



## All Exits Are the Same

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All Exits Are the Same

A Thesis Presented

By

ALICE POWLEN

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
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MFA for Poets and Writers

Fiction

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ABSTRACT

ALL EXITS ARE THE SAME

MAY 2014

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Directed by: Professor Noy Holland

A collection of short stories concerned with the dichotomy between interior and exterior landscapes.

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# INTRODUCTION

Over dinner, high in the Tibetan Plateau, a Buddhist monk told me that every morning he says three *Thanks Yous*. The first *Thank You* is for the obstacles he creates for himself. The second *Thank You* is for the obstacles others create for him. The third *Thank You* is for the obstacles created by natural forces. This monk believes that obstacles are the greatest teachers. Without obstacles, we would not evolve; we would be stuck. So, each morning, he thanks the universe for the obstacles ahead because, at the end of the day, he will be a wiser man.

The characters in *All Exits Are the Same* encounter obstacles, but, unlike the Buddhist monk, these characters do not always grow wiser. They stagnate and regress, sometimes meeting unpleasant ends. They move through their journeys, blind to the blessings of adversity. Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote, “People always grow more and more foolish, unless they take care to grow wiser and wiser.” These are cautionary tales. These cautionary tales concerned with crossings. They are concerned with walls, both invisible and concrete. *All Exits Are the Same* seeks to explore dividing lines- boundaries that exist between cultures, countries, families, friends, and generations.

I paired “Wall Red” with “Wild Life” because they are about the same thing. Both stories are concerned with the boundary between human beings and the natural world. In both stories, civilization exists apart from wilderness, giving wild spaces *other* status. In both stories, wild spaces are central to the conflict between those that want to protect them and those that want to exploit or tame them.

I am fascinated with the American attitude towards wilderness. At first the wild lands needed taming, conquering, and civilizing. It was our manifest destiny to expand west, bulldozing as we went. Then, around the mid-1800s, the American attitude began to change. For the first time, we considered that wild spaces might have value in and of

themselves. We walled off some of these lands in an attempt to preserve them. In doing so, we created a new set of conflicts and challenges, as we transitioned from settlers to visitors. Wild lands still existed as *other*. Although America vs. Nature became America saves Nature, we still insist on separation.

In “Wall Red” and “Wild Life” there is a tension in this separation – this walling off. There is also a tension in the need for control. Even when we are protecting a place, we are managing and controlling it. In “Wild Life,” there is an irony in restoring wildness through human intervention. Our need for control and the illusion that we can have control may be our demise, as it is for some of the characters.

In “Wild Life” and “Wall Red” there exists the divide between nature and civilization, but there is also the divide between cultures and people. Blue-eyed folks pit themselves against brown-eyed folk. Rangers pit themselves against tourists. In both stories, clashes of culture cause violent ends.

These clashes are echoed in “Rhinos”, “Lions and Tigers”, and “All Exits Are the Same.” There is an inherent peril when characters venture into a place that has a different set of rules. This peril is rooted in misunderstanding, as we cannot completely transcend the prejudices and assumptions created by our experiences.

I once heard it told-

In China everyone wears red-colored glasses while everyone in Canada wears blue-colored glasses. A Canadian man plans a trip to China. He wants to see China through the eyes of a Chinese man, so he buys red-colored glasses for his trip. He wears them while he travels around China. When he returns to Canada, he tells all his friends that everything in China is purple. The point being, even though he tried to look through his



new red glasses, he was unable to remove his blue glasses. The result was that everything looked purple.

While we may be eager to see things through a different perspective, we can never take off our own glasses. Our new experiences are filtered through our old ones. The inability of the characters to shed old ways of being is present in “Lions and Tigers”, “Rhinos”, “Wall Red“, “Meira”, and “Wild life.”

While some of the stories are filled with external obstacles, the conflicts in “Adrian”, “Catherine”, and “Emma” are largely internal. The walls are self-created and exist internally. The characters are stuck, lacking the courage to take action.

The stories in the second half of *All Exits Are the Same* function as peepholes into the lives of others. The reader gets a quick glimpse of people at their most vulnerable. Those stories explore the walls between daughters, mothers, lovers, and friends. They focus on how relationships can become obsessions that we allow to ensnare us. These stories are intended to feel claustrophobic and, in part, stuck. The interior landscapes are meant to contrast with the exterior landscapes.

I have woven reoccurring dichotomies and images throughout this collection of stories. The stories echo each other.

The characters bang up against walls. Some choose to cross; some choose to accept their limitations. These stories are the consequences.

## **RHINOS**

If there are no small trees to climb, you must run in zig-zags. That is the way to escape a charging rhino. We all know this. It was the first thing Amrita told us when we arrived at her compound in Chitwan National Park.

“If you are on foot with no elephant, they will charge you,” Amrita said. She said it once in English and once in Nepali. “When you leave the compound, always take an elephant. The rhinos will leave you alone if you are with an elephant.” She took us to the back of her hut where two elephants were chained to a metal stake in the ground. “Bati will show you how to handle them.”

“Dhanyabaad,” we bowed our heads in thanks.

Asmita, the smaller of the two elephants, gently wrapped her trunk around Amrita’s shoulder. Amrita nuzzled the elephant’s trunk with her tiny, human nose. “Asmita is my oldest friend,” she said.

That was four months ago. We have ridden Asmita, everyday since. Sometimes we attach the platform seat, but mostly we ride bareback. Asmita is gentle and kind, and she is old and slow. A trip to the market will take thirty minutes or three hours, depending on Asmita’s mood. Sometimes, she stops and refuses to walk at all. Prodding her is no use. She is old and stubborn and accustomed to getting her way. And she is an elephant, after

all. We sit on the ground, in Asmita's shadow, and play cards until she is ready to continue on. No one else's elephant has such frequent breakdowns. The Nepalese pass us and laugh. We are the four Americans always waiting for a stubborn elephant.

Andrew thinks Asmita tires easily because she is old. Ryen thinks it is because she is lazy. Meghan thinks it is because Asmita is having fun at our expense. Meghan thinks this because that is what Meghan would do if she were an elephant. The laughter bothers Meghan. She does not like being the butt of a joke, even when it is kindly meant.

Meghan tried complaining to Amrita once.

"Better a slow elephant than one that is prone to stampeding," She launched into a story a boy that had been killed when he was thrown from the back of a stampeding elephant. For awhile the story made Meghan more patient.

With Asmita by our side, we've had many pleasant encounters with rhinos. The rhinos we meet are docile, perhaps lonely. They follow us on occasion. Birds perch on their backs.

Our own experiences rub off Amrita's warning. You must understand this. You must understand how a place will never be anything other than the sum of your own experiences. Stories and warnings can only last so long.

At the end of July, Asmita fell sick. Amrita said it was because the Tuthka grass was blooming; it was unusually potent that year. We were short an elephant.

On that particular morning, Amrita had woken early and ridden Birbal, her other elephant, into the village.

It was 105 degrees at 8am. By 9am, we were irritable. By 11am, we were desperate. By noon, it may have been a matter of life or death. At least, that was the way Meghan put it when she suggested that we go on foot. Meghan had a talent for making bad ideas sound like good ideas. We should have remembered this.

It was less than two miles to the swimming hole. We knew the way like the back of our hands. It was ever so hot.

Meghan unlocked the back gate, but Andrew was the first to step out of the compound. He stuck out his right foot very slowly, as if something might attack the moment his toe crossed from the compound into the Park. We held our breath as he stepped across the boundary, but nothing happened.

Andrew took a few steps into the Park. He stopped and looked back at us. “Well, are you coming?”

The air was thick. It was hard to tell if the droplets on our skin were perspiration or condensation. No one spoke for the first several minutes. We listened for the sound of movement in the bush. For a while, our own survival was foremost in our thoughts. And then it was not.

“Do you think Amrita will buy sugar in the village?” Ryen was the first to speak. He had a hard time with silence. At night, when we were all settled into our bunks and wanted nothing more than the sweet silence of sleep, Ryen jabbered on and on and on.

“She usually does,” came Andrew’s reply.

That was enough to break our vigil. We talked the rest of the way to the swimming hole, arriving in good spirits.

When we reached the river, we picked up our snake sticks and ran into the water. We each swam with a long stick in one hand, so that we could redirect any snakes that swam near us. Amrita had told us the water snakes at the swimming hole were harmless. Still, you did not want them swimming too close. You did not want to feel scales sliding along your back or curling onto your arm. If a snake swam too close, we simply reached out our sticks and gently redirected its path.

Andrew was the first to suggest we head back. He was hungry and ready for some chiyaa. I did not want to go back yet, but Andrew insisted. He pressed and pressed, until Ryen yielded. Then Meghan yielded, so I followed.

We climbed out of the water and pulled on our sneakers. There was no need for towels. We relished the cool water running along our skin and dripping from our hair. We would dry too soon.

The edge of the riverbank was vast grassland. The Tutahkla grass tickled our hips as we walked through it. We spread out, each walking at our own pace. Andrew was five feet to my right. Ryen was a little ahead and ten feet to my left. Meghan was five feet ahead of Ryen.

I spotted it first, thirty feet ahead and slightly to the right. The rhino spotted us and lifted its head. I watched it watching us. It did not move. I waved at the rhino. Its head disappeared into the grass. Then, I heard it scrape its horn against the ground. Then it snorted. You do not want a rhino to scrape its horn and snort at you.

“Rhino!” I yelled and pointed in its direction.

Then everything happened very fast.

First Meghan started running. Then, Ryen started running. Then the rhino charged.

“Zig-zag! zig-zag!” Andrew screamed. He wasn’t running, just screaming.

“Andrew, run!”

The rhino ran towards Ryen.

“Zig-zag!” yelled Andrew while running.

Ryen zig-zagged, and the rhino blew past him.

When running in a straight line, the rhino was extremely fast, but it was slow to change directions. The momentum from its charge carried it about 25 feet past Ryen. When the rhino came to a stop, it turned and spotted Meghan. It charged again.

“Zig-zag, Meghan!” we all screamed in unison. She did, and the rhino missed her.

We were now within 200 feet of few small trees.

“Make for the trees!” Andrew shouted. The rhino was busy chasing Meghan as she zig-zagged through the grass. Which I thought was fair since this trip had been Meghan’s idea in the first place. Meghan was crying and screaming and running in zig-zags.

I reached the small trees first. They looked flimsy. I wasn't sure if the thin branches would hold my weight. *You only need to be four feet in the air*, Amrita had told us. Something about the height scares the rhino. I climbed into the tree. The branches bent, but they did not break.

Andrew reached the trees next. He climbed into the tree next to me. The branches hissed and crackled. A second later, Ryen reached the third tree. Now it was just Meghan and the rhino racing around in the grass. The rhino seemed determined not to let Meghan reach the trees. For Meghan, this was a matter of life or death. For the rhino, it may have been a matter of principle. We had, after all, dared cross the grassland without an elephant.

If this were another kind of story, Meghan would have been a goner. Her fate would have been sealed the moment she complained about Asmita's slowness. The rhino would have trampled her. It would have shattered her bones and used its horn to rip apart her flesh. Her head would have rolled in one direction, while her body flew in another. We would have watched as Meghan was reduced to nothing but a pile of guts and bones. We would have watched as Meghan's blood evaporated in the heat. But it is not that kind of tale, and the truth is that Meghan made it to the tree. Eventually, the rhino lost interest and wandered off.



We never told Amrita or Bahti about that day. We never told anyone. We preferred to be the Americans who patiently waited on an old elephant rather than be the ones who ran from rhinos.

Yet, as I have been told, I will tell you now. Do not venture into the brush without an elephant by your side. Remember to live by these words, although you will not.

## **ALL EXITS ARE THE SAME**

The American Embassy tells me there is nothing they can do. The Maoist Bandh will start at sundown and last four days. “Make sure you have lots of food. Stay inside,” the man behind the desk tells me. He is slight and pale. It looks as if he hasn’t been outside in months. I can see I will get nowhere with this pale man, so I leave.

Outside, the street is crowded. Everyone is trying to get somewhere before the bandh begins at sundown. A little red car trying to pass a bigger blue car drives onto the sidewalk. I jump out of the way, just in time. The red car honks its horn. I can’t tell if it is a warning or an apology.

There are no traffic lights or stop signs in Katmandu. The road is a wild place. You can use a cow as a shield. Everyone is very careful when it comes to the cows, which roam freely through the streets. The cows are holy. They are also big and more visible than humans. If you walk alongside a cow, you will be safer. Everyone knows this.

Pedestrians flank the wandering cows. When the cows stop to graze on garbage, you have to make a choice. You can wait patiently by the garbage pile, or you can venture out on your own. I have done both. The garbage piles are mostly comprised of the packaging from imported junk food. There are Coke cans and Snicker wrappers and chip bags.

I hail a cab and take it back to my Nepali family's house. It is a small house in the northern part of Katmandu. The walls are made from a mixture of clay, dried grass, and cow dung. Last month I helped do repairs. Aadesh, my Nepali brother, and I walked all over Katmandu collecting cow dung in big buckets. We dug a hole in the front yard. The hole served as our bucket. We threw in the poop, the clay, and the grass. We added water and stirred it with a stick. When it was mixed, we took handfuls and spread it across the outside of the house. There was no garbage afterwards. We used everything we had. Aadesh tells me they do this once a year, right after the monsoon season ends. It is good to keep up your house. It is also a good way to make new friends. Many people stop to lend a hand. Some of them are neighbors; some of them are strangers. You need to apply the mixture to the house before it dries. That is easier with more hands. Everyone knows this. If you see a house being repaired, you should stop and lend a hand. That is how I met Murti.

Murti knows everyone and everything. He'll tell you all sorts of things. We have become good friends. Someday, he says he will come visit me in Oregon.

The taxi drops me in the front yard, literally. It drives over the sidewalk and parks in the yard.

"What did the Embassy say?" Aadesh comes out of the house.

"They can't help"

“Ke garne?” He shrugs, offering the standard Nepali response to any problem. *Ke garne?*

- the rhetorical and resigned, *Oh well, what are you gonna do?*

“Maybe Murti can help.”

Since Nepal adopted democracy seven years ago, the country has been unstable. Maoists have crossed into Nepal from China. Determined to overthrow the democracy, their strategy is to undermine the credibility of the fledgling, democratic government. They seek to destabilize. Their numbers are growing. The Maoists are becoming more active and more violent. The bandh is one of their tactics. It is a “shutting” or “closing” of the city. For seven days, no one will be allowed to use electricity, drive a car, operate a business, attend school, or gather in numbers greater than five. All of Katmandu is ordered to shut down at sunset. The Maoists implement their orders by terror. They patrol the streets with guns, shooting anyone who breaks their bandh.

Normally, I would just wait it out, but I have a flight that leaves in two days. My sister is getting married. I am the maid of honor. I need to make that flight. I haven't been home in two years, and my sister will never forgive me if I miss her wedding. She does not understand about bandhs or Maoists.

The airport will be open, but during the bandh, there is no way to travel to the airport, which is located just outside the city. This is the difficulty at hand.

Aadesh and I go in search of Murti. He has been lying low because of some recent trouble with a hashish dealer. We find him at his great-grandmother's house.

"I know a guy," he says when I explain the situation. I laugh because it sounds like a line from a made-for-TV crime movie. Aadesh and Murti have only watched TV once, so it takes awhile to explain why I am laughing. I try to explain the clichés of gangster movies. I have no idea how much of this translates. My Nepali is not as good as it should be.

Murti takes us to the tourist district to find this guy that he knows. We walk down an alley to the back of a shop that sells excursions to Everest basecamp to tourists. Murti raps on the door. An old man opens it a crack. They speak fast and in a language I don't understand. Finally, the old man nods to me. He goes back into the shop and reemerges with a slip of paper that he pushes into my palm.

"Call this number at sunrise on the day you want to go to airport. Bring two hundred American dollars." He closes the door.

Two hundred American dollars is more than most Nepali families make in one year. I look at Murti with raised eyebrows. He shrugs, "Ke Garne?"

"Will it be dangerous?" I ask Aadesh

“Yes.”

“Should I do it?”

“Depends on how much you want to get to the airport.”

The following day, I pack my bags and say my goodbyes. I will not be back to Nepal for many months, if at all. At sunrise, I walk to the pay phone on the corner. My Nepali family’s house doesn’t have a phone. Using the pay phone during the bandh could get me killed. Aasdesh keeps watch at the corner. This morning I am relying on my pale skin for a little protection. Maoist know they can shoot the Nepalese with little consequence, but shooting a tourist is different. I hope they will think twice. Then again, it may cause them to shoot faster. I call the number quickly. I can hear someone pickup on the other end. I can hear him breathing.

“Hello?”

Silence

“Hello? I’m calling about a ride to the airport.”

Silence

“I have the money.”

“Where are you?” a voice whispers. I tell him my location.

“Stay there,” he hangs up.

I am not sure what to do. Standing on the side of the road with two large duffel bags is conspicuous but not technically against the rules of the bandh, as long as I’m not using the phone. I decide to stay put. The streets are deserted. It is barely light.

Aasdesb and I sit in silence. He draws in the dirt with a stick. I play with a loose thread on my shirt. The morning is still and we do not wish to disturb it with conversation. We do not wish for it to send us trouble. Our silence is an offering to its stillness. Thirty minutes later, I hear an engine. We jump to our feet.

An old bus rounds the corner and stops in front of me. There are men in full riot gear at each window. Their rifles rest on the windowsills. I cannot see their eyes, only the tops of their helmets and the tips of their guns. The bus door swings open. A skinny man jumps out. He grabs one of my bags and carries it onto the bus. He motions for me to follow. I grab my other bag and follow him. There are six other tourists already aboard. They are not in the seats; they lie on their bellies on the floor of the aisle.

“Hurry,” the skinny man orders, maneuvering me towards the others on the floor. The bus lurches forward, and I do not get a chance to say goodbye to Aasdesb. I lie on my

stomach with the others. My head is about five inches from a blonde woman in her forties. She is wearing hiking boots.

The driver speaks into a black radio. He gives our location and waits for an answer. Ten seconds later, a voice crackles through the radio; the voice gives the driver directions. It reports the most recent Maoist sightings. The driver and the skinny man must have spies positioned throughout Katmandu. The driver receives updates every three minutes.

The black radio crackles again. New directions are being shouted to the bus driver. A Maoist patrol has been spotted on our route. The driver makes a quick right, then a quick left. Our bodies roll to the left then the right. I keep my head down. No one speaks. The bus jerks this way and that. It bumps and shakes. The voice on the black radio changes our route two more times. We pick up another tourist. His thick, auburn dreadlocks are tied back with a bright blue fabric. He is wearing a shirt that reads *Teach Peace*. When he joins us on the floor, I can see that his dreadlocks reach all the way to his butt. I wonder if these tourists are needed urgently in other parts of the world or if they are simply too scared to stay in Katmandu for the bandh. The feeling of motion is the feeling of control. No one wants to be a sitting duck.

Only one section of one road in all of Kathmandu is paved. So when I feel the smoothness of pavement beneath wheels, I know we are close to the airport. I know we have almost left the city behind.



I hear a gunshot. I hear splitting metal as a bullet hits the bus. The men in the window fire several rounds. Then there is silence.

“Don’t fear,” the bus driver’s voice comes through the intercom. “There were only three. We killed them.”

Nobody makes a sound. We keep our heads down. The bus glides on.

We arrive at the airport. It is heavily guarded; a chain-link fence surrounds it. The airport is different than the City. It is an international port protected by more dangerous conquerors. The Maoists know this. They will not interfere with the airport. They are not ready to poke larger bears.

The door of the bus swings open. “Up. Up,” the skinny man singsongs to us. We are grateful to be alive. We pay him. We would have paid him more. We would have paid him anything. We do not belong here.

If he survives the bandh, the skinny man will be rich. He will buy a house with electricity and plumbing.

The bus driver motions to the skinny man. They examine the bullet hole in the side of the bus. The skinny man traces it with his fingers. “Ke Garne?” he shrugs. His voice is barely audible. Above us, planes come and go, shuffling tourists around the globe.

## LIONS AND TIGERS

“Don’t drink the water,” Adam cautioned one night. I was flying to Costa Rica in the morning. “It will look safe, but it isn’t. A few years ago,” he launched into one of his stories, “I travelled around South America. At first, I was careful about treating the water, but I kept seeing the locals drinking it, and after a while, I got lazy. The water looked clean, so I drank it. I drank it from rivers, streams, and rural village taps. I was nervous at first. I waited, expecting to get sick, but nothing happened. I continued on for two months, drinking water that looked clean.

A year later, back in the States, I got a bad case of the flu. I was really sick. I didn’t eat anything for days. On the fifth day of my fasting, I felt something inside my throat. It was itchy and ticklish. I drank some water trying to make the feeling go away. It didn’t. An hour later, I felt something inside my mouth. There was something moving around in my mouth. I rushed over to the mirror, and I saw two thin, long, silver worms in my mouth. They were trying to wiggle through my teeth. As I tried to pull them out, I could feel them being pulled up my throat. They were so long that they were in my mouth and throat at the same time. I rushed to the emergency room.

The doctor told me that I had picked up these worms by drinking contaminated water.

The worms had been living in my stomach for over a year. When I got the flu and

stopped eating, the worms got hungry. They crawled out of my stomach in search of food. It's always the things you can't see that will get you in the end."

"Thanks Adam," I said making a mental note to never again hang out with Adam the day before a trip.

With every step, the forest grows thicker and we do not notice. We do not notice, until it is so dark that we need a headlamp during the day. I have just woken in a panic. In my dreams are silver worms. I'm sweating inside my sleeping bag. I thrash around before remembering that I'm on a wooden platform 100 feet off the ground, covered in mosquito netting. The rainforest hums its night noises. In the thickest parts, that is how we tell night from day. There are night noises; there are crepuscular noises; there are day noises. We are never alone. Even now, in this tree, there are thousands of organisms. Most of them are invisible to the human eye, like most forces at work. Life feeds on life. We do not notice.

At night, before we get into our sleeping bags, we beat them with sticks. Juan, our Costa Rican guide, gave us a demonstration on the first night. *Start at the bottom and beat up to the opening.* To make the demonstration more entertaining, he planted a snake inside Carey's sleeping bag. She screamed when it slithered out. We never forget to beat our bags.

Carey was upset about the snake, until Juan told her to be thankful it wasn't a Bogo Beetle. "What's a Bogo Beetle?" she asked. Sometimes it is better not to know.

"The Bogo Beetle," Juan informed us, "is the most dangerous creature in the rainforest. Bogos only live deep in the rainforest, so most people are unaware of their existence. This morning," he paused for effect, "you entered into Bogo territory."

Carey let out a squeal.

"The Bogos are all around us," he continued in a low voice. "When you are asleep, they make their move. The bigger Bogos can eat through your bug netting. They crawl onto your arm. When they sting you, they inject venom. After they sting, they defecate on the sting. When you wake, you feel an intense itch on your arm. You will instantly scratch it, but that will be the death of you. When you scratch the sting, you will be scratching the poison from the Bogo stool into your blood stream. A week later, you will get very ill." Juan took the time to look each of us in the eye. I think he was checking to make sure we were all sufficiently terrified. We were. "You will recover from this sickness after a week or so. You will think you are OK. You are not. All the while, your heart will be swelling from the Bogo's poison. After several months, your heart will burst, and you will die. It will be painful. There is no cure. Once stung, your only hope is not to scratch the sting. You must wash it immediately."

We scratch at nothing now. Our arms and legs are full of mosquito bites that we refuse to scratch. *Just in case* is our mantra. Which really means we can no longer tell things apart. The constant itching makes us more miserable as we trek along. We are often ankle-deep in thick mud. Sometimes, we are knee-deep in it. There is no way to stay dry. We are either drenched from rain or drenched from our own sweat. Usually, it is a combination of the two- warm rain dripping down our skin, as warm sweat pours out of it. If there are trails, they are overgrown. Juan uses his machete to clear a path. The process is painstakingly slow. It is noisy and destructive.

We are on guard for weeks. We treat our water. We beat our bags. We watch for signs of danger. We fear the invisible. We scratch at nothing. We wonder why it was we came to this place. The more we research, the less we understand. We collect samples from streams. We photograph plants. We keep walking.

One morning, Juan tells us that we are nearing a small village where we can resupply. Everyone is in high spirits. Soon we stumble upon a trail. After a few hours, it widens into a path. We have reached the section that is maintained by the village. We move more quickly. We have come out of the deep. A fair amount of light now reaches the forest floor. We can see well.

We see Juan stop suddenly. Up ahead, there is something in the trail. He goes to investigate. We hear him start to hum again. "Come look," he calls to us.

We crowd around Juan. There is a snake in the trail. It is coiled and motionless. Carey looks uneasy.

“It’s safe,” Juan assures us. “The snake is dead.”

“What kind is it?” Carey asks.

“A two-stepper,” Juan grins mischievously and winks at me.

“A what?”

“A two-stepper. It bites you, you take two steps, and you die.”

We all instinctively take two steps backwards. Juan laughs. “Come on Carey, get a good look,” he playfully grabs her by the wrist and tries to pull her towards the snake.

She screams.

He laughs again. We all laugh. We are near the village.

He pokes the snake with his boot. Nothing happens. “Dead. See. It is dead.”

I bend down to get a closer look. Everyone, except for Carey, moves closer again. It is cool to see the snake in such detail. Its head is broad and flat. It is beautiful and majestic in its own scaly way.

“What is its real name?” I ask Juan.

“La terciopelo,” He answers.

“The yellow of its tail is beautiful.”

“Its underside is yellow too.” Juan kneels down and extends an arm to pick up the snake.

“It’s a paler yellow though.”

The snake lifts its head. Carey doesn’t even have time to scream. It strikes fast and hard, biting Juan on the forearm. His face is full of surprise. He stands up. He takes a step...

We saw it coming.

## WALL RED

This is a story about a wall. Not an imagined wall, but a real wall, made of old stone. The wall is low enough to climb over, should someone be that brave. The wall is easy enough to dismantle, should someone think to try. But no one does. No one thinks of the wall at all. Like winter frost, or bread rising, or birds flying south, it simply is. It is how things are. It is how things have always been.

On one side of the wall, there is the town. On the other side, there is the woods. Before the town, there was a single house. Amid the crooked trees, the house stretched upwards, towards God. Before the house, there was the woods. Some people called this nothing. The priest often said: *Before the town, there was the house. Before the house, there was nothing.*

The first house still stands in the center of town. All the other houses huddle around it. There is one road. It starts in the center of town and spirals outward until it reaches the wall. The more desirable houses are in the center of town, near the original house and close to the church. The less desirable houses are closest to the wall. The town's thoughts lean inward, towards the old house and the church and the center of things.

Mary Hartford lives in the original house. Thirteen and pale, she has grown up an afterthought. It is her absence, not her presence, which attracts her mother's notice. In the evenings, when Mary reads in the velvet wingback chair that sits in the corner of the



drawing room, her mother always forgets she is there. Mrs. Hartford sings softly to herself, as if she is alone in the room.

When Mrs. Hartford is alone in the room, she grows agitated and does not sing. Instead, she mutters nonsense to the cat. Occasionally, she calls him Mary.

Yesterday, Mary was in the attic examining the contents of an old leather case. It held faded paper dolls, a silver baby rattle, and several pairs of lace gloves but no secrets. Recently, Mary has begun to wish for a secret. At thirteen, she has solved life's most basic riddles. In the attic, amid forgotten playthings, she grows bored for the first time. It is a strange feeling, boredom. It causes her to move more slowly and think less often. She touches her forehead expecting to feel a fever- some sort of delirious haze. Her skin remains as cold and as pale as ever. She wants something of her own. She needs something of her own. Finding nothing, she leaves the attic.

Behind the house, there is a small garden. Mary sits among the nightshades. Eggplant, she thinks idly, is her least favorite fruit.

Today, Mary is sitting on the steps of the old, stone church. The church is across from her house. The church is next to the school. These three buildings - her house, the church, the school - form a triangle marking the center of town. Mary spends her days walking in

triangles. House, School, Church. Church, School, House. House, Church, School.  
Often her dreams are triangles. Occasionally circles. Never squares.

The church has a bell in a tower that rings out the hour. It has a cross that, in the late afternoon, casts shadows across Mary's bedroom window. It has a priest. The priest had a wife, but now he only has three sons. John: age 14. Matthew: age 12. Luke: age 8. John has thick hair and a waxy smile. He smells like canned tomatoes and clean socks. In school, John sits at the desk next to Mary's. In church, he sits in the pew behind her. Lately, he has started bringing her things: shortbread cookies wrapped in foil, a potato from his garden, a silver coin he found wedged between two cobblestones in the spiraling street.

Mary doesn't know what to do with these things. She isn't sure yet if they are treasures or junk. She smiles palely and puts them in the corner of her desk. John grins waxily. He shakes his shaggy hair.

As Mary sits on the steps of the church, the wind blows. A strand of colorless hair escapes from her ponytail and flaps idly against her pale cheek. She thinks it might rain. It is late on a Sunday afternoon. It is time to go sit in the velvet chair and listen to her mother sing softly. Mary had grown bored of reading and of listening. Excepting the bible, the town has 100 books. They are all kept at the church. Mary has read them all. She had read them many times. She wishes someone would tell her a new story. All of the books are about the town and about God. The first book was written by the original

Mr. Hartford. He wrote the first book right after he built the first house. Her house. He also built the school and the church.

The schoolteacher is an old man with a long beard and a crooked hat. The schoolteacher has always been an old man with a crooked hat. Everything is as it has always been.

Mary is about to leave the church steps, when a boy appears. It is Hazael. He lives near wall. Mary has never spoken to him. He doesn't come to school often. He never comes to church. That is why she remembers him. He is the boy that is never there. He is about her age, maybe slightly older. He is dressed in grey pants and a black wool coat. Under the left side of his coat, there is a big lump. His right arm is cradling the hidden lump. He moves quickly, head down. His short golden curls swirl in the wind. Mary gets to her feet. Her feet start following him. She isn't certain why. She thinks it has to do with the boredom.

Mary has to move quickly to keep up with Hazael. She does not want to move too quickly and be noticed. Mary is wearing a knee-length, red, wool coat over a knee-length, black dress. The red coat has silver buttons, two pockets, and a hood. She pulls the hood over her colorless hair. She stuffs her hands in the pockets. She has never followed anyone before. It's more difficult than she would have imagined, had she imagined it at all. She goes too fast, then too slow. She thinks her footsteps are as loud as horse hooves. They echo up her legs and rattle about in her head. The road spirals its way through the town. The houses get smaller and shabbier. The roofs change from stone to

hay. Mary has never been in this part of town. She wants to look around, but Hazael is moving even faster now. If she stops to notice something, she might lose him.

Before too long, the road arrives at the wall. Before they can collide, the road bends to the right and begins to run alongside the wall. Beyond the wall, the woods sway steadily back and forth. The houses lean away.

Hazael stops abruptly in front of a small house with a red door. The house is made of crumbling stone; the roof is thatched. Hazael tries to open the door. It is locked. He knocks. Nothing happens. The wind blows. He tries to tuck one of his swirling golden curls behind his ear. The door opens. An old woman with silver hair leans on a wooden cane. Outside it grows darker. Clouds are gathering over the woods. The old woman looks up and down the street. The light from the open door illuminates her long hair, casting strands of silver shadows on the stone street. Her gaze lingers on Mary for a moment. Then the old woman's gaze moves on. It does not think much of the girl in the red coat. Hazael enters the house. The door shuts. Mary is alone in the street. She should be scared, but she is curious instead. Curiosity is better than boredom. Mary wants to know what was under Hazael's coat. She creeps up to the window. The curtains are drawn, but there is an inch of space between them. Through the inch, she can see a stone floor, a wooden table, and a small fire in the hearth. Hazael comes into view and places a package on the wooden table. It is wrapped in brown paper and tied with silver hair. Mary is on her tiptoes. Suddenly, there is a tug on Mary's shoulder.

“What do we have here?” a rough voice comes out of the dark and spins Mary around. The town’s constable holds her by the shoulders. His face is hard and menacing. Then it is surprised. Then it softens. Then it grows firm again. “Mary Hartford? What are *you* doing in *this* part of town?”

Mary grows paler. The red hood of her coat has fallen down, and the wind whips her ponytail against his hand. She doesn’t know what to say, so she says nothing at all. The constable’s eyes are pale blue. Mary’s eyes are bright blue. They stare into each other’s eyes, engaged in war. Mary wins because the constable does not ask more questions. The constable wins because Mary does not struggle or scream. Holding Mary’s shoulders, he marches her away from the house. He marches her away from the wall. Mary looks back at the window. Silver hair dances in the light.

Mary’s mother has noticed that something is amiss. She looks nervously about the drawing room. Her bones rattle against the china teacup as she lifts it to her lips. Her face is pale, but her lips are red. Her eyes are bright blue. She looks around the room again. “Mary?” she mutters to the cat. The cat purrs. Mrs. Hartford goes back to her embroidery, but she does not sing.

Eventually there is a knock on the door. Mrs. Hartford hears Rebecca answer it. She hears the constable’s voice. She hears Rebecca’s voice. Mrs. Hartford’s bones stop rattling. Mary strokes the arm of the velvet chair and opens book number ninety-nine. Rebecca brings the tea. It starts to rain.

It rains all night. In the morning, it is cloudy. Mary puts on a black, knee-length dress. It has long sleeves and a white lace collar. She puts on white tights and black shoes. She puts on her red coat. She brushes her colorless hair and ties it with a black silk ribbon. She nibbles at the toast on the silver tray that Rebecca has placed on the bench under the window that faces the church. In the distance is the cross casting shadows across the town. Mary walks to school. John places a pimento on her desk. She smiles palely. He waxes back. She puts the pimento in the corner of her desk. She notices that the potato has sprouted. The schoolteacher adjusts his hat. The morning passes.

The children are dismissed at lunchtime. Outside, the boys from the center of town gather together in a tight circle. All the other children put their heads down and head home. Only the boys from the houses in the innermost circle of the town attend school in the afternoon. Mary sits on the stone bench outside the school. She doesn't want to go home. Her thoughts are languid. She buttons up her red coat. She rests her elbows on her knees. She rests her chin on her palms.

John pretends to talk with Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but he is really watching Mary. She is paler than the other girls. She is peculiar in a particular way. Surely, her bones are translucent. Surely, her skin is papyrus and her hair is spun silk. Surely, her heart is a pimento. Her eyes are bright blue. It is a blue he has never seen before. It is not sky-blue. It is not bluebird-blue. It is not a water-blue. He watches her fiddle with a silver button on her red coat. The wind blows. It might rain.

Hazael walks by. Golden curls flutter in the wind. Mary gets up. She does not complete the triangle back to her house. She is bored with triangles. She starts down the street, following Hazael. The schoolteacher calls for the boys to come inside. Instead, John follows Mary. He has to walk very quickly; she has almost spiraled out of view.

Before too long, they arrive at the wall. Hazael turns right. Mary turns right. John turns right. Hazael opens the red door of his house and goes inside.

A noise comes from the inside the house. It is part gasp and part scream. Mary rushes into the house. John follows. In the center of the room is a wooden table. On the wooden table is an empty wooden box.

Hazael is panicked. She has gone without him. She had taken it with her. A cry rises from his throat. The door flies open. *She is back*, Hazael thinks. But it is not his grandmother. It is the pale girl in the red coat. It is the girl with the bright blue eyes from the original house in the center of town. His panic gives way to shock. The door moves again; the priest's oldest son comes through it. He has shaggy hair and a waxy nose.

No one is sure what to say. The girl's eyes are wide. The priest's son clears his throat and takes a step closer to the girl.

“You have to leave,” Hazael finally thinks to say. No one moves. He tries again. “You need to go. I have to get ready. I don’t have much time.”

“Get ready for what?” the girl’s voice is dusty. She hasn’t used it in a while. He tries to think of her name. M. It starts with an M. He doesn’t have time for remembering.

“What’s your name?” Hazael directs the question at the girl. She looks startled by the question.

“Mary,” John answers for her. “That’s Mary Hartford.”

Mary looks at John for the first time. “Did you follow me?” she accuses John.

“You really must leave.” Hazael shakes his golden curls.

“Where are you going?” Mary is interested.

“To look for my grandmother.”

“Is she lost?”

“No.”



“Then why do you need to look for her?”

“Because she is in danger.”

John perks up at the mention of danger.

“Why?” Mary’s voice is getting clearer.

“I don’t have time to explain.” Hazael begins to move about the room, pulling things out of cupboards and putting them on the table. Hazael isn’t exactly sure what he’ll need. He pulls out a loaf of bread, a block of cheese, two cans of tomatoes, three apples, a butter knife, and a jar of cookies. He disappears into one of the back rooms. He comes back with a brass compass, a black handkerchief, and a leather satchel. Mary and John watch in silence as he wraps the bread in the handkerchief and the cheese in the brown paper. When he begins to put everything into the satchel, Mary takes a few steps towards him.

“You’ll have more space if you take the cookies out of the jar and wrap them in brown paper too,” she suggests.

“But they’ll crumble.”

“But they’ll still taste the same,” she offers.

“And they’ll last longer.” John sticks out his chin.

“No they won’t.” Mary turns towards John.

“Yes they will. You’ll have more pieces. It will take longer to eat more pieces. Therefore, they will last longer.” He grins.

Hazael takes the cookies out of the jar and wraps them in brown paper. John remembers it is lunchtime. It starts to rain.

“May I have a cookie?” asks John

Hazael doesn’t have time for this. He has to catch up with his grandmother. He has to get to her before the man does.

“I have to go.” Hazael hoists the leather satchel over his shoulder. He walks out of the house. He doesn’t bother to close the door. Mary and John follow him. Hazael doesn’t turn right or left. He walks straight across the street. He stands in front of the wall. Mary sucks in air. John spits out air. No one has ever gone over the wall, at least not that the town can remember. Hazael puts his hands on top of the wall. He braces his toes against one of the stones.

“No!” shouts John.

The twisting trees sway in the background. Big drops of rain land on their faces. Hazael is on top of the wall. Hazael is over the wall. Mary lurches forward. Instinctively John grabs her arm. Her skin crinkles.

“Let go,” Mary says, as the wind blows her wet, colorless, ponytail into John’s eyes. He lets go of Mary’s arm and tries to wipe her hair out of his face.

Mary is at the wall. She is on top of the wall. She is over the wall.

“Maarrryyy,” John yells. He doesn’t want to climb the wall. It is lunchtime. He is hungry and wet. He feels strange. He thinks it might be fear. John presses the back of his hand against the back of his honeycomb neck.

“Ahghhah,” John hears Mary moan. He hears a thump. That is enough. He is up and over the wall.

Mary is bent over, brushing dirt off her white tights. She has tripped over a small rock.

Her tights are speckled with mud.

“Where is Hazael going?”

“I don’t know.” Mary shrugs. “To find his grandmother, I guess.”

“This doesn’t make sense,”

Mary pulls the red hood over her wet hair. John runs his hand through his soggy hair. In the distance, Hazael is nearing the edge of the woods. The trees are thick and tangled. They move without noise. They remember what the town does not. Since the first house, no one from the town has entered the woods. No one talks about the woods. People talk about the wall but only in how it defines the town. There is the town. There is the wall. And there is nothing. Over the wall, there is nothing. Before the town there was nothing.

Mary doesn’t think it looks like nothing. Mary runs. John is only a step behind her. They are running towards Hazael. They are running towards the woods.

Hazael is the first to enter the woods. He steps carefully and slowly as if something might bite off his leg. He stops and looks back at Mary and John running towards him. It makes him glad. He had just realized the woods are not a place to go alone.

“Hurry up,” he calls back to them.

The trees block out most of the light. They also keep out most of the rain. It is drier in the woods.

“Granny?” Hazael calls. There is no answer.

“Over there.” Mary points to a tree branch where several strands of silver hair blow in the wind.

A little further on, John spots footprints. Then Mary sees a few broken branches. They continue on, following the signs, going deeper and deeper into the woods. Hazael tries to navigate with his compass. “We are heading north,” he says.

In the late afternoon, they break for a snack.

“What was in the package?” Mary is too tired for secrets. She wants answers now.

“An old knife and a drawing of a man.”

“Just a knife and a drawing? That’s all.” Mary is disappointed. “What did the man look like?”

“Like everyone else, except for one thing. His eyes. His eyes are brown.”

“Brown eyes!” John is shocked, alarmed, disbelieving. “The sign of the Devil,” he whispers looking suspiciously at the trees.

“What did the knife look like?” Mary asks.

“It was plain and old and a little rusted. Granny polished it and sharpened it though.”

“Where did you find it?”

“That’s the thing. Every Sunday when Church was finished and the priest went home for the Sunday roast, Granny would take me to Church. Granny taught me how to pry up a stone tile and put it back without leaving a mark. That’s what we started doing on Sundays- prying up a stone and then putting them back without leaving a trace.”

“That’s weird.” John turns his suspicion towards Hazael.

“Why only on Sundays?” Mary inquires

“Because that’s the only time when the priest is guaranteed to be at home. He never misses a Sunday roast, and he always takes a nap afterward.”

“Why pry up the stones?”

“We were looking for something.”

“What?”

“Granny wouldn’t tell me. She just said ‘you’ll know when we find it.’ After a while, she stopped coming with me. So I continued methodically checking the tiles alone.”

“You found it yesterday, didn’t you? It was the wooden box with the knife and drawing.”

“Yes.”

They eat their cookies in silence. Hazael is watching Mary suspiciously. Her eyes are too bright. Her skin is too pale. Her coat is too red. John is watching Hazael suspiciously. His curls are too golden. His shoulders are too broad. Mary is studying the trees. She starts to like them.

Mary smells it first. Smoke. Someone has built a fire. She jumps to her feet. They follow their noses. They come to a little clearing. There is a small meadow with green velvet grass and a sprinkling of purple wildflowers. In the middle of the meadow is a white cottage with a red door. There is smoke coming from the cottage’s chimney.

“Wait here.” Hazael goes to peer into one of the windows. Hazael rushes into the cottage. Mary tears across the meadow. John is not far behind.

Inside, the cottage is warm and bright. The fire is burning strong. Mary smells potatoes and tomatoes and eggplant. She sees a large pot hanging over the fire. She hears a woman’s muffled voice. The silver-haired, old woman is tied to a chair in the corner.

Hazael is frantically trying to untie the handkerchief that is covering the old woman's mouth.

"I'm here, Granny," Hazael says over and over again. Finally, he gets the handkerchief out of her mouth.

"Quick," says the old woman. "Quick, get the knife. The man put it in the big, wooden box. Over there, in the corner. Quick. The man will be back soon."

John moves towards the box. "It's locked."

"Let me." Hazael gets out his butter knife. He starts to fiddle with the lock.

"Hurry, my boy. Hurry," the old woman growls.

"What is this place? Who live here?" Mary asks the old woman. "Is this the brown-eyed man's house? Did he tie you up?"

"How do you know about him?" the old woman snarls at Mary.

Then she gnarls her teeth at Hazael, "Foolish boy." The old woman notices Mary's eyes.

"You brought the bright-eyed child to this place!" The woman's own pale eyes flash silver.



“What do you mean?” Mary is confused.

“You are his direct line, child. You live in the original house,” the woman growls.

“Before the town, there was the old house- the original house. Before the house, there was nothing. There were only wild and tangled woods. One day, two brothers arrived with their young wives. They looked at the land and decided to stay. The blue-eyed brother saw great potential in the land. He wanted to build a house, then a town, then a great city. He wanted a city where he and his young bride could rule. But the other brother, the brown-eyed brother, loved the woods. He did not want a town or a city. He knew that towns grew into cities. He knew that cities grew into countries. He knew it would bring people. He knew that people made the trees disappear. He knew that people burned forests to the ground. The brown-eyed brother only wanted a little cottage in the woods where he could live with his wife.

At first, the brothers did not argue. The blue-eyed brother helped the brown-eyed brother build a cottage in the woods. The brown-eyed brother helped the blue-eyed brother build the original house. The brown-eyed brother thought that once his brother had a large house, he would be satisfied. He was wrong. Once they had their house, the blue-eyed man and his blue-eyed wife wanted to build more houses. They dreamt of a town, a city, a kingdom.

One day while the young wives were collecting berries, the brothers began to quarrel.

The blue-eyed brother, seeing red, took out his hunting knife and stabbed his brown-eyed

brother. The brown-eyed brother fell to ground. The blue-eyed brother suddenly realized what he had done and was filled with sorrow. He knelt over his brother and cried. He begged his dying brother for forgiveness. ‘A wall,’ the dying brother said, ‘build a wall right here, and promise me that the woods on my side shall live undisturbed. Promise they shall live undisturbed for as long as my line shall live. The brown-eyed brother’s wife was with child.

The blue-eyed brother promised. In those days, a promise made to a dying soul was like a spell that couldn’t be broken. It had to be kept. A wall was built in the spot where the brown-eyed man died.

The brown-eyed man’s wife returned to her cottage and bore brown-eyed twins. The blue-eyed man and his wife returned to their big house. The blue-eyed man built the church and the school. Around them, the town grew. But, as the blue-eyed brother had promised, the woods remained absent from their desires. The town did not cross the wall. The promise held. The blue-eyed man never told any of his children that he had had a brother. He was too ashamed and too sad. His wife held her tongue, as well. But on her deathbed, delirious with fever, his wife told her youngest daughter the story of the two brothers. She told her youngest daughter where her husband had hidden the knife that he had used to kill his brown-eyed brother. She swore her daughter to secrecy. She made her daughter promise that the secret of the two brothers would pass only from youngest daughter to youngest daughter as a deathbed confessional. Each daughter would have to swear to uphold the promise and tell no one of the story.

I was there the night your grandmother died. I stood outside her door and listened as she told the story and the secret to your mother. I was not sworn to secrecy. I made no promise to uphold the blue-eyed brother's promise. All my life I have lived by the wall. For generations, my family's house has been in the shadow of the woods. We have watched them sway. We have watched their tangled branches reach out like the fingers of the devil. I hate the woods. I hate the wall. I want to see the progress the blue-eyed brother dreamt of.

I was not afraid to look for the knife. I am not afraid to end the promise. I will see the wall destroyed.”

“How can you end the promise?” Mary asks

“The blue-eyed man promised that he would leave the woods undisturbed as long as his brother's line lived. I have roamed these woods. I have discovered there is only one brown-eyed man left. He has yet to find a wife. He has no children. If I kill him now, the line will end. The promise will be lifted.”

“That is what you have come here to do? You have come to kill the man who lives in this cottage?”

“Yes,” snarls the old woman. She gnashes her teeth. “I am sick of living next to the wall. The town must expand.”

“I’ve got it,” Hazael yells. The lock falls off the wooden box and onto the floor. Hazael reaches into the wooden box and pulls out the knife. His face is full of triumph. At the same time, the door of the cottage flies open. A large man with golden curls and brown eyes enters the room. He smells of pine and earth. He is holding an axe.

“Kill him!” the old woman howls. “Hazael now! Kill him!”

Hazael charges the brown-eyed man, knife outstretched. With a swing of his axe, the brown-eyed man chops off Hazael’s head. Hazael’s body hits the floor with a thug. Hazael’s head flies across the room and lands in the old woman’s lap. Blood gushes.

“The knife! Get the knife. Kill him,” the old woman howls at John. John doesn’t know what to do. He runs to the door. He forgets about Mary. The brown-eyed man charges after John. Mary picks up the knife. The old woman howls again. Mary turns in time to see John’s head go flying across the room. The old woman falls silent. The brown-eyed man turns towards Mary. Their eyes meet. The man pauses. Mary pauses. Behind the man, the door is open. Outside the trees sway. Mary catches a glimpse of green velvet grass and purple flowers. The town doesn’t have grass or flowers or twisted trees. It only has stone and nightshades and gusts of unchecked wind. Mary lowers the knife. She lets it fall to the floor. The man looks at Mary. Her eyes are bright blue. It is not sky-blue or

water-blue or flower-blue. It is the blue his mother warned him about. It is the blue of the blue-eyed brother.

“Kill him!” the old woman whispers to Mary. “Do it now.”

Mary picks up the knife. She turns and with a twist of her wrist, she slits the old woman’s throat. Blood splatters against her red coat. It speckles her pale cheeks. It oozes into her colorless hair. She turns back to the brown-eyed man and smiles. She drops the knife. It clatters on the floor. The old woman’s blood drips down Mary’s chin.

The man looks into the bright blue eyes. The man steps closer to Mary. He swings the axe and chops off her head.

The stew bubbles over. It is finished. It tastes good.

## WILD LIFE

The squirrels were incorrigible that summer. Matt thought it was due, in part, to the dry winter and unusually hot spring. Acorns and other nuts were in small supply, so the squirrels resorted to panhandling. It was a matter of survival. It was always a matter of survival.

At first the tourists were eager to oblige, doling out bits of peanut butter sandwiches, chips, and trail mix to the hungry, and seemingly docile, squirrels. But, by late June, the situation had spun out-of-control, especially at the top of Vernal Falls where it had devolved into total warfare: Squirrels vs. Tourists

Tourists vs. Park Rangers

Squirrels vs. Birds

It was impossible to tell which team was winning. It was easy to see that the Rangers were losing.

When Matt tried to trace the events of that fateful 4<sup>th</sup> of July back to their roots, he kept coming back to the squirrels and their war of survival. They should have known that something had to give. They should have know it would spiral.

Yosemite National Park was approximately the size of Rhode Island, as Matt often told tourists (or *visitors* as the Park required that he call them) while manning his post behind

the Information Desk at the Yosemite Valley Visitor Center. This tidbit was often met with the reply, “What is Rhode Island?” He was ready with the follow up, “1505 Disneylands could fit inside Yosemite National Park.” They were impressed. The foreigners more so, because, from their perspective, Disneyland was one of America’s greatest achievements. “Over a thousand, did you say?”

The *visitors* formed long lines, waiting to see him. Their children became impatient. They began to do the things impatient children do. “Don’t climb on the 3-D model” he called at regular intervals. “No eating or drinking in the Visitor Center,” he added to the loop after a child spilled hot chocolate on a stack of Valley maps.

When they finally got to the front of the line, they asked all the wrong questions. “We only have one day. My wife doesn’t like walking. What should we do?” asked an overweight man in his late forties.

“We have three hours before dinner and my son wants to see a bear. Where can we see a bear?”

“Where can I get a beer?”

“Is it always this hot and crowded? What buildings are air-conditioned?”

“Is there a movie theater in the Park?”

They wanted to be entertained. The Park was, after all, an attraction. They looked at him bewildered or angry or bored. They never liked his answers.

If the two million people that visited the Park each summer bothered to spread themselves out over the Park's 1200 square miles, there might not have been a problem. Yet, as if tethered to their automobiles like animals restrained by invisible fences, the average Park visitor only ventured 30 feet from his car. And since 98% of Yosemite was designated wilderness, that meant that millions of Park visitors crowded into the 2% accessible by car. The effect was maddening.

When Matt had first arrived in Yosemite, only his grandfather's old army bag in hand, he had been full of questions, too. He tried to ask the right questions. He had spent the first weeks foraging for understanding. At night, in the idle moments before sleep, pieces of disjointed knowledge ran through his head like ticker tape.

There were facts about wildlife: Despite being featured on the California state flag, there were no brown bears left in California. California's once one healthy population of brown bears had been hunted to extinction. Now, there were only black bears. Black bears were often brown in color, but black bears were more timid than brown bears. There were no wolves left either, only coyotes. At dusk, tourists heard the howls and called them wolves. "Did you hear that wolf last night?" They'd ask him.

There were facts about geology: The Valley walls were granite, and their true color was light grey. The other colors on the granite were lichen. Lichen was cryptobiotic, which



meant it could die when the conditions were not conducive to life and then come back to life when conditions improved.

Rock fall was most common in the spring. Curry Village, a popular place to stay, was notorious for rock fall. Only a tourist would pay hundreds of dollars to sleep where there was a good chance of being crushed in the night.

There was a long list of rules: Guns were allowed everywhere. Horses were allowed most places. Dogs were allowed next to nowhere. Removing anything from the Park was illegal. It was federal offense that could carry jail time. Matt had learned that from Patrick whose friends had been jailed for a night when they got caught removing Sugar Pinecones from the Park.

Don't stop in the middle of the road to take a photograph. Don't keep food, or scented products, or pot in your car. The first two would be found by bears. The other, by law enforcement rangers. The law enforcement rangers were a rare breed. They kept to themselves. They had reputation for being hostile and aggressive and wild. But not as wild as the Bear Patrol.

In the summer months, the sheer scale of the Park's production was nauseating. There were huge crowds to control, traffic to direct, litter to dispose of, fights to break up, and questions to answer. People flocked to the Park to be entertained and to be awed, but they

came for something else too. They picked Yosemite, and not Disneyland, because it was public land. And it was wild land. The publicness gave them ownership, and with ownership came entitlement. The wildness supplied them with the illusion of freedom. This freedom was the idea of reprieve from the laws that governed towns and cities. It was this idea that caused the law enforcement rangers to be a little lawless themselves. You had to fight daring with daring.

In Matt's third month in the Park, he heard whispers about the Bear Patrol. The Bear Patrol was created to deal specifically with issues involving wildlife management and tourists.

Matt was standing outside the visitor center lecturing a group of elderly ladies from Alabama about Ravens. "Ravens are the smartest birds on Earth," he told them. "They are remarkable. The ravens in Yosemite have figured out that backpacks likely contain food. The ravens are all watching your backpacks and bags. If you were to leave your backpack unattended, a raven would swoop down to rob you.

I once saw a raven unzip a backpack, pull out a banana, peel the banana, put the empty peel back in the backpack, and zip the backpack closed." The women gasped. "Ravens are the best imitators of sound, too." He continued "Ravens mate for life." He noticed a tall woman standing at the back of the group. She was listening and watching him intently. "If you see one raven, its mate is not far away. If you see a group of ravens, it is because

they are young and have not paired off yet.” The woman was making him a little nervous.  
“Any questions?” he asked the older women.

He answered a few questions. When the church ladies began to leave, the tall woman moved closer to him.

Her limbs were long and graceful. She had black eyes and long, black hair. Her movements were part bobcat, part deer. She was predator and prey.

“What’s your name?” she asked abruptly, despite it being displayed on his gold, metal nametag.

“Matt”

“Where did you learn about ravens?”

“I read about them. I study them. I don’t know. They’re my favorite birds.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why are they your favorite birds?”

“They’re smart.”

“Lots of animals are smart.”

“They’re fiercely loyal. They mate for life. I read about a raven clawed out the eyes of the hunter that killed its mate.”

“Do you work at the visitor center?”

“Yes.” Who was this woman?

“Do you enjoy it?”

“No.” He answered honestly.

“Have you heard of the Bear Patrol?”

“Yes.”

“There’s an opening. I had to fire the last three people we hired. Come by my office tomorrow if you’re interested.”

“I’m interested.” It was all he could think of to say.

“I’m in the Aspen Building. Go to room 113. Ask for Genny Marshall.”

“You work for Genny Marshall?”

“I am Genny Marshall.”

Every morning, Genny carefully loaded two rifles. The first rifle she loaded with small beanbags. The second rifle she loaded with tranquilizer darts. As head of the Yosemite National Park Wildlife Management Team, Genny was in charge of protecting visitors from wildlife and wildlife from visitors. It didn’t take long for Matt to realize she was only concerned with the latter. They were known as the Bear Patrol because they spent the majority of their time dealing with the bears. When a bear was spotted in the Valley, a ranger would radio Genny directly. Genny would then send two members of the Bear Patrol to manage the situation. Managing the situation meant keeping the tourists a safe distance from the bear. Tourist were willing to do just about anything for a good photo. It was a problem. The other portion of the job was crowd control. Bears drew huge crowds. If the bear was near a road, traffic would come to a halt as tourist leaned out windows trying to get a photo. Bears came to the Valley for food. They came mostly for human food. That summer natural food was scarce, don’t forget. Remember the squirrels. Remember their war. It was in full swing at the top of Vernal Falls. It required attention. Tourist were getting bit. The squirrels had begun to work in packs. It was big moment in

squirrel evolution. One squirrel would distract the lunchers. The other squirrels would run in and grab the food. Squirrels were dragging whole sandwiches away.

The lunchers were not happy. They began to throw rocks at the squirrels. They shouted obscenities. They tried to catch the squirrels. There had been reports of tourists throwing squirrels over the Falls. It was madness. Genny took manpower away from the bears.

She spent her people to the top of Vernal Falls. She told them to maintain the peace. She told them to ticket whomever they saw harassing or feeding the squirrels.

One weekend, Genny went up there herself. She took Matt with her. When a surly man with a potbelly and thick beard ignored her order to stop feeding the squirrels, she handcuffed him. She hiked him three miles to her patrol car in handcuffs. She wanted to set an example.

The man complained to the Superintendent. Genny was ordered to apologize and tone down her efforts. She seethed in silence. The summer grew hotter. Her eyes hardened, as vengeful tourists nailed squirrel carcasses to trees.

The next incident occurred when Genny caught a man dumping the trash from his car into the river. She wrote him a ticket.

“I thought this was a free country.” The man spat at her.

“You’re right,” she said and took the rifle from her trunk. “I guess that means I’m free to shoot you.” She aimed the rifle at the man’s balls.

Everyday they won little wars, but they were losing the battle. The tourists were winning. Things were escalating.

On the first day of July, after asking several groups of lunching tourists not to feed the squirrels, Genny suddenly got very quiet. She sat down on a rock and just stared at the crowd of lunchers. She watched mothers allowing their children to feed the squirrels. She watched other tourist trying to catch the squirrels dragging away their sandwiches. Finally, Genny took out her sniper rifle, the one loaded with small round beanbags. She aimed carefully. The beanbag bullet, travelling with tremendous force, hit an offending tourist in the shoe.

“Jesus! What was that?” the startled tourist jumped up.

Genny laughed as she walked towards her mark. “I was hazing the animals, which is a government approved wildlife management tactic. I guess I missed. My apologies. You’ve welcome to report it, but then I’m going have to do things properly and write you a \$5000 ticket for feeding the wildlife. Just let me know how you’d like to handle this.”

Three days later, they received word of an escalating deer situation. Deer were dumb. They were also skittish, unpredictable, and powerful. In combination, these traits were dangerous. The mule deer that called the Park home, were so habitualized, they would eat out of a human's hand. People often confused habitualized with tamed.

A mother would never allow her five-year-old child to feed a bear. It would just never happen. People still had some fear of bears. A deer, especially a little deer, did not evoke the same instinct in mothers. On any given day, a mother, realizing the deer would eat out of her hand, would give her child a piece of apple. "Go feed the deer." She would tell her child. The mother would retreat to a good photo snapping distance.

The first mother's actions would a trigger chain reaction. Other mothers, witnessing the irresistible photos successfully obtained by the one mother, would send their children, food in hand, to feed the deer. This escalated, until the whole scene closely resembled that of a mall full of families waiting to have their children photographed with Santa. Eventually a park employee would pass by the Santa-mall-deer-scene and radio Genny to send someone to deal with the situation. It was a simple matter. A member of Bear Patrol, would softly and carefully separate child from deer. The Bear Patrol member would then attempt to educate the disgruntled line of thwarted parents. Usually, Genny sent Paul or Lance or Molly to handle the deer problems. But that afternoon, Genny decided to go herself.



Earlier that day, Genny had been forced to euthanize Mars, her favorite black bear. The Park had a three strikes policy when it came to bears. The first time a bear was caught acting in what the Park called a “habitualized and destructive” manner, the “problem” bear was trapped, tagged, and transported out of the Valley. Unfortunately, bears were very territorial, and it didn’t take long for the problem bear to find its way home again.

The second time the bear was caught in an act of vandalism, the bear was again trapped and relocated.

The third time, the bear was euthanized. It was believed, by the powers in Washington, that problem bears only taught bad behavior, through their own bad example, to other bears.

Genny often joked that this policy should be applied to the schools as well. Unruly problem children would be put on the three-strike system. “I’m sorry,” a school principle would tell a mother, “We’re going to have to euthanize your child. We’ve given him *three chances*, and we just can’t have him teaching his bad behavior to other children.”

Genny thought, from a logical standpoint, it was more reasonable. The human population was multiplying, while the black bear population was dwindling.

Mostly, the Park’s three strike policy had been implemented because the Park couldn’t have bears brazenly breaking into human occupied spaces, which is what they were doing when caught by Bear Patrol. This Park was, after all, the property of humans. Of course,

Bear Patrol tried all manner of preventions. Hazing and education were at the top of the wildlife management list.

Yesterday, the Park Superintendent had noticed Mars was on his tenth strike. This fact came to his attention when Mars made the grievous miscalculation of breaking into the Superintendent's kitchen through an open window.

That morning, Genny had sat motionless beside the lifeless body of her favorite bear. She hadn't spoken since.

Matt blamed the squirrel situation. It had eaten up so much of their time that summer that they had been lapse on hazing Mars and the other bears. Less hazing and overall bear management meant Mars was free to get himself into trouble.

Genny was at her computer, gazing out the window, which offered a view of Yosemite Falls. Matt was seated at a table on the other side of the room, monitoring the radio scanner.

The radio call came through.

"Deer situation. Who should I send?" Matt looked over at Genny.

She didn't respond. She just got up and walked out of the office. Matt followed her to their vehicle.

It was a scene they had both witnessed a thousand times. Families with children in a semicircle around a group of deer. The semicircle was, of course, a line. Each family was waiting, with cameras ready, to send their child to feed the cute little deer.

The family, whose turn it was, was young. The mother's blonde hair was pulled into a ponytail that stuck out from underneath a "Life is Good" baseball cap. She was wearing sneakers, jeans, and a pink long-sleeved T-shirt, obviously purchased in one of the Park's gift stores. The shirt read *Yosemite: America's Best Idea* in big cursive script. The mother clutched an impressive camera and was calling out encouragement and instructions to her daughter. The father was wearing a matching baseball cap, jeans, and a Texas Rangers shirt. Their five-year-old daughter had pigtails, and a face that matched the mother's. The little girl, with the support of her mother, had made it within a foot of the deer.

Matt was ready for action. His job was to support Genny in the reprimand and dispersal of the families. He stood at Genny's side, waiting.

Genny silently drew her rifle. A few families had noticed their arrival and shrunk away from the scene. But, the majority of families, focused on the deer and pigtailed girl, had their backs to Matt and Genny. The little girl extended her arm and opened her fist, offering the deer a handful of sweaty Skittles.

Genny aimed.

Matt's brain worked overtime trying to process what the hell Genny was doing. These were not squirrels and defiant lunchers. This was a skittish young deer and a little girl. Christ. The situation was precarious. He knew it, and he knew that Genny knew it.

He needed to stop her. He needed to do something.

Genny pulled the trigger.

In an instant, four things happened. The beanbag pellet struck the ground between the young deer's front legs. The deer startled, acting on instinct, it turned, and issued one tremendous kick before fleeing into the woods. The pigtailed girl fell to the ground. The mother screamed and dropped the camera.

Matt looked over at Genny. She put her gun away.

"You can handle it from here." She told Matt. Impervious to the scene unfolding before her, she walked back to their SUV and drove away.

The mother knelt on the ground, clutching the body of the motionless girl in her arms.

The left side of the girl's head was deformed. Blood and other things gushed from it.

Matt could tell that the girl's skull had been split in pieces by the deer's hooves. He could

also tell that the girl was either already dead or would be within minutes. It was impossible to tell which ounce of blood, flowing from her head, contained the last bit of life.

The father was on his cell phone speaking frantically. Several other fathers were also on their cell phone speaking frantically. Dialing 911 in the Park was no use. At best, it connected you to a dispatcher in Mariposa, a town 50 miles away. At worst, it connected you to someone in your local area code. If visitors had read the informational signs posted throughout the park, they would know they needed to dial 555-8888 to reach the Park dispatch. Matt sighed, if the tourists bothered to read the signs, they would know a lot of things.

The other mothers shielded their children's eyes. Their own eyes, unable to turn away from the bleeding girl, were wild with fear. Some cried. Some sniffed. Some whispered things to their children.

One of the fathers noticed Matt. The father waved his hands, "We need help."

Matt reached for his radio and contacted Park dispatch.

He fielded the parents' questions. He told them he didn't know what had startled the deer. He told them Genny had fired afterwards, trying to tranquilize the offending deer. He told them it was protocol. He told them there was nothing anyone could have done. He told

them not to feed the wildlife. He told them to read the park signs. He told them the Park was wild and unpredictable, out here, in the wilderness, things just happen. They seemed to understand that best. After all, they had come, in part, to witness the world at its wildest, and they had already dreamt that anything could happen.

## EMMA

There are two kinds of people in this world – people who on the first sunny day of spring come out slowly – mistrustful – still wearing winter coats, sweaters and scarves. Then there are the overly eager lawn-bathers who strip down to hopefulness– short skirts, flip-flops, tank tops. It makes for some snapshot confusion– winter sweaters crossing paths with summer dresses. The interpretation of weather is a risky business.

Standing next to a woman in a floral-print dress, my black pantsuit looked severe. The day had been a mix of warm sun and freezing rain. Everyone was confused. We want to know the season. We wanted to plant our feet firmly in the appropriate cliché.

I normally avoided these types of events. I find the uninhibited ambition of youth depressing. I dislike the people who encourage it to run wild and the places, like this gallery, that put it shamelessly on display. But Chris had implored me to come.

It was a small gallery, the kind that frequently featured work from local college students. The show was titled *Breakthrough*, and it was immediately apparent that the majority of the photographers were photojournalism majors. These students had recently spent their semesters abroad. And while there were a few photographs of gothic architecture and Parisian cafes, most of the photos been taken in developing countries. Grand displays of poverty lined the walls. The photographers were engaged in a kind of one-upmanship. *I'll take your grass hut and raise you an Aids hospital.* Who had captured the most destitute?

Behind which eyes lay the most pain? Who had broken barriers? Who had charted new territory? Who had had a breakthrough? The quest for originality was tedious.

I imagined these photography students, who were currently eating overpriced cheese on toothpicks, strolling down dusty streets, overly conscious of things like lighting and composition. The people in these photographs were nothing more than subjects. They were a means to an end. These students eagerly anticipated their return to the States. They dreamt of all the new words they would attach to themselves- world traveler, activist, photojournalist, innovator, artist. They would compete for space in shows like *Breakthrough*. They would look for flaws in each other's work, evidence that their work was better. *Her skin is overexposed. His face is too symmetrical. Aids Hospitals in Africa are such a cliché. Tibetan Freedom is passé.* Wall space was limited to the lucky, the precocious. The less fortunate photographers only appeared in the glossy program brochures used to ensnare the next group of aspiring photojournalists.

I scraped the cheese off a toothpick with my teeth and took a sip of cheap champagne. I stopped in front of a black and white photograph titled *Alone*. In the photograph, a group of Indian orphans were playing with rotten oranges. The game resembled cricket. The surroundings were shabby, and the children were dirty. Yet, something about the photo was off. The photographer had tried to capture the poverty and the pain of these dirty children, yet there was no trace of agony in the faces of the children in the photograph. Their eyes were exuberant. The thrill of the game was in their bodies. To western sensibilities, these were underprivileged children. But to the children, unaware that their



image would appear in sterile galleries, there was no injustice, no misfortune, no statement. There was only the warmth of a summer day and the freedom of the game. Yes, these children had hardship- only in the instant when the shutter clicked, transforming these children into symbols, the photographer got it wrong. Most of the photographs in the gallery were wrong, in one way or another. The photographers were desperate to capture the emotions they thought they were supposed to capture.

My musings were interrupted when Chris appeared by my side and handed me a toothpick filled with cubed cheese.

“What do you think?” she asked, pointing to the photograph in front of us.

“What do you think?” I threw the question back to her.

She laughed. “Based on your expression, probably the same as you.”

“Perhaps, better left unsaid?”

She nodded in agreement. “Have you seen Alyse?”

“No. I just arrived.”

“Yeah. Me too. If she doesn’t surface in five, I say we leave without her,” Chris joked.

I scanned the crowd and pointed to a corner where Alyse was talking to a middle-aged man in a tweed blazer.

“Darn,” Chris sighed. “This could be awhile.”

“Why do you invite me, no, practically beg me to come, when you don’t even want to be here?”

“So I’ll have someone to talk with while Alyse works the room. She wants to be on the Board of some art charity. Several of the Board members are here tonight. I think the man she’s talking to is one of them.”

I nodded, faking interest. “I see.”

Chris playfully nudged me in the side. “Cheer up. I think I spotted a tray of chocolate covered strawberries earlier. Wait here.”

Chris went in search of the strawberries, and I looked over at Alyse. She is one of those people who can go on forever about nothing; she requires only the occasional nod to keep her talking. She is passionate about everything, which really makes her passionate about nothing. There are never awkward silences with Alyse, which was the basis of our friendship. Alyse and Chris had been dating ever since I made the mistake of introducing

them at a dinner party. I knew Alyse from my days working at a nonprofit dedicated to providing fine arts education to at-risk-youth. It was a lonely time for both of us. As new college graduates, we had bounced from one idealistic job to another. Menial tasks, even when done in the name of a noble cause, are not gratifying. At the end of the day, stuffing envelopes and entering data will always be stuffing envelopes and entering data. It was a far cry from the kind of interesting, grand, and planet-saving work we had imagined. That feeling of purpose, we desperately sought, continued to elude. Alyse was there to fill the space. She was a filler friend, someone I invited to parties so that the numbers worked. She was the person I called when I had an extra ticket because someone else had canceled. Alyse was supposed to be a filler friend the night I had introduced her to Chris. She was supposed to be a placeholder by Chris's side, while I chatted with my other guests. Instead, she had become a permanent fixture in Chris's life.

I can remember the exact moment when I met Chris. The world stalled, and when it started again, everything had shifted. I can remember every detail of those first few moments. She smelled of oranges. Her fingernails were jagged. She was wearing brown leather oxfords with navy socks. They say when something new or exciting happens it takes your brain longer to code the memory. That is why, in moments such as that, it feels as if time moves more slowly. That is also why, the older you get, the more time feels like it is speeding up. The years "fly by" because our brains take less time to code the familiar. The older you get, the more everything is familiar- life is less firsts and more repeats.

Chris returned, offering up a chocolate strawberry on a white napkin. There was a flash, and we turned to see a man holding a camera. “Gallery newsletter,” he explained before disappearing into the crowd. I couldn’t help but think that another photographer had just gotten it wrong.

“Hi Emma.” Alyse moved in for the double-cheek air kiss. I remembered the days when a high-five was Alyse’s standard greeting. “Pretty impressive, huh.” Alyse gestured sincerely to the photographs on the walls.

“Yeah. It’s great work,” I lied.

Chris placed an arm around Alyse’s waist, and I imagined she was guarding her from all the balding, middle-aged men at the gallery. Or maybe she was trying to keep her from entering into another long conversation, in hopes we would all get out of there faster.

“The photograph over there was taken by...” Alyse started talking, and I stopped listening. Eventually, a tall woman walked by, which caused Alyse to stop midsentence.

“Excuse me,” Alyse said to us, “that is Anne Belagio. I was hoping to run into her.”

“Go,” Chris said, swatting Alyse on the butt.

“Sorry,” Alyse offered as she darted off after the woman.

“I think I’m going to take off,” I told Chris.

“Emms, no,” Chris pleaded with me. “I thought we were all going to dinner after this?”

“I’m really tired. It was a long day at work, and Dan will be waiting at home.”

“Thanks for nothing,” Chris groaned. “I guess I’ll have to fend for myself.”

“You’ll manage.”

“OK. I’ll call you tomorrow. We’re still on for brunch on Sunday, right?”

“Yes, but Dan can’t make it, so it will just be the three of us.”

“We’ll miss Dan, but we’ll be happy to have you.”

*We.* How did Chris and Alyse ever become a *we*? For Christ’s sake, Alyse *loved* the photographs at this exhibit. That should have instantly made her ineligible for Chris’s love.

Out on the street, the cold air caught my breath. The weather had made up its mind; it was sticking with winter. I didn’t feel like going home just yet, so I walked north towards downtown.

There is a sadness that hangs over Cleveland. It's the sadness of remembering what once was, as well as what could have been. Cleveland was forever moving parallel to what could have been. In the early 20th Century, the city was an important American manufacturing center. By 1920, due to the city's economic prosperity, Cleveland had become the fifth largest city in America. It was now the 48<sup>th</sup>. It carried the scars of its decline. The city had a sunken-eyed look. I wandered the streets, mourning the city's abandoned ambition. The wind whipped. In the doorways of buildings, the homeless huddled. They wrapped themselves in blankets and prayed for spring. Why had their images not graced the walls of the gallery? Is the poverty in our own backyard invisible? Or is it more familiar and thus less interesting? Or it is simply too real. Maybe we need the distance in order to gaze at pain.

When I arrived home, Dan was asleep on the couch. The TV was on, and the sound of ESPN hummed in the background. The empty beer cans on the coffee table told the story of his evening. I did not try to wake him; instead, I placed a blanket over him. His expression was peaceful and goofy.

For a while, I had thought Dan was a hero. In the evenings, over beers, he would tell me stories from his day. He once told me that he had applied a tourniquet to the arm of a bleeding woman whose husband had died on impact in the seat beside her, but she did not know it yet, so she kept screaming his name and waiting for an answer. She screamed and waited. Screamed and waited.

As an EMT, Dan was first to the scene of tragedy. He saved a lot of people. He helped a lot of people. I read once, "In antiquity, and especially in the Greek tragedies, a hero was not a person who saved society from a danger, but mainly a person who caused and suffered many dangers himself. A favorite of the thunders." Those words were something I had only recently began to understand. The hero is not the savior. The hero is the one who carries the burden. The woman whose husband died next to her will carry the memory of those unanswered screams for the rest of her life. Those screams will be there when she stands in line at the supermarket. They will be there when she attends her daughter's graduation. They will be at every birthday and every Christmas. She must carry her loss. Dan saved her life. That is a fact. But what did Dan suffer? What burden does he carry? Dan sleeps like a baby.

During the idle moments of life, is the average person at peace? Are we all heroes carrying our burdens along or are some of us able to let go and move on? Do some of us travel light, moving with ease?

"You run them all wrong," Dan tried explaining to me over Breakfast. We were eating oatmeal and drinking coffee at the kitchen table. "Those miles only wear you down. It's too much wear on your joints without enough cardio gain to make it worth your while." Dan had always been a self-proclaimed fitness guru. The conversation lingered on passed breakfast.

“OK,” I replied, putting on my running shoes. “I run them wrong.”

“Come on, I’ll help you come up with a better running workout.”

“OK. We’ll do it tomorrow.”

“That’s what you said last week.”

“And that’s what I’ll tell you when you ask me again next week,” I said sweetly.

“You’re just running junk miles.” He shook his head in exasperation.

“What are those?”

“Junk miles are miles run at an easy pace, added to a training program only to reach a certain mileage total rather than to achieve any specific training benefit. They offer little benefit and unnecessarily waste energy,” He explained patiently.

“I see.” I often find patience the same as condescension.

“Let me design a better workout.”



“How do I know when I hit a junk mile in my running?”

“Well, it’s all about optimizing and pacing. It’s not about running more; it’s about making what you do run count,” He was excited by my sudden interest. “It’s about knowing how fast and how far to run, when to stop and when to push. It’s about limits and timing. It’s about change of pace, change of stride. Constantly break the routine. That is the most important part, breaking the routine. Don’t be afraid to try something new.”

“Break the routine.”

He smiled. “Want me to show you some new workout strategies?”

“Tomorrow,” I assured him. “Tomorrow. I will eliminate the junk and break the routine.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it.” His excitement evaporated.

“Tomorrow. I promise,” I called after him. “Really, Dan, I promise, tomorrow.”

I thought I heard him grunt from the other room.

How long can one run the same routine? How long can one live the same routine, until the seeming sameness of everyday turns all the hours to junk? When are the majority of

minutes just placeholders to move us forward from one moment to the next? Tomorrow.  
Tomorrow. Tomorrow.

Tomorrow I will let go of my patterns. Tomorrow I will try something new.

Two hundred tomorrows have passed in the blink of an eye. Five hundred tomorrows are gone without a trace. I have lost count of my tomorrows. They come and go unceremoniously, save for a few moments here or there.

I once watched Chris splitting wood in the yard. We had only been friends for three weeks. She raised the axe. Behind her, the snow-covered horizon stretched into eternity and the seconds stalled. There was no limit to what could be. For a moment, the picture of happiness was actual happiness, and I was a part of it - standing in jeans and cable-knit sweater, offering up a mug of cinnamon-scented cider. The body's capacity for joy is as great as its capacity for pain. We carry these moments too. They inflate us with helium and help to move us along. That is the only hope in life.

The fire was lit. Chris and I sat on the sofa facing each other. We did not need conversation. There was no space for it. There was no space for Dan either, but that did not stop him from coming home unexpectedly. We could hear him rummaging in the kitchen.

"Don't cut into the pie," I called to him. "It's for the dinner party tomorrow."

“Who’s coming again?” He asked, wandering into the living room. “Hi Chris.” He smiled warmly.

“Mostly my friends,” I told him. “Chris, Lauren, Josh, Pete, Carrie, Dave, Kate. Oh, and Alyse.”

“I don’t know Alyse, do I?” Chris asked.

“You’ll like Alyse. She’s easy to talk with.”

“More like she’s easy to listen to and not bad to look at,” Dan added, smiling.

“I’ve known her for years.” It was an apology.

“I better get going.” Chris stood to leave.

“We’ll see you tomorrow.” Dan poked at the fire.

“Tomorrow,” I said

“Tomorrow,” Chris echoed.

Dan makes a production of producing the roses from behind his back. “How’s my girl?”

He kisses me on the cheek. He is home early. The brownies cooling on the counter suddenly distract him. He reaches for one.

“Don’t eat them! They’re for the dinner party tomorrow.” I slap at his hand.

“Who’s coming?” he asks.

“Kate, John, Lauren, Andrew, Becky, and Eddie.”

“Not Alyse and Chris?”

“They can’t make it,” I lie because I haven’t invited them.

“You don’t see much of them anymore,” He notes without much interest.

“No. I haven’t seen them since their wedding.”

“What’s for dinner?”

“I’m going running,” I say.

Outside it is clear and cold. My feet hit the pavement; motion is my only goal. It is not a lofty goal, but it is all that this routine requires. I do not think about the tomorrows past or the tomorrows yet to come. I let my mind drift out over the lake, as I carry myself along. For me, there is no other way.

## MEIRA

*“And God said, let there be light; and there was light. And God saw that it was good. And God divided the light from the dark.”*

### I.

As a child I played with diamonds. They were my toys - my after school entertainment.

Other children went home to watch TV or play with plastic figurines. I came home to fish in tiny pools of pure light.

An only child in a long line of gem dealers, I grew up in the heart of New York City’s diamond district. My world was always lit, a washing machine of radiance – constantly swirling and turning. In brightly adorned store fronts, elegant women sipped champagne on velvet sofas, while men in dark suits clasped hands in secret rooms. Light was bought and sold – smuggled in the night by rough hands.

On the way home from school, I would squeeze myself between the black coats, as gold watches reached out to scoot me along. I was a ship at sea, rolling and shifting with the tides – looking over my shoulder for pirates. Our store was an island – radiance signaling home.

In the afternoons, my zayde closed the shades blocking out the neon light of roving bandit eyes. Then it was only us, the chosen guardians of pure light.

When I was seven, my zayde made up a game. I would sit on a metal stool in our shop, at the appraising table, underneath warm lights, surrounded by black velvet cloth. My zayde would lay out diamonds, and I would try to put them in order of worth. At first, thinking it was only a child's game he gave me easy tasks. The difference was so obvious any meshugener would have known. But gradually, seeing that I had an inexplicable aptitude, he raised the stakes. I had to stare long and hard - slowly rolling each diamond about in my hand, as I held it to the light. Finally, with hesitant hands, I would lay them out. My zayde clucked his tongue as he inspected the line. I was always right.

"Motek," my zayde would say, patting my dark curls. "You have an appraiser's eye."

Like explorers of old, we scoured the world in search of the best stones. Father had no patience for mediocre diamonds. To be king, you had to have the best treasure. To have the best treasure, you had to be able to identify the value of the thing you were looking at. If you couldn't, you were nothing more than a common fool- like the tourists who overpaid. Father took them into the backroom promising a special price. They left common schmucks displaying their tchatchkes like real treasure.

One afternoon, Father, who had come up from our storefront below, watched the game. He leaned on the table. His dark curls and dark eyes were very still- more pirate than parent. "Einayim sheli, how do you do it?" he asked. "Are your eyes so clever they can see without tools? How can you trace each contour, each flaw, using only the pinpoints of

your pupils?” Father was very pleased. “Im Yirtzeh Elokim,” he said stroking my dark hair as he looked upward.

I am no fool.

The truth - I was not really looking at the diamonds at all. I was watching the light -the way it went in whole and came out fractured. Those broken pieces of light were each different – marked - each diamond, its own blade, leaving its own seal on the light. Sometimes, the light was tattered – sometimes frayed or ripped. Sometimes, the light was so powerful it could mend even the deepest sadness. Other times, it was barely alive, like a timid heart. The secret was in the light.

One night, a truck arrived. It was unmarked and not armored. I could taste the secrecy floating in the air. The hairs on my arm stood at attention – waiting. Father and zayde, were still dressed, although it was late. They went down to the street where strange men ushered them into the shadows. Soon I heard many boots on the stairs - then quiet. I crept to the door and lay on my belly, peering under. I could see zayde’s shoes. He was alone, standing guard.

Zayde crossed the room and opened the door gently. Zayde put one long bony finger to his lips and motioned for me to follow. I crept across the floor like a thief. On the table was a small wooden box. Zayde nodded, motioning me to open it. I did. Suddenly, the room was dancing with light. It was the most beautiful light I had ever seen. It shot from



the diamonds- heaven itself. It was also a dangerous light – so pure it must be kept secret - or else the pirates will descend, bringing mayhem in the night.

“From Sierra Leone,” my zayde whispered, pointing to the wooden box. Then we heard Father on the stairs. I fled from the room.

That night, my world shifted. I dreamt about God. He was the rarest diamond- radiating pure light - like the diamonds in the wooden box. God bounces brilliance and casts no shadows.

Shortly after my ninth birthday, mother came to the shop. She stood in the corner watching our game. She did not speak, but something reflected in my eyes worried her. Later that night, she spoke in angry whispers with Father and zayde. I knew it was about the game.

I awoke thirsty and went in search of water. Mother was sitting alone in our dim living room, reading the Torah. She was so plain and sincere in her dull dress. I barely recognized her. A flash of disappointment struck my chest.

We never played the game again. Zayde sent me downstairs to Father. I poured champagne and talked to ladies, as they examine our treasure, from their velvet thrones.

**II.**

Years later, I was walking through central park. The gold of autumn hung heavy on the trees; every now and then a fleck fluttered to the ground. I rounded the bend and something flashed in the amber light. It was a woman, barely more than a girl. She was sitting on an iron bench silhouetted by the trees, like a diamond set in gold. The late afternoon sun refracted off her skin. Only once before had I seen light that pure. She smiled. Our eyes met - I followed hers, like a sailor after Polaris.

Soon we are lovers. But, Meira is engaged to an art dealer. So, we moved in secret, rolling and rocking on a wayward tide. We wrapped ourselves in velvet darkness. Sometimes I think, even in the dark, we will be found. Our bodies are prisms slicing the streetlight into fragments of forbidden colors. Once freed these colors fire-work around the room. It must have looked to passersby, hurrying along the evening streets, that our window was a portal to a new world, where God was creating light for the first time.

Meira said she is in love with me and she will leave her fiancé. Meira was lying naked with her back to me. I nudged her into a patch of morning sunlight. It had traveled from the heavens just to wrap its slender fingers around her. The light was not lost as it caressed her skin but cut into a thousand pieces, moving in every direction at once. I stuck out my tongue trying to taste it. Meira rolled over so quickly that her eyes blurred into streaks of light.

“I love you,” she said.

Some things should not be spoken - once voiced they change. I watched the light; it was busy bouncing off walls, rearranging itself.

Once again, summer has faded into the fall. It is October, and autumn's alchemy has transformed the park. I sit on a bench, waiting for Meira. Today she will leave her fiancé. Our love will no longer be opaque. It is noon, and she is late. I pull out my book and begin to read. All of a sudden, a hand startles me. It is Meira. She has crept up like cat in the dark.

"Where are your things?" I ask. She was supposed to have collected her things from their apartment. "How did it go?"

"I couldn't. Not today. I just couldn't. It wasn't the right time." Her voice is high like tinkling crystal; it holds autumn's heart hostage. Flecks of gold line the ground, but something has changed. Meira is no longer Meira. Her skin is muted. I take her hand and hold it to the light, moving it slowly back and forth.

"What are you doing?" She tries to pull her hand away.

She is worthless - an imposter. I drop her hand and walk away. She follows me for a while. She calls my name. Over and over she begs, and pleads, and cries.

Inside, I am screaming too- it is the sound of pirates who have just boarded a ship only to discover there is nothing but broken glass in the cargo hold. Like fools they stand in the empty belly of another man's ship. Like a fool, I waited for Meira. Like a fool, I had believed every word.

Back in my apartment I close the bedroom door and lean against it. Perhaps my zayde was wrong; I am not an appraiser. I have been tricked - like Herod Antipas. I have been tricked like the tourists in Father's shop.

Months pass. There are other women. But they too are worth nothing more than the cheap necklaces sold on street corners. One afternoon, I take the subway back to the heart of the diamond district. Although I talk with Father and mother on the phone every Sunday, I have not been back to the shop since my zayde passed away four months ago. I knock. Mother answers the door. Father is in his study. He is wearing thick glasses, hunched over, inspecting a stone. Carefully he turns it- rolling it in his hands.

He hands me the diamond. I hold it to the light.

The stone is transparent; it casts no shadows.

"Perfection," I say.

He smiles, "A true beauty."

Carefully, he tucks her back into a dark velvet bed.

As I turn away from the brilliant light, something catches my eye through the door. It is mother in the kitchen. She stands in her brown dress, wringing out a dirty dishtowel.

Time has drawn on her face, and it is darker now- worn and creased. I stand in the space between them: father alone in his study admiring the brilliance of hard stone - mother in

the kitchen quietly putting away the dishes, before she goes into the living room to read the Torah.

Mother looks over at me. Something in my eyes must worry her. Her brow creases. She follows my eyes, only to find the contours of her own wrinkled flesh.

“Ahuva,” she asks softly, “What is it you see?”

## CATHERINE

Catherine watches her daughters out in the field, out in the gray light of a December day. An unremarkable day, just like all the rest. A day as common as the crimson berries frosted over with the milk of winter, or the ice frozen too thin for skating, or the swirling clouds of breath that hang, a concealing haze, about the mouths of those who have dared to venture out. Her daughters move across the field, towards the woods. Annie slips, and in that same moment Olivia moves to catch her, extending a slender arm. To Catherine, still lingering in window, it seems as if the arm is there before the fall. The girls continue on, growing smaller with each step. Catherine inches nearer the pane. Using her sleeve, she wipes a circle in the misted glass, willing her eyes to focus. But the edges of their shapes are indistinguishable now. She cannot tell where the December day ends, or where Annie and Olivia begin. Her girls are lost to the afternoon, enveloped in blankets of snow.

To the human eye, the Ohio cornfields stretch all the way to the ends of the earth. And it is easy to believe, standing in the window, that the earth is flat, and she could follow those frosted cornfields to the edge – maybe even farther. Catherine watches the faded frozen line that separates one plane from the next. She wishes she could walk along it, dissolving into the folds of sky and earth, as her daughters have done.

“Catherine,” he calls from the kitchen.

Catherine turns slowly. She can hear her husband rummaging in the refrigerator.

“Catherine!”

“Coming”

Joe straightens as she enters the room.

“We’re out,” he raises an empty beer can.

Catherine nods

“Go get more,” his sound is sharp.

She pauses, hesitating only for a second. It is too long. The empty can flies at her head.

He takes a wobbly step towards her, arms out stretched. Catherine doesn’t hesitate again.

It is always easier just to go. She hopes the woods do not return her daughters too soon.

Catherine drives towards town. The moon is already in the sky, although it is only afternoon. The white crescent feels too close- heavy and large, pressing down on the earth. A waning moon, she thinks.

Snow falls lightly, a shimmering veil of frosted lace. She is reminded of winters before the girls, before the drinking. Sometimes, she lets herself remember how the world used

to surprise her. How every minute was an adventure - full of fugitive promises. If only life was something other than forward motion.

Catherine pulls into Nolan Foods on Main Street. It is a solemn brick building at the center of town. Every detail of its facade has remained unchanged for decades.

“Hi Catie,” Jim Nolan greets her from behind the counter. He has an easy smile. In elementary school, they played make-believe together. She used to throw the fallen leaves in the air like pixie dust, while Jim waved his hands and chanted secret spells. After school, they zigzagged through the barren trees, serenading the fading light. Jim was the only person in town who still called her Catie. Joe preferred Catherine.

She was playing with Jim the day her mother and little brother skidded into another world. She and Jim had spent the day racing through frosty fields, casting spells, and building fortresses with snow - glittering and sticky. But, when Catherine returned home for dinner, it was the sheriff who opened the door. Her father was slumped on the couch and did not stir. Catherine’s world became a silent snow drift.

“Hey Jim, how’s your day been?” Catherine asks

“Same as always. Come for the usual?”

“Yes”



“We just got a delivery in this morning.”

“Good thing,” Catherine says quietly

“Sure is.”

Jim rings up the beer.

“How are Annie and Olivia?” Jim’s daughter Hailey is Olivia’s age. He shows Catherine a picture of Hailey sitting on Santa’s lap.

“Hailey gets prettier every day.” Catherine pulls a similar picture out of her wallet. They take the same photo every year.

“We’re truly blessed.” Jim says smiling at the photos.

“Yes”

“Happy Holidays,” He hands her the beer in a brown paper bag.

“You too, Jim.”

Outside the western horizon is busy pulling light from the sky. Catherine decides to take the long way home. She likes to drive along the river and over Rose Bridge.

One by one, stars join the moon. They too are close this evening. It is strange how some nights the stars are so close – crowding the universe - pressing down like memories. Yet, other nights, the stars are far away – cold and distant. Then it's easy to forget they exist at all.

The river meanders on her right. It looks tired, moving alone in the darkness. The bridge is ahead. She strains her eyes, trying to see the exact point where the water disappears underneath.

Without warning, a deer appears in her headlights. Catherine swerves violently. Tires skid on the snowy road. Her car swings up on its right two wheels. She is inches from the flimsy guardrail. Catherine has a clear view of water weaving through steel. She is suspended, teetering. It feels as if the slightest movement will tip the scales. She could throw herself toward the passenger door - the car would flip, tumbling over the low guardrail into the river below. Or she could hurl herself the other direction, causing the wheels to return to the frozen ground. Catherine does not move. She simply stares straight ahead. She wonders where the deer has gone. Has it lingered in the woods to watch the lights of her car teeter, like a tightrope walker performing? It is silent; the snow muffles all sound. Suddenly, Catherine feels the wheels touch down. She is back on the road, gliding forward.

An hour later, she pulls into her driveway. By now, Joe will be asleep on the couch. The lights are on in the house. Through the thin, white curtains Catherine sees two shapes sitting side by side at the kitchen table.

So the December day has returned them after all.

## ADRIAN

Take the highway north. Leave the city behind. Hold your breath as you drive across the bridge; legend says it's the best way to ward off earthquakes. Drive for two hours up the coast. Eventually, you will see a white church with a blue door, at the edge of a crumbling cliff overlooking the sea. Turn right. You will enter a neighborhood that owes its existence to the last Great War.

You are surprised to see no cars on the street. There are no cars in the driveways either. The sky is grey. The sun had better things to do. When you look closely at the houses, you see peeling paint. You think of your own childhood and are grateful for the first time.

You find number 23. It is a single-story, ranch house. It looks like all the others. The front door was once blue, but it faded to grey many years ago. You take out your camera and begin to shoot. This is, after all, what you have come for- to capture my origin. To take a piece of me home, the way a child bottles sand at the beach.

This house is all that remains, and you are surprised that time has not devoured it too. You photograph the house from the sidewalk because you cannot bring yourself to set foot on the brown dirt that was once a lawn. You imagine me playing on that lawn. You do not know what I looked like as a child, so what you are really imagining is yourself as a child playing on that lawn. You might have played here had things been other than they were. You might have played here had I wished it so. Your head begins to hurt.

You have gotten what you came for, which was never going to be much - a photograph, a glimpse of this place and this house. Memory is a cruel master. You are weary of collecting it.

On the way out of this town, you stop at *Jim's Tavern*. There are no windows and no other patrons. You seat yourself at the bar. A few rays of sunlight creep in through cracks in the walls. Everything shrinks from these uninvited patches of light. You shrink too. The darkness is kinder.

"I'll take something local. Whatever you have on tap," you say to the man that you have just realized is standing behind the bar.

"Haven't had anything on tap since 1979." His voice is moldy and tired like the log ceiling not far above your head. You remember people were shorter back then, back whenever this tavern was built.

"I'll take a whisky." You never really wanted beer.

You take out your camera and flip through the photos of the house. The man puts a glass in front of you. His pour is generous which surprises you because his eyes are not. He glances at the camera.

"What do you want with the old Morton house?"

“You knew the Mortons?”

“I knew them.”

“Do any of them still live around here?”

“No.”

“Did you know Penny Morton?”

“I knew her.”

Until now, I have only been an old photograph you keep in a box under your bed. I am a name, too. A name on a deed to a house that the lawyer says isn't worth much. You glance down at the camera. You remember the shock in the lawyer's voice when he realized that you did not know about the house or my death. The lawyer had not meant to break the news like that. He had assumed you knew.

“What was she like?”

“Pretty. She was the prettiest girl in town. She was sad, too. She left one day and never came back.”

“Did you hear from her after that?”

“Never heard from her. Never saw her again.”

“How old was she when she left?”

“Must have been about 17.”

“Why did she leave?”

“Her daddy was as mean as they come. Her mama left when she was just a baby. If I had to guess, I’d say there wasn’t much reason to stay.”

Your bones feel cold. Hate makes your mouth dry. You do not want to know more. Or maybe you do. Maybe there is something in knowing. Why have you come all the way to this place?

“I’ll take another whisky,” you say for the fifth time. You will sleep it off in the car, in the parking lot, in back of the old tavern, down the road from the crumbling house where your mother once played as a girl. The mother you barely knew but have always hated. The mother you toast with every glass of whisky in every bar. You begin to feel warm

and drowsy; your hate is no longer a sharp pain pummeling the front of your brain; it is a dull ache that radiates down to your toes.

I'm sorry. I never meant to haunt you.



## **ROSE**

We go down to the beach.

She twirls in the sand, as if she is still young. We pass the bottle back and forth, swigging  
100-year-old whisky.

When we are drunk enough, dizzy enough, I grab her by the waist and guide her to me.  
She does not know if we still belong together, but she has momentarily forgotten this  
uncertainty.

We fall to the sand.

She breathes an old sea shanty.

You humpback, you orca, you bowheaded whale.

You sailor, you fisherman, you saltwater thief.

We pass the bottle back and forth.

The moon is painted on black silk with a smudge of fog lacquered over it. Which should  
really be a lament.

There are streaks of silver light gliding across the sand.

There are houses on the crumbling cliffs above us.

I pluck a homeless eyelash from her cheek. She blows and wishes for something besides me. Then she shrugs and kisses me.

There are waves beating the shore.

We are as relentless as water. We know no other way.