instead, I hung my head in shame and exhaustion and allowed the tears rolling off my face and onto the carpet to narrate my dismay. Oh, this weakness!

I chided myself for acting as a trembling child, rather than a fearless and collected American artist. Whenever my father was called on to slaughter a calf, he could pluck the appropriate knife from his workbench and, with three smooth whips of his hand, unflinchingly bleed the calf out onto the dirt of our yard. Violence was a terrain he navigated with certainty and a lack of self-consciousness. I tried to calm my convulsing shoulders with the invocation of Father's sure-handed dominance, but the only image I could call into my mind was that of Ayn Rand's singular gullet as it strained to suck me down into the razor-sharp abyss of her fair transaction. The furnace of her breath blasted the back of my neck, and I shuddered again. Phantom monkeys clambered over my person, tugging and savaging.

“Nicht mehr! Nicht mehr!” I screamed, trying to shake the apparitions from me.
“Nicht mehr!”

In the midst of my agitation, a soft, pleasant warmth spread over me. With a start, I realized that Gertrude Stein had come to kneel beside me and that she had enwrapped me in her sturdy arms.

“Oh, Stein!” I cried, and burrowed my face in the great poetess's bosom.

“Shhhhh,” she said, stroking my hair and kissing the top of my head, “you ruin my placidity.” She brought my head away from her chest, pulled a handkerchief from her cleavage, and began mopping foodstuffs and ape saliva from my face. “You ruin, but more so, you are ruined. You ruin my placidity, but you do not ruin my placidity. Your terror is not your terror, although it is your terror. To speak plainly,” she said, and she looked at me with a flash of severity, “you do not disturb me. This disturbance disturbs me. This disturbance is your disturbance, but it is not of you. This disturbance is

Sansone's disturbance first of all. Sansone's disturbance is your disturbance, and your disturbance is my disturbance. In the first place, it is Sansone, however. Sansone is the disturber that disturbs. He creates all disturbances."

"Sansone," I said, and his name stung my tongue like an electric spark. "Sansone was not there."

"Sansone is everywhere we are," said Stein. "Sansone creates and controls. Never a more controlling creator. Never a more creative controller. His creations are disturbances, and your disturbance—my disturbance—is his creation. Do you understand?"

Gertrude Stein looked me in the eye, and though I didn't understand her well-intentioned barrage, I wanted to please her, so I smiled and shrugged.

"Yes," I said. "Most yes. Ayn Rand is Sansone's *schreckliche Monster*."

Stein's wrinkled forehead bespoke her sympathy. With the abrupt agility of a gymnast, she brought her lips to mine, applied a moment of suction, and released me.

"You will see all in time," said Stein, not without dismay, as she returned to her desk and picked up her pen once more. "But now you must not disturb me. Now you must clean yourself and create your own miracles. My miracles are my miracles, and, being mine, they belong to me."

"Miracles belong to Sansone," I said.

I was conscious of having misspoken when Stein whipped her glare at me, her brow burning with fury. Through quivering lips, she sliced me with words: "You are a dupe and a fool, and you know nothing of the terrors ahead. You are a fool and a dupe, and you know nothing of the terrors ahead."

My chest constricted as Stein's acid gaze corroded me. To avoid her eyes, I looked up to the archer on the ceiling, but his weapon glistened with threat and his cheeks seemed to bulge with Rand's savage pantophagy.

"The terrors ahead," said Stein.

The dusty green walls of the study towered above me, on the verge of total collapse. The heavy scent of leather binding and moldering pages choked me. The carpet on which I kneeled writhed against my skin. *Ach! Deutschland, mein Deutschland. Warum ich dich verlassen?*

"The terrors. The terrors. The terrors. The terrors."

Stein's mouth dropped open, and she inhaled sharply. She ducked to her manuscript and printed, "lost help lost."

I needed to find my way out of the study. I needed to return to the only being that could gather together my anxieties and rework them into something that sang beauty, that glistened, that soared above corporeality and, through its purity, exposed our bodily lives as nothing more than philosophy's excrescence: I needed to return to music. The vibrations through which I would disperse my sorrows already shivered through my hands, and I needed only the instrument to unleash the melody. As I watched Stein, overtaken with inspiration, inscribing her miracles onto her parchment, I came to my feet, smoothed out my dress, and squared my shoulders. If my life entailed indignity, then my redemption would emerge from harp strings.

"I must create!" I cried to Stein, and she waved me off with a morose smile. "Art will beauty."

And so my age of exploration gave way to my renaissance. From that afternoon forward, I forewent my cartographical inquiries in order to spend my days seated before the harp, joining its abilities to my own. My journey into Ayn Rand's dominion became a harmonic epic: The clashes of violence resolved before my triumphant motif of placid clarity. I needed to bring the event under my own dominance, and because my unsteady English provided only an imperfect vehicle in which to transmit my narrative, I relied on the elemental language of the *arpeggio* and the *accelerando*, reworking my story again and again, today *agitato*, tomorrow *appassionato*. My fingers blistered and grew numb, but I cared nothing about my bodily vexations. I took meals when I remembered, summoning Skylark to my cabin by ringing a large bronze bell, and then dispatching him again with requests for bread, butter, porridge—anything that could stave off my hunger long enough to allow me to complete my coda. My hands sometimes left the harp in order to transfer the food to my mouth, but I could not bring myself otherwise to leave off my labors.

I lost count of the days as I spun out my creations, and so it was with the greatest alarm that I raised my head at the end of a particularly strenuous *rondo* to see Sansone smirking in my rehearsal room. A quick mental calculation revealed that, indeed, my first fortnight at the mansion had passed. Sansone seemed pleased by the surprise he had given me, and he grinned as he wound to me. My manifesto! I had been so overtaken by the passion of composition that I had forgotten entirely to articulate the purpose behind my efforts.

Sansone, however, did not immediately approach the subject.

“You’re the most despicably violent creature I’ve come across in my life,” he greeted me, his voice light and indifferent.

“I?” I asked.

“You are,” he said.

“I don’t love violence,” I said.

“You do,” he said.

My lips worked ineffectually.

“Oh,” said Sansone, with a self-indulgent smile. “You need not issue any reply other than cowed acceptance of the fact. You’re welcome to try, but I don’t recommend it. Falsehood does not become you.”

“I . . .” I failed to say more.

“Why don’t you continue playing?” he asked.

I continued playing, seething at Sansone’s open contempt. I groped along the rhizomatic lanes of my memory in search of my offense. I could not concentrate sufficiently to bring expression to my playing; instead, I was rankled by the glib manner with which Sansone reclined on my divan and allowed his eyes to rove over my room with wolfish curiosity. I had hoped to astonish the man with my music, but his offhand comments about my violence reduced the majesty of my *molto adagio* to a tinny replication of my prior excellence. The thud of my passionless performance hung as a physical weight on my arms, and, rather than continue to humiliate myself, I sighed, ceased, and sank my hands to my lap. I ventured a smile as I glanced at a forgotten bowl of oatmeal that Skylark had brought me perhaps three days ago.

“I cannot play,” I said, expecting a volatile response from the master. However, he simply raised his eyebrows at me and stifled a yawn. “My heart grows heavy in sorrow.”

“Sorrow?” Sansone asked, as if simply hoping to verify that he had heard correctly.

“I must know why you say violence.”

“Ah, must you?”

I picked up the bowl of oatmeal and displayed it to Sansone. How could I be a despicably violent creature? I was an artist so preoccupied with beauty that I had forgotten this oatmeal. Surely a monster would have eaten her breakfast?

“My oatmeal,” I said. Sansone was unmoved. “I have been busy. I work only on music and harmony. I do not work violent acts.”

“Tell that to the bonobo monkeys in my geodesic rainforest,” said Sansone. He raised himself from the divan and took the bowl of my oatmeal from my hands. He peered at it as though he could see the future written in its mounds. “Unwarranted violence.”

“It was my being attacked!” I said. “I want only beauty. It is my manifesto.”

“Yes!” said Sansone, and he put the bowl on an end table with a smile. “So we come to your manifesto. You were to come to a decision about the purpose of your artistic endeavors. Have you done so?”

I screwed up my face, wishing that I had not said “manifesto.” I closed my eyes, lay my hands tidily next to my oatmeal, and tried to silence my self-consciousness.

“I discovered a forest with creatures called a monkey and a woman with a name of Rand. In this forest occurred much fright for me and possible eating misadventure of a manservant. His hand! Chomped upon by *unheimlich* woman-beast. But to explain this fear is necessary music. With music, it can make bad things of life transform into the actual beauty. You see, with beauty of harp becomes only most glorious things in life.”

“Very well,” said Sansone with a nod. “You wish to use your talents for the perpetuation of hideous violence. A very German answer indeed.”

Had I not been mortified at the prospect of allowing Sansone to see me weep, I would have permitted myself tears of frustration. Instead, I pried a smile from some well of deception within me and, blinking away my injury, attempted to express myself more clearly.

“*Nein*,” I said. “I make glory. You understand? *Schöne Musik. Nicht Blutbad*. No mess or violence. Only lovely music to make a human sigh.”

“I understand perfectly,” said Sansone, “even though you’ve once again lapsed into your distastefully glottal mother tongue. However, my dear C—, you seem to have forgotten Tāne. Beauty without purpose is empty sensation.”

“Yes,” I said. “No. It has purpose. Purpose of escape from atrocity.”

“Perhaps,” said Sansone, “but what if the atrocity is within? By stimulating the senses, you nourish the monster.” His grin emanated sympathetic warmth. “Whatever the object of your gluttony—be it music, drink, or sexual delectation—your nerve endings’ delight dies with you. Do you understand why I call you savage? The craftsman responsible for my *pare* created an artifact that spliced him into the DNA of his universe; you, on the other hand, seek to create music that will help us forget about evil awhile so

that, when it comes, we won't recognize it. Perhaps your music will titillate and, as you hope, anesthetize, but it serves only the flesh. And you, butcher's daughter, understand all too well what becomes of flesh. Do you disagree?"

I had intended none of what Sansone was saying. He was responding to my words and not their meaning. Again, I coaxed the harp to do my speaking for me, and again, anxiety caused my harp to stutter and my argument to be lost. I stood and allowed my head to droop. The varnished wooden floor cast my reflection back at me, and I shivered. I knew my thoughts, but how to communicate that knowledge?

"It's quite alright," said Sansone. He touched my arm, just above the red-ringed bite mark left by Rand's monkey. "I told you that you would be allowed to define your own manifesto, and it is not my place to judge your motivation. My place is to locate and cultivate talent. You will have all the resources that you require in order to pursue your goal of hedonistic escapism. I have given you my thoughts on your manifesto, and I have no interest in further philosophizing. Your artistic mission is your own, and we will see where it lands you." He winked. "I do hope, of course, that it will be somewhere quite pleasant indeed, but you will determine that yourself."

A peculiar thrill of fear came over me as I remembered the warning Gertrude Stein had given me. However, as I looked at Sansone, with his wide, confident stance, his open smile, and his bearing of certainty, I could not bring myself to doubt him. If I had failed to make my manifesto clear, it was the fault of the inarticulate German girl in the dress that had been given to her as charity; it was the fault of the girl whose childhood had been spent rooting about in the scrap heap of her father's butcher shop; it was the fault of the girl whose English possessed all the precision of a truncheon blow.

Eventually, I told myself, Sansone would understand my aims. I simply needed to apply myself with renewed vigor.

Of course, I underestimated the man. Sansone understood my aims with perfect clarity from the first. Had I known in that moment how vicious I was to become—how vicious I was to *enjoy* becoming—I do not know what form my despair might have taken. However, I knew nothing then, and so I nodded, berated myself silently, sat down, and continued to play.

Sansone watched impassively as I fumbled through my rehearsal. Every time my fingers tripped, I looked to see if disappointment registered in his face; he remained a perfect blank. I prayed for him to leave me in peace so that I could return to the creative swells I had previously enjoyed, but Sansone remained. The longer he stayed, the worse my music; the worse my music, the more I longed to be left alone; the more I longed to be left alone, the more firmly Sansone seemed rooted in place.

At the failed climax of a particularly tepid crescendo, Sansone finally stood, smoothed out his slacks, and shook his head piteously.

“Your sense of beauty is quite idiosyncratic.”

I paused long enough to shoot him a ferocious glare. He gasped in faux affront.

“Such malice in your eyes,” said Sansone. “If you ever doubt that you’re anything other than a blood-trafficker, remind me to show you the face you’re pulling at this very moment. I don’t suppose you’ve ever gone hunting?”

I did not respond, exhausted from a surfeit of English. I tried to hear only the harp.

“You’d adore it,” he said. “It’s high sport. It’s the destruction of something weaker than yourself.”

A particularly forceful pluck of the F string opened a blister on my ring finger.

“Which is all an artist is after.”

My finger bled, but I continued to play.

CHAPTER 5

NOCTURNE

As the weeks passed, I applied myself to the cultivation of my musical compositions, though not as single-mindedly as before Sansone's visit. I realized that I must couple my forays into the thickets of harmony with simultaneous development of my English-language expression. I would wake in the mornings, enjoy a stroll in the garden, and rehearse until noon. After a light luncheon taken privately or among whichever small collection of colonists I could find, I would spend the afternoon chattering aggressively with anybody whose English surpassed my own. By degrees, I became more confident in my speech and in my comprehension. After supper, a snifter of brandy and a kind exchange with a skylark or two would ease my nerves sufficiently for me to relax into my evening composition session. I was no longer the timid girl amazed by an infinite mansion, nor was I the fevered artist who remained sequestered in her garret; through a conscious application of the lifestyle, I fought to earn my ease amidst luxury.

Even after the first month, however, a particular nightly occurrence grew ever more vexing. Though I could not have been more physically comfortable in my silk bedclothes, with the crisp air of spring gusting through my lace curtains, an awful, high-pitched whining invariably filled the hours between midnight and dawn. During my first few weeks on the estate, I tried to block out the howling by pressing my goose-down pillow against my ears. I assumed that a cat or a coyote had somehow breached Sansone's property boundaries and was stridently boasting its ingenuity. However, as time passed, and the noise increased in its intensity, my thoughts turned to ghosts.

Perhaps a specter lurked somewhere on the estate. In Germany there were many ghosts, and I had no fear of them. In Papa and my miniscule hovel, space had been so scarce that the ghosts had nowhere to lurk. Instead, we had welcomed the spirits as transient visitors, leaving them beer and bread crusts so that their moaning hunger wouldn't disturb our rest.

One cool evening in mid-April, I was once again roused by a hideous wail. A return to sleep proving unattainable, I pulled on a ragged flannel jacket—one of the few items in my wardrobe whose functionality was permitted to overshadow its style—and initiated my investigation of Sansone's grounds.

The cobbled garden paths of pink granite blushed in the moonlight as I picked my way along them. The boughs of lime trees arched overhead, and the dark silhouettes of Sansone's fountain sculptures stood sentinel in the near distance. Swallows cycloned overhead, dark figures against an irradiated blue sky.

I hesitated next to the greenhouse's small annex, trying to determine the source of the whimpering that had become a continuous mewling thread. Before I had decided on my course, I noticed a spectral figure sitting on a marble bench in front of the *koi* pond. Ghostly pale, and much like a man, the spirit was launching pebbles into the water, aiming unsuccessfully for the broad, green lily pad at the pond's center.

I hid myself behind the greenhouse. Was this ghost the source of the heart-rending howls that dripped from the night? If so, what could I give him to dampen his plaints? Such anguish as I heard in the cries could scarcely be satisfied by beer and bread crusts alone.

However, when the next quaking sob filled the air, it was clear that the noise was not emanating from the ghost, who continued sitting simply, content to scatter ripples over Sansone's pond. Nonetheless, even if this ghost was not himself the mourner, he might be acquainted with the ghost who was. I resolved to approach.

I had not gone three steps towards the apparition before I realized my silliness. The figure I had taken for a ghost was nothing but Edvard Munch.

"*Helluen*," I said, shamelessly pretending that this single phrase was not the extent of my Norwegian.

Edvard Munch raised his head at me. The moonlight caused his eyes to glow.

"Females should not walk alone so late," he said.

"What's to fear in the garden?" I asked.

"Nothing more than there is anywhere else in Sansone's domain, I suppose," he said. "The hell that will find you will find you anywhere."

"I came because I heard ghosts," I said.

"Ghosts?" asked Edvard Munch. "Is your world so empty that you must fill it with spirits?"

"Spirits are spirits, regardless of me."

I sat beside Edvard Munch, unusually conscious of the warmth of his body and his appealing odor of hay and fresh sweat. Munch did not respond; he merely fired another handful of pebbles into the *koi* pond.

The distant howling was interrupted by silence.

"What is it that makes such inexcusable noise every night?" I asked.

"Only a horse," said Edvard Munch.

“Bucephalus?”

“Yes. He is sick at heart,” said Edvard Munch. “His lover, Alexander, has spurned him in favor of a human.”

“Bucephalus had a human lover?” I asked. I eyed Edvard Munch’s hands, hoping and fearing that one of them might find its way to my arm.

Edvard Munch nodded pensively as Bucephalus continued to whimper in the distance.

“Sansone will ruin you, by the way,” said Edvard Munch. “He has ruined us all.”

“What is he?” I asked. The evening chill suddenly bit through my coat’s thick fleece lining.

“He sees what we are,” said Edvard Munch, “and he will not let us be other than what we are—which is nothing at all.”

“He told me that I am a despicably violent creature,” I said.

“Then you are,” said Edvard Munch.

I looked up at the stars, so small and so real. Fictional stars are enormous and composed of chemicals and processes; actual stars are tiny sparkles pinned into the night sky.

“When I saw you sitting here at first,” I said, “I thought you were a ghost. But you’re just Edvard Munch.”

Edvard Munch nodded and allowed a handful of pebbles to fall through his fingers and onto his knees.

“A ghost is more substantial,” he said, and drifted away.

What I learned that night had little to do with Munch or Sansone and much to do with myself. I was of course familiar with sex; one cannot grow up among pigs and geese and fail to see that the collision of bodies is a phenomenon that gives rise to mysteries. I was aware, too, that humans are not immune to the magnetism of arousal. However, what I hadn't appreciated until I beheld the streaks of moonlight in Munch's beard, felt myself drawn into the vortex of his sorrow, and blushed with the warmth of his proximity was that I, myself, could twine myself into the web of chemical lunacy whose unyielding strain characterized the adult world. I felt no attraction to Munch in particular, but my conversation with him beside Sansone's *koi* pond left me blushing from a stupefying possibility: What if the concept of sex was relevant to *me*?

I bounced these confused speculations in my head to distract me from what I began, in the upcoming weeks, to see as my failure: In spite of the certainty with which I had defended my manifesto against Sansone's deliberate misinterpretation, I struggled with the creation of beauty. I was capable of plucking out moments of subtlety and elegance, but they proved transient. I needed something more—a solid goal or purpose to serve as the wire along which I would string my musical pearls. What was the good of giving an audience pleasure if that pleasure was a fleeting phantom too quickly forgotten?

I lived, too, in anxiety of Ayn Rand. Some days after my escape from her domain, I received a cream-colored envelope under the door of my cabin with my name written on the front in showy calligraphy. Inside was a letter, unnervingly brief.

BILL OF RECKONING

Consumed: One hour's productivity; wisdom & sundry intangibles; damages (table, monkey servants, &etc.)

Owed: An equivalent fee, payable in dollars or flesh, subject to all applicable interest charges

Payment must be transmitted within the space of two weeks or will be collected forcibly. From one artist to another, beware disrupting the perfect harmony of the market.

A. R.

I did not know how to respond, and so I ignored her missive. Her beauty was not my beauty, but at least she seemed to have a driving motive. I was adrift on currents of ambiguity. I had an abstract sense of what I wanted to achieve through the harp, but what would it sound like?

The more I lusted for a substantial sort of beauty, the more I lusted in general.

One night in early May, after a particularly unproductive rehearsal session, I found myself dining in a cool, wood-paneled lounge filled with potted ferns and miniature trees. Fed up with my artistic impotence, I sought distraction by sitting beside a dreamy young poet with muttonchops. Next to him was a muscular and clear-eyed ballerina, whose arresting hair was confined with some difficulty by a diamond tiara. The poet and the dancer exchanged civil chatter in a throaty language that escaped identification. As the dancer chirped along, she cracked into the meringue of her dessert and engaged her spoon in her fluid gesticulations. The poet laughed and buried his chin in his high, stiff collar. His ears glowed red, and though he continued to slice his veal cutlet

into ever smaller bites, none of those bites made the journey into his mouth. Every now and again, he interjected a spout of enthusiastic agreement, and the dancer would smile at him and continue the thread of her own narrative with renewed vigor, nodding emphatically and darting a spoonful of dessert to her mouth whenever her urgent stream of declarations could withstand an interruption. Could the young poet be in love with the ballerina? I was torn between a desire to join the flirtation and a desire to avoid interfering in a scene of such scientific interest.

When the skylark in attendance rounded the table to serve the tea, I motioned him over with a nod. I glanced to make sure that the two lovers were paying me no mind and, seeing that they were engaged in one another's charms, I leaned to the skylark and murmured, "Could you tell me please, who are those?"

The manservant, in an unforgivably loud voice, said, "Oh! Those are Anna Pavlova and Alexander Pushkin. New colonists. They are from Russia, but they can understand some English if you speak loudly."

Hearing their names spoken, Pushkin and Pavlova startled and looked up in the abashed manner of two children caught in a humiliating form of mischief. The skylark, discomfited by this sudden attention, emitted a grotesque honk and bobbled the teapot. Drops of Lady Gray dribbled along the white linen tablecloth before the skylark managed to set the teapot to rights.

"*Ach*," said Anna Pavlova and I simultaneously. We looked at one another, two breathtaking young women, and smiled in complicity. Alexander Pushkin attempted to smile at us but, as he was not a breathtaking young woman, the moment was not his to share. Rebuffed, he directed his smile to his cutlet and continued to dissect it.

I flipped through my mental lexicon in search of any familiar Russian words but, finding nothing, I spoke loudly and clearly to Anna Pavlova in English: “Do not worry, fellow colonist. The disaster is only minimal.” In illustration of my point, I retrieved my cloth napkin from my lap and used it to dab at the spilled tea. Anna Pavlova floated her shoulders up in a dancer’s exaggeration of a shrug and then returned to her loquacious seduction of Pushkin.

“They are very much in love, yes?” I asked the skylark quietly.

He brayed with anxious laughter, which once again arrested the attention of the two Russians. Humiliated, I steered my eyes to my fennel. I made my motions sweeping and fluid in imitation of Pavlova’s grace as I nibbled at the remnants of my dinner. The manservant began clearing dishes while Alexander Pushkin and Anna Pavlova flirted breathlessly. I tried to understand their language through sheer exertion of my will, but I was rewarded only with a meaningless soup of consonants. I was about to relinquish my dinner plate to the skylark and retire to the familiar, if dreaded, language of my harp, when Anna Pavlova, depositing the final spoonful of meringue and peach into her mouth, swept a napkin across her lips and rose. She stretched her arms over her head and arched her back as though just emerging from an invigorating sleep. She kissed her fingers in appreciation of the meal, dipped into a quick curtsy for the skylark’s sake, and bestowed a smile and a giggle of farewell upon Pushkin. I assumed that she would leave without acknowledging me, but she turned directly to me and, her eyes and diamonds glittering in the candlelight, murmured, “All the best, *moya dorogaya* colonist-ka.”

My breath halted in my throat as she leaned over me and one of her curls, having worked itself free from the confinement of her tiara, brushed my face. With lips as soft as

the feet of an angel, she breathed a kiss onto my forehead. Pushkin and I both watched Pavlova glide out of the room, agog at the elegance of her bearing; the skylark alone seemed unaffected, as he continued to clatter and fumble through his table service.

I expected Pushkin to follow the young ingénue out, but instead he pushed his plate back, reclined in his chair, and pounded the table.

“*Monsieur!*” he bellowed to the skylark. “Vodka, *s’il vous plaît!*”

The manservant’s hips swiveled contemplatively as he processed the poet’s request, and then, with a panicked nod, he bolted back to the kitchen. Pushkin, apparently no longer reined in by the presence of his lover, roared with laughter.

Curious, I scrutinized the poet. Aside from the muttonchops, he was handsome. His cheeks glowed with joviality, and his olive green eyes took in his surroundings with intelligence and perception. His torso was wide like the hull of a ship, his skin was the color of toasted almonds, and a forest of curls bloomed from his head. The man’s powerful body seemed to double in size with every inhalation and to ease into a state of perfect relaxation with every exhalation. His smile blasted me with testosterone, and I had to avert my eyes to the limp strand of fennel that still dangled from the end of my fork. I wanted to be taken within the compass of this man’s aura, but I could not speak his language, and Anna Pavlova’s vacant chair sat at an angle between us.

Pushkin, however, addressed me directly in a timid English that exposed the insecure cub cowering behind his ursine frame: “Ahhh. You? Vodka drink?”

The skylark returned with a carafe of clear liquid and two small crystal glasses. He whipped my plate away, leaving me with only my useless fork.

“I don’t know vodka,” I said, but Pushkin had already begun pouring the liquid into my glass. He pushed the glass to me with an encouraging nod before pouring a glass for himself.

“You vodka drink.”

I took a miniscule sip of the vodka, while Pushkin whipped his head back and tossed the entire contents of his glass into his mouth. The vodka had little taste, but it rubbed warmth over my lips and throat as though it were a cat nuzzling up against me. I smiled and licked my lips in order to feel the warmth against my tongue, while Pushkin readied another glass for himself. I sipped from my glass once again as Pushkin disposed of his second helping the same way he had disposed of the first.

“Ahhhhh,” he said. “You must drink such a way.” He poured a third glass for himself, which he drained with great dispatch.

Still savoring the warmth that lit up my face, I raised the vodka to my mouth. Even before I put the glass to my lips, the abrasive vapors of the alcohol seared my nose. A discoverer set to sail, I fired the vodka shot into my mouth, and the result was a fireball that blasted from my nostrils. I coughed and spluttered, what was once pleasant warmth now corrosive anguish.

Pushkin chuckled and handed me a napkin, into which I tried to hack up my misery. I succeeded only in dribbling vodka from my nose, and I buried my face into the napkin, humiliated. Anna Pavlova would never disgrace herself so. I remembered the emotional contortions I had suffered in G— when I had tried to manipulate my clumsy body into something worthy of displaying on stage. How I had hated myself then! But now, once again, I was an awkward beast, a countrified scarecrow of a girl. I sniffed back

some tears, but this dragged a burning rope of mucous through my nasal passages and against the sensitive tissue at the back of my throat.

I whimpered in pain and hacked up a clot of discharge into the napkin. The skylark was at my side with a tumbler of water, which I took from him and used to rinse out my mouth. Once I had drained the glass, I looked shamefacedly at Pushkin, but he responded with an easygoing shrug.

“You will try one more,” he said, reaching for my vodka glass and refilling it from the carafe. The skylark whisked away my water glass, along with the few remaining serving dishes from our evening meal.

I took the vodka from Pushkin and eyed the meniscus of my drink with a cautious eye. Vodka was a slippery mistress, I realized. Now that I had washed away the burning sensation with water, the warmth had returned to suffuse my entire cranial cavity. A pleasant soporific sensation tingled in the blood vessels running along the surface of my brain, and amiable fog hung behind my eyes. A dopey smile crept across my face as I considered my vodka. (Though, I told myself, I must remember that this is sinister vodka! Specious vodka! A false friend, indeed.) Pushkin beamed encouragement, his glistening smile a half moon in the darkening lounge.

“Oh!” I cried in wonder as I looked down at my place setting. The skylark had somehow removed my fork without my noticing. Such efficient, commendable work! Alexander Pushkin and I faced one another across a table, draped in spotless white linen, empty aside from our glasses and the carafe that fed them. Overhead, the cobalt sky of early evening peered in from the skylight. “I drink!” I said, and winked at Pushkin before emptying my glass into my mouth.

I swallowed the vodka in one gulp, and this time its passage into my stomach was far less tumultuous. The warmth that had been localized in my head spread over the entire surface of my skin like a net, and I shuddered in pleasure.

“Yes,” said Pushkin, little more than a silhouette against the deepening shadows of the room.

“Lamps!” I called, though no skylarks were visible.

“Lamps!” yelled Pushkin in concert, and he took another shot of the vodka.

I reached for a glass that I thought held water, but upon drawing its liquid into my mouth, I realized that it did not. I gulped, laughed (and did Pushkin join me, or was that basso laughter emanating from some other source?), and finished off the glass.

Relaxed, I babbled indiscriminately in German and English, the distinction between the two melting away as all boundaries grew diffuse. Time sagged, and I slowly came to realize that I had turned inside out. My veins, my muscles, my nerves stretched from one end of the room to the other until (glory!) the walls dripped away, puddled, condensed in incandescent dewdrops (or had that industrious skylark dotted the room with candles? But how had he done so without my taking notice?) and then, finding myself alone with Pushkin in a forest of potted ferns and Chippendale chairs and, oh yes, what I discovered indeed to be the dancing flames of candlelight, I realized that my skin and all its contents had, in fact, been pulled taut over the entire surface of the earth! A bit more vodka—just a drop, really, for there was no need to go overboard—trickled into me, bled out through my osmotic heart, and vanished into the night.

“I am *eine Harfenspilerin*,” went the muted purr of my voice through the fronds of the room’s vegetation and into the whorls of Pushkin’s ears. “*Ich bin* the harpwoman!”

Yes. Yes. Yes.

This made sense to me: a masterpiece for the harp. That would be my work during my year in the colony. I would compose one great *magnum opus* that touched the ecstasy I felt, the sheer bodiless euphoria of ... of ... of something, or, better, of nothing! A road—a purpose—a manifesto—along which to direct my efforts.

Drunken purpose music midnight song.

My eyes rolled to the skylight, where the stars glistened like harp strings and the moon spoke in a bizarre Russian tongue. (Or was it not the moon at all, but the mouth of that poet? And the stars perhaps candles? Oh, it is all one! Any material substance can be split into its constituent atoms and rearranged into any other. The moon ... a smile ... every thing is equivalent to every thing. Why should it matter, so long as yet one more glass of vodka was flowing into me, sopped up by the absorbent tissues of my very self! I was vodka and the night.) My body had been pulled so thin that I could feel individual molecules of air brushing against my skin. I was a porous membrane, delicate chiffon wrapping existence. Vodka: beauty: the transcendence of music. This was my sonata. (“But be wary,” said an ever-diminishing part of me. “Be wary. Music is pure, but vodka is a stranger.”)

Alexander Pushkin seemed as surprised to find me on his lap as I was to be found there. I picked up his hand and ran it over my cheek, savoring the sensation of touch. As I did, I noticed with wonder that the table had somehow been whisked away; the vodka and glasses had been moved to a small sideboard. What miracles those skylarks worked! I laughed and laughed and threw my arms around Pushkin’s neck, reclining my head on his

sturdy shoulder and inviting him to kiss me. Instead, he shot vodka down his throat as I stroked his muttonchops.

“You are,” I began, and the thread of my thoughts dissolved into night. Somebody took a sip of vodka, and it was I. “*Dub ist,*” I began again, but I couldn’t locate Pushkin, although I was in his lap. Everything bucked and jolted as though the universe itself were a boat riding choppy water. Ah, G—, G—, had the Atlantic devoured you? Where were my memories, my self? The gray image of The Ancestors flashed before my eyes, chiding, cartwheeling. I needed to find steadiness, and so I dug my fingers into the neck I was holding—Pushkin’s, I realized, when my cheek brushed against his.

“You,” I tried once more, but my English had slipped into shadows. My German had followed close behind, leaving me speechless; my thoughts had melted into a mishmash of assurances that transcended earthly language. The only language that remained was the language that glowed like a ruby at the core of my being: the language of the harp. I played my harp with my fingers, and so I played Alexander Pushkin the same way, strumming and plucking. My hands moved from his neck to his face; from his face through his hair; from his hair down along his back.

I would have explored further, but I could not, because I was flying. I screamed at first, but then my scream morphed into laughter as I realized that I was not flying without direction; on the contrary, my flight was supported and purposeful. I moved out of the lounge and along the corridors of Sansone’s mansion. Busts and columns careened by on either side of me. I tried to alter the course of my journey, but I could not; some unassailable force was directing my path. I shrieked gleefully as I barreled past startled

skylarks bearing *hors d'oeuvres* and feather dusters. I wiggled my feet, which were a meter or more above the ground. Had I willed myself into a spirit?

It wasn't until I burst through the front doors of the mansion and found myself skimming along above the cedar chip trails that led to the guest cabins that I realized I was, in fact, being carried by Pushkin. The cool evening air felt heavenly as it spilled into my lungs. Breathing calmly and evenly slowed the spinning frenzy of my vodka-soaked reverie, which allowed me the opportunity to feel concern. Where was Pushkin taking me? He couldn't possibly know where my cabin was, and I was in no state to direct him. Were we to have sexual intercourse? Did I want that? What if I somehow failed to excel? Was Anna Pavlova an adept lover?

Now with urgency, I tried again to bend my thoughts into language. "Ah, oh," I said. I ran my hands along the arms carrying me, and found them sturdy and willful. "Eh."

We raced forward. I stared up, able only to see the dark skeletons of the treetops against the cloudless evening sky. Shadowy owls flapped above, though their hooting cries sounded distant. I twisted, but I could not bring Pushkin's face into my vision, and this disturbed me. He carried me with strength of intention, but his intentions were illegible.

"Anna Pavlova," I finally managed to say. "Wicked *herr*."

"Shhh," said Pushkin, and I screamed loudly enough to scatter the bats from the trees. I screamed as fireflies formed shifting constellations in the air around me. I screamed as I was brought to an unfamiliar cabin whose dark outline wobbled in the deceitful moonlight. I screamed as I was deposited onto a bed whose mattress bore the

tang of male sweat. I screamed as the enormous Pushkin knelt beside the bed and again said, “Shhh.”

“I do not hurt you,” said Pushkin, and I continued to scream. “You sleep now.”

I couldn't quite process his words, but I did understand when he stood up and turned to leave. Immediately, I stopped screaming and reached for his waist. I wanted every patch of his skin lined up against every patch of mine. After my tortuous journey from C— to creature of music, from elated flight to wordless terror, I could not end the night crumpled by myself on the mattress of a man who took pity on me. I desperately needed to join my body to some other. This was not sexual arousal; this was a deep physical yearning for a conjunction of atoms, for overpowering touch. Empty space gaped between my skin cells. Desolation stung with physical chill.

I struggled to wrestle the poet onto the mattress, but he detached my hands from his waist and dropped them at my sides. They lay beside me like cold, dead eels, and I no longer wanted anything but sleep.

“I would not do this thing you want,” said Pushkin, filling me with humiliation. “You are nice, very pretty *devotchka*, but is not proper for man to *zanimat'sya* with girl after *pit'* the vodka. Anna Pavlova is trusting me. You sleep now.”

Anna Pavlova. The name of the graceful, composed woman with the muscular arms and the expressive eyes shamed me. Who was I to have reached such heights of incorporeality? I was only C—, after all, bound in the end to my own physical frame, to my own earnestness, to my own German blood. I was C—, lying sick to my stomach in a strange and lonely bed with muddy thoughts as I whimpered after the hulking Russian who was leaving me alone to sleep in his cabin as an act of condescending charity.

After Pushkin had closed the door of the cabin behind him, I sought warmth in the thin sheets and managed to find comfort in one thought: Although Alexander Pushkin and I had not joined in any actual romantic concert, perhaps, in some strange way that I couldn't understand at eighteen, we had made love nonetheless.

Outside, the onset of Bucephalus's plaintive howls signaled that night had fully fallen.

I had been launched into a love of the physical. As a creature who had come into an experience of adult longing, it seemed that every physical sensation hammered me with twice its usual intensity. When I played the harp, I could feel music as the waves of vibration oscillating against my eardrums. When I lay in bed at night, I was acutely conscious of every point of contact between my sheets and my body. Coffee was a daily force which continued to announce its presence within me long after the last warm drops had slid through my lips, over my tongue, and down along my esophagus. I charted the course of every morsel of food as it wound through the convoluted pathways of my digestive tract. The late April breezes tickled me with cavalier indecency. I treasured my hypersensitivity, while also fearing that it would drive me mad.

This treasure, this madness, fueled my newly purposeful music. No longer content to stumble upon momentary beauty and let it brush by on butterfly wings, I began to wield my net, my bottle of chloroform: inscription. Whereas before my daily rehearsals had been little more than dalliances—sometimes fruitful, sometimes grinding—I now took up paper and began to imprison my transitory discoveries in notation. Sometimes I worked all day, only to add just one note to the edifice of my symphony; sometimes I

flew through days at a time, piling up a sheaf of inspired pages; sometimes I spent a week painstakingly undoing what I had done the week before. Nevertheless, inch by inch, the stack of papers by my bedside grew, and I began to see that I was building an object. I did not yet know what my masterpiece would ultimately be, but it was enough to know that it would be a masterpiece. No matter how many days' work I lost to fruitless explorations of tempting dead-ends, I could now provide myself the solace of knowing that the project itself was not lost. Even if the road was sometimes hard to discern, with patience it would lead me somewhere.

Another project, too, presented itself. My umbrage at Pushkin's rejection of my advances had planted an obsession in my shifting adolescent mind. I must make myself as lovely as Anna Pavlova. I allowed no import to the fact that she had been deliberately cultivating her bodily grace even before her limbs had reached their current proportion. I allowed no import to the fact that the duration of her daily stretches approached two hours. I allowed no import to the fact that rhythm and poise had been the milk of her childhood, rather than distant attributes she mawkishly snatched at in an effort to insinuate herself into an artificial lifestyle she had convinced herself was beautiful. None of this mattered to me. I was to excel as a harpist, creating music as eloquent as speech; I was to excel as an English speaker, creating speech as sonorous as music; I was to excel as a seductress, fusing nature and art to create a woman who could lay claim to anyone and anything on earth. In short, the awakening of my tactile senses left me vulnerable to the two most common words in American English:

“I want.”

And I wanted indiscriminately.

My daily visits to Glory-Anne changed shape accordingly. While I had previously entered her lair cringing in anticipation of the brutal toilette to come, I now took charge of my own beautification. If she did not scrub with sufficient vigor, I grasped her knotty hand in mine and led her to grate her scouring brush over my body until dead skin cells sloughed off me in sheets. I abused my cuticles and contorted my hair. Glory-Anne flossed me until I bled, and then I rinsed the tincture of blood from my mouth with a chalky whitening formula. Disobedient eyebrows were rooted out and overthrown. On one occasion, impatient with Glory-Anne's cautious attempts to comb through an importunate knot, I seized the comb from her and set to a massacre of my own scalp. The warm tingle of pain seeped over the entire surface of my head, but I had my perfection. My lack of concern for my own comfort caused the typically imperturbable Glory-Anne to step back in astonishment and mutter, "The almighty power of the ever-living God."

I returned her comb to her, streaming with the hair I had torn free from my own head, and rehearsed my grin, deploying the dimples that I had ground into the flesh of my cheeks.

"Heavenly hosts of angels and saints."

True delicacy, however, comes not only through the meticulous construction of a flawless body but through the use of that body in space. And so, I practiced my gait, my laugh, and my girlish bearing more thoroughly than I ever had with Frau Schreiber. It was well into May at this point, and so I accustomed myself to taking brisk morning strolls over the grounds to serve the double duty of rehearsal and exercise. Unlike my mapmaking quests of earlier days, these walks did not bear the specious motive of attempting to encompass Sansone's reach within my own. I expected that the grounds

would be as the mansion was: endless. Instead, I surrendered myself to the ceaselessly subdividing branches of Sansone's trail network, trusting that I would never become hopelessly lost; as if by some miracle, I never did.

I tried on many personae during these walks. I skipped with calculated innocence. I trod heavily like a purposeful matron. I stepped lightly, delicately, as though fearful of soiling the hem of my skirt. I powered forward with pumping arms, seemingly unconscious of the impression I gave off. I bent and swayed. I held my shoulders aslant. I jutted my hips and blinked my eyes. I frowned and shrugged. I bit my tongue and clasped my hands. When I met with success, I inscribed the result in the bearing of my body as surely as I inscribed my symphony on sheets of paper.

Although this work was every bit as difficult as attaining perfection at the harp, I came to treasure my walks because of the tactile experience they afforded me. The cool spring air flooded my lungs, the aroma of Sansone's honeysuckle bushes soothed the lining of my nose, and when nobody was around to see, I removed my shoes and strayed from the path, enjoying the prick of the grass stubble on the soles of my feet. I frequently saw other colonists out, taking inspiration from the play of clouds against the sky, picnicking with straw baskets and crystal champagne flutes, and growing quarrelsome over contested croquet victories. The pleasures of my exercise were equal to the pleasures of my music, and both operated easily as stand-ins for the pleasure I had sought from Pushkin.

One luminous morning, after I had taken my coffee and toast under Skylark's supervision and sought Glory-Anne's assistance with my coiffure, I decided that my peregrinations would take me along the margin of a shaggy pasture I had passed many

times while walking between my cabin and the mansion. The glow of early morning cast hale pink light over my body as I set my back to the mansion and began my stroll down the dirt path that traced one side of the field. Although the small thickets that bordered the pastureland blocked off the horizon before me, having all indication of human settlement behind me caused the expanses ahead to seem limitless. A military formation of geese soared above, honking commands, and raining down pellets of waste like heavy artillery. Low wooden fences sagged at my sides, while grasshoppers catapulted from stone to stone. The air enlivened me, and I walked in tempo with a springtime melody I had been composing in my head.

When I claimed beauty as my manifesto, I had hardly foreseen what a far-reaching task that would be. My music reflected my way of life, and so it was futile to cultivate an appreciation of the most elegant melodies without extending that appreciation to all my sensory domains. My task was to become a creature wholly of the world: to chisel away existence's dross until my discrimination allowed only sensations of the highest quality to enter my sphere. Production of beauty is not a labor of creation but of excavation. The true aesthete must possess the ability to locate the kernel of sensory pleasure within a moment, and the artist must display this kernel for all. Why look outside experience for our raptures, when the very slime of this earth possesses wonders enough to enthrall us? Why fly to Rongo and Tumatauenga when *reposado* and *Tempranillo* slake our thirst for meaning? These vicious delusions flitted through my head like kites as I absorbed the morning, abstractedly courting sunburn.

I had been sailing along the crests and depressions of Sansone's pastures for nearly an hour when I beheld that fearsome Macedonian warhorse, Bucephalus, lying on

his flank beside a myrtle bush. Though I first spied his great bulk from a considerable distance, I saw no motion animate his body as I approached, and I began to fear that his stillness signified death. I crept near and found his eyes open and bulging. His legs jutted stiffly from his trunk. I waved my hand before his muzzle, but nothing in his aspect registered awareness. My mind tore from one horrific possibility to the next. Had illness struck down the horse? Had grief finally devoured him? Or—and here my thoughts bent to the sinister Rand—had some villain poisoned his salt lick? Just as I was about to flee and report my discovery to Skylark, a large black horsefly buzzed over Bucephalus's head, eliciting a reflexive twitch of the great horse's ear.

“The crucifixion!” I cried rapturously as I forgot elegance and threw my arms around the horse's neck. “You live, praise heaven!”

Without otherwise moving, Bucephalus dragged his gaze to me and blinked as though neither expecting nor surprised to find me embracing him.

“Nay,” said the horse. “I do not live. I breathe, I eat, I sweat. I do not live.”

The air was so warm and pleasant, and the horse so cold and dour, that, with all the naiveté of springtime, I decided I was capable of cheering him.

“This cannot be!” I said. “The day is beautiful. Look at the flowers.” I indicated a bush of lilacs buzzing with appreciative bees. “Such purple! There is a beautiful world in that purple. You must see it.”

I did not understand why Bucephalus peeled back his upper lip in a scornful laugh, but I was heartened by any disruption of his listlessness, so I continued to press him.

“Perhaps go for a run through pastures,” I said. “It will make you feel very good indeed. We must have air to feed our blood. Come walk a while with me.”

Bucephalus made no move to rise, so I gripped his front two hooves and tried to hoist him at least into a sitting position. This proved fruitless labor. Lethargy rendered him a dispirited mound. Out of breath, I sank back beside him.

“You are a heavy horse,” I said.

“I am,” he said. Bucephalus’s voice weighted the air with solemnity. Everything he said required a moment of silence to house the inevitable ripple of gravity that followed. I smiled and stretched out on my back, feeling blades of bluestem and dropseed poking me through my butter-colored dress. Feathery clouds sauntered across the sky, and spotted butterflies to alit on my nose. I lay with my side against the horse’s back, and the soft pressure he exerted against me as he breathed made me aware of my own respiration.

“Bucephalus,” I said. I waited for a reply, but received none, so I continued. “Watch the clouds. They can show you many interesting pictures.”

“Oh, dear C—,” said the horse. “What makes you so insipid?”

“There is one,” I persisted. “See its long ears? It is very like a rabbit.”

“Who taught you to blather such odium?”

“A face!” I said, and for a heartstopping moment, I recognized the man figured in the clouds. Two narrow shreds of cloud composed scornful eyes, while a third snaked beneath in a sneer of condescension. The chin was defined and the ears sat in perfect proportion. Sansone was writ large in the sky.

I was so preoccupied with my discovery that I failed to notice that Bucephalus had finally turned his attention to the sky.

“Oh, it is he! It is he!” moaned the horse.

Bucephalus was trying ineffectually to hide his streaming eyes behind his hooves.

“You also see it?” I asked.

“How could I not? It is that man, from the curl of his hair to the cleft of his chin. Oh, that regal bearing! Oh, that heaven-sent grace!”

“He watches us even here,” I murmured, awe-struck.

“*You*,” said the horse, finally whipping his head upright. His lip quivered in anger, and his bloodshot eyes screamed wrath. “What do you know of him?”

“Very little,” I said, easing away from the ireful horse. “Very little indeed, please you. Just that he is the master. That he has been hearing my harp and invited me here. Do not be angry.”

Bucephalus brayed with lunatic laughter and propped himself into a sitting position. He drew a circle in the dirt with his hoof, shook his head, and tore up the circle.

“Have you ever heard such imbecility?” he asked the pastureland that spread before us. “Or perhaps it’s infatuation. Are you in love with Sansone?” he asked me. I did not know how to answer, but Bucephalus steamed onward without the benefit of my reply. “Perhaps you are, and perhaps you are not, but he occupies your brain to the extent that you see him in the clouds. That much is certain.” The horse nodded in satisfaction at his own diagnosis. “That man,” and here he waved a hoof at the face in the sky, “is nothing like Sansone. That man is unmistakably (oh, how it shreds my heart to utter the name!) Alexander of Macedon. The likeness is perfect. You only see Sansone because

you yearn for him, but any objective observer would agree that the face is ... is ...” But sobs choked out the rest of his thought.

“Oh, my dear,” I said, laying a hand on the horse’s hide. “You need not be sad.” While stroking Bucephalus’s mane, I glanced to the sky, but the face had dissipated. What would it mean to desire Sansone? If I wished to own him, it would be impossible. If I wished to be owned by him, I would have already achieved my desire. “Your Alexander: He causes you much sorrow, yes?”

Tears washed Bucephalus’s muzzle as he considered the fields in the distance. Something in his aspect revealed that the horse was far, far away. However, after a moment of consideration, Bucephalus turned to face me. Pain wrenched his features into grotesquery, as though his torture were physical.

“My sadness is real,” said Bucephalus, and I placed a hand on his brow, trying to smooth his contorted forehead back into placidity. I nodded, not daring to interrupt him, but wishing him to go on. “You cannot see it, you cannot touch it or smell it or hear it, and yet it is as real as the soil and the bumblebees; perhaps it is more real. We are all worms, C—! We shovel forward in our subterranean blindness, rooting from sensation to sensation, nibbling at this and gawking at that, and never once truly believing that we will never be conscious of the tiniest sliver of what actually exists. We will never make it out of our own paltry worm-holes. My sadness is real, C—, but you will never feel it. It is, for you, non-existent.”

“It cannot be true,” I said, kissing him lightly on the ear. “You are painful, and so I am also painful to see you.”

Bucephalus closed one eye and scrutinized me through the other. I could tell that he found me juvenile, and I thought of the humiliation that Pushkin levied upon me. Foul, muttonchopped idol! I began to sweat.

Bucephalus seemed about to critique me, but instead, he leaned his head back and moaned, “Why, why, why, why, why, why did he leave me?”

“Poor horse,” I said.

“Poor horse, indeed. My love is my susceptibility, and in this colony our susceptibilities are exploited until they ruin us.”

“What is the susceptibility of mine?” I asked.

“Clearly your viciousness,” said the horse without hesitation. “I have heard your manifesto. ‘Beauty’ will lead you nowhere good. Your ignorance is a susceptibility too, of course, but ignorance is a trait that is common to all of us until we’ve already done ourselves so much harm that our belated wisdom only heaps greater pain upon us.”

“Oh,” I said, eyeing the warm glow of the blue sky above. If only this horse would run and bound through the fields with me! If he would bury his muzzle in a luncheon of crisp, golden hay. If he would open his lungs to sing, to breathe, to exalt all the sensory pleasures of earth and air! Oh, then he would not rumble on in dismal tones. He would not go on about blindness and susceptibility. “Come walk!” I cried with vehemence that verged on desperation. “Come feel this beautiful day on your skin and in your blood, and when we are walking you can be telling me your story. It will make it feel better for you—and for me, I will have a friend and maybe will learn something more of English.”

The horse's baleful green eye rolled up to me, and I caught a glimmer of something other than contempt. Amusement, perhaps? Or even hope?

"What can you want with my story?" he asked.

I did not give him the answer I wanted to: the abatement, even if just for a morning, of his tireless moaning! Instead, I pursed my lips and masked my frustration with earnestness.

"I care for you, horse," I said, and found myself able to call convincing moistness into my eyes. A victory for the dissembling body! "I want to know you."

Bucephalus smiled sadly and stared up at the empty patch of sky where the face had lived momentarily.

"You speak such false words," he said without malice. "We can wear all the kind manners we want to, but cloaking our inner beasts in the guise of innocence doesn't amount to slaying them." He sighed. "But, yes, I will stretch my legs awhile with you. Listen well, and perhaps you'll see what the love of beauty reduces us to. And," he added, as he struggled to pull himself onto his legs, "if I should break into tears at any moment in my tale, you must forgive me. I am a feeble and unmanned horse."

After Bucephalus had come aright, he shook himself with melancholy dignity. Without a glance at me, he set off plodding through the pastureland. I waded through the bristly grasses alongside him for several minutes. Just as I began to wonder how long we were going to walk through the plains in silence, Bucephalus, without altering his movement or looking to ensure I was listening, began the account of his tragedy.

"My story begins, he said,

CHAPTER 6

LET HORSES SPEAK

“in the sun-drenched vineyards of Thessaly. I was born in mid-afternoon on a day in late summer. My first glimpse of the world as I emerged from my nag of a mother and lifted my nose to the zenith revealed a vast, bucolic landscape. Inspiring? Nay. In those early days, I feared it. Though I have been bred for muscle and might, I entered the world as we all do—puny of body and muddy of mind, bleary in our senses and inarticulate in our needs—and so my sudden ejection into a land of cold breezes, unstinting sunlight, and secret corners in which unknowable threats lie hidden occasioned the utmost terror. Oh, how I clung to my mother in my infancy, longing to return to that cozy haven in which warmth and nourishment were the only sensations I knew. But even had I been able to wiggle back inside that familiar womb, how little good it would have done me. I had already been pushed out into ‘the world’; I had already, however primitively, become aware of its existence. Going back inside my mother with the knowledge that there was another world out there—an uncomfortable and horrifying world—that I might be forced to return to at any moment would have destroyed the sanctity of the womb. Birth is our first indication that everything we think we know is wrong, and everything we experience thereafter is tinged with the fear that the walls of our reality can suddenly contract and muscle us into an alien world in which we lie exposed and ignorant, unable to return to the existence that we had assumed so foolishly was the only one.

“The taste of my mother’s milk, then, was not the sweetness that poets sing of. It was a terrifying, unaccountable sensation. Think of it! How to speak of something’s

‘taste’ when you have never before used your mouth? It is only after the fact that we can define any moment as precious; at the time, they are uncertain and unknowable, capable of yielding unforeseeable consequences and proof against definition. I spent my days burrowed close to my mother, instinctually understanding that there was a connection between her and the before-world. Day by day, however, I began to flex my legs and understand that a return, if possible, would be as arbitrary and unannounced as my expulsion. I must learn to live upon this sodden earth, however uncertain.

“I never knew my father. Though my master, Philonicus the Thessalian, kept a legion of stallions, none among them evinced any recognition of me. In my lonely youth, I would wander among the sneering warhorses, peering into their distant faces, hoping for a moment of paternal refulgence, but finding only cold contempt. That we should learn to possess emotions! How differently my life would have turned out had I not felt myself dispossessed of the nurturing, instructive influence of parenthood that might have helped my heart become as sturdy as my thighs. Instead, my father remained anonymous and my mother remained aloof: She was Philonicus’s prize nag, and so she was kept in a state of constant pregnancy. My siblings (though I was not allowed to know them as such) were many, and my haggard mother had only enough energy to pump us full of milk, give us each a cursory nuzzle, and then shove us away so that she could rest before the evening’s inevitable marathon of fornication.

“Bereft of kin, I sought company wherever I could, and the one blessing—or so I once thought it to be—of my young life was that Philonicus’s property bordered a popular *lyceum*, where the youth of Thessaly converged to expound upon the good. In my spare moments, I was drawn there, at first simply by the comfort occasioned by the noise

of other living beings collected in community. I grazed outside the academy, understanding nothing of the conversation within. In time, though, I began to comprehend some little of human language and, as only my body—never my mind—was put to work by Philonicus, I could spend my days losing myself in the maze of concepts I heard the Greek youths discussing. Warmed as I was by the proximity of philosophy, I never dared to approach the youths I saw coming in and out of the building. They were cheery, broad-chested boys with gleaming skin, gymnastic bodies, and the self-assured, uncritical liberty enjoyed by a dominant species. And what was I? Just a horse, bred for labor, not meant to reach for mental fruit beyond the confines of brute experience.

“The only other creature with whom I regularly came into contact was the master, and, oh, what a master Philonicus was. Barely able even to control the movement of his own hands, wracked as they were with the tremors of chronic alcoholism, his method of management was to thrash the weak and sell off the strong. The only warmth the man possessed resided in his belly and in his spleen; the rest of him remained a tundra of cruelty. I was raised as chattel, and so every decision about my upbringing was guided by how much I would fetch at market. I was given protein enough to stimulate my muscular development, but nothing with flavor enough to satisfy even my infantile palate. My victuals, I later realized, were typically a potage containing the ground hooves of my less fortunate brethren. (To this day, I refuse to eat animal flesh. What is meat but a potential cannibalization? A horse, a human, a sheep: We all look the same when ground into pulp.) My physical discipline was sufficient to dull my sensitivity without leaving bruises or lasting damage that could affect my market value. Philonicus was generous with the cudgel and stingy with affection. He was a merciless horse trainer, but equally so an

ingratiating horse trader. He reserved his charm, as it was, for his transactions. My first image of tenderness was that of the man who had nearly broken my ribs distorting his face into a craggy-toothed smile as he laid his wine-tinted fingers over his desiccated heart and cooed to a potential buyer, 'These horses are as children to me.'

“Watching Philonicus at market was perhaps the most unsettling experience of my early years. The first time Philonicus brought me to witness the sale of one of my probable cousins, I was only a year and a half old. Before dawn, Philonicus roused me from my mattress of hemlock with a proffered lump of fine Mediterranean rock salt. I had no appetite, not having yet taken any exercise, but I could tell from Philonicus’s leering aspect that this was meant to be a symbol of benefaction, and so I feigned gratitude as I dutifully set to the salt. Repulsion turned my stomach into a gastric Vesuvius, however, when I realized that I was hardly the first horse to have coated this saltlick with his saliva. Bits of masticated hay and dried hair stuck to its surface. Even as a deprived child, I was cultivated enough to recognize the impudence of forcing this dirty, teeming fiftieth-hand gift upon me.

“‘Ah, dear horsey,’ said Philonicus, leaning close so that I could smell the rancid wine on his breath and olive oil on his hands. ‘Today we go to market. Today you become a horsey of the world.’

“I knew my master well enough to know that his interests and mine were rarely aligned, and his joviality dredged up my anxiety. Once I had licked up as much salt as I could pretend to enjoy, Philonicus prodded me to my feet with a pointed olive branch, and I joined a small convoy of horses gathered beneath a cypress. An older and much respected stallion named Abraxas led us out from the grazing lands and along a dirt path

that led us off Philonicus's property. Philonicus took up the rear of the group, shuffling in his torn sandals and greasy tunic. Every now and again, he took a swig from the wine bladder that hung from the rope tied around his waist and swiped at whichever horse happened to be within easy striking distance.

"I avoided Philonicus's arbitrary menace by sticking close to Abraxas at the front of the pack. My legs were young and weak, but my admiration for the regal Abraxas fortified me. Muscled and fire-eyed with a streaming russet mane, Abraxas was the very image of the horse I dreamed of becoming. During the cold Macedonian nights, I sometimes fantasized that Abraxas had impregnated my mother: that I was his beloved foal. Of course, I knew even at the time that such a connection was improbable at best; we were nothing alike. Abraxas's lean and well-proportioned majesty could not have sired my hulking shoulders, my outrageous zeppelin of a head, my spindly and unresponsive legs. The glow of his sun-colored hide outshone my black coat. I was a freak specimen with a white blotch on his brow, a wall-eyed and unlovable abomination. Timid and uncoordinated, how could I be of the same blood as this magnificent stallion?

"I beg you," I said, taking advantage of a moment in which Philonicus's wine bladder had become snagged in a prickly lettuce bush to address Abraxas. "What do you know about our destination?"

"That most excellent horse, however, glared at me with impatience, reared his head, and let loose a monumental whinny. It wasn't until later that I learned that Abraxas was not trying deliberately to spite me; he simply couldn't comprehend Greek. Strong as Abraxas was physically, he had never questioned the assumption that there are boundaries to what horses should be entitled to understand. At the time, however, I did not realize

that I was anomalous in my desire to enrich myself through learning, and so I responded to my snub as any young and unloved colt would: I blamed myself and spent the rest of the journey trying to make myself as small as possible.

“There was nevertheless much on the road to stimulate me. Having lived my entire life within the confines of Philonicus’s pastures, the winding roads of Thessaly confronted me with novelties. Orange groves and almond trees stood sentinel over rose-colored ravines. Cliff walls were honeycombed over with caves and dovecotes. Shoddy carts drawn by shoddy horses met us along the way, and the smells they contained seemed entire worlds in themselves: Tunisian spices, grilled lamb, goat manure. I witnessed the Aegean, an enormous blue being that surged, shrank, and pirouetted like a living creature. And I witnessed man with his animals. I saw the tenderness with which the traders we met on the road fed and lathered their horses. I saw shepherds breaking bread with their flocks. I saw peddlers with beloved dogs crouched ready beside them.

“Late that afternoon, we reached the market stalls of Larissa. The only time I had before seen industry on such a scale was when I had accidentally uprooted an ant colony during a morning ramble. So many people, each one surrounded by thick ropes of garlic or copper utensils or amphorae or cheese. They screamed and howled, beat on bells and drums, grabbed and pleaded, grinned and swore and spit. They sidled by and barreled along, rushing and strolling, capering and hobbling. I felt hands on my flank. I was touched and shoved, caressed and manhandled. My fellow horses, too, had been set upon by swarms of people. I pawed and reared, but Philonicus had roped me, had pinioned me, had tethered me to a post. The indignity and the ferocious terror that roiled within me! I howled and strained against my shackles, but in the chaos of indecorous hands and

leering faces, my anger lost its direction. I lashed out indiscriminately. I chomped and wept and was throttled for my lack of deportment. Flails ripped my skin. Through my haze of pain, I saw Philonicus drunkenly curtsying and accepting baskets of gold from nicely muscled men who proceeded to club my brethren and lead them away, stunned.

“‘Oh!’ I cried. ‘Where are you taking them?’ But my voice could not be heard above the clamor of the marketplace. I was up against commerce, and a lone horse’s weak appeals to humanity cannot stand up to such a monolith.

“‘Where was the beauty to be found in that, C—? Where does your art fit into the mire of shit that is human history? Your empty aesthetic thrills are not so empty: They are thick with the blood of such as me, if you will stop to look.

“‘So it was that I watched Abraxas and all the others hitched to chariots and made one by one to vanish. Rage and despair in equal measures kept me fighting against my immobility until I heard a man’s gentle voice in my ear.

“‘Sweet horse. Calm down,’ said the man. The voice’s loving consideration cooled my frenzy, and the man inspired my trust. He was a middle-aged man with a well-trimmed beard and curly, black hair. His toga was spotless with a gold border around the neck. His smile was icy but not malicious. I was too young to realize that his enthusiasm signified perversion.

“‘Such a lovely horse,’ he continued. ‘Why, you will grow into quite the full-bodied specimen, I expect. A wonderful birthmark.’ He stroked the white birthmark that sat between my eyes. ‘And noteworthy buttocks.’ His eyes patrolled my body as though desperate to ensure that no other man had laid visible claim to it. The thought that I myself might want ownership of it did not factor into his considerations, but I did not

mind. I was so starved for love that I overlooked the possessive note in his voice. If I could be but fed well and admired, he could do with me as he pleased!

“Philonicus saw the attention I was receiving, so he manufactured a trustworthy smile and approached.

“‘Ah, my dear Pheidippides,’ he said, gripping my admirer’s shoulder. ‘Do you crave this horse?’

“Suspicion eclipsed Pheidippides’s desire, and he glanced immediately to the small money pouch that hung from his belt.

“‘The horse?’ said Pheidippides, as though I had just now been brought to his attention. He glanced me over casually. ‘I suppose the horse is sufficient. You’re asking for far more than he’s worth, I imagine?’

“‘He is quite an exquisite horse,’ said Philonicus, stroking my mane with a show of devotion. ‘It would be hard for us to part. Ten talents and thirty mina is more than fair.’

“‘Ah! You gouger! You usurer! Ten talents and thirty mina is a price, indeed! For such a freakish and knobby-kneed little sapling? Here is discoloration.’ Pheidippides jabbed a finger at my birthmark. ‘Here is a wall-eye. Here is an enormous head, ballooned out of all reasonable proportion. Such a horse for ten talents and thirty mina, besides? Eight talents would be an act of unspeakable charity.’

“‘An affront!’ said Philonicus. ‘Eight talents is an insult to reason. I hold a dear attachment to this horse. Certainly, he is young, but think what he will become! If the horse doesn’t suit your pleasure, in just a few years he will fetch as much as thirteen talents at market. A healthy profit for you, my dearest.’ And here he elbowed

Pheidippides and lowered his voice. ‘And I wholeheartedly believe that this horse will satisfy. He is most affectionate and needs only to be instructed in what you require.’

“Pheidippides’s eyes went wide, and a smile crept across his face, but he quickly frowned and said, ‘I wouldn’t have such a pointless horse.’

“Such is the mendacity of the marketplace. Cruel Philonicus, who despised me and wanted nothing more than to get me out from under his care, pretended to cling to me, while Pheidippides, who was in search of a horse of exactly my proportions, pretended to spurn me. Each man acted against his own wishes for the hope of another coin or two. Such is economic fallacy. The men’s behavior makes sense to me now that I understand disingenuousness, but at that age I was too logical to comprehend the notion of falsehood, and so I credited the men’s words. Fearing that Pheidippides’s feelings really had undergone an abrupt reversal, my sense of rejection impelled me to indiscretion.

“‘Please have me!’ I cried there, in the middle of the marketplace. ‘I am not freakish, nor am I pointless! Perhaps I cannot run and bound with the vigor of my elders, but I assure you that I am a horse of learning and deep sensitivity. Oh, if I can be shown but an iota of tenderness, I will return the favor in any way I can. Just don’t let me return with Philonicus. He is a frigid and abusive master. He starves me and mistreats me. I will be happy with any situation, so long as I can but be looked on kindly once in a while and scratched behind the ears!’

“There was a moment of silence, in which both Philonicus and Pheidippides frantically worked to revise the framework within which they understood the world.

“‘It,’ said Pheidippides at last, ‘speaks?’

“The two men stared in shock. I pawed the ground, bashful.

“‘Wretched horse!’ screamed Philonicus, grabbing a nearby stool and thrashing me with it. ‘Damned, wretched horse! How dare you speak? How dare you comprehend language? You are unloved and unlovable, and you will do well to hold your tongue.’

“The rain of blows caused me less anguish than those words, the words that punished me for the only solace I had found in my miserable life. I hoped that by expressing myself and demonstrating my erudition, I would be shown respect and admiration. Instead, I was a nightmarish error, a walking, talking transgression, whose golden gift of language was coupled with the curse of forever remaining unheard.

“‘Oh, no, no, my friend,’ said Pheidippides, edging away from me. ‘I cannot want a horse capable of bearing witness, you understand? There are certain rumors—false ones, mind you—but rumors damaging enough that, well, should they be perpetuated by indiscreet parties it would be ... well, do I make myself clear?’

“‘Sufficiently clear,’ said Philonicus, terminating my thrashing in order to stare sadly at the agora’s pavement as though watching the dissolution of ten talents and thirty mina. ‘Perhaps,’ he said, suddenly brightening, ‘if I were to impair the horse’s power of speech? Fetch me some shears. I will reduce the cost.’

“‘No,’ said Pheidippides. ‘It is not worth the risk. If, somehow, this horse were to set his tongue awag, why, the insinulators and slanderers would have me exiled. Mere rumors are too easily credited in this polis.’

“‘Of course,’ said Philonicus.

“‘It is a horse, though,’ said Pheidippides, his gaze loath to detach itself from my body. ‘Such a handsome pity.’ He brought an arm over my shoulders and nuzzled my ears. ‘If only you knew the virtue of silence, horse. Such a handsome, heretic horse.’

“‘I assure you, Pheidippides,’ said Philonicus. ‘The horrid creature will be *taught* the virtue of silence.’

“But Philonicus need not have bothered with doling out the slew of thrashings I earned that evening and throughout the days and weeks to come. In the verbal degradation I received at market, I had already become well acquainted with the virtue of silence. My gift of speech alienated me from the horses, and my horsiness alienated me from my potential human interlocutors. I was, in short, alone, unable to fit into an appropriate category. Rather than broaden their worlds to include me, it was easier for horses and humans alike simply to ignore me. Every day was a misery, and in the evenings my ache for a passage back into the prenatal grew ever more acute.

“It was in this stew of misery that I concocted my plan. Though I was entirely without hope of companionship, in this world that stank of corruption and avarice I might yet have one ally: myself. I grew churlish and feral. When Philonicus set me atrot, I tore through his pastures fast enough to rip clods of dirt from the earth. I set to my meager meals with voracity and a malevolent zeal that bespoke my new intention: I would be ungovernable. I would nurture strength—not learning, not compassion—and wield it as a weapon to fend off future humiliation. I would be merciless and willful, stubborn and mighty. With my gnashing teeth and reckless hooves, I mutilated Philonicus’s business model. Sell such a horse as I for ten talents and thirty mina? Impossible. I would render myself a net loss: the red ink on Philonicus’s balance sheets. If he should tire of my antics

and put me to death, so much the better; the chasm between this world and the hereafter could never be so precipitous as that between the world of my mother's womb and the reeking world of the market economy.

“And yet, careless as I was of death, and eager as I was to disrupt Philonicus's income, I never again dared to speak. The threat of the shears lingered with me, and though my power of speech had brought me to ruin, I deplored the thought of parting with it. Someday, perhaps, I would meet the ear that would allow me to funnel my thoughts into it. Desperate as I was, I had not yet fully given up the hope of deliverance.

“Stunned at first by my transformation from a docile and bookish beast into a stampeding tempest, Philonicus, that consummate master of human vanity, was quick to spy an opportunity of turning the situation to his advantage. As I grew in bulk, Philonicus utilized my act of resistance as a marketing tool.

“‘Come one, come all!’ came his bleat day after day through the stalls of the marketplace, drowning out the violent wails of the other vendors as they waggled their wares at passersby and, self-prostrating, beseeched them, begged them, verging on tears, for one coin more, one coin more. ‘Conquer the unconquerable horse! One drachma earns you a crack at this unstoppable demon! Tame the horse, and he's yours for a pittance! Thirteen talents: an outrageous bargain!’

“And so it was that my fury and the cultivation of my muscles had increased my worth by over two talents. Every obstreperous youth who fancied himself strong enough of fist to pummel me into submission tried his hand, and I fought back ferociously. I knew that my truculence played directly into Philonicus's desire to brand me as a wild adventure and a consummate test of manhood, but my rage was my addiction: Once I had

untrammelled it, I could not do myself the disservice of once again reining it in, though its freedom should benefit the man I most hated in the world. Those youths! I kicked them and clubbed them. I bit at them, I swiped them and trampled them. And yet, no matter how feral I grew in anger, these wretched Macedonians grew all the more eager to thrust themselves into my warpath. Young women encouraged their paramours to demonstrate their superiority, never suspecting that their unremarkable boyfriends were as likely as any to have their ribs crushed beneath my desperate hooves. Watching these women egg their lovers on to disaster stoked my anger and my envy: Would I ever have somebody over-estimate me so? Would I ever be able to turn confidently to my companion and say, 'Fear not! My love for you gives me the strength to arbitrarily vanquish an innocent creature in the marketplace'? No, indeed. The more my frenzy served to unite young lovers, the more my frenzy grew; the more my frenzy grew, the more it served to unite young lovers. I came to love the sight of blood, the sight of a broken young warrior lying incapacitated beneath me, begging me to spare his pitiful life. Could I bring myself to extinguish the vital flame of a stranger whose only transgression was his hubris? I weep now to say yes. Such was my sorrow! Such was my fury! Such was the misguided retribution of an unloved horse, spurned and scorned by all!

"I cultivated my reputation as a slayer of men, and my popularity grew. My violence was in such demand that whenever I arrived at market early in the morning, a collection of foolhardy youths had already gathered in the hopes of taking me on, and whenever Philonicus and I departed at sundown, we always left behind a disappointed handful who had not been able to work their way into my schedule that day. We stopped going back and forth to Philonicus's homestead and instead stayed overnight in Larissa,

Philonicus taking out a room in a cheap boarding house, myself shunted into a murky alleyway and held in place with thick iron chains. I do not know who took care of Philonicus's other horses during this time, or maybe he left them to starve, but stage-managing my career as a pugilist became the sole concern of Philonicus's business life. His social life, I conjecture, was far richer in Larissa than it had been at home; from my alley, I could hear him singing and retching as he clattered drunkenly about his room, sometimes accompanied by the gruff voices of his fellow dipsomaniacs or the cooing affirmations of prostitutes.

"I do not know how my story would have ended had it not been for a miraculous coincidence. One blistering summer morning, I was warming up for the day's fighting. The group that faced me looked fierce and determined, but certainly not beyond my ability. Groups of muscled men hitched up their togas and compared their calf muscles while their female companions slathered them in olive oil. Their boasts were loud and false, and Philonicus contributed to the hubbub, braying about my unquenchable ire. Around us, vendors tried to squeeze sales from the contestants, and the oppressive air rang with desperation.

"I had become so used to the clamor that I did not realize how jarring it would be when the entire agora abruptly fell silent, as it did that day. The yells of touts, the ebullition of proud youth, and the endless tinkling stream of coins upon coins all shrank into a collective gasp and murmur as activity ceased and the patrons and vendors alike craned as daffodils to sunlight towards the fissure that had split the crowd. Human lips pressed against human ears, spreading news; horses were left to wonder. I wrenched against the ropes that hitched me to my post, but no matter how emphatically I stretched

my neck, all I could see was a detestable pool of olive-toned flesh, greasy hair, and unclean linen. Such was the human world to me, C—: an eddying pit of skin and stench, a writhing corporeal mass of legs and arms, each pursuing its own bestial ends. An eating, shitting, gaseous swamp of parasites, frantically masticating, shedding piss and excrement as they squirm over one another, fighting to be the first to fornicate, to saturate the world with their own secretions.

“I frothed. I reared up on my hind legs and howled with anger. I wanted to trample the entire crowd of gaping humans. I wanted to coat the stones of the agora with the hot brains of these selfish, sycophantic, tyrannical, hyperventilating creatures. Oh, I stormed. My ropes ground into my skin, but still I fought forward. I would piss into the crushed skulls of the damned. I would slather myself in blood. I would split the foundations of the temples, uproot the statues, and force coins down Philonicus’s throat until his body became so distended that it ruptured like the pimple it was, his monetarism spilling from his breached stomach cavity, the crests and valleys of his projected earnings skimming the waves of his agonized wails. I would dominate the market.

“I reared and whinnied and clattered and raged and then I ceased.

“I ceased because I saw what had transfixed the crowd.

“O.

“Forgive my tears.

“How can I describe what I saw? This is not a rhetorical question. Language is a field after harvest. The lexicon stretches for acres and acres, domain of words that are the sad husks of experience. How can I describe the young prince? Should I say, ‘His hair shone like sunshine’? Disgusting! Should I say, ‘Goodness enlivened his rosy cheeks’?

Oh! Oh, C—. I can say, ‘Pass me the salt.’ I can say, ‘I drank the chardonnay.’ And yet, when it comes to the meaning most worth conveying, what can words do but obscure? Once the thing is said, the thing *is* what’s said, and no longer the thing.

“And this, after all my depressions and disappointments, after a loveless birth and loveless slog onwards to death, is my greatest sadness. If I could launch my sorrows out on volleys of words, perhaps there might be some hope for this ruined horse, but alas. I weep language, and my words are as solid as my tears.

“How, then, to describe the boy that parted the sea of common peddlers in the Larissa marketplace? How to describe the young Alexander the Great?

“He was thirteen then, a stately stick of a lad at the stage during which the body attains manhood in patches. His limbs were long and muscled, but his torso retained the delicacy of waifish boyhood. His brow was smooth and regal, but acne clustered on his cheeks. He walked deliberately, but as if his legs were new to him. He seemed to be consciously measuring out each pace, surprised to find his feet hitting the ground so quickly. The result was a steady gait with the threat of instability lurking always underneath. Though the boy was awkward, as boys are, he appeared at peace with the quirks and fascinations of his body. He was prince enough to let himself be awkward; in his awkwardness lay the grace of honesty.

“As he approached, he held on to his father’s hand, not from fear or timidity, but from the unselfconscious affection that youths possess until they are taught that love is weakness. The father and son walked into the market, beaming at their subjects, each of which fought to wriggle lowest on the ground in vermiform subjection.

“It became clear that the royals were headed to Philonicus and me. As soon as he recognized their intent, Philonicus threw himself to the ground and slobbered his allegiance. Through his phony adulations, I could hear his true intention: to wring money from this act of providence.

“‘Oh, King Philip!’ he cried. ‘May I do your sublime majesty the service of interesting your sublime majesty in a horse?’

“Beside his son, the king was an eyelash of a man. He had arms and legs, I suppose, but what’s to remark in that? He had a man’s face, a man’s body, a man’s deep voice. He had one eye, the other having been cratered during the siege of Methone. He was a king most thoroughly, but he was not worthy of being called a prince.

“‘We hear,’ said King Philip of Macedon, ‘that you’ve a rambunctious horse.’

“‘Untamable, I assure you,’ said Philonicus. He scrambled to his feet and whacked my flank with the flat of his hand. His callous touch spun me once again into a frenzy, and I chomped the air in the hope of severing one of his digits. No success.

“‘As a warhorse,’ said Philonicus, ‘he’s the very thing.’

“‘But untamable, you say?’ replied King Philip. He ran a hand through the curls of his beard as he considered. ‘My son needs a horse if he is ever to become great, but a boy’s first horse is a milestone, as you know.’

“‘Of course, your sublime majesty. A horsey is the very thing for a milestone; I have often said so myself. If your sublime majesty can bear to hear me expontificate on the merits of a horsey for a milestone in a sublime majesty’s young majesty’s youth ...’

“‘He is only thirteen,’ the king continued, ‘and he needs a horse with whom he can develop a relationship. His horse must have ire, to be sure, but he cannot be a

berserker. The boy is fragile.’ He patted Alexander on the shoulders, which set a blush puddling in the boy’s cheeks.

“‘Father,’ he said, eyeing the crowd that had gathered to watch the transaction. ‘I’m not fragile.’

“‘Thirty talents only!’ said Philonicus. ‘A pittance for royalty!’

“‘King Philip frowned. ‘You worthless mongrel! My servants reported to me that the price was thirteen talents, and you won’t receive even that if the worthless beast truly can’t be tamed.’

“‘Quite right!’ said Philonicus. ‘Thirteen talents is exactly what I said. And the dear horsey is practically tame already.’ He put his hand on my leg. I tried to shear off his face with my jaws, but he moved out of range just in time. ‘You see? A good, docile horsey indeed.’

“‘King Philip leaned in and turned his lone eye upon his son. ‘I want you to understand something, my son. This man is a charlatan.’ The agora erupted in laughter, and the energy of the crowd surged into my own heart. A charlatan! Indeed! I trod the ground, straining to reach Philonicus, that I might trample him until he was phyllo dough on the stones of the agora.

“‘Father,’ said Alexander.

“‘This man,’ continued King Philip, ‘is a barbaric huckster, a tippling blob pawning off his unsalable merchandise as something other than the useless savage it is.’

“‘Useless savage? Alas! I made for the king with my hooves and my teeth, but the rope held strong. The onlookers sneered and hurled taunts at me.

“‘Regicidal monstrosity!’

“‘Stomping catastrophe!’

“‘Hoofed scrap-yard!’

“And then the rain of rubbish began. Moldy fruit, wormy strips of meat, pebbles, split ax handles, cracked amphorae: All were hurled at me from every angle, with the jeers of the crowd providing the cruel accompaniment to my martyrdom. When free, I was a threat—an awesome force of nature—but, roped and chained, as I was, I could be maligned with impunity. This is human justice.

“But even through the blur of my rage and the distraction of the objects pelting my sides, my head, my legs, my rear, I saw the young Alexander pull away from his father and rush to me, shielding his head against an onslaught of overripe figs.

“‘No!’ screamed King Philip and myself in the same moment. I feared I would crush the blameless lad under my uncontrollable hooves.

“The boy then disappeared behind me. I found myself unable to stop raging, although I knew I would crush the prince. The crowd had stirred me. I would be satisfied only with blood.

“I suddenly lurched forward, and it was only then that I realized what the young Alexander had done: He had unhitched me from my post. I was free now to unleash my orgy of violence upon Larissa. My eyes slid wildly from side to side as I considered which section of the crowd to decimate first. The marketgoers, now ashen-faced scrambled over one another in an effort to put as much distance as possible between themselves and me. I smiled. Distance would not matter. I would crush all, far and near, until I was crushed in turn.

“It was then, however, that I felt the boy’s hand on me.

“‘Peace,’ he whispered in my ear. ‘Don’t think of them. They don’t exist. Only we exist. I am going to be great, and you are going to be great with me.’

“I choked back my tears while he spoke the words of compassion that I had never before heard, but I could not keep from crying when he ran his hand along my back. Every time a human had touched me before, it had been to shove me here or there, to squeeze my muscles, to determine my price, but the young price’s hand demanded nothing of me. Rather, as Alexander stroked me, his touch invited me to join him in pleasure, to enjoy his hand as he enjoyed my hide.

“I looked at his eyes and found affirmation of his tenderness written there. He returned my gaze, and we fell this way in love, I came to believe that, indeed, the two of us *were* the only two creatures whose existence had any consequence. My rage dropped away, and I wanted only to consent to belong to Alexander—or, more accurately, to be joined to him as a creature capable of love. I dared not speak, so I gave him the only indication of approval available to me: I stretched out my tongue and ran it lightly over his jaw and up to his cheek. The sweetness of his adolescent sweat bespoke his innocence, and what could I do but lay my head on his shoulder and nuzzle his ear as he embraced me there in the marketplace?

“So had I been tamed.

“King Philip paid the thirteen talents, and Alexander received public adulation for his uncanny ability to woo the unwooable horse. That evening, I was borne to my new home, too awed by my abrupt turn of fortune even to administer a farewell kick to Philonicus’s gonads. The honeyed hands of my new master massaged the vengeance from me.

“My new situation in the royal palace at Pella overwhelmed me with its comforts. My pastures were lush and seeded with aromatic grasses and wildflowers. I bedded in the warmth of a stable, where I received fresh hay daily and an abundance of salt. My hide was ever lathered, my mane ever combed. Four or five stable-hands at a time turned their attention to me, lavishing ointments on me, and batting the flies from my ears. I demonstrated my devotion to them in turn by running my tongue between their fingers and rubbing their shoulders with my muzzle. I thought less and less of my prenatal paradise and instead gave myself up to the pleasures of the tactile world.

“Among those pleasures, none was greater than the joy of my daily trainings with my adolescent master. As he grew, I grew. He rode me every morning for an hour or more, sometimes under the supervision of an instructor who showed him where to put his feet, where to direct my head, and how to spur me on. The instructor was a rheumy-eyed geriatric with slightly transparent skin, and his advice was, on the whole, nonsense. Alexander, thankfully, became adept at ignoring him. Alexander’s skill in riding advanced not during his supervised sessions, but during the mornings on which we struck out on our own across the meadows.

“Then again, to say that Alexander became an expert rider is nowhere near accurate; rather, the two of us, together, communicating bodily and harmonizing with one another’s internal rhythms, became experts at melding our wills. Alexander did not ride me any more than I was ridden: such a formulation requires two distinct entities, but we were as one. Alexander and Bucephalus were not horse and rider. Alexander and Bucephalus were a centaur: a being of great grace and sureness of foot with the powerful torso of a man rising majestic from the body of a tireless horse.

“During our private sessions, Alexander would sometimes speak to me, murmuring the sorts of affirmations I had never before encountered.

“‘Apace, φίλος!’ he prompted me, and I would accelerate from a run to leaping flight that brought us sailing over anthills and patches of violets. I gulped breath and loosened my muscles until I felt I could bounce endlessly through the fields, wanting only to do exactly as my beloved Alexander desired.

“Some days, he didn’t speak at all and communicated in the more immediate language of his thigh muscles as they applied pressure to my flanks. In these days of silence, I learned to listen to his breath. When the urge for speed possessed him, he leaned forward, clamped me in his legs, and breathed softly on my neck. When he wanted to slow, he ran his hand over my mane and threaded kisses along my shoulder. I grew used to his scent—sweet in the morning and sour by mid-afternoon—and whenever we stopped by a stream for refreshment, after I had bent to lap the glistening water, I would curl up in invitation on the banks, and Alexander would nestle into the crescent of my body, his head near enough my mouth that I could run my tongue along his brow, loving the salty tang of his skin. These moments of communion assured me that I belonged here, on earth—that I was worthy of love and capable of responding in kind.

“In the tranquility of evening, Alexander sometimes came to my bed of hay and lay with me, whispering invectives against his sophistic tutor or his ever-absent father. I met his troubles with my tongue, and sometimes he fell asleep with his head on my belly, roping us with nocturnal drool. No matter how fitful he became during the night, upon the first rays of morning, his eyes blinked open and, feeling my warm body beneath him,

he threw his arms around my neck and whispered, ‘Good morning, my stallion,’ in my ear.

“Years passed in such perfect balance until, one night during his sixteenth year, Alexander threw open the door to the stables, his face rived by sorrow, and hurled himself atop me. He burrowed his face into my neck so as to choke off the sound of his hot wailing. Turning onto my side, I placed a hoof on his shoulder and nickered softly, soothing his body with the vibrations of my voice. He clutched me as though he wanted to draw me over him like a cloak and disappear inside me. His tears spouted from a black puddle deep within: far deeper than I had yet probed.

“‘My father, dear Bucephalus,’ he said between cries. ‘Our time has come! It is time for our manhood to dawn upon us. The Maedi are howling unruly in the Thracian plains, and with my father away in Byzantium, we are regent. *Us*, Bucephalus. Our boyhood days are no more: we are at war!’

“‘War? How could this be, C—? How, after those tawny mornings of Macedonian sunrises, those feasts of berries and grasses? How to look upon a landscape shredded and seeping blood? In the three years of my kinship with Alexander, my former rage had dissolved. I wanted only to be stroked, bathed, and fed. The violence of battle ... alas!

“‘We equip ourselves tomorrow, oh dear Bucephalus,’ the sixteen-year-old wailed. ‘We will fit you out in saddles and stirrups.’

“‘Nay!’ I cried, breaking my three-year silence. ‘How shall I bear the disruption of our domestic arrangement?’

“The tears of the young regent stopped as he disentangled himself from my legs. He scrambled along the floor of the stables, and I rained curses upon my own head.

Foolish horse! To let myself speak. I saw our relationship sundered. He, a normal human, would spurn me and flee to a normal horse. Another horse would cherish his caresses. Another horse would feel the prince's confident legs pressed against his flank. Another horse—not I! Never again!—would serve as the receptacle for his secrets and intimations. As for Bucephalus, I would be back to the market as a cut-rate sale item. As a hand-me-down horse, a second-hand stallion. Alexander drew his hands to his face and stared at me. A twist of his lips betrayed his discomposure, and I was torn between a desire to plead on my own behalf and the desire to commit myself to eternal silence.

“‘Oh, Bucephalus,’ he managed at last. ‘You ... speak?’

“I nodded and looked away. I could not bear his expression of wounded trust.

“‘Oh, my beloved horse. Speak to me once more so that I can know it is you—and not the terror of imminent warfare, writ large in my preoccupied mind—that bids me so fair.’ I chewed the air but I did not know what to say. ‘Oh, speak again, bright horse!’

“‘Perhaps my life would still be intact had I taken advantage of the opportunity Alexander's confusion had granted me. If I had remained silent, perhaps he would have convinced himself that my isolated act of speech was simply a product of his own distraction. And perhaps I would have been able to remain silent if he had not thrown himself on top of me and brought his eyes on a level with mine.

“‘If I find, Bucephalus,’ he said, fighting the quiver out of his lips, ‘that you have been capable of speech for the duration of our acquaintance, and yet you have withheld from me the benefit of your conversation, I should feel so betrayed ...’

“‘Oh, Alexander!’ I cried. ‘Do not think these three years of silence a betrayal!’ A look of astonishment crossed the prince's face as he heard me speak again, but he did not

flee; rather, he clasped his arms around my neck all the tighter, which gave me the strength to go on. ‘I have never before opened to you the secrets harbored in my breast because I never felt that any word I spoke could be anything other than a horror and a burden to a human ear.’

“‘But *I*, Bucephalus?’

“‘I feel your reproach more deeply than you can know, my master.’

“‘You may speak—oh, please, speak to me without end—but I forbid you to call me ‘master,’ my dear horse.’

“‘Alexander! (For how many months I have longed to speak that name out loud, to feel the honeyed caress of its vowels, the piquancy of its consonants!) I now see my hesitation to speak as the greatest stupidity ever committed by man or beast, but you must know that my history with humans has given me reason to remain guarded.’

“‘I spent much of that night relating the details of my history to Alexander. While I spoke, he never allowed his hands to stop stroking my hide. The assurance of his touch kept the words pouring from my jaws. I felt that as long as I continued to tell my story, morning would not arrive to part us. I spoke and, for the first time in my life, was listened to. I do not know what sort of a reaction I expected, but I will never forget what I received: Once he had waited to ensure that I had finished my tale, he clutched my hoof in his hands and said, ‘You are the most noble creature that has ever galloped upon this wretched earth. I have loved you since the moment I saw you, and that love has been magnified thirtyfold by your words. But,’ and here he grew bashful before my eyes for the first time, ‘now that you possess the power of speech, you possess the power of returning my vows of eternal love—or ... or of rejecting them.’

“Such words from a boy of sixteen! Of course, the more sturdily a vow is phrased, the easier it is to forget that words are fragile. I do not accuse him of insincerity, C— (you must understand that he is blameless in everything), but how could he foresee a Hephestion? How can mere words maintain permanence in a world that is relentless in its changeability? We were both fools in the stables that night, trusting that because he had said words and meant them and believed them, they were true. If I have the right to take comfort in anything, it is that I did not affirm my love with words; rather, I delivered something actual.

“I do not know how many details you want, but I doubt you would deny me my only remaining pleasure: to put myself back into that night.

“Our union began with great passion quivering underneath our tentative and inexperienced manipulations. At first, each of us was too cautious to dive into the carnal maneuvers we silently feared we lacked the panache to execute with any great skill; fearing we might hurt one another, we conducted our lovemaking like a game of brinksmanship, advancing in dribs and drabs.

“Our heads inched towards one another until no more space remained and the only alternative to asphyxiation was to kiss. This osculation was of a different nature than the affectionate kisses Alexander lavished upon me when I trotted well. It stemmed not from fondness but from rapacity. His soft human tongue fluttered within my mouth, and I requited the ticklish favor, careful to keep from harming Alexander with my massive teeth. We explored the interiors of one another’s mouths, mapping the terrain that had hitherto been off-limits. I learned the taste of his dinner—roast lamb, grape leaves, and spiced sheep’s cheese—while he learned the taste of my hay and alfalfa. I cherished this

new sensory knowledge; it brought me closer, perhaps, to understanding his experience of the world.

“As he put his hands where his hands had never before ventured—indeed, onto the very proof of my virility—unsure how firm a grip to take or which rhythm would best satisfy, I nosed up his tunic. He paused, waiting, tensed, to see how far I dared go. I did not know myself, and then the hem of his tunic had somehow risen up above his hips, and there it stood, ‘it’ being the mighty sword of his manhood, the domed monument to his greatness, the fleshly obelisk that he seemed not unpleasantly surprised to see. What to do with it? My hooves lacked dexterity, so I bowed my head and set to cautious work with my unschooled tongue. I was happy to find the human version of maleness not dissimilar to my own, and so I found I was able to elicit grunts and whines of pleasure intuitively. I took the entirety of his apparatus within my horsey mouth, mindful, ever mindful, not to chomp, and darted my tongue over everything I could.

“This pleasure seemed to transport him, but I felt conscious of my inadequacy. My teeth posed calcified obstacles to our intimacy, and I was incapable of applying the suction that might draw out my lover’s expense of spirit. Alexander did not seem troubled by my ineptitude; his lack of experience no doubt prevented any expectations from imposing. He wriggled against my tirelessly lapping tongue, pivoting his body so that he lay against my belly, capable of reaching my own pleasurable bits with his more agile, though less capacious, mouth.

So starved was I for tender human contact that one flicker of the young regent’s tongue upon my tumescent column sent me into spasmodic ecstasy. My withers quaked,

my haunches tensed and released in rapid pulsation, and my explosive orgasm coincided with Alexander's own.

“The sour slime of our commingled ejaculate pooled on the stable floor beneath us. The sight of the flawless Alexander breathless and dripping with our gelatinous love, his face slick with spermatozoic fluid, was so beautiful and so absurd that I brayed with laughter. He seemed shocked at my laughter, then humiliated, and then, when he saw that my mirth, sopping with affection, was but the *denouement* to my physical climax—the dribbling after-currents of my diluvian surge—he twined his pubescent arms around me and convulsed with laughter of his own.

“‘We head into war tomorrow, dear horse,’ he said, ‘but love will prove stronger than armor. We shall be impenetrable.’

“That the story could end here. That this moment of our unbridled romance could be the *omega* of my experience on this pitiable earth. And yet, C—, our ferociously arbitrary world grinds along in its orbit at speeds that erode our intentions as well as our bodies until both dissolve into irrelevance. If birth is a radical expulsion into life, life is slow, relentless decay.

“Was the fleeting sensation of love worth the bitterness of loss? Will your twenty-minute harp sonatas suffice to stir something deeper than momentary hedonism? It is foolish to think so. Until your art can nourish the waifs whose distended stomachs have begun to digest themselves; until your art can demolish the factory walls and repair the limbs of the workers who have courted dismemberment to build up reservoirs of wealth for the men who own their time; until your art can dispose of cannons and scimitars; until your art can melt off the wounded pride, the malice, the savagery, the selfishness that has

congealed around the collective soul of mankind, it is useless. Art serves only to pander to our despicable sensuality. It serves only to permit us to remain beasts.

“Alexander and I shared many more midnight trysts as we waged war. We gutted and decapitated by day, stirring men’s organs with swords, breaking open skulls, slitting wombs, driving spikes through eyes; and by night, we returned to our tent to cram ourselves into one another’s orifices, to drive ourselves deeper and deeper into one another, with the ultimate wish, perhaps, that love would let us fly the atrocities perpetuated by none other than ourselves. However, sex destroys men. They seek it out to the point of their own humiliation, but, once had, it stitches itself into the tapestry of regret that composes their lives. Every ejaculation is a pitiful misfire.

“Hungry as we were, much as we relied upon one another to assure ourselves that, no, we weren’t loathsome, of course such a love was destined to fracture. The end of our heaving affair was inevitable because our love, passionate though it was, was incomplete. Our love was a lone island struggling to maintain its integrity against the erosive forces of the surrounding ocean: our fear. A love that cowers within the carefully guarded compass of two people’s intimacy remains susceptible to attack; only a love diffuse enough to extend to every living thing can exist without boundaries and, so, without the threat of a breach.

“And the breach that came took the form of an ill-proportioned and flat-faced miscreant with a bulbous head and mossy teeth. Hephestion, Alexander’s friend and confidante since birth, was the canker nibbling towards the core of my ecstasy. Jealous of my intimacy with the man upon whom he so doted, he sought Alexander’s notice through feats of two-legged cruelty that a horse could never hope to emulate. He slaughtered the

Thracians. At the Danube, he blistered his foes with fire, while King Philip granted his blessing. At Chaeronea, his broadsword tickled entrails, his lance picked men into piles of flesh, and his boots mashed enemy soldiers into bloody goulash. He was, in short, a victor. A hero of war. His opposable thumbs allowed him the use of tools, with which he was capable of inflicting more excruciating heroism than I could achieve with my brute hooves. Every mutilation, he dedicated to Alexander.

“I feared Hephestion’s love of my paramour. I hoarded Alexander’s affection, knowing the narrowness of our capacity for love. Perhaps it is an economic principle: Love is valued by its scarcity. It is not sufficient to be loved. Our pettiness drives us to claw after a love that is unique, that can be claimed by no other. We demand affection, but if it is too abundant, we are repelled. Perhaps if hate were as rare as love, we would scabble after it in the same way, driving ourselves to ruin in the hopes of winning the enmity of that special someone.

“Oh, but abstract digression is far easier than detailing the slow decay of the intimacy upon which I had grounded my happiness. At Issus, I first found Alexander tepid in his lovemaking. I tried everything within my power: I nosed and tongued; I tickled with my tail; I even had him saddle me and sit astride me as I bounded in a wide circle around our camp, straining to jostle him into satisfaction. As my efforts met impotence, they grew more desperate and elaborate. We tried riding crops; we tried spurs and harnesses; we tried dressing ourselves in full battle regalia and fantasizing that the outcome in Babylon rested on our satisfactory coital performance. The more I ground and tugged, however, the more the young regent seemed to float away into another world. Invisible ambitions glittered before his eyes—Assyria! Armenia! and that cursed, all-

consuming Bactria!—while the visible, tactile horse whose submission was already beyond question, labored over his unresponsive artillery. Alexander cared more for his future gains than his present holdings, and so what could be done? I could only stand by while he advanced his empire, leaving the lands he had already conquered to neglect and ruin.

“‘Dear horse,’ he would say, his eyes asparkle, his malfunctioning maleness draped like seaweed over his thigh, ‘I have plans for us.’

“‘Yet that ‘for us’ was an empty gesture, a politeness he need not have bothered with. I saw how he looked upon Hephestion’s acts of courtship. Every severed head, every loop of charred intestine, every Persian spitted through on a pike that Hephestion lay at his feet, Alexander received with bashful enthusiasm.

“‘I ... don’t know what to say,’ he would say, blushing, his eyes turning to mine for approval they never granted.

“‘Say only that you will continue to give the world the option of being massacred or Macedonian!’ was Hephestion’s habitual reply. Though Alexander tried to hide his smile from me, I knew that it lurked on his lips nonetheless. In Hephestion he had that which he needed: a partner whose ambition matched, and whose ruthlessness exceeded, his own. While my love offered the timid promise of a private, peaceful garden isolated from outside concerns, in which Alexander and I could stroll, hand in hoof, insulating ourselves in our mutual affection, Hephestion’s proffered love was more epic and more appealing: He and Alexander would not flee from the world, but would rather bend it to their shared vision. Such is a love that slashes and burns. Such is a love that demolishes its subjects for their own purported good. They would not hide—oh no, not they! A

horseless couple, they were an acceptable match, with no need to flee to private romantic rhapsody. Their love would raze civilization and resurrect it in the image of their own paradise, while the empire cheered them on.

“Hephestion’s love was a great evil, C—, the enactment of which devoured masses of the colonized, but what I now mourn is that mine was no more noble. While Hephestion’s love pandered to Alexander’s imperial gluttony, mine feebly tried to will it out of existence. Around me, living creatures were subjected to the unspeakable cruelties of warfare, and yet I lived entirely within the fantasy of domestic harmony. My love was no transcendent treasure; it was the cotton I stuffed in my ears to block out the howling misery that constitutes this waking world. It was the moat I dug to insulate myself from hurt. It was my solipsistic fortress, my jealously guarded garrison, the bomb shelter I elbowed my way into, big enough only for two. But love is not cotton, nor is it a moat. It is only an idea and, as an idea, how can it combat the material injustices of our world? If I had not pursued love and beauty and happiness—these substanceless, stupefying words that can never be held because they have no bodies—perhaps I could have better heeded my actual actions. Perhaps I would not have allowed myself to blindly slide into a career as a warhorse (but no ordinary warhorse, mind you, because I had an *appreciation!* A *sensitivity!* The words repulse me now) just because that seemed to be the role history had assigned to me and because I had better, more universal, things on my mind. Perhaps I rather would have acted somehow to lessen the aggregate suffering of the world.

“Imbecile horse! Because I thought love would save me, and because love has no body, I had to give it Alexander’s body. But Alexander’s body belongs to Alexander and not to his horse. And so I claimed ownership of that to which I had no right; and so I

became the avaricious Philonicus I had grown up hating; and so I staked my life on an abstract concept; and so, what's worse, I had the gall to react with disappointment when the very immateriality I pursued proved to be immaterial.

“This plodding, destructive, depressing, outrageous, egregious existence. This sky and this air. This horse and this house. I hate it all. And furthermore, I absolutely must say that ...”

Here the horse shut up his baleful mouth and stared at the catastrophe we had come upon. During the whole of Bucephalus's discourse, we had wandered the fields and wound back to Sansone's mansion. We had come to the foot of a broad stairway, and we were now looking at the sleek ebony banister. Polished and adorned with tiny gold buttons, the banister was hewn into an ergonomic form that perfectly aligned to the contours of a cupped human hand. The wood, Sansone once told me, had been imported from Sri Lanka and hauled around the African horn in his private cargo ships, piloted by Turks. The woodworkers had been Genoese, and the goldsmiths had been Parisian. The banister was a work of art, an international commodity.

The source of Bucephalus's dismay—and the source of my own, once my eyes had followed his to look upon the disaster—was the destruction that could only have been wreaked upon this precious object by an American.

A perfect crescent moon of toothmarks ripped through the wood of the banister. Only one conclusion could be drawn: Somebody had fully eaten through the banister. And from that conclusion, this conclusion, more fearsome by far: Ayn Rand had been set loose.

CHAPTER 7
IN PURSUIT

I raised the alarm, leaving the conclusion of Bucephalus's morose homily to float away unheard. Sour, dour horse that he was! Surely worthy of pity, shriveled travesty that he had made of himself, but to peddle gloom on a radiant April morning, to harp on the insufficiencies he himself had invited into his outraged psyche—no! Such was not the artistic temperament. If anything, his complaints only impelled me to renew my pursuit of overwhelming beauty with increased vigor. Nobody wants to hear a horse. Better to fill our ears with rapture.

Four skylarks trundled down the stairs, each careening into the one in front of him when he came to the evidence of Rand's liberation. One skylark placed his hand within the compass of the bite mark and then immediately snatched it away, as if terrified that the banister would chomp him.

Another skylark yelped and pointed to the ceiling. We all looked up to discover that what had once been a hand-wrought Viennese chandelier was now the twisted skeleton of its former self. Glass bulbs had been crunched through by avaricious teeth; the candles had been sucked clean of their wax; the golden frame of the chandelier itself was a mangled mound, the cast-off gristle of sweeter sustenance.

"Rand!" I cried. "The *objektivistischen Dämon* runs free! The woman will eat all of a house!"

The skylarks writhed together into a human chain, clasping and unclasping one another's hands in the vain belief that catastrophe calls for action, even if that action is

divorced from intention. They yelped as one, glanced around, startled at their collective outburst, and squirmed.

I turned to Bucephalus to see if he would prove a greater asset than the skylarks in forming a battle plan. His face, however, confirmed my fears: His eyes were coals of sorrow, impotent beads that stared ahead with unerring resignation. Rand's escape was simply another numbing misfortune, distinguished only by the fact that it was the most recent. Here was a horse so far mown down by the scythe of hardship that the faintest rustle of resistance could not rise from the mulch that had been made of his will.

“Act we must!” I said. “Find *eine Randmonster*.”

The dolorous horse pointed his muzzle at me and whinnied with unbearable sorrow. The skylarks palpitated the banister as though this availed. My shuddery realization was that I must act unilaterally. I needed to instigate a hunt, and so I would. Necessity promoted me to battalion chief.

“You!” I screamed, and pointed at the first skylark to draw my attention. “Hurry immediately to tell Sansone of escape of *eine Randmonster*.”

That skylark scrambled up the stairs, leaving the other three skylarks exposed to my commands.

“You!” I screamed, pointing at the next. “Go north!”

“You!” I screamed, pointing at the next. “Go south!”

“You!” I screamed, pointing at the next. “Go east!”

“And you!” I screamed, seeing only Bucephalus left, and so pointing at him. “You ...”

But my order, which was to proceed in a westerly direction, faltered at my lips. The horse pawed the parquet, rooted by sadness. His melancholy struck me like a cannonball; I could not compel him to participate in a ferocious manhunt. Instead, I held a hand beneath his snout.

“Here. Please,” I said.

I don’t know what impelled me to offer my palm as a palliative for his emotional wounds, but he did daub his tongue against the surface of my hand, and so it was that I could give a sad horse some solace. However, my mind did not rest with the heartbroken horse that morning as I gave shape to my machinations; instead, as he licked my unresponsive hand, I considered this: A disaster was afoot and I, only I, had acted to prevent it. I was the vanguard. I was the agent: My command translated thought into deed. Here was action; here was substance. For the moment, art was immaterial.

That evening, I was interrupted in my bedtime preparations by a virile rap on the door of my cabin. I was in the process of unpinning my hair, and so it was as a chimera that I moved to answer the knock: Half my head observed the proper forms of elegance, with every tendril of hair tamed and tucked in place, while the other half betrayed the animalism of the boudoir, wild in its liberty. My silk nightshirt was loose at the neck, so I clutched the fabric for modesty’s sake as I opened the door.

A moonlit leer signified Sansone.

“May I enter?” he asked, though permission was a formality.

I nodded, and he imposed himself on my quietude, easing himself into a comfortable wing-backed chair that Skylark had installed the previous week. He sighed and smiled, at home in my space, as he drummed his hands on the arms of the chair.

“How is your music coming along?” he asked.

“It is time for sleeping,” I said.

“Most excellent,” he said. “Then shall we have *eine kleine Nachtmusik*?”

“I do not elect for this,” I said.

Sansone nodded to the harp with great condescension and so, of course, I settled myself to play. Needing both hands for the harp, I had to unclasp the neck of my gown, which exposed a surfeit of collarbone to the master’s view. I tried to devote myself fully to strumming an efflorescent lullaby, but my eyes kept sneaking away from their task and into the compass of Sansone’s aura: I wanted to know if he was looking lustfully upon my skin. I feared and perhaps even hoped that he was, but every time my gaze crept to him, I saw a complacent statue—a broad-chested narcissist who required no source of pleasure beyond himself.

My lullaby was tremulous but not unskillful. I was too tired to strain after beauty, so I allowed my nighttime song to discover integrity in its simplicity. Note followed note in a simple, satisfying sequence. The harp was quiet enough that we could hear the noises of the woods outside, and these noises—the rustling boughs, the plaints of the owls, the croaks of the frogs, Bucephalus’s sustained whimper floating in from the distance—all became a part of my composition. I reached not for ecstasy but for harmony: My music submitted to the atmosphere of the moment, complementing rather than dominating.

“You play against your nature tonight,” said Sansone, his voice becoming a part of the symphony.

“It is very late,” I said.

“You shed your viciousness once it becomes late?”

“Again you speak of viciousness,” I said. “It is most peculiar. I want only beauty.”

“And do you deny that to establish your beauty, you must obliterate somebody else’s?”

“I do,” I said. “Listen please.”

And in the *pianissimo* of the late spring evening, the trickle of music descanted against the tacit tones of eventide, warming the room with its subtle vibrations. Pregnant dewdrops of sound condensed between us, as brilliant and as isolated as stars. The moonlight sat aslant on my hands, ghosting my fingers and casting a sidereal spell on the music they produced. Every note was perfectly placed; every pause was weighted with care.

Sansone despoiled the peaceful balance with a deliberate cough.

“I am listening,” he said. “And I hear nothing but ugliness.”

“*Hässlichkeit! Unmöglich!*”

“Further ugliness, that language. English is the currency we must traffic in here, C—, no matter the depths of our indignation.”

“But,” I said, my fingers disappointed into surrender. My harp sat silent, now an impotent ornament. “You did not listen, master.”

“Indeed I did,” Sansone replied, “but I’m not so certain that you did. Surely a sensitive ear and a trenchant mind would have picked up on the ugliness, the vicious tyranny upon which you built your *nocturne*.”

“Tone quality: good. Tempo: good. Technique: best. Rhythm...”

“I might yet lose my patience with you,” said Sansone, although it was I who was growing impatient. I had already lost sight of the still night’s solemn majesty and was focused only on the injustice of Sansone’s critique. I huffed in ostentatious exasperation while, red-faced, I crossed my arms. Sansone registered no change of bearing. He merely smiled and wiped a smear of dirt from the windowpane. “You are a very bad student.”

“The best.”

“The worst.”

“Leave me to my sleep,” I said, and I stood up and stormed to the door, which I held open for my ruthless detractor.

“Ah,” he said, rising. “But don’t you want to understand your own failings? Surely a serious young artist is thirsty for critique.”

“Yes! Failings! Good! Yes! Failings! Most excellent!”

“For a start, I would advise against your current manner. It is most unseemly in a gracious cloud of a woman to erupt so stormily.” Sansone went to my harp and, cruelly, twanged the strings without the slightest care for consonance between the notes he arbitrarily generated. “Secondly, I would encourage you to shut the door, as I am not leaving until I have made my plea for your reform, and as I do not think it meet for you to suffer a chill. It would only make you still crankier.”

I shut the door but remained standing beside it, burning Sansone with my eyes.

“May I ask you,” said Sansone, with another boorish swipe of his hands across the harpstrings, “to listen for a moment and tell me what you hear?”

I made a petulant show of listening for a moment or two. I then wrenched my answer out, syllable by syllable, with deliberate ugliness:

“Owl. Horse. Cricket. Wind. Bugs. Frogs.”

“And these were the components with which you built your evening symphony? And you say you mastered these elements into a work of beauty?”

I glared. Briefly, I pictured Sansone’s demise. I pictured him garroted, that detestable smirk hacked from that detestable face. Sansone, however, was reading my fantasy and enjoying the confirmation he found of my unkindness therein, so I quickly turned my thoughts to more harmonious images, in order to deny him the pleasure of having assessed me rightly.

“Most beautiful,” I said, sweetening my face, “to any who listens seriously.”

“Even to Bucephalus?” asked Sansone. He gestured at the window, and suddenly the horse’s bawling rose to my ears out of the low mutter of evening. How tortured and heart-rending were those lovelorn whinnies. “Is it fair, dearest C—, to scaffold your art on such consummate suffering?”

“Sad, yes, but I make it beautiful.”

“You invade. You plunder the horse’s heart and appropriate its misery. Your music is your musketry. You traffic in stolen emotion, which you then arrange and distort in order to suit your own conception of beauty. Is this just? Is this artistry? Or is your stubborn refusal to acknowledge the foundations upon which your composition rests

mere savagery, made all the more maleficent by your cloaking it in the guise of objective aesthetic pleasure?”

I could scarcely follow his argument, mired as it was in the complex English of one who has little to say, but I could sense the pleasure he took in undermining my straightforward enjoyment of the music. He spoke persuasively, but where was simplicity? Why was he trying to befuddle me in the labyrinth of “concept”? Why could he not, as I, enjoy the music’s vibrations running over his skin and leave off pontificating?

Why did the man drive me to so many question marks?

“I make it beautiful,” I said again.

“Which is the height of ugliness,” said Sansone, and so we remained, the progress of our conversation gummed by mutual incomprehension.

Sansone stood and plucked a fly from the air. He presented it to me as a token of reconciliation, but it buzzed away as soon as he had unloosed his pincers. The smile that crossed his face possessed perhaps a twinge of sadness, but perhaps the specious moonlight cast false shadows. Regardless, my heart softened at the sight of the man as he brought himself, imperious yet solitary, across the room, dragging his hand along the rough wooden walls of my abode. I gazed at the clean linen and cushioned comfort of my bed. There, I could rest: no expectations of intellect, nobody’s world to navigate save my own.

“And yet you are on a manhunt,” said Sansone.

“I pardon you?”

“You have dispatched my manservants on a hunt for the untamed Rand.”

“She tried to eat me, and now she is free. Maybe she will try again.”

“Indeed,” said Sansone. “That is not at all unlikely. She is an aesthete.”

“Her art is ugly.”

“To her, it most certainly is not.” Sansone paused, considering a lock of my hair that I then wrapped around my finger to protect it from his gaze. “But how do you reconcile the brutality of your life with the tenderness of your art?”

“Art is not life.”

“Then what can it be but death?”

Tricky trickster, that Sansone, but I was too tired to master the arithmetic of his language. I wanted only the repose of slumber, the uncomplicated pleasure of soft sheets and warm winds airing all calculation from my body, leaving me nothing but a fleshly cipher—a living corpse, yes, if Sansone would have me bend my speech to color the concept in such macabre terms—but at least a corpse absorbent of sensation.

“Very well,” I said. “Death.”

“You learn well,” he said, and moved to grasp my hand, which I pulled out of his reach. He smiled more broadly, once again supercilious, and raised his eyebrows. “Have no fear. I don’t desire you carnally.”

“But you desire me.”

“I cannot desire you. I already have you.”

I held up my hand and pointed to it with my other.

“You do not have it,” I said. “It is my own.”

“You defend yourself with such admirable vehemence,” Sansone said. “And yet the right to private property that you assert does not extend to the wails of heartbroken horses? What’s yours is yours, and what’s Bucephalus’s is yours as well?”

“It is not the same,” I said.

“Is it not?” Sansone asked. “Then I stand corrected. I would have assumed that the gross misappropriation of another’s soul is the same as the gross misappropriation of another’s body. However, I am too ignorant to understand the distinction. Please accept my humblest of apologies.”

Sansone bowed low before me, though his eyes never left mine. Had I accomplished a victory? Ironic submission is submission nonetheless.

“And yet, for me,” Sansone continued, righting himself, “both your body and your soul exist only within the ken of my own experience. And so they are mine. Forgive me for bearing the bad news.”

“And so you will use me how you like,” I said, too far trapped to be afraid. Sansone would do as he pleased, and even if I were to defend myself, I would remain entirely at his mercy. Little could be got by despairing over the fact. Had G— ever existed? At the moment, my servitude was my only reality. “I understand.”

Sansone shook his head as he reached past me and grasped the doorknob.

“How little you understand, in fact,” he said. “I am not a vicious German. I am not a feral aesthete. I am a textbook megalomaniac. I would never abuse you, because to do so would be to abuse a part of myself. You are within my world, C—, and so you must be preserved.”

“This is not a lesson you have learned, however. You abuse Rand. You abuse Bucephalus. And, in the process, you abuse only yourself.”

“But you do abuse me,” I said.

“Further evidence that you abuse yourself, said Sansone. He opened the door and stepped into the deepening night. The silhouettes of asters behind him savaged the sky. Nocturnal creatures slithered through the grass, the rustle of their motion a violent soundscape. “Just as you are part of my world, I am part of yours. I know that in my world, I do not abuse you. If, in your world, it seems that I do, that cannot be a matter of concern for me; it is a matter that you will have to take up with your own inner tyrant.”

Issuing a gentlemanly nod, Sansone left me speechless and exhausted in my cabin. In G—, a forest was a forest and the sky was the sky. Sense was sense and beauty was beauty. How had I never before seen that underneath a world so possessed of seeming certainty ran a network of devastating complexity in which we were all complicit? And yet what would it serve to drag the music of my harp down to such subterranean depths, when what I wanted was for that music to soar above the petty concerns of individual experience and mean the same thing to all people: provision of pleasure?

With the howls of Bucephalus still carrying through the night, I finished unpinning my hair and made my way under my bedcovers. I tried to lose myself in narcotic sleep, but my brain roared, and I found sleep to be a transcendence I could not obtain.

Spring gave way to summer, and the verdure of Sansone's estate bent and withered in the merciless sun. Swarms of insects clouded the humid air, alighting here and there to bite, to tickle, to irritate and sting, before whirling off *en masse* to wreak torment elsewhere. The thickness of the air weighed upon me as a wool jacket, and even in the pit of evening, the heat draped over me, parasitizing my energy and leaving me prone and gasping, good for little more than wiping away the sweat that leaked from my brow and ran over my face in miasmatic torrents.

When I could bear to brave the exposed byways of Sansone's grounds, I found myself short of breath and unable to maintain my seductive posturing. Erotic as I had hoped to be in springtime, I was rendered no more than a sopping dust mop, a saturated sponge, set oozing in the sun. April's flowers were brittle husks; lord of the garden now was the sere crabgrass, which crunched underfoot in an unambiguous death rattle. Waves of heat distorted the grounds. The trees went fuzzy, the shrubbery mere blobs of coloration.

What sort of artistic output could be gleaned in such miserable circumstances? To string two notes together in a logical sequence was a task too tasking. To raise my hand to touch the harp required such strength of will that I often sat at my instrument of a morning, my hand lifted as if to begin a rehearsal, my head reclined against the golden body of the harp, conscious only of a desire for a more merciful clime. When I was able to set the harp strings aquiver, the ordinarily penetrating clarity of their resonance dragged through the air, shedding its sublimity. What remained were weary slogs across the musical register: agglomerations of tonalities too apathetic to be called symphonies, too lethargic even to be ditties.

My masterpiece-in-progress was a stack of sweating pages beached by my bedside. In a week, I might add no more than a page, only to look on it days later to realize that what I had thought passable was in fact a debacle. Even the passages in which I had so gloried in the first few months of my residency had dried into crusty, over-rehearsed fossils, the thrill of novelty parched in the desert of familiarity.

Glory-Anne's cavern of cosmetology was my only respite from the slow sauté I faced outside, and so every morning I remained enrapt for hours in my ablutions, wallowing in my bracing bathwater and holding my cheeks against the cool stone walls. I envied the yellow-green lichens that prospered in the room's every crevice. To be nothing but a moss, I thought, must be my midsummer American dream: to crawl unobtrusively through the interstices, to hide myself from solar onslaught, to shield my vulnerability. As I luxuriated in the chill of my toilette, Glory-Anne catechized without cease:

“Hallelujah!” as she righted my cuticles.

“The bliss of everlasting life!” as my eyebrows were forcibly reined in.

“Mercy for our beloved! Mercy for our blameless!” And yet mercy was there none as my feet bore with the scrubbing that undid my calluses.

“Mercy, mercy, O!”

If anybody remained unaffected by the heat, it was that villainous Rand, whose commitment to blind consumption knew no constraint. The search party of skylarks consistently failed to turn up results, and so every day I came upon newly chewed upholstery, half-devoured statuary, and masticated mounds of flatware. As the season's broil intensified, and I found my digestion unable to countenance anything more than the lightest victuals, evidence of Rand's fiendish banqueting spree only intensified. One

afternoon, I saw an entire wing of the mansion drooping, its very foundations gnawed away by the insatiable phagocyte, whose further appetite had impelled her to nibble at the drapery, which hung in tatters over the windows as the sad remnants of a capital feast.

I was willing to accept my lack of progress on the Rand problem as long as it remained on the margins of my daily routine, but one morning spurred me. I was pulling myself back to my cabin after a morning of cleansing. The sun burned directly overhead, a menace. The shadows, which had spent the early hours venturing forth, had retreated back into the objects that cast them, and as a result the grounds were a glowing, uninterrupted plain of white heat.

When I came near my cabin, I saw that the flagstones that led up to the porch of my cabin had been ground to powder by Rand's tireless molars. Atop the heap of mineral waste sat an ivory-colored calling card.

Sought you.

A. R.

Thunder somewhere squalled in the cloudless sky.

The breath of threat was hot on my neck. Rand's thirst would not be slaked. She would take advantage of my lethargy to recoup what she was owed. Unless stopped.

"What's to be done?" I asked Anna Pavlova over a light dinner in the gazebo behind Sansone's stables. She, Pushkin, Stein, Munch, and Bucephalus had gathered at

my behest for an evening meal of salmon, fennel, Italian ices, and cunning. Skylarks circulated the air with wicker fans while we strategized.

“What’s ever to be done?” asked Bucephalus. He rooted around in his dinner, nosing the salmon aside in favor of his greens. I had forgotten the beast’s vegetarian preferences.

“I vote destroy!” giggled Pavlova.

“But destroy how?” I asked.

“Every destruction is a restruction. Destroy, restroy. A desultory story. History destroy his story story. A destoried story. Undoing doing. An addition for a subtraction. An action.”

Stein’s advice went unheeded. We chewed at our fish.

“I stand it no more!” said Pushkin. He brought his fist down on the table. Pavlova’s eyelashes fluttered as she turned her imploring gaze to the bear of a man. “Well, it is simple. A beast is loose. When beasts threaten, we must hunt.”

“But our beast is human,” I said. An awkward silence followed as all eyes turned to Bucephalus. “Though it is wrong to destroy and hunt, even if the beast is not.”

“We are all,” declared Munch, “all, all. All mere beasts.”

“I am not,” said Pushkin as he tore through the tender flesh of his salmon with his fork. “I am gentlemen.”

Anna Pavlova’s face lit with mischief, and she whispered something to Pushkin in that indiscreet Russian tongue. Pushkin guffawed while Pavolva brought her dainty hands up against her miniscule mouth, mock-outraged at her own tenacity.

“She corrects my English,” Pushkin explained, eyes on the table, while Pavlova recomposed her face and settled her hands back into her lap.

“If Mr. Pushkin is indeed a gentleman, as claimed,” Bucephalus said, “then surely he must balk at the most ungentlemanly idea of a manhunt. Rand is being sought by Sansone’s domestic staff. She is galactic in stature and incapable of stealth. So long as she poses no immediate threat to our physical wellbeing, I see no urgency in bringing her to justice. She will be caught eventually.”

“I see!” roared Pushkin loudly enough to send the skylarks scurrying for cover. “Most excellent, beast! We will wait and wait and do nothing. She does not eat us now, so we wait until eating occurs and then we act. But we cannot act then, because already we will be eaten! This is horse logic.”

“Respectfully, Bucephalus,” said Munch, “he is correct. It is horse logic.”

“This savagery,” said the horse. “This despicable bloodlust. It is unconscionable.”

“It is necessary,” said Munch. “She poses a menace. She is the nightmare lurking on the margin. Imagine yourself there between those formidable jaws. The blast of her breath as you disintegrate before the monster. She will not stop of her own accord. She will engorge herself on our blood and bones. Mercy is a sort of suicide.”

“Oh,” Anna Pavlova said.

“Yes,” said Edvard Munch. He inhaled and shuddered as his brow knit. “It doesn’t seem real to you, and it barely seems real to me, but we will be ground down. Our skulls are wafer-thin, our bellies unprotected, rubbery lumps waiting to be breached. The human organism is a nothing-much machine. Our valves and vesicles require perfect alignment to keep our bodily elixirs coursing through the system; our brains require every

axon to spark with impeccable timing; our peristalsis permits no hiccup. A single disruption gums the works. Bile backs up in reservoirs. Blood sprays and pools where it is not wont. Intestines unfurl, leaking offal. One incident. One misstep renders us inoperable.”

“Oh, ha,” said Anna Pavlova, a miserable smile oozing across her lips. She looked around the table, beseeching us to contradict the gloomy Norwegian. “You are most morbid.”

“At any moment,” said Munch, “you might go on living. Just as easily, your heart might misfire. Your bowels might burst. A worm might gnaw through your foot and slither into your bloodstream. Ayn Rand might twist your head loose from your body, and then what will you be? An unfortunate heap. Death is the hungry vulture that circles overhead, casting its shadow over us at intervals. Its caw sounds distant now, but when it chooses to descend, it will not hesitate to shred you.”

“I,” said Anna Pavlova, and she stopped as all our eyes turned to her. This trinket, this harmless bit of froth, this toy ballerina somehow emancipated from her music box, pleaded with her enormous eyes. Normally flirtatious and bold, she suddenly appeared small and terrified. How easily the monster’s teeth could grind her delicate flesh. How feeble her protestations would feel in the fleering face of the beast. Her hand trembled as she brought it up to dab the sweat that misted her brow. “I.”

She lowered her eyes and fell back in her chair, clutching her heart. The skylarks clambered from their hiding places to crowd around, fanning her furiously. Pushkin leapt to his feet and extended a quivering finger to the overcome ballerina.

“This,” he said, and sputtered. “This is why.”

“But,” said Bucephalus, turning to me, somehow marking me as the person upon whose decision the entire affair hinged, “there is nothing in this, you see. We are all afraid, of course. That is the natural state of things. If we vanquish this threat, we will simply leave ourselves open to the next—and next time, we will not hesitate to use violence, because the precedent will already be established. This is how cruelty escalates.”

“This,” said Pushkin, encompassing the whole of our surroundings in a sweeping gesture. “This.”

I followed Pushkin’s hand and realized his intent: This was all at stake. The deep, tranquil blue of early evening. The manicured lawns exhaling new-mown aromas. The intricate woodwork of the gazebo, finely sanded and redolent with the smell of cedar. The skylarks, in their gold-buttoned jackets and spotless gloves. The fresh arugula whose tang still lingered on our palates. The plaintive birdsong against the murmur of the light summer breeze. Here was a world so finely ordered in its beauty, so secure in its elegance. Anna Pavlova’s nervousness had already discomposed the gentle aesthetic of our evening, as had Alexander Pushkin’s righteous anger. These were products of Rand. Were to continue her feast, all would be lost.

“Bucephalus,” I said. “Look all around. You must understand this is all most beautiful.”

“Nothing is beautiful,” he said, “if its preservation requires violent action.”

“Then let a horse get eaten if that is what a horse wants,” said Pushkin. “But do not sacrifice a Pavlova.”

The white-faced ballerina stared into night. I followed her eyes to the ghostly stars beginning to assert themselves, hovering orbs fighting for possession of the sky. In G— at that same moment, the fringes of a conquering sun would be proceeding over the eastern horizon. No consonance between there and here, between America's evening and my homeland's morning. I conjured up a father. Would he be already at work, sliding his knife through the sinews that bound animals together, reducing complicated organisms to their component parts? Could I still smell the homestead: the sawdust, the iron reek of blood, and the rotting mulch of my bedding? I could remember what I thought I smelled, what I thought I knew, who I thought I was, and yet these former tangibles had been gnawed by time and distance until they were nothing more than spectral blurs on the canvas of my memory. Nothing was real except what I could sense, and what I could sense would someday be nothing.

A glittering comet cut a streak across the sky, and for a brief and thrilling moment, I wondered what it would feel like to have Rand's objectivist incisors tearing into the meat of my shoulder, slicing deep into my muscles, spilling the warm blood of my vitality. I would howl in pain, in urgency, in exhilaration, from the pit of myself, from a great thirst for beauty, from appreciation of the fact that for one excruciating moment, I had obtained an intensity of experience so profound that it was capable of imprinting itself on me as something actual.

And then the moment would melt away, leaving me deformed and yet no closer to existence, nothing but ethereal words and ethereal recollections remaining to help me piece together an ethereal past that might never have happened.

“To fight is to assert a right,” Stein said. “To right a right, we right our rights. Two rights make two rights. Two fights make two fights. Our right is right, leaving me my right. My right has left. My right has two lefts. Two lefts make a right. Two lefts make a fight. To fight two fights? To right too right?”

Stein spread her hands on the table and counted her fingers silently.

“Five on right,” she went on with an air of discovery. “Five on left. Ten on two. When one goes, five are left. When right’s left, left’s left.”

She looked at me with tears in her eyes.

“Or nothing’s left,” she said. “Nothing’s left without a right.”

I looked around the table and discovered my companions all focused on me. Even the skylarks stood in anticipation, their eyes milky discs of fear in the waxing moonlight, as they rhythmically stirred the air with their fans. I looked down to avoid the stares, and I saw on my plate the rubble of a salmon steak that I had no recollection of eating. Translucent bones bristled from pink pebbles of flesh, while the fish’s silver skin lay sloughed in a heap. Breadcrumbs and grains of salt sat in dead puddles of oil.

I went vaporous.

I held my hands before my face, and they were nothing. Skin that wastes and bones that crack. Thoughts forgotten and sensations vanished. A nothing past, a nothing present, a nothing future. A whisper. An “I.”

“I,” I said, and gulped, all eyes on me.

Blood, it had to be. If Rand would assert herself with teeth, we could not stand by and consign ourselves to memory. We must exist. We must assert that we must exist.

If not, what?

“I am sorry, horse,” I said, and Bucephalus busied his face with the chardonnay.
“I am sorry.

“We must find her,” I said to the company. “We are all in business of art, and so we cannot let beauty be victim of fear. We must not wait to be attacking by villainmonster Rand. Attack will be ours first.” I nodded at the horse, whose forelegs were tilting a bottle of wine into his mouth. “Capture is our most best option. Better not to do a damage to another human being.”

Bucephalus’s ears twitched at my *faux pas*, but he said nothing.

“Better not to do a damage to another creature of any sort,” I corrected myself.

Bucephalus’s wine bottle fell to the table, dribbling dregs onto the linen. He let his head fall with the bottle and dropped his chin into the puddle of vinegar saturating the greens left on his plate.

“Bipeds,” he said.

“It is the only way, horse,” said Pushkin. “I support this plan!”

“And I,” said Anna Pavlova.

“And I,” said Edvard Munch.

“And I and I,” said Gertrude Stein.

“Then we will hunt,” I said. “With gentleness, of course. We will track down our enemy and most kindly bring her to justice, with all utmost respect. We will be free to create and produce.”

“I am expert marksman,” said Pushkin.

“Fire sweetly,” said I, and he looked at me with a determined air that said we were compatriots. I was the lieutenant, he my foot soldier. I tried to silence the subtle

satisfaction that came to me as I looked at Anna Pavlova, nothing more than a tremulous bird caught up in a windstorm she was too weak to weather. She was not a member of our squadron. Though Pushkin held her hand, his eyes were on his future glory and not on her fragile beauty—on my commanding voice and not on her imploring eyes.

I allowed myself only a victorious smile, which Pavlova saw and could not fail to interpret correctly. Triumph begets adversaries.

I doled out arrangements and stratagems. We would requisition an armory from Sansone and work in pairs: Some would hunt while others concentrated on their artistic output, and then we would switch. We would not let up our search. We would enlist the aid of the skylarks, but the driving force behind the operation would be us, the colonists.

My fellow artists swept up from the table, and I nodded at each in turn as they filed away, suddenly soldiers. I rose as the skylarks began clearing away the wreckage of our dinner. I felt compelled to go to Bucephalus, who remained a sullen mound, and put a hand on his head.

“I am sorry,” I said.

“I am drunk,” he said.

The empty wineglasses clinked as a skylark gathered them from the table and deposited them in the sideboard.

“It is only for the best,” I said.

The horse’s sobs were silent.

The days continued to roast, and the nights were shot through with the panic of the hunt. I partnered with Pushkin, and we pursued what feeble leads we had. I became

expert at identifying the beast's heavy footprints. Pushkin and I followed trails of rubble through the woods, along the edges of the ponds, across ballrooms, into pantries, and up through crawlspaces. We slipped on saliva and waded up to our knees in chewed and discarded upholstery. Our candelabras burned as we poked them into spaces too small to hide Rand's hulking frame. I brought myself to my cabin every evening after midnight had already come and gone, but the merciless sun imposed itself early, and my eyes grew sandy from lack of sleep.

Sansone's coffee was more than a morning ritual. It was a liquid dependency, the driving aroma of which asserted itself as soon as I dragged myself into Sansone's mansion soon after dawn each morning. The bitter, chocolaty thickness that had seemed a mere gustatory novelty when it had first coated my tongue was now imbued with magical properties. It meant alacrity. It meant respite from sluggishness. It was the chemical paramour that tempted me from my boudoir, and yet it was only the handmaiden of my more demanding mistress: that firm and robust harp, which stood puff-chested and ready even on the days that were so hot the trees sweated resin and ripples of heat wobbled the horizon. The harp knew nothing but its duty, and so it sent me reproachful thoughts whenever I wanted to spend an extra hour in bed or excursion on an afternoon ramble. In order to placate it, I poured myself over its strings and stroked every note until it purred. Long and miserable were my days of devotion, longer and more miserable were my nights of fruitless hunting.

And so, languid with the heat and the fatigue, I found myself an amebic jelly, flowing from here to there at the mercy of my daily currents. As I hunted at night, I longed for my quarry to discover herself. With what savagery I would pounce upon her

and tear her into scraps to relieve myself of the onus of her liberty. What freedom I would feel if I could sink my teeth into her neck and obliterate her. A faint conscience protested against the rabidity of such fantasies, but the heat had smothered morality. If Rand did not suffer violence, I suffered sleeplessness. My egalitarian logic demanded that if our aggregate suffering could not be reduced, it must be shared. The only thought that could reasonably quell my violence was the recognition that Sansone had foreseen that I would succumb to it. Whenever I recalled that I was growing along the path he had predicted for me, I honeyed my thoughts from spite. A lovable lamb I was, even in summertime, if being a lovable lamb could prove my master false—but lambhood grew exhausting, and as soon as I let my attention wander, I once again became irritable.

Wrathful as I grew in reality, music was where I sought a harmonious world. In my slowly advancing masterpiece, I evoked levity I didn't feel and strove for the gentleness that eluded me. The uglier the heat and the hunt, the more mellifluous the harp. I devoted my days to the creation of art that was the obverse of reality. My music reflected nothing; in the hollowness of its purpose, I found my hiding place. My beautiful strains were a denial, a round-mouthed “no” that refused my world.

As I made music out of deafness, my fellow colonists heard something in it beyond an echo of my torpor-induced screams. My harp could lull a skylark into a swaying trance, and I won praise even from discerning critics.

“My dear, my dear, my dear,” said Gertrude Stein as she stood in the doorway of my cabin one afternoon, listening to my rehearsal wind down. “My dear, my dear, my dear.”

If I plucked out an up-tempo cascade of notes, I could send Anna Pavlova reeling and pirouetting across the room, a breathless whirl of giggles and curls, while Pushkin stomped and clapped, betraying his ineptitude in matters of rhythmic precision. If I let my tempo crawl into an *adagio* and darkened my tonality, I could mesmerize Edvard Munch's melancholic sensibilities and set his wistful eyes upon some imagined nightmare of perdition.

"I don't understand it. It is simply notes," said Bucephalus when once I tried to serenade him, but what of that? A horse will mope sometimes.

Sansone, too, remained unconvinced.

One evening in late July, he had Skylark wheel my harp from my cabin to a malachite-paneled music room in a section of the mansion I had not yet discovered. In this room, I was horrified to discover a sneering Sansone and several rows of empty chairs. Was I to have an audience?

"You are to have an audience," said Sansone, and the air rushed from me. I was back in G—, a knobby-kneed girl with no deportment.

"But I did not know."

"It is part of your contractual obligation," said Sansone. "You were brought here to perform."

"But I did not know I would perform tonight."

"You have been performing since you arrived."

"If I refuse?"

"You will not refuse."

Skylark grunted and snarled as he angled the harp into position. He saw that he had drawn my attention and knotted himself up in a panic of embarrassment, all arms and knees.

“Why would you not tell me?” I demanded of him.

“Oh!” said Skylark. He creased his forehead and pointed at the harp. “This is a harp.”

“I am no longer such a poor student of English!”

“The harp makes music. Music is nice.”

“Why is such an insult necessary? It is not mannerly!”

Skylark hiccupped and crouched beside an end table.

“Your imperious demeanor is hardly comely,” Sansone said to me. With a sweeping gesture, he importuned me to sit before the harp and begin my scales; of course, I complied. “You are here by virtue of my munificence, and so we will make of you what we will. If Skylark wishes to promote your English education, he may do so however he wishes.”

“‘I’ before ‘E,’ except after ‘C,’” Skylark offered from behind the table.

“Or?” asked Sansone.

“When sounds like ‘A,’ as in ‘neighbor’ or ‘weigh.’”

Skylark, triumphant, bounded from his hiding spot. He yanked out a cloth that had been tucked into his belt and began wiping down the chairs in preparation for my audience.

“Do you see,” asked Sansone, as I tried not to hear him over the sound of my warm-up, “what satisfaction can be gleaned from the construction of simple, consistent

rules? The bramble-patch of language has been dethorned and closely manicured by our devoted lexicographers. And yet, isn't this imposed order a sort of tyranny? Your ignorance is your freedom, C—!"

I stopped playing and looked hard at Sansone.

"Weird," I said.

"Not weird at all. You, my dear specter, have the liberty to operate in that liminal space outside the constraints of our proper language. You can shape experience howsoever you choose, grasping at phonemes and sound clusters in a primitive sputtering that perhaps better replicates your crude experience of our world than the most polished aphorisms."

"Weird' is spelled most appropriately with an E coming prior to I, even if no C is involved and not sounding like A, leaving 'neighbor' and 'weigh' aside entirely."

"Troubling," said Sansone as though this were news. "An outlier."

"This is a chair," said Skylark.

Perhaps it was my accumulated frustration with the Americans' condescension, perhaps it was my anxiety at being asked to perform without adequate preparation, or perhaps it was simply my response to the English language's maddening inconsistency, but the next instant saw me standing with my stool held high in my upraised arms, and the instant following that saw me bearing down on Skylark as he sidled frantically along the wall, trying in vain to escape the blow that my stool then rained upon him.

"Temper!" Sansone said.

Skylark puddled into a bruised ball at my feet, rubbing his head and peeping at me as though he were a baby hermit crab new-schooled in terrestrial vagaries.

“Such Teutonic rage,” said Sansone.

I turned my furious face to Sansone. The well-groomed monster taunted me with his laughter. He quaked with mirth, but even his mirth was within his control. I could master nothing: not my rage, not my body, not my subject-verb agreement. I could play false notes at another’s behest, but I could not seduce a Russian poet, could not placate a heart-stricken horse, could not even locate a gargantuan objectivist.

“You are one provocateur” was my feeble riposte, muddied by the imprecision of my articles.

“Two provocateurs!” cried Skylark from beneath. I despondently thrashed him once again.

“I warned you of your viciousness,” said Sansone. “It is your artistic temperament. Your temper is ugly, but perhaps you can redeem yourself through music. Leave off castigating my dear manservant and comport yourself as a young woman preparing for a recital.”

My anger and humiliation welled as I righted my dress, brushed my hair once again into order, and turned my back on Skylark with no apology for my outburst. I set myself up before the harp and picked once again at my scales, but every note sounded tinny and flat. I could no longer deny that Sansone had spoken the truth about my tendency toward cruelty, and yet his assessment was nevertheless unjust. Surely any beast will lash out if beaten and scorned? Even Bucephalus, that gentle stallion, had once ground men to bits when he was put up for sale in the marketplace. The violence I had just shown Skylark was real, but it was not truly mine. If I had been bloodthirsty, it was only because Sansone had provoked my thirst.

And yet it was here that my thinking ran aground. I knew that I was not a violent person, but when I tried to characterize myself, I found that I could not. I was ... what? Lovely? Under the right circumstances. Creative? If it was not too hot out. Loyal? Only to that which merited my loyalty. Vicious? Apparently I was that as well. At any given moment, I could only respond to the stimuli around me, based on what had come before—and what had come before was just as arbitrarily based on what had come before that, and so on into the void.

At least the horse now had his pacifism. Even Rand had her consumerism.

And I?

From what heaven could I pluck an ineffable certainty, a guiding principle, a fixed star to shine me through the twilit mire, to offer me consistency without a question mark? How could I seize the right to create myself, refuse to be created by circumstance? Could I bring myself to believe in a god for which I had no evidence outside myself? Could I invent a moral code whose strictures would be as arbitrary as my upbringing? But, on the other hand, could I consent to wander from moment to moment like a waif, daring to claim none of existence for myself, absolving myself of any authority and, in the same renunciation, doing away with my potential for autonomous life?

It was then that I heard the notes I was playing and had the confidence to really listen. Each was a vibration initiated by my fingertips, a something called up into the world where before there was nothing. My music was an imposition, a physical impress onto the sensations of anybody near enough to hear. Certainly, Sansone could cover his ears if he wanted to block out my intrusion into his consciousness, but this would be a

response, not an autonomously generated action. I was cause to his effect. If he created me, then it became my right to create him in return.

The music poured forth, a violent assertion of my right to exist and an equally violent denial of anybody else's.

My warm-up turned into my performance. I created new melodies and soared on the updrafts of my own generative experimentation without waiting for my audience to arrive from the furthest reaches of Sansone's colony. By the time the attendees filed in to take their seats, ostensibly assisted by Skylark, who, in his excessive officiousness ended up upturning more chairs than he managed to successfully populate, the concert was already underway.

Stein was in the front row, and I threaded in a repetitive motif as a gift to her; her eyes reflected gratitude that I had created.

In this way, I was a benefactor. I mirrored the sorts of beauty that my audience hoped to find. I wanted applause, and so I exercised virtuosic finger-work. I wanted gasps, and so I thundered. I wanted tears, and so I mewled and twinkled. I probed my audience, feinting this way and that, here a *scherzando*, there a *rallentando*, all the while tweaking the atmosphere that I desired, manipulating their emotions, trying their patience, coaxing them into being who I wanted them to be, refusing to brook any voice but my own.

The room had filled with colonists, some of whom I knew, most of whom were strangers. Faces were fleshy smears in the sea of bustles and string ties, thumbprints bobbing atop eveningwear. My audience. *Mine*. I had grown up possessing little, so I could not now hide my exultation at claiming mastery over the thoughts and feelings of a

platoon of strangers. Sansone sat on the margins, issuing his trademark smile of superciliousness, but even this was a response to the musical experience that was mine alone to give or withhold.

I finished off with a smug *mancando* and grinned at my audience. I owned them, but I would do them no harm. A generous tyrant, I.

During the applause that followed, Sansone slithered up to stand beside me, as though he had a hand in my accomplishments. I bowed and, gallingly, so did he. I stared in open-mouthed contempt at the animal which was now motioning for the colonists to quiet their approval, appropriating my glory.

“We must,” said Sansone, “have our talkback before it grows too late.”

“I do not give a talkback,” I said.

“You are contractually bound,” said he.

Before I could point out that his letter of invitation had indentured me only to create art and not to justify it, he had already selected a lithe redhead with kohl-covered eyelids to ask the first question.

“Your philosophy of art is?” she choked out with a heavy accent.

“I produce beauty,” I said, pleased that my purpose had remained unshaken since the time of my manifesto.

Sansone nodded at a dandy.

“Your philosophy of beauty is?”

I smiled in a way that I hoped was mysterious.

I waited for the next question, but the room was taut with silence. I realized that we would not carry on until I spoke. Once again, I held the reins, and so I allowed us to sit in quiet contemplation until I deigned to issue my condescending reply.

“Beauty is I think we all know what beauty is.”

“Bless her bless her bless her bless her bless!” screamed Gertrude Stein, pumping her fist victoriously. “A beauty speaks beauty.”

A cheer rose up in the audience, and my ears burned with rapturous humiliation. I had read my crowd aright; I had courted their better sensibilities and achieved a kind of conquest.

“So beauty is to be understood as pandering submission to the predominant tastes?” asked Sansone, once again flexing his ability to inflict torsion on the most fundamental of human values.

“I pander not,” I said, imitating Gertrude Stein’s fist-pump and feeling suddenly ridiculous. “I create?”

“Your ‘creations,’” said Sansone, “are by your own admission servile prostrations before the altar of Taste.”

And so the foundations upon which I had built my pretensions of existence collapsed, rendering me once again nothing more than a wisp, created by the very circumstances I thought I was creating.

“Speak out!” I screamed at the audience that had moments ago been mine. “Tell this man who wants only hijacking of your experience: Was this music you heard not object of deep beauty and significance?”

The roar of support I then received wrung my hands and curled my lips into a smile. Colonists drummed their feet on the floorboards. Men swashbuckled the air with their cigarette cases while women's handkerchiefs shot up in flutters of appreciation. Beauty was mine. Artistic success was mine. Sansone was a sore loser: the master who couldn't concede that he had been bested by his serf.

But then, the freezing pressure of the master's stare inflicted my face, and I knew that a rational desecration of my vaunted beauty was moments away. Sansone, as ever, had a response that would render me an imbecile.

"But," he said, and the hooting colonists fell silent. "If beauty is a simple fact, agreed upon by all, where is the horse?"

In the ensuing silence, I caught myself wishing that the damned pacifist horse had never sullied my life with his existence.

"If your conception of beauty is a universal principle," he continued, "and not simply a tyrannical reiteration of the values of those who hold sway, then why do I hear such plaintive, unstinting whinnying from certain equine parties after such an objectively magnificent performance?"

I sought the faces of the crowd for any remnant of the support that had so recently been mine, but I saw that they had turned their eyes away in humiliation. Everybody was staring at shoes, chair legs, creases in pants. Nobody wanted to see the flustered young harpist who was hearing, suddenly, piercingly, the tragic howls of Bucephalus, which had been floating among us all this time unheeded, which had been drowned out by my own single-minded quest for aesthetic dominance.

I closed my eyes and tried to hear.

I looked away while Pushkin brought down the heel of his boot upon it. The crunch ripped a shudder through my shoulders. I could not bear to look back at the destroyed chipmunk, but in my imagination, it lay breached and gooey on the lawn, curdled bits of brain seeping from its half-collapsed skull.

And yet Sansone called *me* cruel? To equate even the most domineering of aesthetic preferences with physical violence inflicted on a living creature seemed in that squeamish moment nothing more than a rhetorical flourish. Pursuit of beauty, even at the risk of ignoring an angst-ridden warhorse, could never result in such monstrosities as a slaughtered innocent—at least, as long as the beauty sought was mine and not Rand’s.

As Pushkin and I felt our way along the path of crushed grass that led into the wild expanses of Sansone’s pastureland, keeping our senses attuned to any evidence of Ayn Rand’s whereabouts, I questioned him.

“Alexander, you do not think it wicked to wish for beauty?”

“Why bother with ‘wicked’? We will search to make life most beautiful and coherent for us in image we want for it. If it is wicked, it is wicked. It is not something that will be stopping.”

“But how can it be wicked if it is truly beautiful?”

“Ask chipmunks.”

I allowed a moment to pass as I digested my frustration. Rand’s quest to quench her inordinate hunger was not a pursuit of beauty: It was a detestable spree, an attempt to press the world through her digestive system and render it an excrescence. Some forms of beauty were beautiful and not wicked; some forms of beauty were wicked and not

And as the horse crescendoed, and as the poet's body eclipsed my own, I watched the moon bloat as it bubbled into the apex of the sky, its light blazing forth over the grounds, revealing the contours of the field we were standing in, exposing the moles who were busily at nocturnal work, ghosting the squirrels whose eyes gleamed gemlike from under the brambles. I pulled Pushkin's arms around me in the unreliable milk of moonlight, fitting my spine to his sternum, disappearing, dissolving, straining towards the off-limits zones where never before had I ...

A scream, distinctly female.

Pushkin's body jolted, dissociating itself from mine, his ears at the ready. I pooled at his feet, disappointed in love. Pushkin's face was intent on the source of the noise.

"Pavlova," he said, and whipped his head in the direction of the mansion. He pointed. "There. We must!"

And he tore away.

I drew myself to my feet and watched Pushkin's hulking frame hasten off in thrall to his balletic lover. I brushed the grass from my knees and rushed after him, through the stubble of the pastures. He bounded over a wooden pylon, and I leapt as well. He led me along the shores of the reflecting pools, past hedge mazes and rose bushes, and into the nimbus of light cast from the windows of Sansone's mansion. He turned back to see if I was still with him; as I supported myself against the trunk of a nearby oak, fighting not to appear out-of-breath, his face was a brown, creased walnut of torment.

"She is near," he mouthed, and motioned me into silence.

Over the horse's wails, I heard a quiet crunching coming from inside the house. Periodically, the rustle of mastication stopped and a low panting, humid and frantic,

became audible. Then, invariably, the noises of consumption reinstated themselves with renewed vigor.

I dropped to the ground and crept alongside Pushkin to the patch of grass beneath the window. We craned our necks up and brought our eyes over the sill to glimpse what was occurring inside: Ayn Rand sat cross-legged like a child in the center of the library. She had pulled many of the volumes from the shelves and barricaded herself behind a mound of books. She blithely brought book after book to her mouth, chomped through the pages, licked the adhesive from the spine, and chucked the cover over her shoulder like a discarded peanut shell. A considerable pile of eviscerated covers lay beside her, and yet the beast's appetite showed no signs of cessation. She worked regularly, scanning each book's title before devouring it. After every fourth or fifth book, she wiped loose scraps of paper from the corners of her mouth, checked the floor around her for any overlooked morsels of confetti that she had let fall, and then continued.

"Oh, beast," I mouthed, and yet, horrified though I was, she seemed to be taking such simple satisfaction in her consumption that I found it difficult to begrudge her her literary pursuits.

It was then, in the midst of my fascination, that I felt Pushkin tugging on my arm. I turned to him, but he was not looking at me. He was gesturing wildly to a corner of the room behind Rand. I looked to where he was pointing, but I didn't immediately notice anything other than an oak bookcase that had been stripped of its contents.

A flash of movement behind the bookcase, however, revealed what had agitated the poet. Poking from the side of the bookcase was a pair of terrified blue eyes and a brow cut through with horror.

Anna Pavlova was mere feet from the all-consuming demon, her presence hidden only by a bare bookcase and the monster's absorption in her feast.

The meal of books would not slake Ayn Rand's hunger. As soon as she had devoured all that sat in front of her, she would begin the hunt for another source of nourishment—and a sadistic nose such as hers, well calibrated to the discovery of new victims, would not fail to scent the ballerina.

Rand's squared jaw munched up and down, her teeth milling the paper between them. Her creeping tongue writhed and pulsed, a venous gastropod. Her short, stout arms hefted book after book. Here was power. Here was certainty of purpose. Here, doubtless, was the ballerina's end. I met Pavlova's eyes and, in a nauseating moment, could not shed the image of her lying crushed and seeping like the chipmunk Pushkin had killed in the field. My sudden resolution to act was spurred less by my desire to prevent suffering than by my desire to shield myself from having to witness ugliness.

I grabbed Pushkin's arm and tried to drag him to the entry. He shook me off.

"We must have plan," he said. "Or we both will get eat, and Anna Pavlova too."

A plan. I had fought off the monster once before, and my victory was pursuant upon an application of flailing violence. I had been in grave danger and had acted instinctually. This was a new situation: I was preparing myself deliberately to enter the world of danger. I was not responding to an immediate threat; in some ways, I was creating the threat. Pushkin was right. We could not rely on our adrenaline alone. We must be calculators.

One function of calculators is division.

“One of us will distract,” I said. “She will want more meat than she can find in books. She will look to devour. Other of us will meantime pounce and incapacitate.”

“What means this ‘incapacitate’?”

I, suddenly an instructor of English rather than a student, went on: “To make her unable. To create her as useless. It will require some violence.”

“Ah, yes. ‘Violence,’” said Pushkin, comprehending. “How?”

I peeked back into the library, looking for potential weapons. I saw nothing but books and empty shelves. I looked behind me into the moonlit grounds. Was there a concrete birdbath? A weighty gnome? Unfortunately, Sansone’s good taste limited our arsenal: I saw no possible armaments.

“This book,” Pushkin said, pointing in at the window. I looked in and saw that he was indicating a massive encyclopedia volume that sat by the door to the hall. Rand had not yet drawn the book into her slop pile, and it could perhaps serve to break an ankle, if wielded with confidence.

“Is there no knife?” I asked, and Pushkin showed his empty hands. In G—, no man would be without a knife. In America, nobody expected to labor on a moment’s notice. To burden oneself with a tool was an act of *gaucherie*.

“It is better with a knife,” I said, “or a weapon more to the purpose.”

Rand continued steadily to deplete her pile of books, but her eyes were already roving in search of her next meal.

“We have not time!” said Pushkin. “It is to arm ourselves with books or not to arm ourselves whatsoever.”

“Very well,” I said. “You have more of the muscular strength than I. I shall serve as our distraction, but you must promise me that as soon as you see Rand come for me, you shall be upon the scene, brandishing encyclopedia, and ready to fight for me and for your Pavlova.”

“Most certainly,” whispered Pushkin, and he gave a bow, bending his head to my hand and allowing the hot tickle of his breath to pepper my fingers.

As I struggled to keep myself tethered to my mission, I noticed Anna Pavlova staring at Pushkin and me from her hiding spot. Her eyes betrayed her anger and humiliation. Her lover and an unfamiliar woman were growing close over her disgrace. I tried to transmit reassurance with my eyes, but I was unable: Anna Pavlova was trapped behind glass with a voracious beast; I was at liberty with a strapping Russian poet. I did not wish the situation reversed.

I stole a final look at Rand. Sitting alone amidst her supper, mechanically drawing her hand to her maw and never reaching satisfaction, her gaze always directed towards future consumption, her mouth never resting, her isolation from her fellow humans cemented by her single-minded pursuit of self-interest, a wave of self-conscious pity overwhelmed me.

“When you smash,” I said to Pushkin, “smash with mercy.”

And with those words, the plan was set in motion. I sidled along the mansion’s outer wall until I came to the nearest door. I heard Pushkin creeping after me as I let myself into a granite atrium, merciful relief against the late summer heat. Now inside, I paused a moment to acquaint myself with my new circumstances. The library, I calculated, was two rooms distant, and the faint, persistent sound of chomping confirmed

my supposition. Catching Pushkin's eye, I wordlessly slipped from the atrium into the neighboring room: a study of some sort, papered in burgundy and outfitted in walnut. I glanced around in the hope that a more effective weapon would reveal itself, but I encountered no likely candidate. Fighting to even my breath, I slid to the far door and peeped into the adjoining hall. All I had to do was cross through the hall and jog right, and I would find myself exposed in the library, just as trapped as Anna Pavlova. I knew that I could not afford to doubt Pushkin, but I looked over my shoulder nevertheless. In the murky light of the study, I did not immediately see that he had come with me, and a momentary panic seized me. However, I heard his low, husky breath under the sounds of mastication coming from the next room, and I understood that this was the moment in which I had to give myself up to faith.

I shuddered and winced and then darted through the dark hall and into the bright light of the library.

"Rand!" I screamed, and the objectivist's head lolled up. Part of an illuminated flyleaf was poking from her mouth. "Good evening."

The woman was even more terrifying without a pane of glass standing between us. I was close enough to see the dark bristles that jutted from a mole on her neck and the film of sweat that coated her face. She twisted her mouth into a smile, which left the flyleaf free to drift into her lap.

"You've called upon me here," she said, "to settle our debt, I imagine? I have compounded the interest, and you owe a considerable sum."

"I understand," I said. "I will give you satisfaction."

"Nothing *gives* me satisfaction," said Rand. "I *earn* satisfaction."

I kept my eyes trained on Rand; though I was anxious to give Anna Pavlova the reassurance of a glance, I could not risk revealing her hiding place. How long would Pushkin allow me to fend for myself? I needed to cause Ayn Rand to turn away from the door, which meant I had to plunge deeper into threat.

“What do I owe?” I asked.

“What are your assets?”

“I own my talent,” I said.

“Very well. And what is your talent?”

I edged further into the library, but although Ayn Rand’s eyes were alert and followed me flawlessly, she would not shift her body. She remained rooted to her position like a toadstool that had sent its rhizomes deep into the soil.

“My talent is most lovely harp playing,” I said. “Fluid and melody sounds.”

Rand nibbled thoughtfully on a dust jacket.

“Great art is expressive of ideals,” she said. “I believe in justice. What are your music’s beliefs?”

“I cannot currently say,” I said. I continued to move around Rand, but she continued simply to swivel her gaze. I had positioned the beast between me and my exit. If she were to pounce ... And yet, she calmly sat chewing, eyeing me. I felt Pavlova’s terror radiating behind me. Mentally, I cursed her. If her anxiety should bleed into my own nerves, she would botch her own rescue.

“I cannot currently say,” I repeated, “but will you join me for discussion of such matters?” Rand’s eyes skewered me from in front, Pavlova’s from behind. In the crush of scrutiny, my tongue flopped. English dissolved. “I will be meaning, rather, can we not?”

I tripped over a tassel on the rug and nearly fell. Rand, nonplussed, cracked open another book.

“Well, answer this?” I said, or asked. “I’ve not. Or?”

The more I tried to wrest sense from my mouth, the more gibberish clogged my voice. My confidence faltered with my expression, casting desperately from vowel to vowel. Rand watched a blabbering German wheeling bullishly around a library, manhandling the furniture, gushing inadequate syllables. Here was that bumbling butcher’s daughter, that rube in a borrowed dress, humiliating herself before her audience. Where was the virtuosic mastery of technique that cloaked me while I was onstage? Without a set of harp strings to absorb my anxiety, I was an amateur actor, chomping the scenery, gesticulating without intention or substance, spouting sound without articulation.

If I fainted right and darted left, would Rand intercept me with her grasping mitts? If I wished her good day and strolled back to the hall, what toll would she demand? If I pre-empted her onslaught by pouncing on her and sinking my teeth into the meat of her neck, would my aggression reap sufficient distraction to save the ballerina? And would I then, in turn, be saved?

“Art!” I said, and sighed, leaning against a bookshelf, surrendering myself as untaken bait. “What means it all?”

Rand looked at me as though I were a curious beetle: intriguing, yet distasteful.

“Are you deficient in a specific way or in a general way?” Rand asked.

“Pardon without comprehension.”

“I simply mean to ask,” Rand continued, reaching out for another book but finding none within the radius of her grasp, “about the nature of your impairment. Is your brain chemically lacking, or has your mind simply gone to dough from the laxity of your integrity?”

I chuckled as a coquette, bending sideways to expose my tender flanks. Could I not tempt the beast’s gluttony?

“Your native stupidity,” she said, “is no excuse for your demeanor.”

“How delicious I feel today!”

While Rand’s eyes appraised me, her arms continued to root blindly for sustenance. When they couldn’t find any literary volumes, they took hold of the carpet and yanked out a small patch for her mouth to gnaw on.

The carpet scrap grew wet and ropy as Rand’s jaws worked over it.

I considered my next tactical maneuver, and she considered hers, and Pushkin pushed into the room, howling some sort of Slavic *cri de coeur*, disrupting Rand and my brinksmanship, galumphing like a boar into the library.

Rand was upon him in a flash of teeth and jaws. The high trilling of Pavlova’s shrieks strung loud and long through the air as I threw myself atop the pile of poet and objectivist. Rand’s reflexive arms whipped me off and flung me against the far wall, where I juddered and dropped to the ground.

I peeled myself up, no plan in mind, no strategy to work from, motored by horror at the pulsating wad of flesh in the corner that was Rand and Pushkin locked together, wrangling, grunting, each a sack of organs susceptible to rupture. Flecks of blood leached into the carpet. I scanned for the encyclopedia with which Pushkin had meant to

incapacitate Rand, but I could see only the wriggling arms and legs of the fighting couple; I could only hear the snapping of teeth and the sound of my own voice shouting orders as my eyes stumbled upon that useless ballerina, cocooning herself behind a bookshelf, uninspired to come to the aid of the man who had thrown himself into the monster's jaws for her sake.

“Pavlova! Now!”

And then it was not my voice that was spurring her to action, but my arms, as I yanked her up and slammed her against the wall again and again until her eyes registered resolve.

“Now, we must!”

A lupine ululation of pain—Rand's? Pushkin's?—rent Pavlova's stasis and she was with me, shuddering in sweat-streaked exertion as she took one end of the bookshelf, I the other, and we inched it forward ... forward ... forward towards the sparring animals.

Pushkin or Rand shot out an arm, and I pinned it with my foot. It wriggled beneath me, a feisty animal plotting to disrupt my balance. Not knowing whether the hand was friend's or foe's, I pounded my heel down upon it, cracking it open and laying it flat on the carpet.

Pavlova and I held the bookcase upright at the edge of the melee, but the ballerina was struggling against its weight, and I felt the stubborn dip of gravity lurking, threatening to pull the bookcase earthwards.

“Hold on!” I screamed. We needed to be precise in our offensive. A premature bombardment could be ruinous.

But with a whimper, the ballerina loosed her hold on her end of the bookcase. I jumped back, and the bookshelf careened down upon the human mass below.

No more sounds of tussling.

Only the sounds of heavy breathing. My own. Pavlova's. And others'? I could not bring myself to look.

In G—, the carnage my father wrought upon his livestock was tempered by tenderness. When slaughter is a vocation, it can be learned and administered with merciful accuracy. When violence falls into the hands of those who strike from compulsion—from panic, from riled emotion, from triggered terror—it is an unwieldy club. It is a messy, inarticulate viciousness that flails its bastard limbs and hacks at whatever falls within its compass, leaving its enemies gashed and bruised but not at peace. That our lives could pass as sonatas. That the trilling of a C could replicate the purity of experience. That our deaths could bring resolution to our lives and leave the reverberations of our melodies to meet the applause of the audience that survives us.

That we not lie as half-chewed chipmunks, struggling ineffectually for life when death has already claimed us.

I stood in the library, my eyes closed, but my ears still capable of hearing. And so I listened. I heard my own breath, fighting for steadiness. I heard Pavlova's, high and pregnant with relieved terror. And then, halting and tremulous, I heard the damp and bloody breath of a third. The vitality in that breath was limping. There was death there.

“Aleksander,” came the ballerina's whisper.

That gurgling breath.

And that horse, somewhere.

CHAPTER 8

DIRGE

It was with Pushkin and Rand's deaths that autumn descended upon the colony. Cracked leaves drooped from skeletal branches. Gray drizzle rendered fallen fruit mulch. The clouds massed above us and there they remained, day after day, a sepulchral slab lurking overhead. If in spring I had felt free, the onset of autumn contained me. The muddy sky set a ceiling on my gaze; the opaque mists that grayed the windows kept my imagination from straying far.

Pavlova haunted the mansion, ghoulish in her gauntness. I rarely saw her after the culmination of our manhunt, after our clumsy rescue effort had collapsed the lungs of her lover and left us sitting, wailing, two survivors in a library of devoured books, emptied shelves, crushed colonists. Mercifully, I had not seen the bodies, but Pavlova had, and the image shocked her to silence. I returned days later to the library, when all that remained was the prodigious bloodstain on the carpet where Ayn Rand and Alexander Pushkin had been extinguished and a solitary skylark responsible for scrubbing away their legacy.

"Was it very awful what happened here?" I asked the manservant.

His eyes, moon-sized and saturated with queasy anguish, answered in the affirmative, while his lips stammered words too small to stand up to the enormity of catastrophic death.

Our victims bled as well in my nightmares, neither finding their peace nor allowing me mine. I relived the quiet crack of Rand's snapping ribs. Pushkin's choked breath as fluid dribbled into his lungs and ended him. As soon as sleep overtook me, I

was transported back to the library, this time to see all. The poet's collapsed chest. The objectivist's bulging, dead eyes. Her massive, dead tongue, coated with blood, draped over dead lips, dead teeth. His fingers twitching in spasmodic rebellion against the inevitable. The pallid skin. The ruptured flesh. This, again, and again, until morning.

And then, with morning, sorrow and impotence and guilt to drag with me through the endless day, to join me for meals, to accompany me again into my fitful sleep.

Imprisoned in autumn, in remorse, I tried to tease substance from the harp. Nothing. I achieved a note here and there, but in the face of my brutality, anything beautiful rang false and anything true rang hideous.

Could I have done otherwise? Had I not taken violent action, Rand would have shown no mercy in grinding through Pushkin and continuing to feast on further innocents. Yes, the world was two lives lighter because of me, but how much senseless slaughter did I avert by stepping in as I did? An unanswerable question leads to much conjecture and little satisfaction.

I spent full days staring, self-interrogating, gaining no knowledge, no illumination.

And yet I was better placed than Pavlova, that shattered, overtaken ballerina, no longer nimble and no longer light. I saw her only in glimpses, an ashen figure lurking on the margins of the estate, in possession of a body but suddenly with no sense of what use it held. Perhaps she blamed her hands for her lover's death, she punished them by allowing her body to go to seed. In the momentary flashes I caught of her, I saw a sliver of a woman, whose sagging skin bespoke no nourishment. Her jagged breath wept. She

plodded from room to room, trailing heavy self-hatred behind her, while I despised my luck at being left at least with my will to live.

From Pavlova, a lump of pudding devoid of intention, I felt one clear emotion rising to the surface of her malaise: malice. I cannot say with any certainty how I became aware of her hatred of me. We never shared words, or even glances, following that night in the library, but as a porcupine's mood can be gauged by the slant of its quills, Pavlova's seething anger glared legibly in the tension of her bearing. She may have dropped the bookcase, but I was the one who had set it in her hands. She was party to the massacre, but I was the massacre itself, the crystallization of that evening. I dared not breathe tenderness. I dared not share her grief. I dared only to observe her from a distance, absorbing her fury and entitled to none of my own.

In Sansone's orchards, apples bulged. In the fireplaces, crackling logs shed empty warmth. In the halls, draughts slithered, serpentine, over my feet, while I flinched at shadows. Fall breathed promises of a grim winter.

The horse's howling entered autumn more wretched than ever, and I found the sound unbearable as I failed to sleep. Frosty winds slammed the walls of my cabin, which groaned under the strain. My harp sat cobwebbed in the corner, its strings distorted by the weather's fluctuations. Under my quilt, I was a solitary mouse. I knew that I was contracted for one year at the colony; a return to G— stood at the end of winter. But what lay there for me? My father? I could not clutch his ghostly image, could not recollect him as anything but formless nostalgia. Konrad and his compeers? To return to such bullish, provincial insipidness, such a gauche and uncultured lack of refinement, after the

extravagances I had encountered in America—after the intellection and theoretical acrobatics prevailed upon me by Sansone and his ilk, to return to the blunt simplicity of “right is right” and “I am me”—was unthinkable. Frau Schreiber? A mulish acorn. Butchery? *Deutsche*? The language rang ugly in my ear.

Yet, what would become of me in America? Would I continue to eat and sleep until I bloated into irrelevance? Continue to develop my music, to pursue a train of rich artistic promise, only to discover that my progression was regression and that I must start anew again and again? Continue to feel the chill judgment of Sansone and have no more understanding of how to achieve his blessing than of why I bothered to value it? Continue to seethe with the guilt of manslaughter? Continue to scabble after beauty in an ugly world, to exist in an isolated utopia, in willful ignorance of the howling horse, the baleful ballerina, the miserable Munch?

Ill, I somehow understood Bucephalus’s longing for a return passage to the time before his birth. Every day sees a new complexity and a new insoluble problem. Under my goose-down covers, I cursed the boundaries of my insular existence. If I am not to know everything, why am I to know at all? How does it serve me to inch along the surface of the monstrous globe, aware that little of it will ever be familiar? How does it serve me to meet horses, writers, painters, tyrannical Americans, knowing that I will never understand them except through my own limited, vermicular perspective?

The complaints. I had caught them.

My door creaked open, shedding a sliver of light from the garden outside.

“Hello?” I cried. A black silhouette lurched into my cabin and shut the door behind it.

I drew my knees to my chest and the cover to my chin, balling myself defensibly.

The heavy breathing of a creature hung somewhere in front of me. In the darkness, I could see the thing's lumpy outline but nothing more. Sansone? But his punctiliousness would not permit him to enter unannounced. He would never arrive by stealth: He wanted his victims to be in full anticipation of their own dismemberment.

"Show yourself," I said. "What are you?"

The figure approached.

"What are *you*?" replied the figure in a female voice.

"I am C—," I said.

"What is C—?"

The figure had reached my bed, and I made myself small. Should I lash out? I had nothing but my fists. Should I scream?

I screamed.

"Don't fret," said the figure. "We all grow and we all change and maybe who we think we are is who we know we aren't. Thinking is not knowing and knowing that we can think."

I felt weight on the mattress beside me and knew that Gertrude Stein was in my bed.

"What do you mean here?" I asked. Her body lay still and warm, her fingers grazing mine. "Please be aware: My bed is a place of my privacy."

"Wicked wicked wicked wicked bird," Stein said. "Dirty dirty dirty word."

I edged away from her and found myself at the limit of my bed. I could not interpret her, and yet it was not unpleasant to have an antidote for evening's loneliness.

Perhaps Gertrude Stein had arrived to keep me from wandering back to the grisly site of Pushkin's demise. A babbling angel, she would divert me through the night.

"I am not in possession of anything wicked or dirty," I said. "I am just me, C—."

"We are judged by our actions," said Stein, "which sit in judgment upon us, which in action give us inaction. Which action? Witch action."

"Please. Let us just lie here and not discuss. Night is long and lonely. Future, present, past: All is not certain. I am only happy for company."

"We lie here," said Stein, edging closer, threatening to force me over the side of the bed. "We lie there. We lie when we discuss and we lie when we live. Lying and living. Lying and lying. Lying long, lying lonely. When we lie, we lie alone."

"Silent yourself," I said. "Please. Night is quiet. I am glad for your friendship."

I grasped Stein's hand under the covers. Hers clamped onto mine with ferocity I had not expected. I tried to wiggle my fingers free of hers, but she held me captive. Sweet captivity. Tired of acting and thinking for myself, I happily consented to act and think for her. Stein, I felt, would be a benevolent dictator, and so I nestled my body into the hollows of her form and felt her breath warm on the back of my neck.

We lay in the quiet cabin, two uneasy, unacquainted allies against the darkness beyond. In her arms, I felt incapable of brutality, incapable of angst, capable only of being soft, of transmitting warmth, of allowing myself to rest. Such comfort from a body I didn't really know. Simply by allowing my self to mold to hers, our breathing to grow aligned, our rhythms to synchronize, I had grown beyond myself. And yet, who was she? What was she? No matter the extent of the harmony between our porous selves, the center of Stein was an iron core that I could never enter. To be so close to another, and

yet to have that other be so unknown. So unknowable. So everlastingly other. We sighed together over our mutual impenetrability, each woman prisoner to herself and yet so tantalizingly close to breaching the boundaries that kept her hemmed within.

“Wicked wicked wicked wicked wicked bird,” she breathed, her words lightly percussive.

“Oh, I am not,” I said.

“Wicked wicked wicked wicked bird.”

“I want nothing more than just peace for me and you and all,” I said.

“Your actions,” said Stein, and she clucked, drawing me more tightly against her body. “Your bloody deeds and deeds and deeds.”

I gave the night a shuddery scream worthy of Bucephalus.

“No!” I cried. “You understand nothing. Ayn Rand. Alexander Pushkin. I did not wish to create death. Never, never, never would I. It was the most necessary, only because if not a little death there in the library, then bigger death to follow. You must understand me. Please understand me. You must at least understand me.”

“I do not understand you. I will not understand you. I cannot understand you.”

“Then I am hopeless. I do not myself understand me.”

“Poor dear,” said Stein. She ran the point of her nose along the outer rim of my ear. “Poor poor dear.”

“I am wicked,” I said, my anger and my sorrow dribbling into words. “I must at last say it, just as Sansone has once made it inevitable to say. I am wicked. In the library, I did not think. I was controlled by impulse and did what I thought must happen, what I was not able to resist. I acted, thinking only defense. But I did not see, Stein. I did not see

at all my own wretched wickedness. If in instinct, first move is to crush, then what does that say for awful, wicked creature that is acting on such instinct?"

"Shhhhh," said Gertrude Stein. "If there is no free will, you cannot be wicked. If there is only instinct, you cannot be wicked."

Her arms pinned mine, and her lips were on my face. I twisted free of her.

"You don't listen to me," I said.

"I do listen to you," she said. "You are a beast."

"I am not a beast," I said. "Once I lived in Germany with my Papa, who was one butcher. I received invitation to come across the Atlantic and play beautiful music on the harp. It was told me that art was contemplation of the most beautiful things. It was told me that I needn't want anything more than beauty. I still believe in principles and laws. I believe in rules and boundaries. Sansone is a beast. You are a beast. I am not a beast."

Gertrude Stein shrugged at me and kissed me again, this time square on the forehead.

"You're a vicious vicious vicious vicious German," she said.

I lay in the dark, hating her because it was easier than hating myself. She lay with me, an opaque figure on the other side of the bed. We were sundered, no longer to feel the comfort of mutuality, but I allowed her to remain, a heavy object beside me, a sponge whose purpose was to absorb the ill will I dared not direct inward.

It was as we lay apart that her hand found its way back to my body. The mischievous critter sidled toward me, and I was conscious of its approach, but I had no desire to arrest it. I let it scamper, and scamper it did, once it realized that its progress would not be hindered. It began an exploration of my arm, quizzing the *terra incognita*

with courteous palpations. I lay still, trusting that every inch Stein gained would further my hatred and thus drive me happily away from the sort of self-scrutiny that had left me sleepless for so many nights.

Finding no bar to its course, the hand rejoiced its way along the slope of my shoulder and over the terrain of my chest. My heart beat in the dark, but this heartbeat was mine and not Stein's. Even as her hand crept around the circumference of my adolescent breast, I kept our selves distinct. She was outside me and a source of displeasure. I was myself, C—, a creature of integrity, a well-intentioned innocent.

I successfully avoided a reflexive lurch into ticklish laughter as her hand made its way onto my abdomen. She could draw nothing from me but disdain.

Lower still crept that inquisitive gastropod, that ownerless hand, that five-fingered navigator whose astrolabe had set it on a southerly course.

I would not flinch, nor budge, nor relinquish myself.

And yet Gertrude Stein managed to hit a note of surprise as she located the spot that rendered me liquid. I ordered myself, sudden puddle that I was, to stay within myself, to respond in no way to the simple strumming that had set me ashudder, to try, where possible, to remain stone, and yet this commandment to self-petrify earthquaked accidentally with the motion of Stein's swirling, whirlpooling me down and up into the waters, into the sky, into the constellations, where points of light beamed steady and clear, solitary stars, unshaken by the shaking that started to shake me; shaking, I shook and shuddered and—yes—maintained my integrity through grit teeth and my body hiccupped once and hiccupped twice, but, never mind, I was me, myself, my own being, inviolate, until a sudden twist of her wrist launched me alurch once more, and I found me

myself scaling past the moon, then sucked down to soil, then bounding again once, up, clad in clouds, weightless, but not yet hers, no, still me, C—, still a room with four walls, still a person with intact skin, still a teenaged German lying corpse-cold in November dark, determined not to enjoy the enjoyment that was kindling in my core, determined to radiate waves of hate, oscillating waves of hate, sine waves of hate that rose and fell in the same rhythm as the searching, sliding fingers of that hateful hand, the hand that continued creeping deeper toward the mystery that was me, into my I, insistently knocking at the door, knocking, knocking, growing louder and louder, until I felt that the door might burst at the pressure of the knock, and there, it flew open in a burst of light, in a gust of wind, in a moment of exposure that ...

And here I realized that the door that had burst open was not the door to me, but rather the door to my cabin, and there, small and wraithlike against the gloom of evening, was that miniscule ballerina, Anna Pavlova.

Her hair wild, her nightgown sagging from skeletal limbs, her body warped by sorrow, she was an evening apparition, wailing into my sanctum.

In an instant, I was up and out of bed, my attire discomposed, Stein hiding herself within the mess of sheets and shadows that lay upon my mattress.

“C—!” shrieked the ballerina, and she flailed around the room, seemingly in search of me, although I was making no effort to conceal myself. “O, C—!”

“Pavolva,” I said, which sent the furious figure wheeling towards me. “Pavolva, be calm.”

“*Nyet!*” she screamed. “You are horrid!”

Her little body rebounded against mine, pushing me back onto the bed where the craven Stein still lay, obscured by the darkness and by Anna Pavlova's single-minded sense of purpose. I grasped for Stein's hand, but she had turned her back on my plight. I clutched only fabric.

"Monster!" screamed Pavlova. In torrential rage, she took hold of the nearest piece of furniture—a roll-top *escritoire* that held my burgeoning masterpiece—and upturned it. She kicked the upended desk and struggled to break off one of its legs.

"Please, Pavlova," I said.

Unsuccessful in her efforts to destroy the desk, she turned instead to the sheet music it had spilled and kicked it up and around into a flurry of white paper, iridescent in the moonlight, mottled with the black craters of notation. As and Bs and Cs and Ds and Es and Fs and Gs and flats and sharps and chords and discords slipped through the air, divorced from their phrasings, discrete moments of meaningless harmony, reshuffled melodies. A storm cloud of notes cumulated with Anna Pavlova at its heart, and I launched myself from bed and plunged into the bluster of untethered musicality. Immersed in the swirl of my own creation, I stumbled over the body of my desk and dodged updrafts of manuscript.

"He was a poet," Pavlova muttered through her sobs. Just out of reach, she smashed a mirror with her elbow and then ripped its jagged carcass from the wall. "He was an artist. He was a seer. He was a lover."

"Calm," I ordered, slipping on a sonata and tumbling against my dresser. "Do stop. I as well am grieving as you."

“*You?*” Pavlova asked, and this question alone seemed to collapse her formless anger into a single, burning point that raged between her eyes. “*You? Grieving as me?*”

I steadied myself against the dresser. Pavlova stood in the center of the room, breathless and staring, quivering with the effort of drawing up the deepest dregs from the well of her fury. My dismembered composition carpeted the floor. At the far end of the room, Gertrude Stein was an unhelpful bulge beneath my bedclothes. It was hard to discern her in the shadows, but I thought I perceived her propped up on one shoulder, watching me and Pavlova spar without acting to intervene. I wanted to call out for aid, but the state of Anna Pavlova’s ceasefire was so tenuous that I dared do nothing but look at her with unthreatening compassion.

Should I speak? Would that calm her or merely set her once again awirl?

“You,” Pavolva said, skewering me with her finely focused loathing, picking her way carefully around her English to find the words that bit most cleanly. “You. Do. Not. Grieve. As. I. Grieve.”

A pregnant pause ballooned between us. Pavlova’s tearful anger swelled, threatening to push the very air out of the room. I choked to breathe.

“You,” said Pavlova, and here we locked our eyes, knowing that nothing more could be said. “You.”

“Wicked wicked wicked wicked wicked,” came a murmur from the bed. I blanched at the injustice of Stein’s reproach, but Pavolva seemed not to hear it, intent as she was on my mortification.

“Pavolva,” I whispered, hoping not to stir the air that had seemingly begun to settle. “Yes, I cannot know what it is to feel sadness as you feel.”

Those hateful eyes held me.

“There cannot be anything to make sadness less,” I continued. “But there is perhaps a way to make sadness more. We are all people in this colony together, and together we must live and continue. When misfortune falls, we must weather it as one and not allow deepest sorrows to create still deeper sorrows. If violence alone can answer violence, then where does that leave us?”

Pavlova moved her lips as if attempting her words silently before committing them to speech.

“You,” she said, “killed him.”

“Shame shame shame shame shame shame,” said the humped bedding at the far end of the room.

“He was killed,” I said, “by the colony. By me, by you, by chance, by Sansone, by the hideous Rand. We put ourselves in danger only with the thought of saving you. You must know this.”

And Pavlova sank to the floor, a forgotten rag doll surrounded by an expanse of sheet music. Her body quaked.

I took tentative steps to her and, finding that she did not rebuff my advance, I set a cautious hand on her shoulder.

“It is okay,” I whispered.

“Of course it is not okay,” she said.

“Of course of course of course,” said Stein from the bed, and my hatred for her redoubled.

“Well,” I said, and crouched beside the twisted husk of a ballerina. “Well.”

She splayed herself on the ground, her breastbone jerking up and down with the force of her sobs, her flesh translucent and undernourished. Her eyes bulged as she gargled air.

“I cannot breathe,” she said, and clawed at my nightgown. “There is no air.”

“Shhhhhh,” I said. “There is air enough. Be calm.”

I stroked her hair while she stared at the play of shadows and moonlight on the ceiling. Her eyes gazed unblinking from the bottom of cavernous sockets. Anna Pavlova was a skeleton draped in skin, a fleshed mote.

“It is my fault,” she gasped. “It is my fault.”

“Please,” I said.

Anna Pavlova rotated her head in my direction and let her dead eyes fall upon me.

“I hate you,” she said. “I will fight you.”

“Settle yourself.”

“I hate you,” she said, and she levered herself into a sitting position, her gaze unrelenting. “I will fight you.”

“She will fight you,” said Stein from the shadows.

“We will duel,” said Pavlova. “We must duel!”

“It is unnecessary,” I said.

“We will duel!” Pavlova screamed, leaping to her feet and accusing me with a single extended finger.

“No,” I said.

And Pavlova screamed and battered me with her ineffectual fists. “A duel! The very thing!” she cried and, kicking up the sheet music she had scattered, she tore from

corner to corner as though she were a trapped moth, never turning her gaze away from me, never allowing her threatening finger to relent. “A duel! A duel indeed!”

“A duel! A duel! A duel!” Stein leered.

“Please consider that the idea is bad,” I said, but my protestations were of no use. The two women who had invaded my bedroom cheered in concert over the possibility of violent entertainment, Pavlova from a deep source of misplaced misery, Stein merely from an urbane anomie thirsty for diversion. Pavlova continued to scuttle through my room, unsure what to do with herself, but certain at least of the outlet her anger had discovered, and clinging to that anger as the only remaining cord that kept her tethered to life.

“A duel!” she whimpered, and with a sudden scream of terrified laughter, she bolted from my cabin and into the night from whence she had come.

Nothing can be said of grief.

I stood amid my scattered music, chilled and confused, alone save for Gertrude Stein’s proffered solace:

“Look what you’ve done. You’ve done what you’ve done. Wicked wicked wicked bird. Dirty dirty dirty word.”

“Please leave me in peace,” I said.

In the darkness, Stein’s titillated grin was a nacreous crescent.

The next day, I tried to reconstitute my *magnum opus* from the scattered sheets that Pavlova had left to carpet my cabin. I despaired at putting the pieces back in order. Entire movements slid from one position to another, as the logic that had once connected

them melted off into a past I could no longer recreate. I felt myself unraveling and, for once, music could not serve as the golden thread that would stitch me back together. I decided instead to walk in Sansone's grounds and seek the horse whose boundless sorrow could perhaps serve to guide me. If I were not to collapse under the weight of my woe, I would need to sturdy myself. Who better than Bucephalus to teach me how to shoulder the unbearable?

I layered furs on myself to withstand the biting wind and set out at a brisk pace. The snapping teeth of autumn nipped my cheeks, tweaked my ears, as I wound between splintered trunks, over the crisp corpses of leaves. Dying flickers of red, orange, and gold tongued the upper boughs of the trees, but all else had settled into gray. Squirrels scavenged, seeking living kernels amidst heaps of decay. Birds hooted discontent, bodiless.

My leather riding boots sank into the spongy earth with every step. Beneath me, earthworms milled soil into soil. The dead shed nutrients into the dirt, enriching through rot. I shuddered to consider the future time in which I, C—, would be rendered compost. At the end we will give life to weeds.

I approached the stables and steeled myself against the rank smell of wet hay and stale excrement. The spectral afternoon light peered between the ceiling slats, but the interior of the barn was a murky, twilight boudoir with a grit floor and networks of spider webs running between forgotten rafters. The lump of Bucephalus's body was a black mass. His hooves dangled, indolent, from his limp legs. I walked to him, and although his unblinking eyes apprehended me, he made no sign of welcome.

“Dear horse,” I said. “I am in sadness.”

“Dear C—,” he said. “You are in life.”

“Oh, do not be despondent, Bucephalus! How much sorrow you have seen and yet stayed afloat. Do not now, when I most require the wisdom of your perseverance, desert your fortitude.”

Bucephalus snorted and twitched his ears. His eyes followed a grasshopper that had not yet been killed by the frosts; the insect bounded across the horse’s line of vision and disappeared into a knothole in the far wall. With nothing left to watch, Bucephalus drew his lids over his eyes.

“Why is perseverance a virtue?” he asked. “Why embrace fortitude? Any truly intelligent being would realize that life is a colossus of disappointment, would turn tail, would flee. For me to coach you in outlasting sorrow, C—, would be for me to lead you blindly into your next, more grotesque, tragedy. Better by far to prostrate yourself before the altar of all-consuming despair. Once you have sunk so low as this molten horse, you are at least immune to further hurt.”

I scratched the horse between his ears, but no show of pleasure registered on his face.

“Please,” I said. “You may neglect your own life, if such is your pleasure, but do not be deaf to friends who need your comfort. Such is ungentlemanly.”

The horse’s eyes remained shut.

“I suppose you have heard,” I continued, “that Ayn Rand and Alexander Pushkin are not anymore living.”

“Such is life,” said Bucephalus.

“Such is death,” said I.

“The distinction is not so interesting.”

“Anna Pavlova does not see it such,” I said, my scratching growing more intense, fuelled by sudden irritation with the horse’s self-absorption. If the increased friction generated anything of pain or satisfaction, however, such feelings remained locked behind Bucephalus’s stoic indifference. “The ballerina is haunted by ghosts, and I am as well. It is impossible for me to live such, still more impossible for her. She wants a duel.”

“So duel. Perhaps some good will come of it.”

“*Ach!* What’s to be done with you, horse? When we hunted Ayn Rand, you stood up for peaceful behavior. Now it is a duel, and not a manhunt, that threatens. Where is that same pacific virtue? You said yourself that we must not let tragedy answer tragedy.”

“And what benefit did my pleas for peace provide?” asked Bucephalus. “Your manhunt was successful. Be pleased. Vicious German. You sought death, and you’ve found it. Enjoy the fruits of your labor. Fight your duel.”

I smacked Bucephalus across his face.

“Don’t dare call me vicious!” I screamed. “I want peace only! I want beauty only! You are a coward. You have sunk into your smug defeat, and it gives you pleasure to be a tumor, eating always at vitality of us who are still bold enough to dream for utopia. You are a drain and a nuisance!”

I smacked him again, harder than before.

No response from the impassive horse.

“Well?” I asked, raising my hand to take another swipe at him.

Bucephalus drew open one of his eyelids.

“Has your tantrum subsided?” he asked, and shut his eye once more.

“It is not tantrum!” I cried. “It is fundamental anger!”

“I am asking you to be honest, C—. Your love of peace and beauty is nothing more than fear. Behind your noble sentiments is a homely Black Forest girl too scared to admit that she’s not equipped to handle a vicious, arbitrary world. You are a student of Sansone—a creator whose creations are not dollops of heavenly manna, but outgrowths of an imperialist self. Here we are, all awash in the hell of the human experience ... (‘Human experience’! An anthropocentric construction, if ever I heard one. As though *my* pain and *my* triumph were somehow lesser, somehow nothing more than curious, inconsequential tangents to the One True Experience—the Human Experience—how the taste of the words—human words—English words—sits bitter on my tongue: a tongue that was never formed to utter such Anglophonic pabulum.)

“Yes, here we are, in a world that surprises us and stuns us and horrifies us, where we are acted upon by time, by weather, by chemicals, by others, and where our control over our own circumstances is a fiction. How can we make this capricious world less ferocious, less terrifying? I will tell you, C—, if you haven’t already guessed it. We appropriate it, bit by bit. We pretend to authority. We wield the scepter of God. We remake the earth to suit our preferences, declaring that this is beautiful and that is reprehensible and this is art and that is excrescence and, in the process, desperately try to justify razing the world in order to re-imagine it in terms that make it safe for ourselves.

“But our efforts are laughable because the world is not even remotely safe. As soon as you’ve decided what beauty is, your neighbor has decided that it is something else entirely, and who can win then? If we admit that our definitions, our theories, are

contingent, then where has our safety gone? We find ourselves once again flailing in a soup of confusion, at the mercy of external forces, permeable bubbles of flesh and fluid.

“And so we find we must fight. We must territorialize. We strive not to create love and peace in discrete slices but rather to emerge victorious from a slash-and-burn campaign to define the very ideas of Love and Peace in the first place—and to crush our opposition with whatever tools of death and torture we can devise.

“Your peace is a mummified corpse: stinking carrion wrapped in clean, white linen to hide what lies beneath.

“Go fight your duel. You will win, or Pavlova will, but how can you coexist? Better to rip the bandages off the putrid cadaver that lies at the heart of your ideology. Go fight. I hope there will be plenty of blood.”

I stood in the grey light of the barn. Winter whistled through the slats of the walls, unapologetic for its murder of summer’s vegetation. Germany lay across an ocean. Spring lay across a telescopic span of time. All around me was the estate that conformed to Sansone’s principles. I was a colonist who had signed a binding contract in a language she couldn’t accurately read. I was nothing. I was a drowning ant whose flailing acts of artistic self-preservation provided no protection against reality’s onslaughts.

Bucephalus was right, and because he was right, I hated him, and because I hated him, I found myself lunging against his body and battering it with my fists.

“Presumptuous horse!” I screamed. “You know nothing. You are a monstrosity. You are a depressed gunnysack, bloated with philosophies. How could you think ever that a hero such as Alexander would spend his energy on such a soggy hippopotamus like you? How dare a horse think it appropriate to speak a human language? You are not

worthy to possess our words. If only Philonicus had been more generous with his thrashings.”

Round, perfect tears traced a glistening path down Bucephalus’s muzzle.

“What?” I demanded. It was inconceivable that my weak punches could have registered painfully against the horse’s impervious hide.

Bucephalus did not answer me directly.

He looked at me, his eyes aqueous gems of hopelessness.

“You could not know,” he said, “how truly I wish I could have lived without language.”

I threw my arms around his neck, embracing him as though an overabundance of affection could undo the injustices he had suffered at my hands, at Philonicus’s, at Alexander’s, at his own. I pressed my face into his flank, hoping that he could not tell how breathlessly I was weeping.

“And you could not know,” he said, “how truly I wish *you* could have avoided the curse of language. But, alas, you begin to speak like a native.”

“Is there no way out?” I asked Bucephalus.

He considered a moment, and then rubbed my back with his hoof.

“C—?”

“Yes?”

“No. There is no way out.”

I continued to hold my body against his, and he continued to offer his meager physical solace as neither of us spoke, as neither of us thought, as we lay, defenseless bodies in a draughty barn in America in late November.

Bucephalus's suicide shocked us all, occurring as it did directly before breakfast the next day.

The hell of it. The horse had impaled himself on one of Sansone's Modernist sculptures and splayed himself across the oak breakfast table.

Dark, iron-rich blood sat in stagnant pools on the parquet tabletop and dripped onto the porous tile flooring of the breakfast nook. On the horse's face, a desperate, lovelorn sneer.

We colonists, having been summoned by Skylark's ringing of the breakfast bell, stood by, small before Bucephalus's sorrow.

"Fragments of a horse," said Edvard Munch epigrammatically, as he strummed his wispy blonde beard.

"Knowing it is knowing it," said Gertrude Stein with a shrug. "Dying it is living it."

And, catching the cold glow of Sansone's chandelier reflected in the dead black jelly of the horse's eye, I cried. I buried my head against the horse's flank, the air of the breakfast nook heavy with the heat of Bucephalus's escaped vitality. I rubbed my cheek against the warhorse's rough hide. Faint vapors of vermouth still emanated from his pores.

"Verstorbene! O, verstorbene!"

A hand on my shoulder was Sansone's. I knew it from the nausea in my belly and the warmth spreading over my face.

“There’s no need to mourn a horse,” said Sansone. “A horse does not have faculties.”

Sansone was smiling. A martyred horse, driven to anguish, lay before him, and his response was to stroke my hair and smirk.

“Berühren Sie mich nicht.”

“We’ll divert you. We’ll expedite your duel,” he said. “You’ll hunt ballerinas. It’s nearly the season. Your contract requires you to present a final showcase. I can think of nothing more suitable.”

“Ich kann nicht.”

“Oh,” he said, and laughed like a child. He squeezed my cheeks in the palm of his hand. “Oh, yes you can.”

“And so we all meet our end,” said Edvard Munch, his eyes roaming the breakfast nook for any trace of a coffeepot.

“A diversion, C—,” said Sansone. “Don’t waste your good spirits on the remains of this dipsomaniac horse. Nothing like sport to enliven the artistic mind. I’ll fit you out with guns and ammunition, and you will stalk a Pavlova. You will see her tracks in the snow, so we will know where she is hiding. When you find a ballerina, you will shoot it. You will roast the meat over a blazing bonfire. And you, my German, my bloodthirsty German, will enjoy this more than anything in the world.”

“Nein,” I whispered.

“You will need to wear something warm.”

I stood, stinging, by a former horse. All went to mist behind the scrim of my confused tears. Sansone wafted away, and Skylark arrived to perform triage on the furniture.

Gertrude Stein clapped a hand onto my shoulder and spoke:

“A wise woman named Gertrude Stein once said that a wise woman named Gertrude Stein once said that a wise woman named Gertrude Stein once said that a wise woman named Gertrude Stein once said that when a single lobster goes to glory, the entire ocean weeps salt.”

Skylark described a wide circle around me as he scoured the tile floor with bleach and steel wool, terrified that he might come into contact with my numb sorrow.

Time passed, and I stood.

For a living, loving horse to become skin and blood, a drapery of flesh serving as tablecloth and centerpiece. I had spoken with him. I had rubbed my hand over his exhausted muscles and partaken of his thoughts, absorbed his anguish. In turn, he had absorbed part of me. I had spoken, and he had heard. His brain had processed my words and my glances. What of that remained? That C— had dispersed into the void. The C— that Bucephalus had known could never be reclaimed. Selfishly, I clawed at Bucephalus’s death, claiming it for myself. The contents of his mind ... the things he had known and never spoken ... the opinions he held and never voiced ... the impressions and indents that experience had ruttled into him but that had never crystallized into something discrete, something physical, something graspable and knowable and touchable and consumable and ... and ... where had it all gone?

All. All was gone,

Somebody will be moved by my noise. I am not just sitting by myself plucking and plucking and plucking and making empty noise.

Or.

I wasted through December. Ever expanding nighttime seeped across day like a horse's streaming blood. Down came snow in slick pellets, while my windowpanes grew caked in ice. Nothing warmed.

Skylark stoked a daily fire in the boxy hearth carved into my wall, tiptoeing around my recumbent body as I lay swaddled in haphazard sheets. Diligently, he fed cracked wood to the braided flames, which twisted and swooped in temporary struggle before giving in to lethargy and spending themselves in dead mounds of ash.

Skylark brought hot-water bottles for my feet and woolen blankets for my bed. I suffered his attentions, making no show either of gratitude or exasperation. The more I allowed silence to sit guardian at my bedside, the more Skylark was driven into obsequious gracelessness, tirelessly adjusting the lay of my duvet and presenting log after log to the tepid fire. After his duties were performed, he would linger in the doorframe, idling while attempting not to appear idle, shifting his feet and shrugging as he awaited the acknowledgment of his service that I never mustered the strength to issue. He scuffed and pawed and whimpered, making a show of chipping splinters off the walls, until he would heave a sigh, stammer, "Good day, good day," and eel himself out with a series of bows and nods and cringes.

When food came, I nibbled what was before me, but when food did not come, I did nothing to seek it. I stirred during the scant hours of daylight, but my ambulation

carried me from bed to harp to window to harp to bed. In response to the infinite cruelty of the outer world, I collapsed into myself like a dying star. I contracted my borders and I guarded them with single-minded gravity. No longer a maid of the meadows, no longer the plucky cartographer who strove to map the colony—to draw it into the orbit of her knowledge and thereby to own it—I was a spinster whose domain was limned by her four walls. Within the confines of my rude cabin, I was aware of all that happened. I could give consent for the floor to be swept, or I could let my surroundings go to seed. It was my fief: It ran as I willed it. In order to live, I had to shed Germany; I had to shed Bucephalus; I had to shed music and steamships and coffee flown in from exotic lands; I had to shed dishes and dinners, hot baths and midnight wanders. I gave myself only the known—only that which I could see and touch.

An occasional note would sound from my harp, courtesy of my hand, the culprit responsible for giving life to melody, but any note whose birth I allowed was doomed to the floor, sinking meaningless. Music was not permitted to exist if it threatened to soar beyond my boundaries.

Inch by inch, I claimed my territory, securing my world, striving for the gradual acquisition of a fixity that would give me the confidence I would need if I were ever again to set foot outside my cabin.

I hoped to trust that, if I stepped, the ground would be there, a solid thing.

Sansone's shadow stretched above me like a storm cloud sent to disrupt my carefully cultivated certainty.

“Your sad state of mope,” he said, “does not release you from your obligations: Sunny or sad, you must play.”

The deep December evening cast grey over my quilt, my armoire, my forgotten harp. I had not practiced for performance, and when I hoisted myself from bed, I simply stared.

Sansone held a candle, and its filigree of light set reflected threads of illumination slipping over his eyes. The man had a certainty that I had long envied but that I had not quite come to understand until I realized that it was precisely what I now lacked: Sansone could stride wherever he chose and trust that he could master the terrain. If something did not conform to his expectation, then it was existence itself—and not his expectation—that was faulty. When it came to me, he had the security of a contract behind him. I must play because it was written that I must play. Sansone owned me because he owned the words in which my terms and conditions had been set down. What did I own? Liquid reality. Nothing so permanent, nothing so binding as words.

Aching, I moved to the harp. I sat, my hands at the ready.

Sansone went to my bed and lowered himself onto it, confident that it would bear his weight, never questioning its solidity. His candle dusted his face with a ruddy aura, and in the pale firelight he stalked me with his eyes.

At my recital in the barn, in G—, I stamped my signature on beauty. I advanced my aesthetic and cursed the provincial Germans who could not appreciate what I assumed to be objective sophistication. I had not foreseen a desperate horse. I had not envisioned the vital fluids of a crushed poet, a crushed objectivist leaking into the fibers of the library’s rug. I had not known, had not understood that ideals are permeable—that

I will never be a Sansone, certain that my imprint is worth imprinting, assured of the correctness of my impulses. Sansone has chiseled his world from granite and stone, hacking out brick after brick which he has used to construct a colony wherein imperial order rehearses itself to his liking, while I—I—I live in reality, I think, and so my life is a galaxy, perhaps clustered around some grouping of cells I refer to as myself, but diffuse and imperfect, its nebulous tendrils daubing the uncertain boundaries of the void, never safe from trespass nor innocent of consequence.

If only I could carve a world à la Sansone. But upon what foundation could I build?

“I await your artistic triumph,” said Sansone.

And so I continued to sit, my fingers on the harp, my face caught up in a frown of concentration, as I allowed the swelling silence to condense into the first brick in the ramparts of my self-definition.

“I will not play,” I said.

“You must play,” he said.

“Then, so it must be. I am playing. Best art is found in silence. Welcome to my masterpiece.”

With a sneer worthy of the master himself, I settled my hands into my lap. Outside, owls held discourse. Inside, no show of surprise registered on Sansone’s face. He flattened his lips into a tight smile and nodded.

“You are learning,” he said.

“Shhhh,” I said. “You interfere.”

“You realize, of course, that you’ve made yourself into a cringing artiste, timid in the face of pain. Your belligerent ‘masterpiece’ is a feeble reaction to the colony you’ve suddenly found so distasteful, rather than an emphatic declaration of will. Do you really wish to play such a textbook *yin* to my *yang*?”

“My silence feeble? No. It is not. Just because you say I am *eine* ‘cringing artiste,’ this does not mean that I am.”

“Doesn’t it? It is how I perceive you.”

“Then, master, you are wrong.”

He snorted at my logic, and I astonished myself with the calm I exercised as I grasped one of the harp’s strings with both hands and twisted. The string cut into the sides of my fingers, but I flexed and tugged, grinding my teeth but careful to make no outward show of my effort. Blood seeped over the string that was garroting my fingers, but I continued to strain and, just as I began to fear that my destructive display would result in nothing more than my humiliation, I was rewarded with an ugly, distorted *ping* as the string popped loose from the frame of the harp and flopped into a useless coil.

“That was an expensive harp,” said Sansone. He spoke as though suppressing laughter; he was enjoying the performance.

“Oh,” I said, affecting sweetness. “Art is priceless, you see?”

Behind the thin flame of his taper, he roared a full-throated, leonine guffaw that would have jangled me had I heard it at the beginning of my tenure at the colony. However, in my months in America, I had learned that being taken by surprise was a sign of weakness, and so rather than respond to Sansone’s approval, I took the offensive.

“My masterpiece is not complete,” I scolded him. “We have reached only to *entr’acte*.”

“Then, by all means, I await the apogee of your artistry.”

Sansone set his candleholder on the bedside table and folded his hands on his lap. Although he was streaked with shadow, I could sense that he was playing the role of a model audience member. Mock-expectant, he sat in silence.

So, I rose and, assuming my role as stage performer, I stepped with overdone precision to the disordered mound of sheet music that I had never fully put back to rights after Pavlova had whirlwinded my painstaking composition into a muddle. I bent to pick a sheet from the pile.

“Most beautiful music,” I said, clutching the sheet to my chest.

Holding my creation close, I walked to the bedside table. I stood so near Sansone that, had he been human, I might have felt the warmth emanating from his skin. Beast that he was, his proximity only gave me a slithering chill.

Thinking of Germany, thinking of the dear Papa whose image had already slipped fully through the gaping lacerations that my artistic development had torn into my sense of reality, thinking of a past that had nothing to do with me, a future whose approach I could do nothing to stem, and a slippery, unknowable present, I touched a corner of the sheet of music to the flame of Sansone’s candle and allowed it to burn into a figment.

“Bravo,” said Sansone.

I gestured to the hill of sheet music behind me.

“The performance,” I said, “has not nearly reached to a conclusion.”

“Do you expect me to sit here all night while you incinerate your entire oeuvre?”

“My oeuvre will be over,” I said. “We will burn all night.”

“And you will somehow declare this a victory?”

“It is at last the only true art.”

“It is indistinguishable from what you’ve been doing all along, you beast,” said Sansone. “Whether you destroy materially or through your domineering aesthetic, you are ...”

“Silence!” I screamed. “So, if it is vicious, it is vicious. Perhaps I no longer care what I create, so long as it is mine. Perhaps I never cared at all. And, yes, perhaps this is great evil or selfishness or imperialism or whatever you will call it, but this is what I am wanting, and I am the artist. Your role is audience, and you must be silent and accept what I give you.”

Giddy with impertinence, I galloped to the pile of sheet music and grabbed up great fistfuls. I twirled to Sansone and screamed laughter in his face as I set my masterpiece ablaze. Imperturbable, Sansone sat receptive.

“For Bucephalus!” I shouted as I held the wad of flaming papers above my head. I allowed burning scraps to rain over me onto the cabin floor.

I shoveled another stack onto Sansone’s candle and caught his eye in the blaze of light. Was there fear in his eye? Was there the realization that he had fought to make me the C— he had wanted and that I was now playing my role all too well? Or was there just that same familiar smirk, that entitled sense of certainty that he wore like a tailored suit? No way now to know: A moment’s illumination was all that we were granted before the paper blackened and curled and gave way to residue.

I had burned my way through perhaps a quarter of my pile before I noticed sweat standing out on my arms and forehead. The heat of my exertion hung upon me, and I paused to catch my breath, but as I cast a glance to see what, if any, effect I was having on the master, I gasped to see him seated stoically in the midst of an orange glow. The embers from my careless performance had collected in my bedding, and a slow fire had begun to creep over my linen. Sansone, the model spectator, watched on, surrounded as he was in flames.

“*Ach!*” I cried out. “You will be burned!”

Sansone smiled as the fire found its way to the hem of his trouser leg and began to nibble it.

“Are you ending the performance?” asked Sansone. “Or must I continue to sit and admire?”

“Fire! Fire!”

From the bed, a trail of fire had snaked in a tortuous path along the wooden floor, devouring nodes of sap along the way. The fire had crept up Sansone’s right trouser leg as far as his ankle, but the master gave no indication of pain. While I coughed from the smoke, Sansone cloaked himself in smugness.

“Well,” he said, and stood. “This performance is not especially perfect, but I do at least concede that this is more honestly human than your prior attempts at artistic expression. Here is the catastrophe of the human spirit writ large in a combustible medium. Here is your brutality made flesh.”

Sansone wrapped his bare hands around his ankle, choking off the fire before it could climb further up his body. The bed, however, was fully engulfed in flame, and the

trail of fire running along the floor had spidered into a network of offshoots, each edging towards its own disaster. The stack of music was threatened. The armoire was ringed. The harp itself stood vulnerable, its golden frame already shining with heat.

“Call Skylark!” I yelled. “We must find water!”

“There is no point in water now. The cabin is compromised, a victim of culture. Come with me and let’s enjoy what you’ve created.”

Sansone held out his hand and it wasn’t until I had begun to follow him out of the cabin, stepping around the puddles of fire that smoldered on the floor, that I realized that he had once again taken control. I had initiated what I thought was a bold assault, and here I was, led by the hand by the very beast I sought to assert myself against. I glanced over my shoulder and, in my last glimpse of my former room, I saw the old daguerreotype of The Ancestors that I had perched atop my dresser as a feeble reminder of the past. The old faces in the picture bubbled with the heat. An elderly matron’s mouth was drawn open in a contorted grimace as the flesh was seared from her cheeks. White and ghostly were the faces that stared out at me from the burning image, twisting and evaporating into a bodiless reproach, screaming ignominy for the fact that I had forgotten—that I had forgotten—that I had forgotten, I know not what.

Thus, with a tug, I was out the door and among the trees, Sansone my guardian. The cabin burned behind us, but we struck out into the woods. I had forgotten the winter. We were met with the wail of frigid blasts, and I was immediately shivering.

“Don’t be cold,” said Sansone. “You are a huntress.”

Night chilled the front of me, while the blazing cabin warmed the back of me. I was a divided creature, exhausted, befuddled, and miserable. In my nightgown, I plopped onto the forest floor, balled up, and soaked my face in tears.

“I give up,” I said with my face buried in my elbow. “I am whatever you say I am. If you choose me to be a huntress, then I am a huntress. Set me to my quarry.”

“I have nothing to do with it,” said Sansone. “I merely diagnose what I see. I look in your heart and understand your nature, and so I speak it.”

“How am I anything until it is said what I am? No. I defer to you. I will be what you please. Just give me rest.”

“How can you rest? Artists do not rest. Huntresses do not rest. There is no such thing as rest, C—. Demi-gods, we are perpetually creating ourselves and the world around us.”

I shuddered, and my voice came out as a wail.

“I wish to stop creating.”

“Such a wish is death,” said Sansone. “Are you asking for a release from life?”

“I don’t know what I am asking for.”

Cold soil numbed my legs, and the winter air that met my haggard breath slipped cool and spacious through my veins, slowing my blood and absorbing my panic. I sifted through the dirt. Night crawlers twisted between my fingers as I listened to my kindling cabin.

“If you no longer wish to live,” said Sansone, “perhaps it is time to fight your duel. Pavlova awaits.”

I watched columns of flame tickling the night. Weightless ash breasted currents of air to sail the sky. Smoke cloaked the stars, but the moon leered nonetheless, a careless thumbprint smudged in the haze. Black bodies of bats darted through openings in the smoke screen and disappeared into offstage lairs.

I turned to Sansone.

“I hate you,” I said. “A murderer at least kills directly. You cannot even bear to do this. Instead you goad us and insinuate. You prod and annihilate until we are scraps. And then, if we kill ourselves, if we kill each other, what does that matter? You have had your fun and made your mark. And you escape with no blood on your hands.”

For the first time, I saw sympathy cross Sansone’s face.

“Oh, C—,” he said, “I am sorry to hear you say so, but I don’t deny a word of it. I’ll ask you for an honest answer, though: Do you fault me? If you look closely at your own heart, my dear, I think you’ll see that the only reason you begrudge me my fun is that I am better at it than you are. If you could puppeteer me as well as I could puppeteer you, don’t you think you would enjoy it?”

I smiled back at Sansone, oddly warm. Of course I must not surrender to death! It was suddenly quite obvious that I must live on to exact my revenge.

“And perhaps I can puppeteer you?” I asked.

“In that case,” said Sansone, “I will bow before you and admit that you have mastered me.”

“Very well,” I said.

“But it takes more than an act of arson to emerge as the victor,” he said.

“Oh, yes. Yes, I am aware of that.”

We both smiled into the night, each of us confident in our superiority. Sansone, however, would surely lose. His incentive was to maintain his lifestyle; mine had crystallized from spilled blood: from Pushkin's, from Rand's, from that dear, forgotten horse's. Had I become brutal at Sansone's behest?

Either way, he would suffer.

The blaze spent itself soon after Sansone left my side, and I picked my way to the smoldering remains. Ash and ruin: no more than this.

The music was done. Every note I had set down had been rendered a cinder. The harp on which I had doted for nearly a year was a blackened husk standing among the charred crossbeams and carbonized detritus of my former cabin.

I smiled, and then my smile split into a grin. I had come to America with dangerous intentions: I had wanted to create something beautiful. I had wanted to loose the bonds of gravity and ricochet off my own artistic brilliance into an ethereal plane that hummed with the mental activity of savants. In this world, we would all be granted eternal life through art. In this world, we would not be tied to anything actual. We would float on breezes of brilliance without casting a glance below to the suffering masses, uncultured and inept. What a selfish and impracticable world I had hoped to vanish into. I laughed as I gazed at the rubble of my naïveté: a shipwrecked sensibility, a decimated dream.

So much for beauty. I would become a practical person. I would seize my existence by the throat and show no mercy.

I spent an hour sifting through the wreckage of my former abode to ensure that nothing was worth salvaging. The contents of my wardrobe had been burned through, and all the furniture had been weakened to the point of uselessness. I searched in vain for any workable memento of the recent past. As night progressed, winter honed its knives against the whetstone of my body, and I had to give up. Chill sliced, ripping across my face and lacerating my body under its insubstantial nightclothes. Without warmth, I would be lost.

I gazed out at the mansion, cold light leaking through its suppurating windows. Undoubtedly, I would be welcome to find a place to bed down there, but when I thought of what was occurring within, I was repelled: Silver implements were laid out in elaborate place settings atop imported linens to enable the consumption of thousand-dollar dinners that would be then transformed into excrement; cocktails were quaffed and voided into porcelain pots; skylarks were chained to their labor; artists positioned abstract figures on vellum that had been peeled from a bleeding animal, scraped clean by hands that had been eaten through with lye and callused by work, and sold at a usurious rate; mahogany end tables had been hewed from the corpses of trees that had once reached at the sky before being felled by men and women whose feats of strength were paid for in grains of rice; philosophies perfumed the air while the sewage disappeared underground. Could I return and join the clucking, braying mass of my fellow artists? Could I convince myself that my brilliance gave me license to ignore my lifestyle? Could I belch out conceits like a manifesto-breathing dragon, slobbering after a fetishized beauty whose *raison d'être* was its uselessness? I could not live with those iguanas. I could not dot parchment with musical notes while lovelorn horses struck open their own abdomens and

pretend that my work held worth beyond self-indulgence. If I was a base and brutal animal, then I would live like a base and brutal animal. To dress myself in lace and chiffon and pretend I was other than a beast would heap sin upon sin, adding hypocrisy to my hedonism.

I screamed in mirth as I stripped off my slippers and tore barefoot into the woods. Roots savaged my feet, and the wind grew more courageous in its onslaughts, but as long as I remained in motion, I would generate sufficient internal heat to keep me from freezing. Hot blood circulated through my body, flooding my fingers and toes with warmth. My heart, a furnace fuelled by ire and heedless vitality, brimmed with almighty power. I ran along the cedar trails of Sansone's domain, and then I ran off the trails, overlaying my own pattern of migration atop the prescribed paths. Beasts don't heed colonial boundaries. Wolves are not asked for their passports.

Lupine, I bayed at the moon and pointed my nose to the stars. Branches snatched at my nightgown, but I could not be held back. I was propulsion embodied—the unreflective, indiscriminate manifestation of impulse. Craft? Ha. Technique? I was a mess of being, sacrificing beauty for truth, living just as I was.

I ran along, my breath gusting before me as my effort embodied. I was a steam locomotive, but even in my frenzy, I could not maintain my pace indefinitely. I had to seek a place to nest, and so when I saw the boxy shape of the stables approaching me from the horizon, I intuited that I had discovered my new home. I flew through the front gate, sending a flotilla of bats careening from the rafters. The musk of wood and hay met my exhausted inhalations. I picked up a fistful of hay, acquainting myself with my new

bedstuff. Safe now in the shelter of the stables, I allowed my heart to slow and my breathing to regain its normal cadence.

“Hello,” I said, just to hear my voice in the cavernous space. In Sansone’s mansion, the spaces were perfectly calibrated, acoustically designed to give their inhabitants the feeling that their voices, their ideas, their noises—however inarticulate, however stentorian—could fill the space; that we could populate the entire air with substance; that the slightest “ah” or “eh” was worth magnifying in depth and volume for the benefit of all; but there in the stables, the “hello” I pitched into empty space thudded a few feet in front of my face, small, heavy, and useless.

Hay sat in shadowed mounds, and the only light making its way into the barn was the moonlight dribbling through the gaps between ceiling slats. I felt along the roughhewn planks of the wall until I found a cobwebbed pitchfork leaning against a far corner; taking it, I heaped together a bower. Wrung by exhaustion, I did not bother to take care with my work. My arms objected to anything more than a meager effort at building a sleeping space, and so as soon as I had amassed a suitable pile, I discarded the pitchfork and sank to the floor.

The pricking of the hay put me in mind of my rude bedding in G—, and I was too tired to mind the sensation of insects, mice, and other unseen creatures rooting in my nest. All were welcome to share my bed; I had no interest in territorializing, and if a little rodent or barn sparrow could find comfort against my body, could I begrudge him that minor pleasure? Nay. My eyes sank shut, the heat that had set my thoughts boiling cooled, and my consciousness pooled into soup as body and mind melted into sleep.

I woke to chipmunks. Their shining eyes probed mine, and the chatter of their high council puzzled over my sudden appearance in their midst. One intrepid ambassador brought his paw down on my forehead as if to confirm my substantiality.

“Hello, friends,” I said, stretching and running my fingers through my hair to rake away the bits of hay it had collected overnight. “I am one of you now. I will not terrorize you.”

“*Squick scree hup-hup-hup?*” said one chipmunk to the one that was exploring my brow.

“*Chip-chap-chup,*” replied the ambassador with a glance at his compeers.

“*Sprechen Sie Deutsch?*” I asked.

Ignoring my overtures toward fellowship, a platoon of the chipmunks burrowed through my bedding to arrive at my leg, which they climbed over as though it were nothing but a fallen log that happened to have come into their path. In my haste to construct my nest the previous night, I had mistakenly undone the chipmunks’ own nest. Whether or not this annoyed them, I had no way of knowing: Once they had confirmed that I posed no imminent threat, they had proceeded without further ado to refashion their living space around the destruction I had wreaked.

“*Ich für meine Nachlässigkeit zu entschuldigen,*” I said as apology to the ambassador, who neither understood nor cared.

“*Hip scree cree chip,*” he said philosophically and, with a shrug, scampered away to join his comrades in the reconstruction effort.

My body had become a promenading ground for ants during the evening, and I allowed the creatures to maintain their byways over my arms and along my collarbones

as I scanned the barn's interior. Morning sunlight filtered through the gaps between the slats of the walls, giving the stables a luminous amber glow. Up in the rafters, I heard the vibrations of a snoring owl. Here was peacefulness. Here was bucolic simplicity. To think that I had come miles from G— in search of fortune and artistic advancement, only to shed my ambitions and find serenity in a ragged nightgown while resting atop a pile of hay. In the future, I would need to find a source of food and water; I would need to decide on a course of action; and I would need to figure out how best to tend to my hygiene, but for the moment, I could simply enjoy the fact that I didn't have to appear to advantage or polish my expression. Here, I could lie, watch the languid flies cutting paths through the air, and be as sloppy, as illogical, and as idiotic as I chose.

I had my legs half-buried in hay and my ruined nightgown slipping off my shoulders when the barn door let off a low moan and inched open to reveal a short, squirming figure wearing a wide-brimmed hat and holding a small shovel.

“*Ach!*” I cried and patted myself down into a slapdash form of presentability.

The figure gasped and dropped its shovel when it heard my exclamation. Clutching the doorframe, it poked its head into the barn.

“H-h-h-hello?” called the figure, and I recognized the voice as Skylark's.

“Skylark!” I said, and sprang to my feet. This sudden motion set a fearful howl quivering in Skylark's throat, and his legs became entangled as his feet pursued mutually incompatible routes of escape. “Do not fear me! All are welcome here.” I threw open my arms, which only flustered the poor creature further, but I could not repress my bonhomie. Though I was still on Sansone's estate, technically speaking, I was establishing my own domain. In my lair—or, I should say, in the lair I shared with the

chipmunks, the flies, the sleeping owls, and whomsoever else should pleasure our abode with his presence—all would be welcome. There would be no art, no honeyed speeches, no hackneyed witticisms—no striving, in short, to transmute the stuff of life into mediated forms—but only life itself. Love and warmth! Impulse and instinct! Liberty and honesty!

“You ... you ... you speak!” wailed Skylark, flapping his hands protectively in front of his face. “It speaks!”

“Why should I not speak, dear Skylark?”

I flung my arms around him in an embrace, and he went rigid and breathless.

“Relax!” I said. “You are a friend.”

He was locked in paralysis until I loosened my grip, and as soon as I freed him, he gasped air and goggled his eyes with a sense of betrayed trust.

“You must finally understand,” I said, “that I want only for us to act in a spirit of cooperation.”

“I do not speak German,” Skylark said, pausing after each word to analyze its effect on my face.

“I am speaking English!” I said. “We are speaking English!”

“She speaks!” Skylark whimpered to the ground. “It speaks!” he despaired to the sky.

“You may come in,” I said. “The stables do not have much in way of luxury comforts, of course, but you will find them pleasant enough. You will be my guest, and I can make you up a most comfortable place for resting, providing of course that we do not disturb our brothers the chipmunks or our sisters the ants.”

Skylark forced a perplexed smile and shrugged.

“Yes,” he said, and pointed at a chipmunk whose rear legs were sticking out of a knothole and wriggling furiously. “Chipmunk.” He nodded vigorous encouragement. “This is a chipmunk.”

“My dear,” I said, pitying the rubbery imbecile. When I first arrived in America, I felt that my understanding was somehow deficient, but the deficiency was Skylark’s. Not quite a person, he was a rucksack full of jelly, a tilted maypole, infirm in will, cognition, and stature. Like a damaged puppy, he needed to be nurtured and coaxed. How much of his feebleness was owing to Sansone’s tyranny? If anybody could benefit from the joys and comfort of a domain without hierarchy or affect, with its bedrock in natural affection, it was Skylark. “Come join my kingdom. You will not need to serve Sansone. You can serve yourself and others, not out of social duty but out of love and lightness of spirit.”

“Yes,” said Skylark, nodding vigorously, “Sansone. He is the master!” He picked up his shovel. “I will shovel. You,” and here he pointed at me, “will return to mansion.”

“No, I cannot go back to that world, Skylark. Sansone gives us luxury, but his world is empty. He makes you dress up like a servant and answer his calls, and he treats you like you have not the slightest brains. Skylark, you could be an intelligent person, but such is not permitted in Sansone’s estate. The master must hold the monopoly on knowledge and confidence, and so he makes you into a timid specimen more gosling than man! You do not need to consent to this. You must be author of your own self. Do not be what Sansone decides you will be. Soar free, Skylark. Join me in *my* colony, *eine* colony of freedom and love.”

Skylark's jaw moved up and down, and his eyes darted side to side. I could see him trying to process my proposal. At last, a slow smile spread over his face and he held out his hand to me. I shook it vigorously.

"Skylark! You will join us?"

"You," he said, and pointed at me, "learn to speak English *very good*. Clever, clever C—," he said, tapping his forehead. "I will shovel! You will return to mansion!"

"I simply will not."

"Yes, mansion is *good*. The master wants to see you very much. The master is *good*. He says that you have run away." Skylark here fluttered his hands. "He says that he needs to see you because you have to fulfill your contract. You need to perform at your showcase. You understand? At your duel. Do you understand 'contract'?"

I stared at him in astonishment at his utter incompetence.

"No?" he continued. "*No comprende?* Con-tract?" He clutched an invisible pen in his hand and scribbled effusively onto an invisible sheet of paper. "Contract. Laws." He turned his eyes to heaven in the hopes that some divine presence would inspire in him a means of explaining the concept. After a moment, he turned his eyes back to me, smiled encouragingly, and repeated his former gesture. "Con-tract."

"I do not honor this contract."

Skylark beamed. "Yes! Contract! Honor!"

"No!"

Skylark frowned, thought a moment, then smiled. "Not 'no,' C—. 'Yes'! You mean to say, 'yes.' Yes, you will honor your contract and return to Sansone."

No hope in rescuing Skylark from Sansone's dominion. His will had been ground down by years of servitude, and I could not combat such long-engrained idiocy in a morning. Some skylarks are past saving.

"Simply no, Skylark," I said. "I will not return, and you may tell your master that. Shovel now, if you must."

Skylark pointed at his shovel. "Shovel."

While Skylark made his way into the corner of the barn and began to root in the hay with the tip of his shovel in search of heaven knows what, I sought my logical next step. The spell of the morning had been broken by the intrusion of an arm of Sansone's empire into my reverie, and I was left to face reality. I could not return to the servility and ill-disguised viciousness of the artist's colony, but what could I do on my own? It is well to lie in hay for a morning, but sooner or later, I would crave fellowship. I would crave industry. I couldn't go off in the woods and collect berries for the rest of my life. If I were to create my own settlement, I would need to attract recruits. Perhaps Skylark was inflexible in his allegiances, but surely I could entice others? Surely there would be others who were not so seduced by Sansone's incantations of prosperity that they could not be convinced to prefer a simple life of honest, egalitarian community?

And here I thought of Stein. I remembered the despairing literary work she had been writing when I came upon her after my first brush with Ayn Rand. She clearly longed for an escape. She would join me in rejecting Sansone. True, I did not view her without ambivalence, but my frustrations with her were part of the old world. In my new realm, all would be forgiven.

I would find a way to extract her from Sansone's clutches. I would steal her away in the night. Once she had fled to my empire, it would perhaps be easy to capture the others: Munch, Pavlova, eventually even Glory-Anne and the skylarks. All would reject the satin-shrouded world of wealth for a bed of hay and freedom from art. Life would be an end in itself; we would feel no compulsion to improve or transcend it.

Skylark was busily making a mess of the hay, casting his shovel about wildly and kicking up divots as he sifted for the tiny pellets of mouse excrement that seemed to be his quarry. He was making up a little pile of waste as he worked at his Sisyphean task, but even as he cleaned out one section of the barn, the chipmunks were already at work befouling another.

"Perhaps," I said, forgetting my resolve to leave Skylark to his imbecility, "it is making more sense for you to get rid of old hay—waste and all—and replace with fresh. Such will be easier and more efficient, you see?"

Skylark flung his shovel to the ground and blustered to me, his chest protruding and trembling like that of an insulted pigeon. His arms squirmed outrageously, and his face underwent contortions as he shaped and effaced his words, huffing and scowling and whining and twisting.

"You, C—?" he began. "You ... y-you who do not even speak the language."

"What are you, slug?" I screamed at the mop, the charlatan. The useless noodle who slunk and skulked, flopping from order to order, his will a desiccated moth gone to powder. "You are a flimsy nothing, a zero in tails." Such a quavering, wavering, swiveling, sniveling guppy-eyed dumpling. A puddle of pusillanimity, a sludge of semen

somehow incubated in a wobbling womb long enough to produce a man half-made of milk.

The wretch's nostrils flew open and the sweat oozing from his face made him nothing but a damp, salt-cured lump of human ham. I pitied him until a thick black fly swooped at his nose and made its best effort to wriggle up his nostril. The manservant screeched and leapt, batting his face in squeamish horror. The burlesque was more than I could bear, and so I put my hands on Skylark's chest and pushed him as hard as I could. With a squeal, he fell backwards into the hay. The fly extruded itself from his nose and stumbled, winded and exhilarated, off Skylark's face.

"You barely exist," I said. Skylark looked at me, his face full of rage, and I kicked him in the ribs for this liberty. "What's the point of you?"

I do not recall whether I expected Skylark to disintegrate under my abuse or whether I expected him to be roused to retaliation, but I do know that I could not have foreseen his actual reaction. With calm dignity that I had never before seen from him, he picked his way to his feet, brushed himself clean of dust and hay, and even straightened out his lapels and righted his hat. He looked at me with unexpected smugness as an inchoate smile fought to assert itself on his lips.

"The point of me is to serve," said the manservant. "I am reliable and consistent. I speak English and I perform my duties. What is the point of you? You cannot even understand my language."

"I understand your language. I speak it without flaw."

"No. If you are a German, be a German. If you are an American, be an American. If you are a harpist, be a harpist. But don't go drinking champagne and rolling around in

the hay and burning down cabins and squashing poets and ‘*ach*’-ing and ‘oh’-ing and pushing manservants and sympathizing with manservants and judging manservants and inciting turncoatism in manservants and pretending you speak English. I am a manservant, and this is my shovel.” Here the lout took up his shovel and held it aloft as though it were a point of pride. “You are what? A harpist but without a harp? A German but without a Germany? I have a shovel. You have what? Art, I guess.”

This last comment struck Skylark as exceedingly funny, and he shook with a hateful, high-pitched giggle.

“Art, I guess,” he repeated to himself, which only spurred him into more uproarious laughter.

“No more art,” I said. “Life only.”

Skylark held his shovel up to me and shrugged. Pity and derision competed in his expression.

“*Entschuldigung*,” he said, his accent clunky but not grossly incorrect. “*Ich weiß nicht Deutsch sprechen.*”

“Skylark?” I asked.

He winked and wriggled. “I do not understand you,” he said. “I am sorry. I know when it is correct to submit to boundaries. Even if I can speak German, I do not speak German. Return to the master. Contract. Laws. And Pavlova wants a duel.”

“Pavlova?”

“Pavlova. Duel.” Skylark stuck out his thumb and forefinger in the shape of a gun and mimed shooting me dead. I staggered at the force of the imaginary bullet.

“No,” I said. “There is no need for violent action. Sansone’s sport is to watch us fight, and I will not give him such satisfaction. Pavlova can join me here; we will forgive all, and we will live in natural goodwill. You must transmit for me that message. See the chipmunks?”

The chipmunks were scurrying in busy networks over the hillocks of hay, looting seeds and overlooked acorns. They were not looking beyond themselves to understand why they were seeking food or what their existences meant. They were creatures pursuing their instinctual needs, and so would I be, and so Pavlova, and so us all someday in the new world.

“She needs not Sansone’s world,” I continued. “She needs no duels nor no ballet.”

I traced a wide, bashful circle in the dirt of the barn floor with my toe.

“So, too,” I said, “you are still welcome. If you choose. You are not beyond forgiveness.”

Skylark, however, had once again adopted his squirrely, servile persona, and so it was clear that he was determined neither to transmit nor to understand my message to Anna Pavlova. Instead, he fired another mock bullet at me, grinned helplessly, and shrugged. “Duel,” he said, and pointed at me. My response was my glare. “You will duel,” he said once more. “You are still under contract.”

With a spasm of his bony posterior, Skylark made his way out of the stables, clutching his shovel in one hand and using the other to play with the brim of his hat.

“I will not!” I yelled to his back. My vehemence made him jump, and he nearly beamed himself on the head with his shovel as he flailed and made haste to flee.

I looked after the receding Skylark and strategized. If Sansone wanted me to fight Pavlova, I could not simply wait to be apprehended. I would have to build up the strength of my own fledgling colony. Mice and owls and flies are worthy creatures, of course, but to defend myself against the onslaughts of human provocateurs, I would need compatriots schooled in the science of human language. The sky was a faceless grey sea, and unmoored as I was from the daily routines of civilized living, I couldn't hazard a guess at the hour. I had not woken long ago: Was it morning? The striated underbellies of the clouds gave me no indication. The sky pressed me with its nearness, and the chill of the air made me imagine myself an insulated corpuscle contracting into itself for warmth. This was pressure. G— was a lost fiction, Sansone's colony a sinister sequestration against which I must raise up arms, music an untenable frivolity. If this were all true, I had no choice but to fight for the liberation of my splinter colony: It was my only remaining hope. If I must exist, I must exist within some frame of reality—and that frame must be one that I have created, rather than the one Sansone has thrust upon me. If I could not establish the means of my own existence, what else was left for me?

The master must be overthrown.

If I had to duel Pavlova, I would duel Pavlova. I would duel, however, on my terms.

Ghostly, I crept along the exterior of the mansion, keeping low to the ground. The daffodils and crocuses that had flourished in the springtime had gone to mud and mulch, and so it was mulch and mud that I dragged myself through as I crawled from window to window, poking my eyes up just high enough to scan a room for friendly faces before

silently shrinking back to the earth. Every room had a lively fire blazing on the hearth, and the warmth of the civilized life beckoned to me more emphatically every moment as the murk of evening inched closer. My teeth chattering, I bit back the urge to cry asylum and continued to pull myself along the perimeter of Sansone's domain. Cracking with cold, I was no less troubled by my hunger. When I set eyes upon a vacant lounge with an unmanned sideboard, stocked with plump fruit, hot buttered toast, and steaming carafes of tea and coffee, my stomach protested that I had not eaten since the previous evening. Couldn't I stop indoors for a bite to eat and a moment's rest by the fire? Would that be against my new principles of self-authorship? "Silence!" I demanded of my stomach. I was not to partake of Sansone's world and risk becoming once again trapped in the vacuous world of luxury: I was a member of the natural universe, and I would subsist on grass and rocks if I must—anything other than to give myself over to the seeming pleasure that served as the bait to Sansone's snare. Though my stomach raged at the sight of the apples and pears sitting free for the taking, my will rejected them: The pain of hunger is nothing compared to the pain of servility. Let the colonists chuckle and bleat and stuff themselves with cake and self-satisfaction! I was on a quest for liberty, a dish more piquant than the rich excesses enjoyed by slovenly flesh.

I tore myself from the vision of viands and continued apace, seeking any sign of human presence. I lost count of the number of windows I looked through, but it had perhaps been scores by the time I caught sight of blessed life. I found myself peering into a fully white room with a candelabra burning on a centrally situated table. An easel had been set up against the far wall, and it was caked with aggressively smeared paint that tumbled colors together in violent collision. Standing before the easel was Edvard

Munch, his red, swollen eyelids drooping as he gazed in despair at his masterpiece. In one hand, he held a makeshift wooden palette on which the colors he was mixing had congealed into a deep purple-gray; in the other, he held a ragged brush that dribbled paint onto his shoes. I would recruit him, but first I resolved to watch him work for a moment. The concentration he trained on his picture was transfixing. He stared at it with disgust and humiliation until, with a sudden flick of his hand, he was slopping more of the bruise-colored paint onto the canvas. The new paint had little effect beyond darkening what was already there, and I couldn't perceive what the painting was meant to figure: It might have been a pond by night or a squid drenched in its own ink. At any rate, it was a morass of melancholy, and it didn't seem to appear to Munch's liking. Even after the application of additional paint, he stared at the product of his effort with downturned lips and slumped shoulders. With a sigh, Munch allowed the paintbrush to fall from his hand. It landed at his feet, bleeding paint onto the white tile floor. Munch himself collapsed into a squat and buried his head in his hands. The candlelight projected a monstrous silhouette of the painter's crumpled body onto the wall.

I pressed my face against the glass of the window, hoping that I could call Munch out of his depressed insularity by means of telepathic exertion, but whatever was going on in his mind was too loud and troubling to cede ground to external influences. I glanced to make sure that nobody was near me, but of course the evening was too cold for anybody to be out strolling along the estate's paths, and an incoming crush of fog provided me sufficient cover. Quietly, I scratched at the window. Seeing that Munch stayed folded into his position of stasis, I grew bolder in my efforts to rouse him. Checking around me once more, and receiving satisfaction that the only witnesses to my

presence were the leafless shrubs that the skylarks had planted along the edges of the mansion, I raised my fist and knocked against the window. Munch flinched, and so I began to hammer at the glass.

“Munch!” I hissed, though he couldn’t hear me through the window.

Edvard Munch rose and came to the window, leaving his paintbrush on the floor. I looked imploringly in at him, but he squinted as he peered out at me. Though his studio was brightly lit, darkness was gathering outside the mansion, and so he couldn’t make out my face. He leaned close to the window and wrinkled his forehead, but I drew no look of recognition.

“Edvard Munch!” I whispered. “It is me, C—.”

He called out, but the window obscured his words: I could only hear the low undertones of his voice. I pressed my finger to my lips, fearing that his outburst might give my presence away to a stray skylark or, worse, to Sansone himself, but of course Munch could not see my efforts to silence him. He said something more and brought his face so near mine that I could see the individual hairs of his beard shining ruddy in the candlelight. From his perspective, however, my face surely looked like an ambiguous blur wreathed by shrubbery. Did I resemble the painting he was working on? An indistinct twilight phantom?

I knocked again because speaking was useless. Sensing that I could not hear him and that he could not hear me, Munch opened the window and immediately recoiled from the winter air he had invited into his studio. I poked my face into the room, fighting not to enjoy the warmth.

“Munch,” I said.

“C—!” he said, and he gave me his arm to hold on to as I pulled myself up to the window.

“We must be quite silenced,” I warned him. As soon as I had climbed over the sill and shut the widow behind me, I collapsed onto the floor. The toasty air of the mansion jolted me into consciousness of my own frigid body, and I couldn’t control my shuddering.

“B-b-b-blankets,” I whined. “H-h-h-h-help.”

“But C—,” said Munch, crouching beside me, “what were you doing outside? It is winter misery there.”

I was too convulsed to answer. I reached up and attempted to drag Edvard Munch over my body for warmth. He flinched at my touch.

“*Jesus Kristus!*” he yelled. “*Kald som snø!*”

“H-h-h-h-h ...” I tried to speak, but my lips were rubber lumps. A pained whine escaped through my nose. Feebly, I clawed to Edvard Munch’s feet, desperate for his body heat, but he stepped just out of reach, staring at me with perplexity as though I were the canvas that had just been giving him such trouble.

“We must get you warmth,” he said. I tried to nod. “You are a reckless young woman. The cold is a treachery. Treasonous winds make winter.”

Tears leaked onto my face. Even my heart seemed sheathed in frost. My ears, my nose, my fingers and toes: all stung, and I howled in pain and cold, giving up any effort to conceal my presence in the mansion.

“Oh, do not!” said Edvard Munch. He knelt beside me and put his hand in mine. He yelled. “*Kald! Kald!*”

“I-I-I-I ...” I began, but gave up speech. Instead, I implored Munch with my eyes to somehow save me, somehow to warm and protect me.

“The fire,” said the Norwegian. “We must.”

He scooped me into his arms and, staggering under my weight, hauled me out of his studio, down a maroon-carpeted corridor, and into the lounge I had been looking into earlier, with a fire glowing under the grate and the stocked sideboard taunting my hunger. Munch deposited me in front of the fire, the warmth of which melted my face and set to dissolving the ice crystals that my fingers had become. The surface of my skin became the locus of all sensation. I was a defrosting shell, nothing within.

“You must be careful,” said Edvard Munch. He retrieved a heavy blanket from a chest under the window and piled it over me. I cocooned myself, the blanket’s rough fabric shredding my hands. “In the cold of winter, we are apt to become somewhat dead.”

“*J-J-J-Ja.*” The blanket smelled of dust and ancient smoke. Was I the first frozen colonist to whom it had provided comfort?

Munch continued to prattle as he stepped to the sideboard and poured me a cup of tea: “It is important to mind our own constitutions. You are, what? A delicate flower of, what? Fifteen?”

“E-e-e-e-e-eight-t-t-t-teen.”

“And in such tundra to be nosing and marauding. Well.”

Munch kneeled to hand me the tea, but I did not trust my trembling fingers to keep the cup steady on its saucer. Instead, I brought my insensate lips to the rim of the teacup and blew. Edvard Munch tilted the cup just enough to send a drib of hot tea onto my lips. I flinched, but once the initial sting had subsided, I felt the warm beverage

drawing life back to my face. With a whine and a pleading look, I tilted back my head to receive further libation.

As Edvard Munch nursed me back to coherence, I looked into the frigid, Norwegian eyes that betrayed nothing of the person behind them. His eyes were the static objects of my eyes' inquiry; they did not inquire in return. They sat there in the Scandinavian face, optical organs whose sole grace lay in utility. They did not invite. They did not communicate. Granite globes of unmoving statuary, they, cold and round and perfect like ball bearings. Although Munch sat with me patiently, engaged in the tender act of helping me to drink, the tenderness came from his habit and not from his feeling. I could have been a lost calf, a wounded soldier, a woman or a man. Munch would observe punctilious altruism as a matter of form—and if I were to have expired in his arms, I have no doubt that he would have shrugged me off, rang for a skylark to dispose of me, and continued the work that I had interrupted.

If Munch was an animated corpse, to what malady had his spirit fallen victim? I wanted to beg answers of the man, to warm him as he warmed me, but it was all I could do to keep from dribbling tea from my mouth. My lips were too cold to obey me; I could not ask questions of the painter, and so he remained embedded in my doubt.

“You must retain your health,” said my caregiver. “You must fight your duel.”

Again, this duel.

Because my mouth could not shape my question, I channeled my agitation into my eyes. Munch read me right.

“You will fight Anna Pavlova. She is distressed over the loss of her beloved.”

And I? Was I not distressed over the loss of my empirical foundations? Not G—. Not America. Not music. Not beauty. But the answer was not to fight, not to accumulate suffering. I had been to the barn; I had lived, however briefly, with the chipmunks. Rather than sculpt our grief into the tired forms of human expression—duels, sonatas, other equivalents—we can, if we choose, howl. We can unmake.

Yes! Yes, I remembered! There, in Sansone’s manorial splendor, the rough cloth of the blanket tickled me into remembrance of my purpose for seeking out Munch: the foundation of my own colony on the principle of unmediated living.

Imperial fire—there—in my heart. Burst.

“Oooo.”

My screaming liberation took the form of that thin, familiar vowel which bubbled volcanic from me. Munch cringed at the noise, and I flipped the teacup out of his hands. Tea scalded the carpet. I stumbled up to my feet, still swathed in the blanket, and pointed my lips to the ceiling, wailing, letting the entire colony know that I had invaded.

“C—,” said Edvard Munch, staring morosely at his tea-stained cuff.

I grasped his lapels and drew his body against mine. Perhaps my body was still cold—which I discovered when I tried, ineffectually, to compel my lips to form articulated words—but Munch was the one with the frostbitten soul. He lived a life of drawing rooms and tablespoons. He transmuted himself into paint on a canvas, but the act of translation was too perfect, too complete: His canvas held more than his body. The man himself was a minnow with translucent skin wrapped around the unremarkable skeleton that dictated his self. He marched from meal to meal, buttoned his shirts, tied his shoes, spoke the assigned phrases and lived for the assigned replies. And as he ground

along the proscribed tracks, his life railroading forward, making the scheduled starts and stops at familiar stations, the exhaust he belched from his smokestack took the form of art. Pain and pleasure leaked between Munch's fingers, bypassing the man and making straight for the museum. Who could blame him for his despair? Never would he hold a feeling for more than a moment: As soon as it was felt, it would already be figured; as soon as it was figured, it would be fixed—a point in the past, a scab composed of oil on canvas.

Was Munch a living thing?

And here I gagged at the realization that I had come to understand the lesson Sansone had been at such pains to teach me. Art was a repugnant thing. Either it was birthed of a manifesto—an imperial project unfurling the banner of beauty from atop a bloodily defended rampart, subjecting all unfortunates to its rubric of Good Taste—or it was nothing at all, the placental residue of a personal moment too monumental to be felt, too far past to be present. We who struggle to do, do not—or, in doing, do violence. Better to shriek and squirm and Glory-Anne ourselves to ecstasy. Better incomprehensible to shimmer, puddles, to dribble vowels as slugs dribble slime.

Munch would—must—understand.

Fighting numbness, I pressed Munch's angular frame, pillowing my breasts against his sternum. He radiated nothing, but I rubbed my skin against his skin, myself now the nurturer. I settled my chin on his collarbone and grazed his stubble with my cheek, breathing hot breath down his back. Languidly, he returned my embrace, I suppose because he imagined it his duty, hanging his arms over my shoulders like damp

laundry. I sucked on my lips and moistened them with my tongue, nibbled them with my teeth, before beginning:

“Edvard Munch. You are a slave.”

“I?”

“You have let Sansone decide how you will live.”

“Untrue.”

“When is the last time you have felt joy?”

I worked my knuckles down the man’s vertebrae, each bump of his back an individual node of unexplored pleasure. Instinctually, I pressed my thigh between his legs, uncertain whether or not I detected arousal pressing back.

“If life is woe,” said the painter, “it is not Sansone’s fault.”

“If life is woe,” I said, more aggressively deploying my thigh, “you must reinvent your life. I have a proposal.”

My hands reached Edvard Munch’s lower back and continued down. I clawed his fleshless buttocks and drew his hips to meet mine, impelling an unambiguous erection. His biological response to my nearness, however, was simple reflex; if any other part of him was excited, it made no show of the fact.

“Come and live with me,” I breathed directly into Munch’s ear. “Art is null, and in my colony there will be none of it. You will live with your liberty.”

“Whether I am a slave to Sansone or a slave to you, I remain a slave.”

“You cannot be a slave to liberty,” I said.

“When you came to the window,” said Munch, maddeningly indifferent to my body, “you were half-dead from cold. You had not eaten anything. You could not have

lasted maybe half a day more. And so, here you are, back in the mansion, back in civilization, before a fire in a manufactured fireplace, wrapped in a manufactured rug, drinking imported tea from a manufactured vessel. Your liberation is a slow, miserable death.”

“Then die!”

I plunged forward, grinding my groin against his, tingling from friction. My erotic charge would putty him, surely; in the face of our baser desires, who can submit to the moldy forms of colonial rule? Beasts, we. With a howl or a growl he would fling me against a divan and rip me apart or I would fling him against a divan and rip him apart or we would shudder to the floor, wailing or flailing or wailing and flailing, while I undid his shirt buttons or popped off his shirt buttons, watching them scatter like coins from an invaded treasury. The entire tea service would collapse alongside us and we would devour each other among the shards of shattered teacups. Or I would push him into the fire and love him while he burned. Or he would wind his hands down beneath the blanket that shielded my modesty, rubbing me to unknown superlatives.

Or, as it so happened, I would find myself ridiculous in the middle of an over-furnished study, small among bookcases, manhandling an unresponsive Norwegian: Edvard Munch, the human lutefisk.

He took my wrists and, with condescension, led me to the velvet-cushioned loveseat. He sat me down and—may he be struck dead—patted me on the head.

“You are cold and delirious,” he said, as if believing it. “We have established norms and forms because they help us live. You can shed however much you want of this—” and here he swept his arm through the air to indicate the furniture, the wood

paneling on the walls, the apples and pears on the sideboard, and the engraving that hung above the mantle— “but you will not be richer for it.”

“You are too scared to live,” I said, fighting to stand, but Munch’s hand on my shoulder restrained me.

“Quite the reverse,” said Munch. “I resign myself to life, much as I hate it.”

My eyes were steaming coals blasting a column of fire at the Scandinavian.

“You must rest,” he said, “and I must continue with my art.”

“Why must you continue with your art?” I said, venom in my voice.

Munch shrugged and sighed.

“It is continue with my art,” he said, “or admit that I have no purpose.”

“But what purpose is art?”

“None at all,” admitted Munch. “But it is better than truth.”

I stared at Munch—at his widely spaced eyes, at his freckled nose, at his sorrowful, skeletal face, at his cadaverous pallor—and here was a man who would never survive in my colony. Any effort at living in a natural state would dismember him. The fragile mayfly required lamb chops and chamber pots.

“Then get away from my sight, you coward,” I said to Munch. “Live happy as a slave and a nothing. Keep painting and let nothing be real. Die by increments instead of all at once. It does not matter to me. I have no time to waste on specters and half-people. So go away. Make something beautiful. The idea makes me ill.”

The gaze Edvard Munch set upon me in response was not angry, nor was it abashed, nor piteous. It was a stare that said he did not disagree with me but that this disagreement was not a source of concern. He acknowledged his cowardice but did not

regret it. His chilling, empty look, embodied only apathetic complacency. His life had been set in motion; it had gone according to a certain plan; and so it would end, eventually, without disruption. This did not bother him, and I hated him the more for it.

“Will you still fight your duel tomorrow?” he asked without curiosity.

“Tomorrow? Duel?” I pictured Pavlova, whose very body years of balletic contortion had rendered artificial. I did not want to send a bullet rocketing through her brain, but the thought no longer horrified me. If she wanted a bloody death in a violent contest of marksmanship, what did it matter to me? I was a free being. “Pah! I don’t care for your duels. I don’t care for your tedious face. Will there be a duel? Yes. Will there be a duel? No. There will be a duel if I will a duel. I abhor you, Edvard Munch. Go to your art.”

The wretch suffered no flush of indignation, no defense of his dignity. Instead, he bent at the waist, issuing a stiff bow, and said, “Yes. Yes, I will tend to my painting. I would be careful, C—. You speak a dangerous language.”

Good riddance to the artist. He left me to myself in the study, the stink of caraway seeds receding behind him.

I turned to the window, but the glass had beaded over with opaque condensation. My empire lay without. I belonged there, in the world I could not see through the frosted panes, with the chipmunks and the screech owls and the foraging raccoons. And yet my body, safe and warm and heavy, sank into the cushions of the divan and could not be prompted to rise. Outside in the lonely dark, I would have to steel myself against the cold and ferret out shelter. In the space of days, I would be driven to indiscriminate hunger that would leave me devouring whatsoever I could forage.

Inside, however, nestled in the toxic womb of luxury, I could pull Sansone's fleecy blankets over my body, sprawl on cushions stuffed with the feathers that had been wrenched from goslings' puckered skin, and drowsily read the fiery cryptographs shimmering into and out of existence in the depths of the malachite fireplace.

"I must flee ..." I mouthed around a yawn. "*Ich muss ...*"

But the fire had melted my intentions, and exhaustion and comfort smothered my ire. I tried to drum up verve for a midnight jailbreak, but the yawn that tented my mouth into a cathedral of lethargy sent a flutter along my spine whose message was unambiguous: *One night among the enemies will not undo you. Regain your strength and then tomorrow, with full belly and restored vitality, you can abjure the company of human things. But for tonight ... for tonight ...*

I blinked and drew darkness over me and then, blinking, darkness again.

I heard a yawn—mine—, fought fruitlessly to stay awake, hoping to continue the debate with myself, hoping to trumpet myself into immediate action, but as I dissolved, I saw myself lying, a tuneless C—, a C—'s face to the fire, a C—'s body recumbent in a C—'s moment of surrender.

So, she, I, C—, sighed to sleep.

CHAPTER 9

FANTASIA

Sansone's smile split his mouth, exposing bullets where his teeth should be. He fired his index finger at the coppice beyond the skylarks' quarters, and I turned to see what he was indicating. Pavlova's corpse was a rotting husk with a worm already half-burrowed into the ragged bullet-hole that pierced her forehead. Exposed brain sat red on the snow.

“Eine freudige Überrashung,” said Sansone with a giggle of delight.

Dogs arrived to tear open the ballerina's abdomen, bloodying their snouts with the slippery treasures therein.

A horse's eye, black, lolling at the end of a stalk protruding from a horse's empty eye socket.

Bucephalus's tongue, red, venous, a bulging, an alien, thing, is a slug, is a bird!

“Good cheer!” sing the skylarks in chorus, a Christmastide harmony, all trimming a *tannenbaum* with strings of teeth.

I'm presented a present: a heart, beating in its box.

I eyeball the heart. It seems expensive, so I pretend to joy.

“It's one of a kind,” says a skylark.

I put my hand on the heart, and it becomes a friend. It thumps, friendly. It pumps, friendly.

Skylarks drift away on puffs of winter air, fluttering like wisps of dander, scraps of clouds. “Farewell!”

In order to lock and load, you require a shooting pouch. You require a powder horn. A vent pick. Patch material, powder measure, patch knife, flint knapping hammer, priming horn, ball starter. And the pistol itself, to be sure.

Empty black powder into your powder measure and, after, into the barrel. Moisten your patch material. Use your ball starter to start your ball down the barrel. At this point, extraneous patch material can be trimmed. Of course, you will have a patch knife handy for the purpose.

Utilize your ramrod. I trust you know what to do with your ramrod.

Now.

Pull back the hammer ...

Prime the pan ...

Ready ...

Steady ...

A heaven of dewdrops gilds the morning. A G— breeze blows free through Black Forest foliage. Ribbons of sky braid the canopy, shedding morning light on a human figure standing by the creek, its back to me. I am drawn to this person—this man—that stands still in a placid pose of expectation. His head is bent forward as he scans the slow water trickling just beyond his toes; his calm, even breath lifts his ribs, his shoulders.

Fondness rips me. Although nothing but a pair of legs, the back of a head, this man is a solid certainty, and I love him for it. I enjoy his privacy. I am neither a sneak nor

an interloper, but I do not want to make my presence known. The man's silence does not involve me. It is sufficient for me to know he is there, reflective, proof against theory.

A branch breaks beneath my foot and I am discovered, but no panic comes. Branches break. Moments are ruined and replaced with others more perfect.

The man's face turns, patient, inquisitive, and it is Papa and also not Papa whose eyes see me. It is my father, younger than my father has ever been. It is Papa before fatherhood, before butchery, before the network of wrinkles and the blur of stubble. It is a young man who recognizes and does not recognize me as the daughter that will someday be born, that will someday betray.

He does not speak but instead opens his arms, creating a home into which I run. This is his forgiveness of a misdeed not yet committed.

Together we watch the run of the creek, the bubbles and bursts of water that tumble over rocks and leaves. Grasshoppers leap-fly bank to bank. The bullfrogs belch satisfied, reigning kings of indolence. The sun-warm surface of my face is a spread of lively atoms, each alert to the presence of its neighbor, each awake to the oncoming tremble of day.

The questions I want to ask my father are superfluties. Probity disrupts, and to scatter our moment of kinship is impermissible. Instead, we watch as sunlight sheds its concentric shells of color—red slips to pink slips to orange slips to gold slips to yellow slips to white—melting closer, minute by minute, to a revelation of its innermost self.

It is as I watch the soil, studded with emerald shoots of new growth, that I first become aware of the worming. Grey fingers wriggle through the crust of the earth. Grey fingers are attached to grey hands are attached to grey arms. I clutch my father nearer, but

he is more sad than scared; his boots have already been wrapped in the necrotic arms blooming from the ground like jagged flowers. The arms struggle to hoist themselves up from the dirt, revealing dead shoulders, gaunt necks, colorless faces.

I have pushed away and am screaming, my stomach an acrobat in full flip, as I recognize the black-and-white figures unearthing themselves, engulfing my father: They are The Ancestors. Their dour and distorted faces are locked in the half-melted screams that I saw on the smoldering daguerreotype when I left my cabin ablaze. Perpetually now, they suffer my artistic triumph.

“*Verzeih mir,*” I weep to my father, as the arms of the newly risen Ancestors encircle his torso and drag him to the ground.

If only my father in this moment had the generosity to chastise me, to curse me, to hate me, but instead he patches a smile over his broken heart and slaughters me with a tearful goodbye that holds me blameless.

“*Ihre einzige Sünde war Hoffnung,*” are the last words that pass through his lips before the groping hands cover his mouth, grip his head, and drag him soundlessly into the fissure that rends the earth.

I wake into slipping. The void is white, and I fight to maintain my balance atop a slick, perfect black orb that hurtles through space. I splay myself over the ebony sphere, scrabbling not to fall off as it whistles along the empty white. There are no handholds, no notches, no grooves: nothing to cling to as I lose my traction and slide, screaming, down the surface of the sphere that carries me. In the absence of direction, however, all ways are up, and so, rather than topple off the orb, I merely slide along it, clinging to it with

invisible gravity, always on top, always slipping to what will next become the top, always falling to a new equilibrium that is never an equilibrium.

I cannot keep from slipping—cannot maintain my balance—but I also cannot pitch myself into the white expanse. I am stuck to the sphere but never stable, never at rest.

I cry. I want desperately to stand still, to fall, to climb to my feet, to walk, to gain control, but I am whisked faster and faster by a force I cannot see, and as I slip perpetually over and over and over the face of the faceless orb, my screaming subsides and I hear the *allegro* romp of a musical melody thrumming around me. And here I recognize that the black dot carrying me is a musical note and that in all directions, speckling the void, are other black dots locked in concert, streaming forward in malevolent symphony—onrushing towards the asymptote of perfect beauty, impervious to the terror of one lone passenger—me—who sobs against the cold onyx surface of the note she rides, impotent to alter the tempo, unable to adjust the dynamic ...

CHAPTER 10

RESOLUTION

I blinked into the actual dawn, roused from my flurry of dreams by Sansone's breath raking itself, warm, over my face.

"You are alive!" he proclaimed.

The scratch of the blanket on my skin, the gold frame of the fireplace visible over Sansone's shoulder, and the soft luxury of the divan that supported me all reminded me where I was. I surveyed the room. Little had changed since the previous night. The fire had subsided to a feeble glow among the ashes, and someone had removed the platter of fruit and the tea service, but otherwise all remained as it had been.

"I am no longer yours," I said, fighting sleep from my voice.

"By contract you are," said Sansone, "for two months more. And although you have burned your cabin to the ground and decided with such vim to go feral and live among the barnyard animals, you seem unable to resist the allure of a warm fire and a soft bed."

"I hate this luxury," I said.

"You don't seem to."

"I am liberated."

"Shall I have Skylark fetch you a cup of coffee and a brioche?" Sansone smiled, his certitude stemming from an ignorance so damaging, so desperate, and so global that he would never be forced to contend with it. He did not need to recognize my conception of myself as a free being because he simply lent it no credence: What didn't lie within his

narrative was extraneous; what did was proof of the correctness of his theories. How to break away from the closed circuit of authority?

“No. I depart today,” I said.

“Depart for where, my dear C—?”

“For G—.”

“By what means?”

“My secrets are secrets.”

“Very well,” said Sansone. “You are welcome to put your ingenuity to the test.”

“I do not require your permission.”

“Correct again,” said Sansone. He crossed to the window and stood looking out at the yard, his hands clasped behind his back. “Only ...”

He paused to allow my follow-up question, but I denied him the pleasure. Instead, I stretched on the loveseat, arching my back and throwing my arms wide, luxuriating in the sensation of taking up as much space as possible.

“Only,” he continued undisturbed, “it’s such a pity you’ll miss it.”

“Miss what?” I asked before I remembered to be obstructionist.

Sansone chortled.

“‘Miss what?’ she asks. Of course you know. Preparations have already begun.”

He waved his hand at the window, and I felt compelled to rise and look.

The new morning light cast a white gloom over the winter world outside, and at first I saw nothing remarkable in the crinkled hedgerow outside the window and the plains of brown grass beyond. Moving over the surface of the estate, however, was a small, crumpled figure, pacing with furious excess of energy. The wretched body,

hunched into a gallows, soldiered against the cold, back and forth and back once more. The face was a brown, inscrutable nut. The tortured hands clutched a pistol. A red silk handkerchief was tied around the forehead like a bandana. It wasn't until the figure turned once more to set off on another iteration of pacing that I recognized it. The precision of the about-face belied the residual grace that had not yet drained from the hard, sexless body of Anna Pavlova.

“She waits for you,” said Sansone. “She waits for you to give her the peace of justice or the peace of the grave.”

“But I do not want to fight her.”

A blast of wind nearly gusted the poor creature over, but she dug her toes into the ground as she marched on, undeterred. I couldn't hear her through the distance and the windowpanes, but it was clear that she was shouting rebukes, her angry mouth a cave of blame.

“Then do not fight her,” said Sansone. “Go on your way and condemn her to a future of everlasting fury, of suspended justice and ceaseless self-loathing. She will march then just as she marches now, her only pleasure derived from cursing you.”

“I will not fight her.”

“Then do not. But you feel the need to keep protesting your disinclination because you know that, ultimately, you will fight her.”

“I have nothing to say to that.”

“Because it's true and because you know it's true. What can one say when faced with truth?”

I lost my patience, if I had had it in the first place, but to some extent I had to congratulate Sansone for his ability to repeat a series of lies until he had somehow managed to shoehorn them into a sort of truth. I could have flown into a rage at his obduracy, but what would I have profited from another tantrum? By now the pattern had become clear: Sansone would provoke me, whether by lies or by disingenuous truth, his means neither consistent nor coherent, and I would respond, whether by acquiescence or rebellion, and with every response he could elicit, no matter its nature, he could more readily claim me as the slate on which he inscribed his intention—as the manifest effect of his accumulated causes. However, I could act as easily as I was acted upon, and so what was to keep me from declaring myself my own owner?

Nothing other than my failure to do so.

What is “ownership,” after all, but an impermanent concept conceived in language and birthed in contract? The flow of words dictates the boundaries between what is mine and what is yours—between what *is* me and what is you—and sometimes those words are figured in writing or proved in currency, and sometimes, too, they give rise to fetters and chains, armies and bayonets, all in order to preserve the very fiction that we ourselves have adopted, to make the world resemble what we’ve called it, and above all to disguise the fact that at the heart of the enterprise—the sun around which our day-to-day habits have dragged us into orbit—is a ridiculous nothing. A sea of words. An unjustifiable hunch that because I can call myself a thing, then I am a thing. What a cacophony our preponderance of polysyllables has created, viable as existence only because we are, at heart, credulous cowards who find it more expedient to believe what we’re told than to surrender ourselves to the miasma of ignorance.

And, knowing this much, I looked pityingly at Sansone, impressive emperor of precisely nil—but, seeing the unabashed arrogance with which he looked back, my pity shrugged and bid me adieu. It was his turn to be colonized.

“I own you,” I said.

“Ha. What an idea.”

“You are mine.”

“This is childish,” he said.

“This is truth. You will not feel anything unless I make you feel it. You will not think anything unless I make you think it. You are small, and what little you are is only what I allow you to be.”

Sansone issued an untroubled roll of the eyes. “You rave, C—. I am afraid that you must have suffered hypothermia last night.”

I shook my head, slow at first, and then faster and faster until my hair whipped around my triumphant head.

“Don’t deny it!” I yelled, laughing. “You own none of this.” I raced to the corner of the room and picked up a coat rack that had been carved to resemble the teak tree from which it had been manufactured. “This is not your coat rack. This is not even a coat rack at all!”

I pitched the coat rack, javelin-style, through the window. A shock of cold snapped through the shattered glass. How much wall would I have to destroy before “inside” and “outside” returned to meaninglessness?

“I would recommend you stop this,” said Sansone.

I laughed, privy now to the joke of existence.

“Of course that is what you will recommend,” I said, “because you do not want me to smash what you call your ‘belongings’! But these are my belongings, and I will smash them if I choose.”

My hand met a mirror, which splintered when I flung it into the fireplace.

“You think that this is victory,” said Sansone.

“I beg your pardon,” I said in my best American accent. “Fetch me some grits.”

Sansone snapped for Skylark. “This is too much,” he said.

“‘Too much’? This is America! Fetch me waffles,” I said. “Fetch me some of your finest transcendentalists.”

A robust still life that betrayed the hand of a seventeenth-century Dutch master went to shreds in my hands and was soon strewn over the floor.

“Fetch me science!”

A timid pair of skylark eyes peeped from the door to the hallway, and I flung a shoe at them.

“Skylark!” I screamed. A whimper issued from the hall. “Extract your servant Sansone from the room. I cannot bear to look eyes at him any more.”

“None of this is clever, C—,” said Sansone.

I turned to face him and realized I was taller than him by several inches.

“Why don’t you remake the world through art?” I suggested. “You may create whatever you want as long as you limit it to canvas or the treble clef. Art is where history hides its impotent dead.”

I caught sight of Skylark slithering into the room on his belly, and I cast my other shoe at him. It struck his head, and he whimpered more in terror than in pain.

“It is certainly regrettable,” said Sansone, “that you have proven to be exactly what I said you would be: a vicious, untamable animal. Pure German.”

“And it is regrettable,” I said to Sansone, without another shoe to throw, “that I have learned your tricks and will not show you mercy.”

A cold hand wrapped around my ankle, and I shuddered at Skylark’s necrotic grip. I stared down at him, a man reduced to a creeping vine, unfurling his impotent tendrils in the hope of lassoing me.

“Skylark,” I said, “how are you not being ashamed?”

“You are needed in the garden!” Skylark whined. Holding my ankle with one slippery palm, he pulled up his coattails with the other and revealed the handle of a revolver that was jutting from his belt. “I’m to be your second.”

“I will not shoot,” I said, easily kicking myself free from Skylark’s grip. “I will not duel.”

“Then you will kill that woman,” said Sansone, flinging a finger in anger at the window, “more slowly and more cruelly than you would with a bullet. This is unnatural cruelty. But let it be as you wish. Duel. Do not duel. Your conscience is your own to live with.”

Transparent manipulation! In stuttering rage, I peered down my nose at this man I had long held to be my master. With words, he sought to bend me to his will. He would not bloody his hands, not he, but—oh—he would incite and insinuate, persuade, cajole, blandish, and wrest until we, his servants, bled each other senseless on his behalf. For entertainment’s sake, he set us up as trained dogs to tear out one another’s throats so that he, in his epic bloodlust, could perch in the upper tiers of the balcony and gaze down at

the Grand Guignol saga of shredded flesh and eviscerated spirit that he himself had set in motion: oh, power. And he to speak of conscience?

A disgusting finale.

“Then I will duel!” I screamed, and kicked Skylark in the ribs, committing the violence I could not yet bring myself to perpetrate upon Sansone. While the manservant whined, I wrenched the gun from his belt and brandished it over my head. “I am your poodle,” I said to Sansone in a voice of seething irony. “Why would I not wish to commit act of atrocity against innocent nothing ballerina? Show me her face and I will ruin it with gunpowder. Yes, please, I desire to splinter her skull in performance of servility. So I see. Such is what underlines this country and its manners. In Germany, a butcher was a butcher and a harpist was a harpist, but in America everyone is everything. So I see. We are designed to take what we want, to let our desire for pleasure and entertainment overpower goodness. So I see. Take me to my duel. I will provide for you an excellent show.”

I fired a round into the ceiling, and a flurry of plaster peppered my shoulders.

“Your fury is endearing,” said Sansone through a wry mouth. Skylark cowered.

Sex fueled my smile.

“Give me everything,” I said. “I am American woman, and the world belongs to me.”

I shot a window, which momentarily spiderwebbed before sobbing into lethal shards.

“Get up, Skylark,” said Sansone. “Your services are necessary.”

Skylark's rump hunched up, but he made no other indication of obedience. Another thrust of my toe into his flank brought the wretch into a tremulous kneel.

"I will be your second," said Skylark, eyes on the floor. His voice transmitted his hate, and I swiped my foot into his back for the fun of it. "Oof," he said.

"Give me everything," I said again, and led Sansone and Skylark both out into the hall, along the mansion's mirrored corridors, and into the frosty chokehold of December to duel.

A robust youth papers over her mortality with a glowing visage. At heart, our interior is a self-destructing mechanism, laying waste to itself as we die minute-to-minute. That Anna Pavlova, in her state of ruin, was so monstrous to me showed me only that I myself was a monstrosity underneath. Her face was rotting skin pulled taut over a skull, her eye sockets deep canyons overlaid with fatigue's shadows. Her head had been depopulated; thin clumps of cracked hair unsuccessfully covered the yellowing expanse of her scalp. An ineffectual mouth gnawed the air, with ground-down nubs of teeth decaying atop the blackened mash of what once were gums. A desiccated tongue lolled paper-white. Her body was no less a picture of decrepitude. Her chest had gone concave. Her cadaverous limbs drooped with excess skin and atrophied muscle. Flies flocked around her, stealing mouthfuls of the flesh that Pavlova herself no longer valued. The putrescence of decay was a dull, dead stench.

The only ember of vivacity that still gleamed among the ash-heap of discarded self was the slow, steady malice that smoldered in her calculating eyes. Pavlova had rotted, every decomposable part of her eroded to the central core of grieving bitterness

that formed her essence. To look in that corpselike face was to see the unembellished components of a human: a set of bones, surprisingly small, and a motoring terror. A tiny person and overpowering anger at one's own irrelevance. So Pavlova was reduced to pure humanness, and I gazed at her as she gazed me, seeing whatever she saw in my face: perhaps an opportunity to assert herself by reducing me to something even smaller, even deader than herself.

The snow arrived as Anna Pavlova and I stood facing one another at twenty paces. Soft kisses from the sky powdered our incipient duel.

Behind me stood Sansone and his entourage entire, a whole colony in expectation of a massacre. Behind Pavlova stood the empty woods, a gaping mausoleum hungry for her corpse. Violence seemed an inevitability, and in the moment of stillness before our seconds advanced to initiate the duel formally, I tried to understand what logic had led me here. In spite of the art, the manners, the language, the fine dinners, the champagne, the quips, the elegance of bearing, and the labyrinth of theories through which I attempted to understand something of myself, in the final analysis, it had all arrived here: a frigid field on an American's property, where I was expected to blast the head off a harmless nothing for the entertainment of the venal rich. Though we may sometimes wear sheer stockings or quaff unmatched vintages, we are wretched, all.

"Why are we here, Pavlova?" I screamed across the distance. "We do not need to play such games for others' sake. We can be free."

The red bandana wrapped around Pavlova's brow flew back on a ripping breeze, and she flinched against the strength of the wind. Her mouth opened and worked laboriously, but whatever words she had squeezed from her emaciated throat were

snatched up by the wind and tossed, dead, over her shoulder before they could bear their message to me.

“Join me!” I said. “We own the colony. We can be masters if we simply say we are masters.”

Behind me, the colony breathed in and out. Men clutched their women. Women clutched their men. I could not see them, but I could feel the pressure of their staring eyes, their parted lips, their slavering tongues. All beseeched me to raise my arm, to trigger my finger, to fire forth a column of smoke that would create a bloody spectacle.

Another mute scream from the ballerina. She waved her pistol wildly above her head. The colony surged and roiled behind me. It teemed and gasped.

“Please, Pavlova. Think of your own liberation. Their rules,” and here I indicated the faceless masses behind me, garbed in overcoats and earflaps, overlaid with skins and furs—the removable trappings of our animal nature, “do not apply to us. We will make our own rules, and we will flee and live outside civilization. Or, we will make a civilization that is ours. Or, we will overtake theirs. I own Sansone. I own this colony. I own myself. You can own this as well.”

A sudden lull in the wind carried the dying whisper of Pavlova’s voice:

“I ... will ... be ... satisfied.”

Her face knotted, whether due to suppressed tears or as a defense against the wind.

“We ... will ... duel.”

Sansone was at my shoulder.

“She has said her piece,” he said. “You are here. The gun is in your hands. Will you back away from the fight?”

The deadly ballerina was nothing but a figurine, gauzy and gray behind the falling snow.

“I do not care about the crowds,” I said to Sansone. “I do not care about you. I am doing this only because I choose to. I am not a victim of my circumstance. If I slaughter, it is because I will it. If I show mercy, it is because I will it. I will follow the customs of your country while I want to; when I do not want to, I will no longer follow them.”

“Yip!” screamed Pavlova.

“You admit responsibility,” said Sansone, “for your own violence? You acknowledge that you are the depraved creature I always held you to be?”

“I acknowledge only that I will duel.”

“Then duel,” said Sansone with a sly smile. “Your seconds will draw straws to determine who shall fire first. You will each shoot three times, alternating your shots.”

I gave him no response, and so he turned to the crush of colonists.

“Let them begin!” he yelled, and the affirming roar of the colony was like the scream of the ocean’s waves.

Skylark clapped me on the back before he crossed the expanse of the field to meet with a corresponding skylark who had come from Anna Pavlova’s side. The two skylarks wriggled and shimmied, mirror images of one another. One bowed, and the other bowed. One sweated and fretted, and the other sweated and fretted. While they dithered, the snow continued to collect underfoot. My hands, red and chapped, maintained their grip on my pistol.

Sansone crossed to the curtsying skylarks and held out two straws in his fist. Skylark feinted right, while the other skylark feinted left. Both made as if to grab a straw, and both recoiled at the other's initiative. Whimpering, each skylark leaned forward, eyeing his equivalent. Slowly, the skylarks extended their hands and, flinching at the moment of contact, grasped the same straw.

Sansone administered a thorough drubbing to each skylark and maintained his grip on the straws.

“You cannot both choose at once,” he said. “I should raise a monument to the glory of such impressive ignorance. You”—he nodded here at Skylark—“take the first straw.”

Rubbing the back of his head with one hand, Skylark whipped out the other hand and flailingly selected the first straw he chanced to contact.

Sansone opened his fist.

My Skylark had picked for me the short straw.

“Anna Pavlova will take the first shot,” Sansone proclaimed. The colonists' effusions crested and waned and crested again.

Skylark cast me a snide sidelong smile before simpering off. The corresponding skylark raised a victorious fist to Anna Pavlova, who seemed too fixated on the fact of her vengeance to concern herself with procedure. She waved her skylark off impatiently.

“All that remains,” said Sansone, “is for you to bow to one another, and then you may satisfy your impulses.”

“I do not understand it,” I said. “We will try to kill each other with bullets. Why will we bow at each other before doing this?”

“These small civilities are what separate us from beasts,” said Sansone.

“It is a small enough gap,” I said. “Bucephalus did not lack civilities.”

“You will bow because it is what’s done,” said Sansone. “Without a bow, a duel is a murder. With a bow, it is sport.”

I could not weigh in further, because a howling scream from the ballerina was the only warning I had before a wild bullet, fired from Pavlova’s gun, went wailing five feet over my head. Seeing she had missed, Anna Pavlova let loose a screech straight from her hideous, vengeful heart and flopped to the ground, a devastated fish.

“This is not the way to duel,” said Sansone to Anna Pavlova with a mirthless frown. “Where is your rigor of discipline?”

“Own yourself!” I cried to her. “Duel as you wish. Do not suffocate in formality. You want to destroy me, so destroy me.”

From the ground, Pavlova cast me a fiery eye.

“You will die, C—, like my Pushkin has died.”

The gnashing teeth of the colonists clattered at my rearguard. Oh, how their bodies pressed against one another in the tearing winter, hoping to squeeze satisfaction from the sight of blood that wasn’t their own. That my body could be a source of edification for them. Or a cautionary tale. Or an aesthetic marvel. The snowfall rendered the ground a blank page on which Sansone’s morality play would be writ in blood. The hot, hungry breath of the artists clouded the air around them. Bodiless vapor.

Sansone leered. Stein waved a handkerchief at me. Men and women stamped their feet. It was my shot. I would level my pistol at the half-dead thing before me and leave her to leak blood and sorrow onto the ground as the snow would collect in mounds over

her body, blotting out anything she once was. The colonists would soak up the visual, would perhaps feel something, would cluck pity, and would then retreat to the warmth of the mansion and wash up in preparation for the *primi piatti*. Maybe they would be inspired to write a play about the fallen dancer, or construct a collage, and while Pavlova's body decomposed, the play would become the thing—the collage would be she—and the living human that once was would be spirited into the realm of the constructed; the Anna Pavlova who was Anna Pavlova would be forever lost. The Anna Pavlova who was not Anna Pavlova would live forever, victim to the aesthetic of whichever colonist chanced to create her—to forge her, to get her, to forget her out of his egoistic, heaven-sent inspiration. The crumpled mess of humanity, sobbing at her ill-conceived wild shot, and awaiting my pistol's response, was the reality that we create our heavens to elide.

Call it a mercy.

Call it a kindness that when I raised my gun to enact the fated violence, I pointed it straight into the air and fired my shot into the faceless winter sky. Pavlova flinched as though she had been shot—and perhaps she assumed she had been—but when she felt no blood, no pain, she lifted her head in wonder at the fact that she lived. The colonists groaned behind me, their primal thirst unslaked.

Pavlova patted herself and the ground around her. She rose to her knees and then to her feet, giddy now at intact life.

“You have been spared, as have I!” I screamed across the twenty paces. “We need not carry on with this duel!”

And yet Pavlova's frothing glee at the fact that she lived was not a new appreciation for existence; it was gratitude that she now had another chance to destroy me.

Taking greater care this time with her aim, she leveled her gun and fired, but a last-minute convulsion wrought by cold or lunacy sent her bullet wide of the mark. A colonist behind me yelped, his cheek grazed by the kiss of the stray bullet.

I fired another shot into the air and was booed by the colony.

"Your last shot," said Sansone to Pavlova. "Make the most of it." Pavlova stared back at him with unambiguous hatred.

The shriveled ballerina, her breath jerking in and out of her cankered mouth, appraised me with the acumen of an expert marksman. She scanned my perpendicular, internalizing my coordinates. The snow crunched under my feet as I shifted my weight from foot to foot, standing firm to await the judgment of fate. The banshee wails railroading past my ears were either the wind or the ghostly collective breath of the colonists.

Pavlova squinted one eye and raised the pistol. Its soulless muzzle eyeballed my heart. Her gaunt arms trembled under the weight of the gun, and her lips worked ceaselessly, casting an incantation, maybe, or exhorting herself to focus. She mouthed faster and faster as her finger wormed around the trigger and, with a shriek, she closed her eyes, unable to bear the sight of the flash that tore forth from the mouth of the gun; the smoke; and the hale, victorious faces of the colonists who bleated and crowed.

I found myself on the ground, pain like a bee-sting having bored deep into my shoulder. I saw only white. I blinked once. Was I dead? It was the feathery touch of snow

on my eyelashes that told me I was still alive. I turned my head to the side, the snowpack shedding cold onto my cheek. A blotch of red polluted the snow around me. Blood. Mine.

The noise of the screaming, jeering, baying colonists was indistinguishable from the noise of the blood pounding through the capillaries in my ears.

“A hit!” proclaimed Sansone. “Non-fatal, but direct.” He leaned over me, his breath spoiling my nose, my neck. His face was an artifact: closely shaven, kept fresh by means of creams and lotions, watered with cologne, preserved from living. The master was an artificial thing—a department store mannequin, a chiseled curiosity—that had nothing to do with the actual, physical, vital pain that drilled open my shoulder. My shoulder, which was bone and flesh and sinew, but which was now an organic reliquary for a manmade metal bullet. Some small, new part of me had been manufactured in a factory, sold and bought in an ammunition shop, loaded into a weapon, and fitted to me. I was still I, but now I, too, was at least in part a product of commerce.

Sansone and his artifice had bested me, had un-beasted me. I was a civilized thing, tagged.

“It is your shot,” said Sansone, and he extended an arm to help me up. I spat in the palm of his hand. I lurched to a sitting position, my wounded arm an unresponsive piece of driftwood. “You have one bullet remaining.”

As I brought myself to my feet, and as the snow clouded my vision, I scanned the contours of Sansone’s American colony: the clutch of sophisticates in bowler hats and muffs; the ceaseless mansion; the keening Pavlova, boiled down to a warped vessel of terrified hatred; the master himself, suave and vicious; and the gun, the bullets, the

And I knew that I should use my remaining bullet before I lost my strength entirely.

Fresh tracks impressed in snow. I, huntress, with stuttering lips and chapped hands, headfirst into a billowing snowstorm. The trail of reindeer prints rapidly vanishing under white. The pistol slung over my shoulder, my pockets packed with powder and tamping rods, I sought my quarry mercilessly.

Sansone in my ear all the while.

“Destroy it because it is weak. Own it because you can.”

Shrieking winds. Agonizing midnight cries. Hunger a thing, a palpable growth clinging to my back, my side, my ins and outs. Gray, white, black. I leveled my gun and sounded a crack shot, without aim or purpose, knowing that my ammunition was my might.

“That’s it,” he goaded from a distant world, “demonstrate your depravity. Show us all what a marksman you are.”

I aimed my eyes at the voice but had gone utterly snow-blind. I imagined Sansone collapsing in a pool of blood, his mask of self-assured apathy stiffening away into the primal grimace of death.

“Strike out. Formless anger is the most beautiful.”

And with a thud and a dribble of blood, a reindeer fell to the ground. I hovered over the kill, watching a ghost of gun-smoke disperse over the animal’s carcass. I brought my lips to the bullet hole, issuing a silent blessing for the soul’s escape.

“Oh, my dearest, dearest C—. Didn’t I tell you that you were a vicious animal? Didn’t I tell you that German blood runs hot? You’ve proven it.”

Meanwhile, I used my finger to pry open the bullet hole. The slick innards spread themselves before me. I tore the skin and coated my hands in the dank blood of my kill. When I raised my fingers to my lips, I tasted fortifying minerals, the direct transfusion of nutrients from the reindeer's body into mine. I lapped at my fingers, plunged them back into the beast, and tore out venous bundles. I wolfed all I could, shoveling dead tissue at my face. Fibrous reindeer threads dangled from my mouth as I bit. The belly was a soft, glistening crater, a steaming potage in the middle of winter. The more I ate, the hungrier I grew. I bent to the ripped abdomen and began simply to gorge. I burrowed my face entirely in the reindeer, my nose brushing spongy organs, my hair falling into the mess of blood and bile and nerve. When I found bones, I ate around them, but on and on I consumed, knowing that I must not stop, that I was a creature designed to feed—to take the world around me and make it mine through vicious appropriation. Here was my masterpiece.

“Now you see your nature. Now you are modern.”

The intense heat of the newly dead animal warmed my face. I covered my face in that warmth, spread that warmth all over, up and down the entirety of my face. I chomped and gnashed, cracking bone, mashing muscle in my mouth.

“A triumph! Now that you are made, you will be polished and civilized. You will fulfill your contract and return home new.”

I smiled through my chattering teeth.

ENCORE

A year comes and goes in a blink.

The night is gentle, a velvet black. My bare arms rest on the railing as I peer down at the inky Atlantic. Supper has ended, and while the other passengers have gone below to their cabins to rest before the commencement of the evening's inevitable ball, I have come above to pay obeisance to the waves. Nobody knows what hunger drives them to surge, but there they are, an unknowable fact. Outside my skin and inside my skin, deep mysteries drive the inquisitive to madness. I will never know anything, and there is solace in that. I smile, placid, owner of the night.

We carry on East, East, East, bound for G—, slipping over the surface of the earth and leaving no traces.

A man roosts beside me. He is dressed as an American soldier, and he stares with me in darkness. His scent appeals and his manner is open. I am conscious of my sheer black gown, of the makeup that embellishes and softens my face in the right places, and of my perfectly coiled hair that took an afternoon to fashion correctly.

“Do you speak English?” asks the man.

“I do.”

“Where are you going?”

“I am returning home to Germany.”

He extracts a cigarette from his breast pocket and offers it to me. I decline with a soft palm, and he lights it for himself. The eye of the cigarette is a luminous gem.

“Aren’t you afraid?” he mumbles, his mouth twisting the words around his addiction.

“Why should I be afraid?”

“You’re not afraid to return to Germany?” he says. “What with the war.”

“War?”

“Hoo boy,” he says. “Where have you been?”

“An artists’ colony. I am a musician.”

“You don’t hear any news in your artists’ colony?”

“What does the news have to do with me?”

He pauses and sucks his cigarette. The night is so silent that I can hear him force the smoke down his throat and into his lungs. He exhales on a sigh, coloring the air with the odor of scorched tar.

“Europe is burning,” he says. He hesitates, having stumbled into a conversation best avoided. “Nobody is safe there.”

“The world is burning,” I say. “Nobody is safe anywhere.”

He whistles and shifts the cigarette from one side of his mouth to the other.

“You’re very brave,” he says.

I shrug.

“I am sometimes brave,” I concede. “I am many things.”

“America is a long journey for you.”

I leave his idiotic statement to stew in its own obviousness.

“What did you think of our country?” he finally asks, his narcissism disguised as a desire for cultural exchange.

“What should I think? It is a big place with many faces.”

“Any special faces? Men’s faces?” is what passes for flirtation amidships.

I laugh quietly and gesture for a cigarette. The soldier obliges, and his lighter twitches flame. Its pale orange light carves a slice of hell, into which I dip my cigarette. I set the cigarette to my lips, but I do not inhale. I take in a mouthful of smoke, let it sit below my tongue, and then blow it out again, letting it shroud me. Every motion of my fingers, every lift of my chin is designed to impress.

“There was one,” I murmur, staring at the far-off beads of light pinned to the horizon—other ships, other lives. “One man. Not a romance. Something worse.”

“Tell me.”

“Why?”

“Because I find you interesting.”

“I am interesting,” I say. “And I will tell you. But it is a long story, and I am particular about how I tell it. If I start now, we will not finish until quite late.”

“It will be cold soon.”

I look at him askance. I blow a stream of smoke into his face. Young, earnest, this American is secure in his own goodness. Perhaps a year ago we would have had more in common, although we would not have shared a language.

“Is the cold such a deterrent?” I ask. I scan him up and down. “You are more warmly dressed than I am. Don’t they teach you strength in your army?”

“Sure. Okay. I’m listening.”

I inhale the moment of silence that ensues and allow it to coat me inside and out. Here, on a speck of wood awash on a giant ocean, we bob at the mercy of outside forces.

And here, an American thinks he knows something about right and wrong. And here, I am about to tell him my reality so that my right and my wrong will crowd out his own. In this moment of silence, I eye the contours of this innocent face and pity its powerlessness. Soon I will master him.

And so, I sigh, and in the cool comfort of anonymous night, I commit myself to words.

THE END