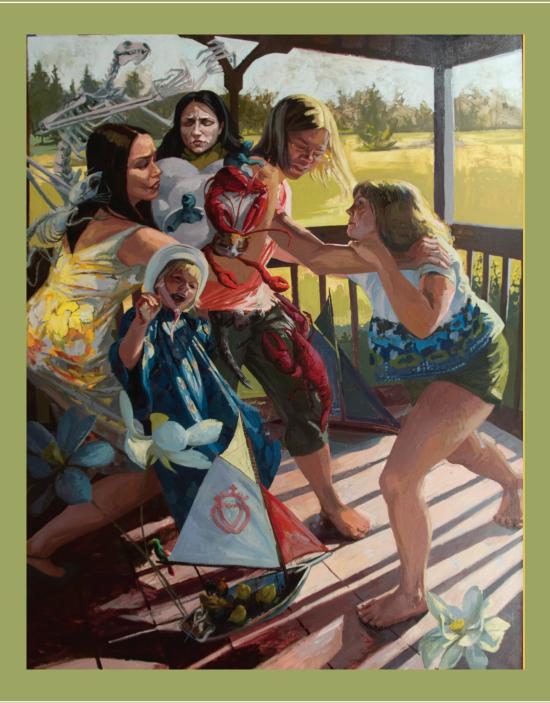
Printer's Devil Review



Fall 2011





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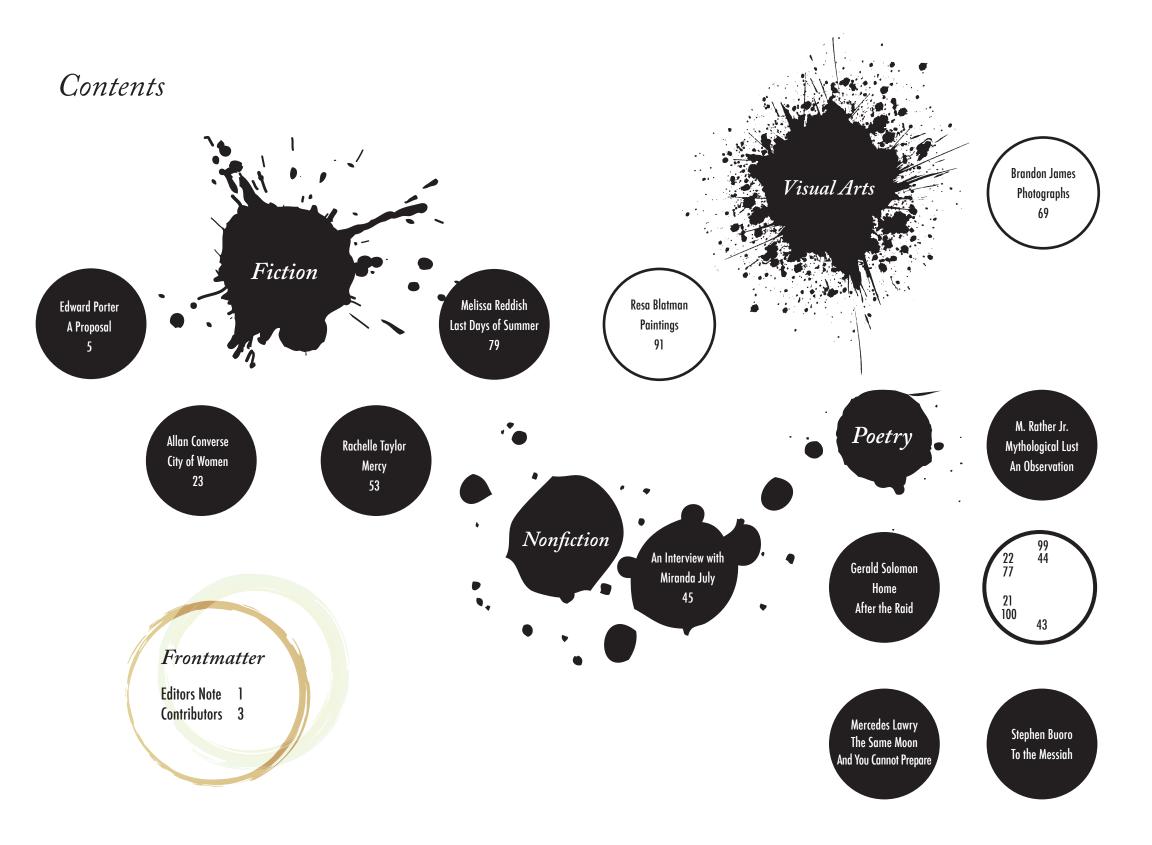
We do not accept postal submissions. Please see the submission guidelines on our website.

Duly Noted

The editors would like to thank everyone who took part in our fundraising campaign this summer. We raised enough money to pay for six months' worth of hosting on a fast, reliable server. We're especially grateful to ANGIE BROWN, RACHEL CANN, CLAIRE CRAMER, ERIC GOLDHAGEN, and DAVID SANDERS for their contributions.

Thanks to JEREMIAH (JB) BERNSTEIN, JAYNE KAROLOW, and everyone at Middlesex Lounge in Cambridge, MA, for hosting our release party back in June. We're also grateful to DAVID TABER and the rest of the Factory Seconds band for playing at the event.

Our interview with MIRANDA JULY in this issue was made possible by STEPHANIE NORTHEN OF TERRY Hines & Associates.



Editor's Note

ILLS BUGS DEAD. This is probably the best slogan I have ever read. On its own, the phrase "kills bugs" is purely descriptive. It's obvious and eminently forgettable. But that extra word at the end – its redundant, reassuring finality – that's what lets you know: with this insecticide there will be no half-measures. It is Ragnaroach; it is the bugpocalypse.

I'm told that the tagline was penned by Beat Generation poet Lew Welch while he was working for an advertising firm in New York. The phrase is artful and effective, but is it poetry? Whatever our disagreements about the purpose of poetry in our culture, I think we can agree that selling pesticides is ancillary to that, something tacked on after the fact. Advertising is an activity that makes use of poetry for some purpose not intrinsic to the literary form.

On the other hand, defining art and its purpose is a risky business. It leads so easily to aesthetic prescriptions that stifle experimentation and condemn original work to either obscurity or derision. In authoritarian regimes, failure to adhere to the proper style of art-making can have grim consequences indeed. Still, shouldn't we be able to say something about what art is for and what is foreign to it?

We can look to ethics, already concerned with how things ought to be, for help thinking through the question of the proper approach to art.

In his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, the philosopher Immanuel Kant suggests the following bedrock ethical principal:

Now I say that the human being ... exists as an end in itself, not merely as a means to be used by this or that will at its discretion; instead he must in all his actions, whether directed to himself or to other rational beings, always be regarded at the same time as an end.

Kant argues that we must treat every person we meet as an autonomous being, a consciousness with the capacity to think for itself, set its own goals, and make its own choices. If I disregard the interests of another person and exploit her solely as a means to some purpose I have in mind (personal profit, say, or sexual gratification), then I have a distorted relationship to that person.

We don't have to agree on the precise purposes of art in order to adopt the principle that works of art, like individual human beings, exist as ends in themselves. If we grant that art has its own ends, independent from other dimensions of society (the economy, the state, etc.), then it follows that these ends should be respected.

In practical terms, this means affirming a difference between art that has been allowed the freedom to pursue its own ends and art that has been subordinated to some other purpose entirely. When art is used only to achieve some end external to it, when its autonomy is denied or disregarded, art is inevitably degraded.

I'm not arguing for some fantasy of purity – art may pursue its own ends and still manage to sell something or support a political cause in the process. I believe, however, that we should be mindful that the primary purpose of art is probably not to produce profit for commercial publishing houses, to stimulate desire for commodities, or to advocate for a political ideology.

It is the purpose of this magazine to support art on its own terms. Some might even say we take this position to an extreme.



Printer's Devil Review refuses, for example, to subordinate art to the market and turn it into a commodity. We give the journal away for free and license the content in such a way as to facilitate its unrestricted circulation.

I'm starting to think that we've been asking the wrong questions, or at least in the wrong order. What if we asked not "what is the proper function of art?" but rather "what does art want?"

How about this for a slogan: Art Wants to Be Free.

Thomas Dodson



RESA BLATMAN has been teaching graphic design at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design since 1997. She is the recipient of numerous residencies and grants, including most recently a full fellowship at the Vermont Studio Center, the Artist's Resource Trust/Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation Grant, and the Blanche E. Colman Award. Her paintings and prints are held in public and private collections in the United States and Europe.

STEPHEN BUORO is a Nigerian poet. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in: *The Good Shepherd Magazine, Sun Revue, Poemhunter, Wasafiri, Able Muse,* and an anthology by Latin Heritage Foundation.

ALLAN CONVERSE graduated from Vassar College in the 1980s and holds degrees in history from Northeastern and Brandeis universities; he teaches history at several colleges and universities in the Boston area. He is the author of *Armies of Empire: The 9th Australian and 50th British Divisions in Battle 1939–1945*, published by Cambridge University Press.

In 2000, a year out of college, BRANDON JAMES went to study at the Maine Photographic Workshops; he wound up staying on to TA and work for two more years. In 2003, he moved to Taos, New Mexico, where he worked as a darkroom manager for the fine art photographer Chuck Henningsen. Brandon currently oversees Palm Press Atelier in Concord, Massachusetts, where he continues to make art in collaboration with others, and on his own.

MIRANDA JULY is a filmmaker, artist, and writer. Her videos, performances, and webbased projects have been presented at sites such as the Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim Museum and in two Whitney Biennials. July wrote, directed and starred in her first feature-length film, *Me and You and Everyone We Know* (2005), which was awarded numerous prizes, including the Camera d'Or. July's most recent film is *The Future* (2011), which she wrote and directed and stars in.

July's fiction has appeared in *The Paris Review, Harper's*, and *The New Yorker*; her collection of stories, *No One Belongs Here More Than You* (Scribner, 2007), won the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award and has been published in twenty countries. Her latest book is *It Chooses You* (McSweeney's, 2011).

MERCEDES LAWRY has been publishing poetry for over thirty years in such journals as *Poetry, Rhino, Seattle Review, Nimrod,* and *Salamander*. She has received honors from the Seattle Arts Commission, Jack Straw Foundation, Artist Trust, and Richard Hugo House. She has also published fiction as well as poems and stories for children. Her chapbook, *There Are Crows in My Blood*, was published by Pudding House Press in 2007, and another chapbook, *Happy Darkness*, is forthcoming from Finishing Line Press.

EDWARD PORTER's short fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Colorado Review*, *Booth*, *Barrelhouse*, and *Inch Magazine*, and has been anthologized in *Best New American Voices 2010*. He holds an MFA from Warren Wilson and was a Fiction Fellow at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Currently he is a PHD candidate at the University of Houston, where he is a fiction editor for *Gulf Coast*.

M. RATHER, JR's work has been published by *Reed*, *The Delinquent UK*, *Centrifugal Eye*, *The Smoking Poet*, *Adagio Verse Quarterly*, *Anemone Sidecar*, *Talon Mag*, *Yellow Flag Press*, *Writing Raw*, *Galley's Online*, *Idiolexicon*; he was also a runner-up for the Flyway's Hazel Lipa Poetry Contest. Rather recently graduated from the MFA program in Creative Writing at McNeese State University. He teaches high school in Southwest Louisiana and emcees the Stellar Bean Poetry Bash in Lake Charles.

MELISSA REDDISH graduated with an MFA from American University in 2008. Her work has appeared in *Wazee* and *Flywheel Magazine*. She is also the co-faculty editor of *Echoes and Visions*, the student literary publication of Wor-Wic Community College.

GERALD SOLOMON has published work in several American journals: *The Baltimore Review, Illuminations, The Paterson Literary Review.* And in the United Kingdom: *Stand, The London Magazine*, etc.

RACHELLE TAYLOR is a native of the Appalachian region of Virginia. She received her MA in English from Radford University in 2010 and is currently pursuing a PHD at Loughborough University in the United Kingdom. Her work has previously appeared in *The Blotter, Neon, Gertrude*, and *Gloom Cupboard*. She writes an ongoing series of poems inspired by turtles and tortoises, which can be read at: THESHELLEDLIFE.BLOGSPOT.COM.

A Proposal

She was late. She was always late, and he was used to waiting for her like this, in a stupor of nerves and fever. Gerald sat in a Windsor chair, looking down from the window on the descending terraces of formal gardens outside the hotel room. The Virginia hills resort swam in flowers: crocuses in the gardens, tulips in vases, rose-pattern drapes and bedspread. It was stuffy; it stank of old money. All the better, he felt, for secret fucking.

He had driven down the day before from New Jersey. She was arriving by plane today. They had picked out the resort on the internet, at her house in the suburbs, while her husband was at Columbia Presybterian renovating a forty-nine-year-old socialite's face. Something special, Grace said, for their two-year anniversary. He wore tight jeans and a white sleeveless tee shirt – that was how Grace wanted him to dress for her. When he could no longer bear sitting, he went into the bathroom to reexamine his shave and touch it up with a dry razor. Then he flung himself on the bed face down, giving himself at least the pressure of his body against the rose-covered tessellation of the quilt – the large squares were softly resistant, like breasts.

When her knock finally came – quiet, clear, code-like – it made him jump. He ran to the peephole. Her lovely, angular face was tense: she knew he was looking at her. He wanted to talk softly to her through the door, tell her to unbutton her stiff, white blouse while he watched, but she might not be alone in the hall. Instead, he turned the knob with deliberate, teasing slowness.

She darted in, dropped her bag, and threw her arms around his neck, clinging to him tightly as he kicked the door closed. He bent his mouth to her pale neck and throat. She never kissed back or did anything willingly at this stage, but liked him to do all the work. Blood flushed in her face and neck, and she trembled. Her nails dug into his wrists, directing his hands, as if by accident, to her thick leather belt. Trapping her between his legs, he undid the buckle and pulled it free. She hit at his chest, almost hurting him, and in response he turned her around, levered her arms behind her back, and tried to get a loop of belt around her arms below the elbow. Finally, she had to stop struggling for a moment so that he could get it cinched in the right place.

"Not too tight," she whispered.

Later, she pulled rumpled bedclothes over herself and snuggled against him. She put her hand on his upper arm, half-circling it, measuring him with her thumb and forefinger. "I like this," she said. "I like this part here." She slid her thumb into the hollow of his elbow and ran it up over his biceps. "And this part." Her hand moved down along his forearm and turned his wrist. "And this," she said, stroking the hard pads of his palms, calloused from years of handling wood and stone.

In response, he cupped her breast, lifting it just enough to feel its particular and delicate heft. Her breasts were slightly pear-shaped. She had been self-conscious of that until he'd made it clear how beautiful he found them. "Oh yes," she said, and then he closed his hand around her, tightening slowly until he drew from her a long soft, "Ahh." She looked into his eyes, letting him see that she did not want it to stop. He relaxed and tightened again several times, and she stayed with him. It was like bending a rod against a big fish down deep.

She talked about her daughter who was away at boarding school. Lucy had been caught smoking pot on the school grounds and Grace had to be angry on the phone, although what was smoking pot these days? But of course *Stan* wanted to punish Lucy by not letting her come on vacation, which meant two weeks in Switzerland with no one but Stan to talk to which, aside from being unfair to Lucy, was unfair to *her*. Gerald listened, more taken with the music of her voice than with what she was saying. Sunlight slanted across the lilacs on the wallpaper, inched its way from one flower to the next, and his own internal time slowed to the same pace. She talked until her voice grew fuzzy and drowsy, then she was asleep in his arms.

Grace had been a client. Two years ago, he'd supervised renovations to her Tudor mansion in Saddle River. The husband was a plastic surgeon whom he had met only once. A week after the job was over, Gerald had a slow day and called to ask her if he could come by and make sure the caulking on the French doors had cured properly. When he arrived she offered to make espresso, and by the time the water began to boil and sputter in the DeLonghi they were fucking: first standing in the kitchen, her hands gripping the edge of the sink, and later in the master bedroom, in front of all her framed photographs of family. The second time he came over, she took a flat leather paddle from the back of her closet and pressed it into his hand.

He found he enjoyed it: perhaps that was leftover animus from his divorce. Marion hadn't left him because she'd had the affair: she'd left him because he'd done such a lame job of trying to win her back. Or so she said. Losing her had been a public shaming but not a heartbreak.

Gerald liked his job, liked being first on the site at six in the morning, liked walking through with a cardboard cup of black coffee, a mason's level and tape measure, averting other people's mistakes: stacks of half-inch sheetrock about to be hung where the fire code demanded five-eighths, sections of trim that had been primed but were still not puttied. He liked being around the guys, the few other Micks or Italians left in the business, and the ones from Trinidad, Jamaica, and the Dominican who had come to *El Norte* to make their fortune. There were no women in the trades. He knew female clients and decorators of course, but that was different. They were people he might have lunch with – blueprints and fixture catalogues spread across the table – but never dinner. Until Grace.

His eyes would not close, and he eased out of her arms. His naked body in the bathroom mirror made him wince; he had been looking at the smooth curves of her body, and his own knotted, hairy limbs seemed simian in comparison. Matching white terrycloth bathrobes hung on the door, so he slipped one on and went over to the Windsor chair again where he could watch her sleep and also look out the window.

Two floors below, a red brick patio ran along the length of the hotel, overlooking the gardens. At the moment, it was empty except for a young couple. The willowy girl had long blond hair and a sweet face, while her companion was black-haired and stocky. Their casual intimacy, the way she ran her hand along the lapel of his jacket, showed they thought themselves unobserved, making them irresistible to watch. The girl spoke, and the boy followed her conversation, amused, sly. Gerald could hear nothing, but thought he saw her make jokes that the boy laughed at, ask questions that he answered, like watching television with the sound off.

The girl performed a slow dance, moving from one side of the boy to the other, drawing him down the length of the patio; she was slowly bringing him to some logical yet unexpected conclusion. Gerald could tell by the accelerating expressions of perplexity on the boy's part and anticipation on the girl's. Until suddenly, she went down on one knee before him, her face radiant.

Some private Arctic descended on the boy; he froze, then shivered. He helped her up and patted her on the back, while his eyes nervously flicked back and forth. They both leaned on the black iron railing, the boy looking at her, the girl's head dropped straight down, her shoulders hunched, her back to Gerald. The boy spoke earnestly, and his hand reached towards her, only to pull back. Then they turned and walked away together. For a moment Gerald saw her face again; it seemed pinched and wearied, as though a switch had been thrown taking her from youth to middle age.

He stood and yanked at the cinch on the drape, letting fall a curtain against what he had seen. A proposal of marriage. It must have been. Of course a girl *could* propose, that was just unusual, not unnatural. But it changed everything. For a boy to propose and be turned down – that was cause for sympathy and amusement. But for a girl ... It was too painful. The couple must be staying here for the weekend. How could you go on, how could you even look at each other? His last glimpse of the girl's face would not leave him. In the way that movies sometimes affected him, he felt more for her than he had felt for himself in a long time. From behind him came sounds of stirring and stretching, and he turned. Grace shifted to her side. Warm, amber sunlight from the other window shone on her pale limbs, the dark brown thatch between her legs, the pink of her nipples, and the ivory lines of her beautiful face. A red, five-fingered mark was visible on her hip, as if a possessive hand still rested there. God, but she was fine.

"What's wrong?" she said, "You look all ... tragic, or something."

He blurted, "Oh Jesus, you're the best thing that ever happened to me. All my life, I've been just drifting along like an idiot or something."

"Gerald, are you crying?" She sat up stiffly and pulled the sheet around her.

He was. He sat down next to her, surprised. He had not cried since he was a kid. She put her hand on his neck, trying to calm him.

"You're great," he said, "I've never known anyone like you."

She laughed. "I've never known anyone like you, either. Don't sell yourself short." Her fingers went through his hair, grasping it, gently shaking his head like a puppy's. "You okay there?"

"We do this," he said. "We meet like this, and it's all ..." He could not find the words. He wanted to ask how she felt about him.

"Shh," she said, lowering his head to her breast, still combing his hair with her fingers. His loneliness began to ease with the thought that, for women, it was never just sex.

*

They went out to the nearby bathhouses, built in the eighteenth century on a hot spring. The octagonal, white clapboard buildings stirred his professional interest. "Center-pole," he said, as they got out of his pickup.

"I'm sorry?"

"Dollars to donuts they're both hung off of a center-pole. That's a big wooden thingy in the middle, to you."

"Sure," she said. "Big wooden thingy in the middle, center-pole, you just can't stop talking about yourself, can you?" She squeezed his rear end. "See you in an hour."

Inside the Gentleman's Bath, two old men paddled slowly across the rock-and-sand-bottomed pool while a white-suited attendant tinkered with the wooden sluice gate that fed it. Floating on his back in hot

water, Gerald stared up at the spider's web of timber radiating from the center-pole to the rafters. He noted the saw marks on the wood from the crude mills of the time. It was a hell of a thing to build with nothing but hand tools. Like most carpenters, he'd fantasized about building his own house. Of course, that dream only made sense if you had a wife and children to shelter. Since the divorce, he had been renting the top floor of a vinyl-clad two-decker and could barely rouse himself to change his own light bulbs.

Someone loudly splashed in from the other side. Black hair and a red face emerged sputtering in the middle of the pool: it was the reluctant beau Gerald had seen earlier. He let himself drift close enough to make conversation seem logical, if not natural. "You're staying here at the resort, aren't you?"

The man didn't answer. He seemed surprised to be addressed, briefly nodded, and began to study the sluice gate as if he was calculating its rate of flow.

"Us, too," Gerald continued. From close up, the boy's features were overly symmetrical, effeminate. His attempt to be politely invisible provoked a sense of devilry in Gerald. "Romantic, isn't it? My wife and I got engaged here. On the back patio, in fact. I remember it like it happened today."

The other man turned slowly and stared. "How interesting," he said.

Evidently Gerald had been right about the proposal. But now that he had gotten the man's attention, he found he didn't want it. The man's arched brows and dark eyes were overcast with a puzzled, questioning intensity that was hard to bear. Gerald was unpleasantly conscious of their nakedness.

"Where are you from?" he asked, for want of anything better to say. "Boston."

Somehow that explained everything. "Well, good for you," Gerald said and swam off awkwardly, now unsure why he had begun the conversation in the first place.

In the bathhouse's gift shop, Gerald thumbed maps while Grace studied the soaps and lotions. "Let me guess," the lady behind the counter drawled. "You two on a second honeymoon?" She put the emphasis on "moon."

Gerald grinned. "Why, yes."

"The way you're looking at your wife," she said. "I just knew it."

"It's great to get away from the kids once in a while," he said. "Isn't it, honey?"

"There's no shame in that," said the woman.

"I'll take these." Grace placed two silver combs on the counter.

Gerald had his wallet out before she could open her purse. "Sure you wouldn't like anything else, sweetheart?" The combs had an elegant curve to them. One was larger, and one smaller. He guessed they were for herself and her daughter: a matched set. "Why don't you get three of them?" he said. Stan, her husband, was bald.

"You go ahead and spoil her," said the woman happily.

In the pickup, Grace said, "You're in a mood."

"Shall we call the little darlings when we get back to the hotel? Your mother must have her hands full."

She laughed but didn't reply, and he dropped the routine.

Instead, he asked, "Did a girl come into your baths? A blonde? Maybe ten minutes after you went in?"

"How did you know?"

"Did she seem okay?"

"She didn't seem any particular way. Why?"

"I saw her earlier." He didn't know what else to say without admitting to his voyeurism. "I just wondered."

Back in the room, she unpinned the rest of the drapes. No one could look into the room anyway, but Gerald had seen her do this before. She was creating a different atmosphere; she was seeking to shut everything else out. It was as if she felt safer in small spaces, like a cat.

"Did you bring it?" Her voice was flat and distant. She was talking about their bag of toys. She knew he had not forgotten it.

"What do you want from it?" he asked.

She stood at the window, looking out through the slit between the two long swaths of fabric. "Rope," she said. "And the Vaseline."

Forty minutes later, her phone rang. Because of Lucy, she never turned it off, never was far from it. He thought perhaps she didn't register the sound: her eyes remained unfocused, her quick sharp breaths didn't alter. When it went off a second time, she surfaced from the depths and said, "I have to see who that is."

She was, at that point, unable to get up or use her hands. Gerald disengaged from her with chagrin, found her purse by the door, and went through it for her phone.

"Show me the display," she said. "I can't read it like that." She was on her side. He turned it. The phone began to ring a third time. "It's Stan. I have to answer."

He flipped it open and held it to her ear. His penis hung in her face, so he got down on his knees.

"Is everything all right?" Her voice was instantly cool and friendly. It was alarming she could do that. "I was just taking a nap ... Virginia, I told you, Virginia ... No, I told you ... college ... Two boys and a girl

... her husband does insurance, I think ... Oh come on. No." Her body stiffened against the ropes. "Stan ... I'm a *guest* in someone's house right now, can we please not ... I know what I *said*, you don't have to ..." She rolled her eyes at Gerald and shook her head. "Yes ... When I get back ... Okay ... I'm sorry." *"Hang it up*," she mouthed.

She twisted against the ropes onto her back. "I hate that phone. Goddamn him. I'm sorry you had to go through that."

"What could you do?" he said, but heard the thinness in his voice.

"His family is over. It wasn't planned, they just came, and he wanted me to get on the phone with all of them and he was mad, because I wasn't there to be a good wife. He couldn't even remember where I was."

A lot of men didn't know when they had it good. "It's none of my business." He turned her on her side again and began to pluck at the knots.

"What are you doing?"

"The wind's gone out of my sail."

"Wait." Her voice was plaintive. "Don't let him spoil it. Wait." She withdrew into herself. After some time, and without looking at him, she said. "You're mad at me."

"No." "I can tell. Admit it." "Yes." "You're jealous. You're angry I'm married to him and not you." *Oh my God.* "Yes."

"So do something about it."

After he started, she twisted her neck to look back, to let him see in her face how badly she needed him.

*

In the dining room, the waiter fussed over them with the formal tenderness good waiters lavish on romantic couples. Other men looked at him with envy, no doubt assuming, as the woman in the shop had, that this gorgeous creature was his wife. Grace drank with abandon, ordering a second bottle of wine that he felt obliged to help her finish. The room turned fuzzy and golden, and he began to float in his chair. She told a story about her uncle, a Congressman, and his affair with an Italian movie star. After their laughter finally ran out, he asked if she ever thought of having another child.

"Stan would never."

"That's not what I mean."

She teared up instantly. "Sometimes – I think about having a boy. Yes. I think about it. What about you?"

"I guess that would depend on who the mother was."

They looked at each other without speaking, until it became awkward and they had to look away.

When they slipped into bed, their arms went around each other and he said, "I love you."

"Love you too."

They had started saying that to each other a year after the affair began. Now it didn't mean what he needed it to mean.

"I want to marry you."

"That's nice," she said. "I'd like to marry you, too."

"Okay then."

"Okey-dokey," she said. "Night night."

The next morning, they kissed and petted, working up to sex without any theatrics. She rocked slowly on top of him, her face close, moving without any sense of effort or performance. He couldn't bring himself to say anything at breakfast, and she was quiet too. They took a walk around the gardens, holding hands, not talking. He insisted on driving her to the airport. In the car, he finally managed to spit it out.

"I really meant it, last night." She didn't respond. "I want to stop hiding." She began to cry. She twisted in her seat, clutching at the shoulder strap. He took her hand and held it, small and limp in his big fist. "I want us to be together. Not this game we have now. I want to marry you."

"I knew you weren't just saying that." Then she squeezed his hand and said, "Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, everything. Yes."

When they got to the local airport with its single runway, he offered to come wait in the Quonset hut terminal with her, but she told him to go. "You'll make me cry more, and I don't want to be like this in front of strangers." She kissed him, her lips soft, lingering, hungry. "Thank you," she said. "Everything's going to be different."

On the long drive back he found a radio station pumping out old Southern rock – Little Feat, the Allman Brothers – and he rolled down the windows and turned up the volume, drumming on the dashboard, pushing his old Nissan as hard as it would go, as if going faster would make the future come sooner. He understood now that he had been in love with Grace for a long time: certainly for this last year, probably even before he had come over to check the caulking. He thought about building a house and starting a family. Most of all, he thought about Grace herself: the sea-salt-and-lilac of her body, the candied rasp of her sighs, and her endlessly surprised gray eyes looking up at him. In that moment, and for the first time in his life, Gerald had a clear vision of exactly what it would take to make him happy, and for this, at least, he was to be envied.

His answering machine was empty. Often she left him sexy, funny messages after they'd been together. But not always. And this time, things had gotten beyond the joking stage.

He called her on Wednesday from his pickup. He was parked in a field beside a neatly carved rectangle in the ground into which a subcontractor was pouring cement. Gray slurry slurped into plywood forms as he let the four rings, her message, and the tone cycle through twice. "Hey babe," he finally said, "It's me. Give me a call. Love you."

When he got home on Friday afternoon there was an envelope in the mail. Inside was a cashier's check for the hotel and restaurant bill, which he'd put on his credit card since, obviously, it couldn't appear on hers. No note. He called again and left another version of the same message.

That evening Gerald stopped by a friend of his, a plumber named Steve who always had marijuana. Until three in the morning, Gerald hung out in Steve's basement, talking shop, drinking whiskey, and smoking from a bong. When Steve finally asked him to leave, Gerald called him a dipshit, spilled bong water all over the carpet, and then was just sober enough to realize he was too drunk to drive and was in for a long walk. The next afternoon he had to trudge back to get his truck and apologize.

On Sunday afternoon it occurred to him that she might have been in an accident, so he called all the hospitals in the Philadelphia area and then all the Washington and Baltimore hospitals as well. Then he drove over to her place. Lights were on all over the house. Her car and Stan's were in the driveway, along with several others: they had guests. He parked for a while on the other side of the street on the off chance she would see his pickup and come out.

He left another message on Monday and drove over again that night. This time the house was dark, and there were no cars at all.

When he pulled up on Tuesday night, her Saab sat alone in the driveway and the lights were on upstairs. He slammed the heavy brass lion's-head knocker into the mahogany door again and again, his eyes fixed on her window above him. No one answered. He felt that people were watching him from behind curtains, wondering what he was doing there. He was out of place. He was humiliating himself. He should have known better all along. "I guess that's that," he said.

Focusing at work became a problem for him. Mistakes by his laborers and subcontractors escaped him. He allowed a bedroom to be Sheetrocked, taped, and painted, although the electrical boxes hadn't yet been wired. He brought tilers onto a job before the plumbers had finished – four men sitting on their hands all day at nineteen-fifty an hour. His boss, the twenty-five-year-old son of the company president, said he could either take his two weeks'vacation and come back with his act together, or he would have to find another job. Gerald held up a pair of tin-snips and told him where they would fit.

Unemployment came as a relief. He wore pajamas, ate Sugar Pops three times a day, and watched TV. The wildlife programs were his favorites. For society, he rented porn from the local video store. He let himself get fat and grew a beard.

Eventually, he went days at a time without thinking about Grace. Instead, he thought about playing the banjo. He rented one from the local music shop and spent three weeks trying to learn it. He gave that up as impossible. He developed an interest in peanut butter and ordered specialty jars from mail order houses. One came already mixed with Dutch chocolate and was amazing on a toasted pumpernickel bagel. His mother in Orlando called him every other day to ask him what the hell he thought he was doing. He held the phone away from his ear, letting her tiny, violent barking go on and on until it exhausted itself.

When his unemployment checks ran out and his savings account had dwindled down to half, he started running in the mornings. He ran slowly, and just the half mile down the avenue to the ball-field and back. One day he shaved, got his hair cut, and made the rounds of his old contacts, canvassing them until someone gave him work as a carpenter. It had been a long time since he'd walked onto a job with his white canvas bag of hand tools and asked, "What should I do?" To his surprise, he found that he enjoyed leaving the work behind at the end of the day, enjoyed being one of the guys again, instead of the boss. Everyone knew he'd had some kind of breakdown. Some said it was booze, which they knew all about, so if he seemed down, they said things like, "One day at a time," to him. He never considered telling anyone about Grace.

A year later Gerald had to show the family flag by going to a wedding – his mother insisted on it. His nephew Terry was marrying some Protestant girl in the Episcopal cathedral three towns over. The place was all high stone arches and stained glass windows, and the crowd in the nave was distinctly high-class: tuxedos, silk dresses, and jewelry. Great masses of yellow and white flowers lined either side of the altar. It looked like his nephew had hit the jackpot. He was all too self-conscious about his worn, all-purpose, out-of-date suit.

After the wedding, the bride and groom stood at the doors receiving friends and family, and Gerald got in line to pay his respects. Suddenly, she was on the steps above him, hanging on the arm of a doe-eyed boy in a corduroy jacket who couldn't have been more than thirty. The two of them were chatting with a circle of five or six others. He felt sick. He thought of leaving, but instead found himself edging up the steps to just below their level. A woman turned around, a friend of his mother's, and said, "Gerry, come here, there's someone I want you to meet."

"But I already know Mr. Riordan," Grace said. "He did some excellent work at my house a few years ago." She smiled. He couldn't tell by her reaction what was on his own face. At least no one asked what was wrong with him.

She was dressed like a lawyer, in a dark blue blazer and skirt, a simple silver chain around her neck, and small earrings with small blue stones. No wedding ring. He was surprised at how calm and smooth her face was: had she been wound up with tension the whole time he'd known her?

She introduced her boyfriend to him as Peter, and the two men shook hands. Gerald, lower on the steps, had to reach up awkwardly.

"So, what brings you here?" Peter asked.

"My nephew," he said, nodding over at the happy couple.

Peter nodded too. "I went to Penn with the bride."

He understood from the conversation that Grace and Peter were living in TriBeCa and that Peter taught art at The New School. She was working again, she said, for the city. It turned out she had a graduate degree in social work. He hadn't known that about her.

He managed to converse politely for a few minutes, even thought to ask how Lucy was without really listening to the answer, then felt he could bear no more and excused himself. He had another *obligation*, he said. The abstract lie clanged in his own ear – what other *obligation* could he possibly have?

She untangled her arm from the boy's. "Let me walk you to your car; there's something I meant to ask you," she said. "I'll be right back honey."

They said nothing until they had gone around the corner to the parking lot. Fortunately, his car was close.

"What do you want to ask me? Something about shelves? Do you two need new kitchen cabinets?"

She tapped his chest lightly with two fingers. "You look good."

"You must be blind."

"I mean, it's good to see you."

His face began to tremble, and he didn't want her to see. He reached for his keys, and bent over the car door to unlock it.

"Stop. I owe you an apology."

He leaned his forehead on the door, bone against glass.

"That was a very hard time for me," she said. "I should have called but I didn't. I was awful, and I'm sorry. Stan was such a bastard. You can't know how hard, how painful that all was. We have a child together. I don't know if you can even imagine how vulnerable that made me." Her face flushed and she bit her lip. She touched his arm. "Thank you. I couldn't have done it without you."

He turned and looked at her. "Done it?"

"Anyway, I'm glad to see you're doing well."

"I didn't realize I was helping you do something."

"We weren't dating, you know. No one was supposed to get hurt. No hurt feelings, anyway." She laughed. "I still think about you, if that means anything."

He had not yet lost her in person. It was as though he had stepped out of the last moment in Virginia into this one. Whatever she had done or said, the part of him that mattered still yearned for her, still believed her love could be won, if only he found the right key.

"Take care of yourself, Gerald," she said.

"Let me ask you something. Does he *take care* of you?"

Her lip curled. "Stan and I ... reached an agreement."

"Not him. That Boy Scout in the corduroy – does he take care of you? You have to admit, I took care of you, didn't I?"

He reached out with both hands and drew her to him by the waist. He slid one hand down her body. She tried to push away, her hands against his chest. She was slippery-squirmy in his arms, and her hips rubbed against him as she turned this way and that. Her arms beat inside his, as they had many times before. Half-formed curses shot out under her breath. "Fuck – fucking – asshole – cocksucker – "He loved seeing the words form on her lips. She managed to wrench herself around so that her back was to him: a familiar invitation. He yanked up her skirt and looked with fond recognition at her pale, gorgeous skin and the black, silky thong that promised she had only changed on the outside. He gathered the skirt into his fist, pinned her down on the hood of his car, and slapped her firmly on the ass. She cried out, and the purity and truth of it thrilled him. Running footsteps and shouts echoed in the parking lot. Grace twisted her head and looked up at him, her eyes thick with tears.

"Marry me," he said.

GERALD SOLOMON

The Same Moon

A cracked sun hovers over ruin. The lovers skitter like insects doused with a dubious rain. There is an absence to contend with and now, a shapelessness. Both the small and the larger.

Seeds are dispersing. The mother and father are too afraid to open their hands. Clever as the boy is, he cannot save them.

Hello? Hello? You can hear the whispers day and night. Whether it's the same moon in every case is up for debate. What are the thoughts of those seeking cover? Loud noises shake the shelves. Some of the bones will be broken and the lovers will be left fitting the pieces together with no clear direction or use for prayer.

Home

Left doctor's for home. (That clock on the wall, pale-faced, self-centred as a galaxy – making, breaking, up to no good ...)

Our bus partners glittering Manhattan. I lean to see what can be seen – night, absence, unreliable secrets.

Two kids horse around, draw on steamy glass – eyes and noses, smilies, from all our breath. I count the numbered receding streets – hidden, more certain than uncatalogued stars.

I know you think: "life, keen as a knife …" Well, keen for time, keen for itself – what time has only time for, little else.

City of Women

THERE ARE MANY DIFFERENT TYPES OF WOMEN IN NEW YORK. There's the type you can see any workday on the big avenues in Midtown like Park, Madison, and Seventh. They're young but not too young, cool but not snooty, stylish but not ostentatious. They tend to be tall, and those that aren't tall are slim enough to look taller than they are. They favor tight jackets and skirts, and most of them wear the latest fashions – but they won't wear something ugly just because a *couturier* says they should. A few of them are secretaries, but more of them are models, office managers, dress designers, and editors. Nearly all of them have college educations, and most are attractive. Those that aren't attractive are beautiful.

I'm one of those women. The men like to watch us, of course. I do, too.

Out-of-towners associate another kind of woman with New York, though they may not say so aloud. Those women can show up anywhere, but you see them most frequently between 14th and Houston. They tend to be young, and those that aren't young are trying very hard to look young. Some wear a kind of uniform: blue jeans or chinos, turtleneck sweaters or open shirts, peacoats with toggle fasteners, mannish jackets and suits, even a leather jacket now and then. Yet you can't always tell such women by the uniform, for many don't wear it. A few of them are ugly enough to stop a train, some of them are almost indistinguishable from men, and some of them are as beautiful as any women in the world.

I'm one of those women, too – sometimes.

There's one group of women who are almost unknown outside the city, and even inside it a lot of people don't know they exist. They wear a uniform, too, just like other groups of New York women, but theirs is usually blue. You can find them all over town, but you have to hunt for them. You can find them at intersections, waving children and old ladies across the street. You can find them in schools, giving safety lectures and counseling the JD's. You can find them in those grim, battered little fortresses called police precinct houses, typing up arrest reports, wrestling female hopheads into cells, escorting prostitutes to the paddy wagon for the trip downtown. A few of them – a very few – wear plain clothes and look like any other women. But they're not any other women, because they carry guns and handcuffs and can beat up men, and because they know more ugly things about human nature and what goes on in this city than you could learn in a hundred years.

I know what they know, because I used to be one of those women. But I'm not any more. My name is Val Cowan.

I was doing paperwork in the office and listening to the radio news when the first flash about the murder of Adele Phillips came on. It gave robbery as the probable motive, and it identified Adele's murdered maid as Louella Johnson. But Milly the prossie was just "a third victim, as yet unidentified." The story gave none of the interesting details that I'd seen in the Phillips house that morning: little things like the .30 Mauser machine gun shells on the floor and the naked young girl in old Adele's bed.

The dead Milly still made an ugly picture in my head, but not quite as ugly as the picture of May in the arms of Johnny Haynes. I had worked on adultery cases and I had worked on murder cases, but now I had to work on both at the same time. I needed help and information, and I knew a girl who might be able to give me both. What she didn't know about the lesbian scene wasn't worth knowing.

This piece was adapted from *The Dying Nude*, the author's novel-in-progress, set in 1950s New York.

I called the last number I had for Hoppy, gave up on the twelfth unanswered ring, and looked at the 182 Club matchbook I'd found in Milly's purse. That was as good a place to start as any.

The 182 Club was on Second Avenue a couple of blocks below 14th, in a Turkish-style structure built as a theater back in the twenties. It was a convenient location. The fags and lezzies from the Village only had to walk four or five blocks east to get there. The mobsters from Little Italy and the punks and hopheads from the Lower East Side took the IRT uptown and walked east from Astor Place. Queer sailors and rock-hard dykes from the West Side waterfront took the BMT or the cross-town bus along 14th. The uptown lesbians and theatrical queers drove down Second or Broadway. All a tourist had to do was hail a cab and whisper the right words, because every cabbie in New York knew the 182. The 182 got them all, and welcomed them all. Now it welcomed me.

I walked through the door and into a huge barroom with décor straight out of *The Sheikh*. The tile floor was a mosaic star pattern, the large mirror had cut-glass images of carefree houris, and the bar was a long, smoothly carved piece of dark oak with a silver-plated foot rail. Through wide double doors to the left of the bar, I glimpsed a big, modern stage and club floor.

A broad, dark-haired woman in a uniform jacket and bowtie stood behind the bar making a corned beef sandwich. She took one look at me and sighed. "Here comes trouble."

"It's nice to see you, too, Gina."

"I shouldn't even let you in the door. You're a private cop, straight, and a looker. Every time you show up my lezzie staff moan, clutch themselves, and rush off to the powder room. What do you want this time?"

"A bottle of Piels will do for a start."

"Sure, hang on." She went to the far end of the bar to deliver the sandwich to a tourist and came back with a bottle of beer for me. "What else?"

"I'm looking for dope on a short brunette who wears pink. Her name is Milly, and she's nineteen years old, a lezz, and a whore."

"So?"

"So she's been in here. She had one of your matchbooks."

"I order those by the gross, do you have any idea how many people go in and out of here every week? I know all the regulars but I sure don't keep track of every hustler who cruises through, and I don't encourage them to hang around either. If the trade in here gets too rough the city gives us trouble, and Tony doesn't like that."

"I see. Well, I had to ask."

"Why don't you ask your little punk pal Terry Hop? She's got the thickest black book in the city."

"She's not my pal."

"That's not what *she* says."

"Come on, who are you going to believe? You know the old joke about Terry, when her lips are moving she's doing one of two things."

"Lying or frenching," Gina said with a laugh. "Yeah, she's told me how much she wants your clam platter, but she says the same about a lot of straight girls. Have pity on her, at least give her a call and let her have the pleasure of lying to you some more."

"I called the last number I had for her, but it was no good. Where is she hanging out now?"

"God knows. Try Eighth Avenue or Red Hook or Jones Beach. She blows whichever way the ass blows."

"Speaking of thick black books, where is Johnny Haynes these days? I know she's one of your regular performers."

"I don't know what's up with John, maybe she's too busy driving. I'd love to have her sing in here again, and there aren't a lot of venues for a broad who dresses like a guy anyway. You'd think she'd want the work, but she didn't return my last call and she hasn't even been in for a drink."

"Why don't you call her agent?"

"She doesn't have a regular agent. She uses Keystone once in a blue moon, but they're not top-notch and she makes most of her bookings herself. That's one reason why John doesn't make as much money as she deserves, she doesn't have a head for business. She's always getting rooked. Why are you interested in her, though?"

"I like her singing. I was playing one of her records for a guy I know, and he liked Johnny's tenor so much he wants to hear her live."

"He's a lucky guy if he knows you. Does he know that John's a shehe?"

"No, I thought I'd surprise him."

"You cops all have a sick sense of humor." She smiled for the first time. "Six years ago Johnny and May Flowers gave the best show we've ever had in here. Johnny played piano while May lay on top of the baby grand, naked underneath some white roses. They sang Porter, Gershwin, and Berlin, and finished up with *Bill*. When they finally kissed at the end of that song there wasn't a dry eye in the house."

"Or a dry pair of underpants, either," an attractive brunette waitress said as she joined us. "Do you have the chicken salad for Table Six, Gina?"

Gina put a sandwich on the girl's tray. I poked my throat where my Adam's apple would be if I had one. "You're showing, Richie."

Richie blushed and pulled his lacy collar up. "Thank you," he said. "But I prefer to be known as Rita."

"Your nails could use a trim, too, Rita," Gina said.

"Trim yours, Betty Hutton, they're closer." Richie stuck his tongue out and left.

I laughed, but Gina didn't. "Cops, hustlers, and swishes," she said. "Why the hell did I ever take this job?"

I finished my drink and paid for it. "Let me know if you see Terry, Gina. Otherwise I wasn't here."

"You never are. Why were you asking about that little pink hustler, though?"

"For the same reasons the cops will be asking about her."

"So, it's like that, huh?"

"Yes, it's like that."

"Thanks for the word."

Hoppy was living in Chelsea that month, in a shabby brown building on 22nd between Eighth and Ninth. That was a good location, too, for a working girl. It put her within walking distance of the Village, the waterfront, the Chelsea Hotel, and Pennsylvania Station.

I rang a bell labeled T. HOEPNER. I got nothing and was about to ring again when a front window sash next to the stoop flew up and a woman in curlers stuck her head out.

"Hey, what do you want?"

"What makes that any of your business?" I asked her in the same tone.

"I'm the super. My husband was the super but he died, so now I'm the super."

"I'm looking for Theresa Hoepner."

"Not in," she said swiftly, and began to pull the sash down. I grabbed a mop handle from a trash can and stuck it between the sill and the sash so that she couldn't close the window.

"Hey, what's the big idea?"

"I told you, I'm looking for Theresa Hoepner."

"Who wants to know?"

"Somebody with one of these." I gave her a quick peek at my special deputy's badge.

Her mouth crinkled in distaste. "Okay, I don't want no trouble. All I know is she's regular with the rent, she don't make noise, and she's got a real job. Yeah, I checked on that before I let her move in, she works in some big office building. I don't know nothing about what else she does or who she does it with. Nobody can say I don't run a clean building."

"I'm sure you do, Mrs.—"

"Stoyanoff. My husband was Mike Stoyanoff and so that makes me Mrs. Stoyanoff. It's Bulgarian. Look, I didn't mean to be hostile with you or nothing, but she gets visitors, you know. Men, women, everything, and not all of them look right or feel right. A super can't be too careful."

"No, you can't. Where is she today?"

"Not in, like I said, and more than that I don't know. It's her day off, and whatever she does on her days off she don't do it here. Oh, I laid down the law on that, all right. I've seen all the gags over the years, but Mike had a nose for 'em and he left it to me when he kicked. No, ma'am, I run a clean building."

"I'll tell them downtown, Mrs. Stoyanoff. When you see Miss Hoepner, tell her to call Miss Cowan as soon as possible. She knows the number."

"I'll tell her."

"Good. Thanks for your help."

"Don't mention."

I was thirty yards up the block when she called after me: "And tell 'em I run a clean building!" The sun died as I crossed 14th, and the girls came out under the soft cloak of night. I was back in Lezztown now, a town of long legs and atomic breasts, tight pants and short skirts, wet lips and eager eyes.

A pair of hatchet-faced butches in windbreakers slouched past me, muttering f— this and f— that around their cigarettes.

A trio of well-dressed young femmes stood on a subway grating outside the Loew's. They broke into laughter as a train passed beneath them and blew their skirts skywards.

I wasn't the only one watching them. "I see you seein', Snowy gal," a bosomy Colored girl in a black skirt said to me. I kept walking.

Two high school girls with that suburban look stood close together outside a bar-restaurant on Greenwich, whispering and hesitating.

"Come on, I just want to see what it's *like*."

"Well, okay then, if that's *all*—"

Two middle-aged women in tweed coats stepped past them. One of them wore a lot of makeup, and the other didn't.

"Look," the one with less makeup said, "If you don't *want* to pay for a real dinner, just say so. I don't mind buying."

"So you say now, but then you'll whine about it for weeks. All I want is soup and a sandwich anyway, how many times do I have to tell you that?"

"I need a drink," the other said as she held the door open.

"That's always how it begins with you, isn't it?" They went inside, and the high school girls shuffled in behind them.

I started with Julian's, but I didn't see Hoppy there. I went to Sheridan Square next, but she wasn't in the Lion's Head or the Limelight either. I thought of trying the Café Bohéme, but I got an idea and kept going down Seventh instead. I turned onto a quiet side street near Houston and found a working men's bar that I had once known as Morgan's. Now the place had a new coat of green paint and a pale blue neon sign in delicate script that said *The Florence Lounge*.

A few girls chatted in low tones at the bar. A dark-haired woman in an immaculate white ensemble with black trim gave me a quick look when I came in, but she went back to her book when I didn't return her interest. The other booths appeared to be empty. A fat guy in a brown suit and a tie as wide as Queens Boulevard sat on a chair near the door, filed his nails, and occasionally glanced at a *Racing Form*. I went to the bar and a bartender came to me. He looked even more bored than the mob boy on the door.

"Schaefer draft, please," I said.

"Just used the last keg. Sorry."

"This crowd must be thirstier than they look. A Knick draft, then." He drew it slowly and he drew it right, and it had a nice head when he brought it to me.

"Good job," I said, and drank.

"It ain't busy. I can do a good job when they ain't in a rush."

"This tomb gets busy?"

"Startin' to pick up on the weekend nights. We reopened a few weeks back. New management, new look."

"New customers too, I see."

"If they pay, I draw the beer," he said.

"I'm looking for a girl."

"You all are."

"You'd notice this one. She's very short, straight black hair, black bedroom eyes. Usually wears all black clothes: leather jacket, jeans, boots, and a little hat, all black. Looks a little like a young guy until she gets up close. That's when you notice how very much she isn't a guy."

"She got a name?"

"They call her Hoppy, sometimes Terry Hop."

"I know the one. She came in the day we reopened, and she's been back quite a few times. She makes friends fast, all right. What's your interest?"

"I want to discuss existentialism with her in my underwear, what do you think my interest is?"

"Hey, no need to get testy. The way you talked, I thought you might be her probation officer or something. She seems like the kind that might have one."

"Hoppy's got one all right," I said with a leer, "but she finds me a little more appealing."

"Your girl ain't been in for a few days. She don't generally come in until late anyways."

I finished my beer, paid him, and passed him a ten spot on top of it. "If you see her, tell her Brunhilde was looking for her. She'll know how to get in touch." He nodded. "I don't usually do this, but I'll tell her. Is that your real name, though, Brunhilde?"

"Would I be dumb enough to use my real name?"

"No, I guess not. Kind of a wise girl, ain't you?"

"I manage okay. You're pretty wise yourself."

"If I was wise, would I be working in a dyke joint?"

We shared grins and I went towards the door. I was halfway there when I made the mistake of glancing towards one of the side booths. A girl in a dark green pea coat sat there, a girl I knew. I started to turn away, but the girl saw me and signaled me frantically with her eyes.

Katie Cadigan was a certain kind of policewoman. If you told her to stay in one place and do one thing and one thing only and where to put her feet and how many times she could breathe and little things like that, she would do a good job for you. If she had to do anything else – like think – then things might get a little too complicated for her and she would have to call headquarters for further instructions.

I didn't want to, but I sat down opposite her. "Hello, Katie."

"Hello Val," she said quietly. "Boy, am I ever glad to see a friendly face."

"I'll bet." I spoke quietly too, moving my lips as little as possible. "What are you doing here?"

"Undercover," she said between sips of beer. "I hate it."

"Everybody does, but we have to take our turn. Are the boys at the Sixth trying to shake Tony Becker for a bigger share?"

"I don't know nothing about that," she said. "All I know is they put me in here to get a line on the place, and on him." She pointed a pinkie at the mob boy. "Name's Lattaro, word is he might be fencing some hot stuff through the back room. But what are you doing here? Didn't you know this was a lesbian bar now?"

"No, I just wanted a drink. I turned right around when I saw what they'd done with the place and was on the way out when I spotted you. I didn't see you when I came in."

"I was in the ladies till a second ago. Nerves, I guess." She pulled her coat collar up around her neck. "God, lezzies give me the chills."

"Relax, Katie. They won't rape you, at least not in this bar."

"There's worse places?"

"Hell, yes. There are some stone butch bars over by the river I wouldn't go into without a gun."

"Lezzies are all crazy. Hey, speaking of which, did you hear there was a lezzie angle to the Phillips killing?'

"No, I didn't hear. It wasn't in the papers."

"It wouldn't be, but it's true anyway. She was in bed with the girl when they killed them both, and the girl was naked as a snake. She was just nineteen, too. Jesus, can you figure that? I mean, the old lady was seventy-seven years old, for Pete's sake. The things people do."

"Yeah. Who did they give it to?"

"McGilvery. He's a good investigator."

"Yes, and he also knows enough not to step on any big toes."

"But they'll step on some small toes, all right. They gave the lezz side of it to Mutt and Jeff."

"Those two girls should get results fast. All they have to do is blackmail the right women."

"Or use the old sockful of quarters," Katie said sourly. "They were supposed to train me for this job, but they weren't much use. That's why it's lucky I ran into you, Val. I heard you were good at lezz work. Could you give me some tips?"

"That depends on what kind of a lezz you're trying to play. Are you a butch or a femme?"

"Do I have to decide? I mean, can't a girl be both?"

"Sometimes, but being one or the other is a lot safer."

"I guess I'll be a femme, then. It's more like being a real woman."

"If you want to put it that way."

"Do I look it?"

"You're pretty, you're wearing a skirt and the right sort of coat, and you've got enough makeup on. You're unsure of yourself too, and a lot of femmes put on a shy-little-girl act. That's enough."

"But how do I act like women do it for me?"

"You never had any crushes on other girls, did you?"

"Heck, no. I mean, when I was six I had a best friend and I didn't like it when she played with other girls, but that was it."

"But you can look at another woman and tell if she's pretty, can't you?"

"Oh, sure, I always wanted to look like Hedy Lamarr when I was a kid, I thought she was gorgeous. I guess Gina Lollobrigida is the prettiest I see in the pictures now."

"What sort of guys do you like? Who do you feature in the movies?"

"Tony Curtis," she said immediately. "I always go for the dark hair and the dark look. Give me a nice Italian or Jewish boy and I'm happy."

I glanced furtively at the woman in white. She was taking an unusually long time to read the same page in her book.

I pointed at her with one eye. "You think she's good looking?" I asked Katie.

"I'm not sure."

"Saying she is won't make you a dyke, you know."

That embarrassed her enough to be honest. "Yeah, she's very pretty. Nice hair."

"Nice *dark* hair," I said, "like Curtis and Lollobrigida. Just make believe she's the two of them in one."

"That's too weird."

"Okay, pretend that she's Curtis in drag, then."

She laughed. "That's really weird, too, but for some dumb reason I kind of like the idea of Tony in a dress."

"You're catching on. So is the lady in white, too, she's been watching us." "She has?"

"Uh-huh. She's been watching you more than me. I'd say you've made a friend. She'll probably offer to buy you a drink after I leave."

"And if she wants to do more than just buy me a drink?"

"It's just like a guy who tries to rush you. Say no, or better yet say you'll think about it. From the daggers she's been looking at me, she thinks I might be your butch, or another pursuer anyway. If she gets too aggressive, just say your big blonde friend would get jealous. If she's a regular here, you'll have the perfect excuse to watch this place if you just keep stringing her along. You know how to string a guy along, don't you?"

"Oh, yeah. That I know how to do."

"Maybe you'll get something out of it. She might buy you a coat or take you to a show. Butches do the same sort of things guys do when they want to lay you."

"Meaning they're just as dumb?"

"They'll believe what they want to. Undercover is just play-acting, but queer women are all play-acting too, trying to hide what they are. Sometimes they even try to hide what they are from themselves. A lot of them don't even know what real is anymore, which makes them easy to fool."

"Thanks, Val," Katie said. "I feel a lot better now. Heck, I might even enjoy myself a little on this one, in a wacky way."

"You never know."

"One thing, though: If you run into any of the gang, don't tell them you saw me in here, huh? They've been kidding me enough about it as it is."

"It'll be our little secret." I stood up to go. The woman in white got up at the same time, went to the jukebox next to the door, and began to browse the titles.

Katie laughed again. "What's so funny?"

"You as a lesbian, Val, that's what's funny. You must have been damned good to make them buy that one."

"Like I said, it's all a matter of what someone wants to believe." I bent down and kissed Katie on the cheek. She played along, kissing me back and stifling another laugh.

I headed for the door again. The woman in white dropped some change into the jukebox and punched a selection. She straightened up as I passed, and I got a good look at her. She was pretty, all right, in a tense, controlled way. Her white dress was tight against her waist and bust.

She looked at me without friendliness as I opened the door. Then the box began to play "Three Coins in the Fountain," and as I left I saw her go up to Katie.

-

I nearly stepped on top of a girl coming in. She was small, she was dressed in black, and she was Hoppy.

She grinned satanically when she saw me. "*Freundin! Schwester!*" she sang out. "*Wie gehts, Brunhilde?*"

"Bleib ruhig, Dummkopf," I said, and pointed my head towards the street just behind her. "Heraus."

She looked puzzled, shrugged, and went back outside. I followed her jangling key ring to a convenient doorway.

"You've still got the worst *Plattdeutsch* accent I've ever heard," she said.

"It's better than your Minnesota *Württembergisch*. You still jockeying elevators?"

"When I'm not jockeying broads," she said with a smirk. "This latest one is real gone, baby. She's a feature writer for *Better Homes and Gardens*, and she spends the day scribbling articles like 'How to Keep Your Man.' She knows how to keep *this* man, all right."

"Sounds like an improvement on your last one, that roller-derby queen from the Immortal Debs."

"It was the Fordham Daggerettes, and we finally split when she came after me with a pool cue. Kind of killed the romance, if you dig me."

"You'd be safer back in New Ulm, Hoppy."

"Yeah, and I'd be bored stiff, too. I'd be married to some cube named Hans Schmidt, rolling piecrust and listening to soap operas all day long. Thanks but no thanks, citizenness, I'll take my chances here in the Big Town. Why do you think I got on the bus in the first place?"

I was thinking of a wisecrack answer to that when a well-dressed young man came up to Hoppy. He had soft, pinkish skin, a woman's eyelashes, and pomaded blond hair that rose from his forehead in three well-sculpted ridges.

"Pardon me," he began, "but do you – "

"I probably do, sugar pie," Hoppy said, "but not for your kind."

"Oh," he said. "Pardon me once again, I mistook you for a boy." "Maybe I was one in a past life."

"Yes, a pity I wasn't there for it. Oh, well, c'est la vie," he said, and left us.

Hoppy laughed, drew a White Owl from an inside pocket, and held it out. I lit it for her. She stuck it into her mouth at a 45-degree angle and blew a thin jet of smoke into the night.

"Even the pansies like you, don't they Hoppy?"

"Like me? Hell, they wish they *were* me, *dahhhling*. But what's the bop, cop? What are you cruising the Florence Lounge for if you're still shacking with that bubble dancer?"

"I was looking for you."

She smirked again. "Changed your mind about me, huh?"

"Don't flatter yourself."

"How'd you track me down, though? I ain't been at my apartment in a couple of days."

"I tried the 182 and a couple of the usual places. Then I remembered that Morgan's just went lezz and I know you like to check the talent in any new lezzie joint."

"Well figured, my dear. So, what can I do you for?"

"I'm trying to get information on a girl who's mixed up in a case I'm working on. She's queer and a hustler, so I figured you might know her."

"I know most of the gay girls in the profesh. What's the specs?"

"She's about five foot three, 110, pale brown hair, medium length with a slight wave, upturned nose, gray eyes, measurements about 35B-23-35, nineteen years old. A girly type, very femme."

"I like her so far, anything else?"

"She likes to wear pink."

"Yeah, now I've got her. I've seen her around."

"Fill me in."

"There ain't much. I noticed her first last fall or early winter sometime. She wasn't wearing pink then but she had a hick accent like me. More Illinois or Indiana than Minnesota, though."

"Where was this?"

"Might have been the 182, but I'm not sure. I think she was mostly Midtown or Broadway, and I don't get up there that much lately. I saw her in the Village again a couple of times after the new year, that's when I noticed that she'd gone all pink. She didn't dress that way when I first saw her in the joints."

"What's her name?"

"She seemed to have a different one every time I saw her: Mickey, Mimi, Michelle, Mindy, Mandy, like that. I never talked to her, so I don't know what the right one was."

"Why didn't you talk?"

"She was competition, not a customer. I'm queer for little brunettes, but I'm not going to waste my line on someone who's in the same bedracket as me 'cause I know how unreliable us hustlers are. This Mickey or Mimi seemed kind of screwy anyway. She hung around with drunks and mob guys a little too much. She had a couple of pals, too, kids like her, and they seemed even daffier than she was."

"I heard she moved into Madge Kennington's stable. You know anything about that?"

"No, but if she was one of Madge's fillies that would account for why I ain't seen her in a few months. Madge caters to the carriage trade, and that don't mean trolling in Village bars. But what's this pink trickster mixed up in?"

"Right about now she's mixed up in the morgue."

"Don't crack wise, Hollywood Eyes. What's the drift?"

"You never did read the papers much, did you Hoppy?" I took the late edition of the *Post* with Milly's picture on it out of my coat pocket and handed it to her.

"Wow. So that was her out there on Staten Island with the old lady, huh? That must have been one bad scene."

"It was, I saw it. They used a machine gun."

"It don't say that it in here and it don't mention you."

"It won't, and you'd better not mention me either. They're keeping a lot of it under wraps, especially the lesbian part. Adele Phillips was pretty famous."

"A machine gun," Hoppy said. "Man, I know some people hate lezzies, like those punk types I see cruising around. But a machine gun ..."

"I hear the same punks beat up Johnny Haynes. Have you seen her lately?"

"Yeah, I had a steady Nellie gig with him for awhile. I'd given him some business before, but not regular every week like that. Kinda surprising, too, seeing that Johnny's usually deep in free fluff."

"That is unusual. What's up with her?"

"Hey, the only questions I ever ask the customers are if they're clean and if they've got the dough. I guess even the butch Barrymore can hit a patch of ice, but that ended a few weeks ago. I ain't seen him around since, and he's not even singing that much. I don't buy that about him getting beat up, though." "Why not?"

"Use your *hübsche deutsche Kopf, liebling*. Johnny works a lot for Tony Becker, right? Tony works for Frank C, and even a hick like me knows that you don't get any bigger than the Prime Minister. Any punk that screws with Johnny screws with Tony, and anybody that screws with Tony screws with the PM, and whosoever screws with that hubcap is one real gone coon. I know a lot of punks, baby, and most of them are thicker than a brick wall, but I ain't never met one that was *that* kamikaze."

"Since when did you get cautious yourself? You flip around like a Mexican jumping bean, and you know what that can get a butch in this town."

"You should talk, flapjack. And the stone butch studs gotta catch me at it first." A gleaming knife blade was suddenly underneath my chin. Then she hit the switch, and the blade vanished as fast as it had appeared. "Besides, flipping is just good business," she went on. "If a guy or a butch has the bread I'll wear the skirt, like I did for you a little when we met in Philly, but I showed you then that I'm no femme either. I'm as stony as they come, and so is Johnny Haynes. Nah, you don't have to worry about him. Johnny's plenty tough, and he has plenty of cover too."

"Yes," I said, "but maybe she's tough enough not to want to ask for cover. She's always been kind of a lone wolf."

"Like you."

"And you, too."

"Hell, every butch is a lone wolf."

"That's your theory, is it?"

"That's right. I got another one, too. Want to hear it?"

"No."

"Tough. I've made plenty of pretzels, and a pretzel is just circles of dough that meet and touch each other. Once when I was working in Graeser's Bakery I had a big tray of pretzels all set to put in the oven. I saw how close they were on the tray and I thought if you could just push them all together they'd make one giant pretzel: thirty or forty little circles, all touching each other. It was a goofy idea, but I couldn't get it out of my mind. I was out hustling all over town that night, and I was on my fourth session or so when it hit me. It was all just one big pretzel: straights and queers, citizens and cats, butches and femmes, Whites and Coloreds. They're all just their own little circles of dough, but two kinds touch them all and tie them all up: hustlers and cops. Hustlers and cops are both moving around on all the circles, trying to make connections, but we're above them too. We see the whole tray at the same time."

"You must have had some н in your arm when you dreamt that up."

"Sure I did, Brunhilde, but it's true all the same. Have you forgotten how the circles we're on keep meeting? First when you were undercover in the Three O'Clock and started making eyes at me, then in that Spruce Street dive when we were both drunk and itchy and out of town, and then again on that Capri Club job when you fell for your Maybelle." She laughed nastily. "For a girl who says she don't dig lezz bars, you sure wind up in a lot of 'em."

"Speaking of lezz bars and lezz bartenders, I'd appreciate it if you didn't shoot your mouth off about me to Gina Bravo."

"I didn't spill your lezzbeans at the 182, Brunhilde. All I said to Gina was how much I wanted to open your box, which I still do. I've never finked on a closet lezz, and I never will. That's the code I live by."

"But you hate cops, Hoppy. You'd have made a lot of friends with the hoods, the dykes, and the department if you'd blown the whistle on me, so why didn't you? I know it wasn't because you love me."

She snuffed her cigar out and tucked it in a pocket. "'I didn't split on you 'cause you're a queer cop who treated me straight, Cowan, and maybe I like having a hot blonde fairy godmother with an in at headquarters. But how come you never turned me up to the Vice boys? I know it wasn't 'cause you love *me*."

"I'm on the outside and I need someone who's on the inside, that's why."

"Yeah, you're still on the outside even though you're out. Maybe that's why May lets you live in her G-string when I only got into it the once."

"I told you that I didn't believe that story."

"That story's as true as evolution, *Schwester*. She was on the skids with her last husband, and she just wanted a butch to make her well again. She paid me good for it, too. I don't see why it bugs you up, either, even a gay goddess like May can get needy."

"You're jealous of me, aren't you Hoppy? That's why you tell that story."

"It's that Flowers tail that I'm jealous of, baby, and she ain't even seen your best side. I'll be your Siegfried again, Brunhilde, I've still got my spear and magic helmet." She rubbed her left hip against my right leg, and I felt her keys gouging me. "Come on, Valentine pal of mine. There's a handy alley around the corner, just like there was in Philly." Her grin was satanic again, and I remembered her little white body against a black wall.

"You're presuming on our friendship."

"I'll cancel my subscription to *Better Homes and Gardens*, Val, as of tonight. You can have my special fellow-pretzeler rate, too. It's only one big George, you won't find a better deal anywhere."

"This doesn't even work as a gag, Terry."

"No?"

"No."

She made a Harpo Marx face and stepped back. "Okay, but you'll get lonesome again, every Leslie does eventually. Why'd you give me the bum's rush out of the Florence, though?"

"Because it's being watched. A lady cop I know is undercover in there right now."

The comedy left her face. "What's she look like?"

"Mid-sized strawberry blonde, wears a green coat and a white skirt." "Thanks for the tip. She make you?"

"Yeah, but I fed her a line and she doesn't know I'm out."

"Funny how cops never want to believe another cop can be queer, ain't it?"

"A riot. Watch your step around the joints, Hoppy, they're going to put the pressure on because of the Phillips thing. Manfredi and Johnson are on the prowl."

"Mutt and Jeff? Hell, those two gals shook me before and never got one little rattle out of me."

"They'll be looking for you again, Hoppy, among a lot of others, and they'll shake much harder this time."

"You're not worried about me, are you, Brunhilde? Solicitous for my welfare?"

"We pretzelers need to stick together."

She checked me with her hip, like a hockey player. "The closer the better, ha, ha, ha. You're right, though. Being a Kraut these days is like belonging to a secret society, and being a Lester on top of it ... well, it's like we're both in the CP and the mob at the same time."

"Let me know if you hear anything about the late Mindy. It's going to be a bad time in Lezztown, though, Hop, so keep your nose clean."

"I will, but what about this, though?" She shot her tongue out at me. "I don't expect miracles."

She took the cigar out of her pocket. I sighed and lit it for the second time. "My Indian's in the alley, Valentine. There's room on the bitch seat if you want a ride."

"Beat it, *Schlampe*, before I change my mind and turn you in for mopery."

She stuck the cigar in her mouth and pulled her little porkpie low over her forehead.

"Auf wiedersehen, Kesser Vater," she said. "Bleib lesbisch."

"Hals-und Beinbruch, Fraulein Theresa Hoepner."

She turned and strode off into the night, singing to herself and the world and moving her hips in time to her own beat:

Ich liebe ein Maedchen, Ich weiss nicht, warum. Mein Maedchen kaut Tabak, Mein Maedchen trinkt Rum.

Oh wake him Oh shake him, The big buck nigger with the seaboots on. Oh, Johnny come down to Hilo Poor old man.

I stared at a rooftop and thought about Philadelphia until the roar of a motorcycle drowned out the memory.

STEPHEN BUORO

M. RATHER JR.

To the Messiah

Eyes the epicentre sceptre of nakedness the ultimate Messiah to the mantra of Earth the insidious herald, the sole highway to the Promised Land

So naked, can you not see the unquenchable cascades of blood on the squeamish streets?

So dazzling, are you blind at the cat and dog friendliness of the mechanism of man?

So alert, have you been insensate, a repeller of the rebelling rivers of eyes?

Are you lopsided, masked or diseased? Your silence dawning the eternal Adam loss of man, your absence making men see a Satan between themselves, your abstinence making the world the friendliest foe of itself ...

Oh you the inflammable compasses of Eyes?

An Observation

Squabs mew over crumbs, pirp at enemy brethren. Their heads slink on neck springs.

Such songs rankle the young, this cacophony of mutter-beaks and car gongs.

Columba have no grace, Prick fingers, draw blood for their bread.

The elderly must like them, walking (as they do) to wooden benches with wings spread.

I Am Wild and Always Will Be

A Conversation with Miranda July

nly a few years ago, the name "Miranda July" served as a kind of password, a way to see if the person you'd just met had also been paying attention to the innovative, intimate performance work being done by women like Sadie Benning, Wynne Greenwood (Tracy & The Plastics), and Khaela Maricich (The Blow).

But with the publication of her story collection *No One Belongs Here More Than You* in 2007 and the release this year of *The Future*, her second feature film, Miranda July has transcended cult status. This summer, *The New York Times Magazine* featured July on its cover, lauding her as perhaps "the most honest, uninhibited filmmaker of our time."

In April, *PDR* was invited to participate in a round-table conversation with July about her new movie, screening at Independent Film Festival Boston. The other publications represented at the roundtable were: *A Bostonian on Film, The Berkeley Beacon* (Emerson University), *Technology Review* (MIT), and *Boston University Daily Free Press.* Rather than identify each participant by name, we use "Int" (Interviewer) for all. Interviewer: In the film, one of the things you said you were thinking about is the notion of wildness. Sophie and Jason are first considering adopting a cat and they are worried that it might be wild. And later, Sophie, distraught by her own actions, says, "I'm wild."

I wonder if you can talk a little bit about your thinking about "wild" and "wildness" as you were working through making this film.

Miranda July: Yeah, they would seem to be different kinds of wildness, but in my head it's the same. And it's the wildness that comes from ... it's the part of yourself that doesn't really believe that you could be loved and do the lifelong domestic relationship, and that you might feel that alone, like Paw Paw says in the middle of the night: "I am wild and always will be."

And I could see her [Sophie] getting into that place, which would be, in a relationship, a pretty self-destructive kind of place – [it is] so outside of the framework of being involved, to really believe in the domestication – that it almost wouldn't matter what you did.

Int: I was wondering how you view the connection between performance and the writing process and if, while you're writing, you think actively about what kind of people might be performing [the work].

July: I don't yet do that. I'm kind of acting out the whole thing as I'm going, which is fine for my roles, the parts I'm going to play, but it then means I have this very specific idea of exactly how I want it said by the time I get to the casting process, because I've already said it that way again and again. Which makes it hard; I get very narrow and specific, and so many great actors are brought to me, and it's also very visual, you know, I feel like, why not be sort of dumb about it since it is a visual medium? And be like, "Well, these two people look like they would be together, and this guy seems like the last guy ..."

You know, to be almost sort of comicbook-like about it. And I remember saying that with the first movie too, that everyone had to be from the same comic book.

Int: When you think about your work, do you think about it in the most surreal way? Because most of your stories are about the little things in life; they are realistic, but at the same time you're referring to these images of things that seem completely imaginary. How do they work together?

July: Those two realms are what is most interesting to me. In my life, I focus on – almost too much on – and find so much meaning in, the littlest thing, or am just kind of floored by the person next to me on the plane. Everything about them seems *so interesting*, you know, and that really easily turns into a story in my head.

And at the same time, I'm trying to get at things that are really hard to articulate or explain ... trying to find metaphors or symbols or placeholders for that stuff to kind of bring them in, bring them into the world of things, which I obviously do a lot in this movie, try and bring hard-to-articulate feelings in.

I would just never move again.

The things that are either spiritual, or emotional things that are -just to say one, there's the scene where I'm in the shirt -I guess that's not really ... okay, that's real. I'm in the shirt.

[Laughter]

Int: But it behaves like some kind of uncanny, supernatural creature; the shirt actually comes slithering into the house.

July: That's a better example. I think I wanted to show, and I've had that feeling, of betraying myself so much that I felt like I was haunting myself. And so to have her security blanket tee-shirt crawling after her felt like a more accurate way to show that feeling than to have me be just sort of despondent.

Int: Your fiction often portrays characters who have to struggle against an inertia, and that can even seem to cross over into a kind of paralysis. In this film, Sophie imagines a possible future in which she says, "We wouldn't have to try, we wouldn't have to do anything ever."

I wonder, do you experience that tension in your own life, between artistic activity and inertia? Or do you feel that's a common experience that a lot of people can relate to? July: Well, I do feel that. I know it seems like I'm very productive, but it's like an all-out battle in my mind. Like if I were to slow down at all, I think I would just never move again.

That battle feels very high-stakes, and every day I have to fight it. My best friend, who is very creative and the funniest person I know, will spend whole years essentially lying on her couch, and I relate to her so much and have so much respect for her. And she'll say, "I'm just as creative as you; this kills me that I cannot get up." And so I think that some of her was in this.

But you are right; it really is in a lot of other work, and that's me.

[Laughter]

Int: When you first get an idea for a story or an image, like the shirt moving across the floor, how do you know personally if it's right for a film or a short story?

July: You mean which medium? Well, usually I just know because I'm trying to come up with ideas for a particular work, and so everything I'm thinking of is in that category. I will say, though, this movie, it began first as a short story, which wasn't a good short story. Then a lot of the ideas, including the shirt, came about in a performance that I did, which was pretty good. I was like:

"Oh, I think this could be a movie, it might be more interesting in a way as a movie, I think specifically because those weirder ideas like the shirt are not actually that weird in a performance context, where anything goes."

So that was an interesting challenge, to make it really work as a character, and even just technically to make it look right. I mean, in the performance, it was on pulleys and stuff, so clunky. But I also knew it worked in a way because if it worked that way, done live, then I thought it would be better in the movie.

Int: How is this whole process of promoting a movie and taking it out, how is that for you, talking about your ideas and your life? July: Well, it's funny, my husband [film director Mike Mills] is also doing the same thing right now, so we talk about this, which is good, because it's an annoying thing to talk about my problems and going to hotels...

[Laughter]

But he was reminding me that when we're making the movie, this is all we dream of, you know? Sitting at a round table in a hotel just seems like heaven on earth, you know: that you could get to that point where other people had seen it and were willing to talk to you about it, and to some degree believing in it as a real movie.

So that does still seem like a minor miracle. Although, of course, wherever you are you want to get somewhere else. So right now I'm like: "Oh, I'm going to write such good stuff when I'm done

Photo Courtesy of Roadside Attractions



with this..." Of course, once all I have to do is write, I'll want to be here – so it's really terrible!

[Laughter]

Int: Do you have anything lined up now, or are you starting to think about something else?

July: Well, I want to write a novel just because I'm trying to figure out how to be a writer. I wrote a book of short stories, and it's kind of the next logical thing one tries to do in that form.

And then I want to do another performance, make some art thing. I have basically all these notebooks of all ideas I had for other things while I was making this movie, so I have to do those things before I make the next movie because it just takes over your life.

I do want to make another movie, but I just think I'm not the kind of person that can do that quickly. It'll probably be just as many years until the next one.

Int: You're part of the independent film community, but could you ever imagine working for a big Hollywood film studio, even if that means accepting tough constraints?

July: Well, certainly, if anyone wants to give me lots of money to do my script, I would love that – a studio or otherwise, it's not my choice really. If you're going to not cast stars and do something that looks as risky as this does on paper, then it ends up being at this budget.

I mean, *have* things gotten better for independent movies? The last few years

were not a great time for anyone to get financing for their movies. And I know a lot of people told me, when I was struggling to get money for this movie, and I'd be like: "Well, it wasn't that hard to get funding for my first movie." People would say: "You'd never be able to make that first movie now."

That was kind of the end of an era as far as companies thinking "this will be the next big thing." But at the same time there's a lot more much smaller budget movies, ones that are like a couple hundred thousand dollars, and some of those break out. I've seen them at festivals, and there are just so many of those; so in that sense, yeah, there are just a lot more movies period.

Int: What filmmakers or artists who are working right now do you consider to be influences, or do you work or collaborate with?

July: As far as in my world, well, there is my husband, Mike Mills, obviously, who is the main filmmaker that I'm contextualizing myself with on a day-today level.

Spike Jonze – we trade scripts and give each other a lot of feedback, which is nice. I mean, I'm giving him feedback on a movie that costs a hundred times what mine costs, but actually it's interesting to realize that it comes down to the same thing in the end. You are trying to tell a story, and you do it.

To be really honest, I wish I knew more women filmmakers. They are out there, and it's amazing how ... I think in some ways men and women reach out to each other more than women and women.



Photo Courtesy of Roadside Attractions

And I think we're all so reluctant to get put in the "woman filmmaker" reductive category that you almost just shy away. But I'm ready for that to change. I feel like whatever would be lost, I would gain a lot more from getting a little bit more of a community with some other women.

Int: It reminds me a little bit of the Guerilla Girls, this notion that they weren't revealing who they were but at the same time forming a kind of collective that challenged some of the male domination of the art world; but they kept their anonymity ...

July: So they wouldn't be ghettoized, exactly. My fantasy is to have a listserv – if that still exists – but something among us [women filmmakers].

You could be like: "Is anyone else dealing with this?" or "Have you noticed that this company is really weird?" Just because you have no way of gauging it, so you're like: "Maybe its just me and I suck, or is this actually a sexism issue, you know?" It's hard to get a larger sense of what's going on.

Int: I once spoke to Courtney Hunt, who made *Frozen River*, and she had said – well she didn't say who, no details – but that she experienced sexism, that being a female held her back in the industry. Have you had any experiences like that?

July: Well, it's hard. It's so insidious that I can't say, "No, that there haven't been specific incidents where I've been horrified at someone's actions."

I also think I'm really avoiding people. Like if I smell that at all, I'm just out of there. Gone. But there are weird challenges. Like you're a woman, but you're making a movie that you're in, and that you are likely to be the focal point of, so you are essentially trying to find a co-star who's gonna be in the girlfriend role. And I began to realize that at a certain point in casting, that if I was me, but a guy, there would be so many women who would love to play the girlfriend, because there are such shitty parts out there anyways.

Int: I remember this banner you had on your website: OF COURSE YOU KNOW EXACTLY WHAT I'M TALKING ABOUT. And in this film, the characters are speaking a kind of private language where they each know exactly what the other is talking about.

Do you have that same kind of goal in the films that you make, of connecting with the viewer, like even though these things that are happening seem very bizarre or particular, they actually have a kind of universality?

July: Yeah, I mean I feel like when it's good – when I feel like it's working, I don't worry about weirdness or those things. Someone else might be worried about it, but I feel like "no, its working."

I think that even if people are logically a little unsure, on some other level they are going to be nodding. Which is just, that's my job I guess, to go out on a limb while simultaeously being familiar and inviting. That's the line to walk.

Int: In a bunch of your stories, people avoid helping others. Like in "The Shared Patio," the guy is having a seizure, and [the protagonist] walks away and [doesn't] help. And in "Majesty," the character doesn't chase Potato. I was wondering how these are connected thematically. July: In all of those, the person isn't quite present enough to realize that their actions really have consequences. That would almost be a complement to them to think, "Oh, I could be the one to save the day here ... what I do matters." And they might realize that in the course of it ... a lot of times the characters don't realize that, and only the reader does. And I guess it goes back to that paralysis thing, but with some awareness that that's a mistake or you are paying the price for that.

Int: A few of us are still in college, and I'd like to ask, when you decided to drop out, was that spontaneous, did you plan that?

July: It wasn't. It's sort of like when you quit a job. You just suddenly realize, "Oh, I could just leave." It seems like the craziest thing anyone has ever thought, but you realize, "Oh, I wouldn't have to do any of this." I think some people become an adult through college, but to me it took leaving it to really realize that I had autonomy. And I still love that feeling. How do you do that now? I don't know.

Mercy

X X HEN THE LAST SOW DIED, Merete Silas began scheming on how she was going to get the boy. Her plan wasn't terribly complex, though for several weeks she tried to make it so. She lacked the faculties of the women in her mother's old books to properly impress a man: she had no musical talents or a voice that could make angels blush, nor did she have any matchmaker friends. In some books a nice dress was good enough, and she settled on the idea. Something light and lacy with ribbons and beads and such. She bought the materials at a craft store in town that her daddy parked outside of when he went to check on his bank account. The light fabric was too thin and brittle, the lace too thick and gaudy. She hadn't been able to find any beads that would look nice in the shop, so she took apart a pair of her mother's earrings and sewed the pieces into the lace. The sleeves were uneven and too short. The transparent cotton left visible the dark impressions of her nipples and pubic hair, but any underwear she wore seemed to glow through the dress. There was no one to tell her which one was worse.

After an hour's consideration she decided not to take any chances and slipped on a pair of discolored panties. Her daddy wasn't home; he would've taken his belt to her legs if he knew she was doing chores in a dress. Usually he had her wear a pair of his old jeans and a torn flannel shirt.

Merete stepped on a piece of glass on her way out to the chickens' pen and cut her foot. She stopped to suck at the wound. Mrs. Carson, the widow who sold her the fabric and the lace, had told her when she was young that sucking the blood from a cut immediately prevents infection from setting up.

The hens were in bad health. They laid infrequently and their eggs were useless often as not. The two cocks' feathers were falling out, leaving a delicate mat of red and black over the mud. Her daddy had moved them out to the far side of their property to keep them from getting the dogs sick. Her feet were dirty by the time she reached the pen with the feed, but she felt no shame. She'd seen the boy with dirty feet before.

From the chicken yard, she could see into the boy's property, brighter and more fertile than the Silases's. His folks kept their only livestock, a hearty herd of cattle, down the steep hill and cultivated the land above the pasture to resemble, Merete thought, a meadow in Paradise. The trees, placed throughout the property deliberately, bore fruit every summer. At the border of their properties stood a thick, squat willow tree, where the boy liked to sit and where Merete liked to see him sitting.

Eli Mahoney took his schoolbooks home to study over the summer, poring over them beneath the willow most of the day, occasionally making notes in the margins.

"I got to know this stuff," he'd said once, more to himself than to her. "I got to know all sorts of things. I ain't staying round here my whole life."

"Then where you going?" she'd asked, curling her crooked toes in the grass next to him.

He hadn't looked at her. He never did.

The dress would make him look at her. It wasn't all that pretty, she knew, but it was the closest she'd ever looked to a real lady.

It was important that she look older. Eli Mahoney was only a year older than she, but she'd been held back twice at the school until her daddy pulled her out. The other teachers suspected in Merete some mental deficiency, something even her daddy's academic influence couldn't cure. He'd tried home-schooling her for a few months, teaching her from the same textbooks he'd used for his students in town, at least until the woman from the state stopped coming round. Merete, her daddy had informed her, was incapable of being educated.

Her daddy had a woman in town now, with dyed yellow hair and false eyelashes that fluttered furiously when she laughed. During the school week her daddy came straight home after his classes ended, but on the weekends he came maybe once or twice to make sure Merete still lived and that she was taking care of the house, then left again with hardly a word to her. Merete feared he was about to ask the woman to marry him. The woman didn't want a daughter, didn't want any children at all. That was clear enough from the round box of pills Merete had seen while rummaging through the woman's purse the night her daddy introduced them. And Merete had always gotten by without a mother.

"Your mama named you," her daddy told her, when she was old enough to realize that the pale woman on the living room wall had once been real. "Said you was her only real mercy. You ain't any kind of mercy, though. Neither one of you." It took a few beers to make him talk about his wife – a Danish painter he'd met on a tour of New York after he graduated from the state teachers' college. The woman moved in with him a week later, bringing with her a single suitcase and a cancer.

If her daddy did marry that woman, Merete wouldn't stay with them. Her daddy could go live in town. She'd keep the house and the dogs. She could steal another chicken and sell the eggs in town for a living, could steal another cock and breed them. When the bills came she'd tear them up and scatter the pieces in the yard. When the woman from the state came she'd hide down in the cellar with a shovel in her hand.

Eli Mahoney wasn't under the willow when she came to the chicken yard. One of the dogs, a mottled brown mongrel, left its post and followed, sniffing the dirt.

"You stay down there," she warned from the side of her mouth. "This is a new dress and I won't have you dirtying it up."

The mongrel ignored her. It kept its nose in the ground, inhaling sharply and chuffing. She'd tried to copy it once when she was little. The smell of dirt still turned her stomach.

It was cold out. The dew hadn't quite left the grass and her bare feet were soon wet. She hated her toes – crooked, inelegant stubs with broken nails, but she had only one pair of shoes and they would have looked ridiculous with her dress. A second dog joined her. Her daddy called it a bulldog, but it couldn't have been a purebred. Merete doubted there was any bulldog in it at all. She shivered against the chill. Little bumps appeared on her arms and her legs and she felt her nipples harden; she realized she should have worn a bra too, no matter how dumb it looked.

Merete stayed by the pen for an hour waiting. Eli Mahoney didn't come. The dogs grew bored of her and sniffed their way back toward the house, pausing briefly to examine their hindquarters. At one point the balding cock squeezed through the wire and pecked her foot. She took no pains to pen it again. The cock always did as he wanted.

When the sun reached its highest point she sat on a great tree root to cry. The boy wasn't coming. He would never come – she knew it, she knew it like she knew there was a God and there was a hell waiting for all girls who looked like their mothers. Maybe it was a school day. Maybe there was another girl, a girl with straight teeth and clear eyes. God Jesus, he wasn't coming.

Merete moaned a secret obscenity and sank against the tree.

It was a foot that woke her, the toe of a boot pushing between her ribs – not swiftly like a kick but slow and gentle, like someone was trying to inch his toe down deep into her insides. She didn't gasp or cry out or even sit up. Instead she just opened her eyes and found herself looking up at Eli Mahoney.

"I thought maybe you was dead," he said, still pushing the space between her ribs with his toe.

"I'm not," she said. She lifted a hand to him. "You want to help me up?"

"No." He moved his foot away and crossed his arms over his chest to study her. There was no pity or affection in his eyes.

Merete picked herself up from the ground, dusting off her thin dress. One side of it was stained with mud. She curled her toes so he couldn't look at them. "Well. What're you doing over here, Eli Mahoney?" He spat on the ground – clear, clean spit, free of tobacco juice. "I done said it. Saw you laying there and thought you was dead."

"Well," she said again, and repeated, "Well."

"Is that dress new?" He reached for her arm and pinched the crooked lace.

Merete felt she could have cried for joy. She pulled the skirt out on either side as far as it would stretch and tried her best to curtsy the way girls did in old movies. "I made it myself. Just finished it last night."

"It's ugly as hell." He spat again and wiped at his mouth with the back of his hand.

Merete bit into her lip. "My daddy ain't home," she offered. It was the last thing she could think of to say, the only thing.

Eli Mahoney looked down the length of her dress. His brown eyes settled on her chest where the thin cotton left her breasts visible. "You cold?" His mouth softened into a crooked smile. Even now his expression was one of superiority – the sight of her and any pleasure her body might have given him were not enough. He was going places, after all. He had books. He was going to get the hell off the mountain just like her daddy would. He'd take a woman with long eyelashes and a fake leather purse filled with birth control pills. He'd marry the bitch. And Merete would be left there with a dead farm and half-breed dogs that ate their own vomit. Her dresses would get uglier every year. When she died no one would find her. The dogs would get into the house and eat her bloated body.

She saw this destiny stretching before her clearly as if she were a fortune-teller or a woman touched by God. If she looked into her palm, she knew she would see it written there. The dress hadn't worked; if she couldn't get him now, she'd lose him for the rest of her miserable life.

"My daddy ain't home," she said again. "I can make real good tea. There's some cold chicken in the fridge."

"I ain't coming in for no tea and chicken. What else you got?" He took another look at her chest, glancing momentarily back at her eyes to be sure she saw what he did. *God Jesus*. She inhaled deeply. There was no time to pray. The uneven lace trembled under her fingertips as she slid the dress's neckline down over her chest. The sweat between her breasts went cold in the morning air. He stared at her unabashedly, his brow knitted as if he were studying a dead butterfly pinned up on a wall, or a vivisected frog. She was terrified he would touch her. She wanted him to touch her. She wondered if she should raise her skirt as well to show him her underwear.

He frowned and gestured for her to cover herself. "You got any liquor in the house?"

Merete nodded and tried to smile. "My daddy has a bottle of whiskey under his bed."

"Then I guess you better let me in."

Odell Silas kept his bedroom in a perpetual state of being emptied. One by one the books on his shelf disappeared. In the cracked chifforobe his shirts and jackets steadily decreased in number, leaving behind a row of dejected wire hangers. The drawer in which he kept his pants now contained only two pairs of wool slacks for the winter; his underwear drawer held three pairs of briefs and a few balled-up, mismatched socks. There had never been any pictures on the walls – no photographs of his daughter or the pale-haired woman who, in some distant nightmare, had been his wife. On the bed lay a single pillow and a large green quilt with no sheet underneath. The floor was carpeted in a thin film of gray dust. Odell was making an escape, one that would never be announced on the mountain and would merit no wishes for good luck from his neighbors there. In the middle of the night, aided only by the moon, the last book would find its way out into his truck, the last pair of pants, the solitary pillow. When dawn came no sign of the man would remain, and over time the others would begin to doubt he'd ever existed in the first place.

Eli Mahoney entered the room ahead of her, feeling for a light switch and finding none. Merete felt she should have gone first. When her daddy was away it was her house, and she had brought him into it. For a long time she'd planned the tour she would give him when she got him. They would start in the kitchen, where she'd show him where all the food was kept in case he got hungry and what temperature the fridge had to be at, and would end in her bedroom. She had already turned down the covers for him.

"When's your daddy going to get home?" Eli Mahoney asked. He went to the curtains and jerked them open.

She wondered whether or not she should shut the door. "Not til after four-thirty." Hours away yet. She put on a wide, happy smile for him.

He frowned violently. "Don't do that."

"Why not?"

"Cause you're awful ugly when you do it."

"I ain't ugly." She drew up to her full height and placed her hands firmly on her hips. Women on television looked sexy when they posed like that – it pushed their breasts out and made their bodies look thick and strong, dangerous, even. Her daddy's woman did it whenever he wasn't listening to her.

Eli Mahoney scoffed and mimicked her position. "I ain't ugly," he repeated in a prissy voice, rolling his eyes up into his head.

She stamped her bare foot. "I am not."

"Your eyes is crossed."

"Look." She shifted her weight onto one leg, pushing out the small curve of her left hip. "Do you want that whiskey or not?"

He grinned at her, narrowed his eyes like a girl. "I want it." He crossed the room to her daddy's bed. "I want it and I don't need you to get it for me."

The bottle scraped against the hardwood floor and came out from under the bed, glistening in the sunlight. It didn't fit into his hand; his hand fit around it, encasing it. Enshrining it. He held it more tenderly than a woman's hand and with more reverence than the preacher down the mountain held his Bible when he stood at the pulpit. In her old school book she had marked page 317, not for a particular poem or a passage from a story but for an image – an oil painting of Lancelot, kneeling to receive the Holy Grail. Looking at Eli Mahoney's hand around the bottle, she understood the real meaning of that picture, the expression of divine gratitude on the man's weary face.

She had never been drunk before, nor did she get drunk now. The bottle was only half-full, and Eli Mahoney drank every last drop of it. When she asked him for some he refused to give her the bottle but offered to spit the whiskey into her mouth.

By the time her daddy came home, the boy had gone to sleep on the floor of the bedroom, drunk on the half-bottle. The truck roared and grunted and coughed its way up the dirt driveway, startling her from the vigil she kept over the boy, and she realized she'd been perched on the bedrail for hours staring at him. The muscles under her knees shrieked when she hopped down; the pain spread out upward and downward, contorting her calves, her thighs, until it finally found a home deep in the pit of her stomach, where it burrowed and fell silent. The bones of her toes cracked when she took the first step.

Odell Silas was no more handsome than his daughter was beautiful. He was a slight man, naturally pale but tanned into a sickly, sallow color by too many days working their useless land. Atop his broad nose sat a pair of thick-rimmed, thick-lensed glasses, round and crooked and glued together in the middle. They magnified his eyes into grotesque pearls, too large and marred by the imperfections of his irises.

He didn't speak to her when she greeted him at the door. One of the dogs tried to follow him into the house, and he kicked at it clumsily, shutting the screen door against the mongrel's teeth. The battle with the dogs was an almost-daily ritual, and lately Merete had begun to feel a vague and bitter disappointment when their teeth failed to grasp onto her daddy's leg; she had never seen a great quantity of human blood before.

"Eli Mahoney's here," she told him. She realized she'd never changed out of the dress and with a gasp crossed her arms.

Odell regarded her as a man might regard a child that was not his own vomiting in a public place. "Is that so?" he finally asked and went about making a pot of coffee. He left his patched-up jacket on – he wouldn't be staying the night. After he had his coffee, as he often did, he'd go back down the mountain to that woman. "Well, where is he?"

"He's sleeping. I tuckered him out." She expected her daddy to look shocked, or perhaps even angry. She expected him to come at her, hands stretching forth to hit her face. She expected him to begin taking off his belt, to whip her while quoting what the preacher said about those who went to bed together before they were married. Her watercolor eyes defied him to do it. When he didn't react, she added, "We're having a baby together."

Her daddy didn't come near her, not one step. His hands stayed on the jar of coffee grounds, away from the belt. He didn't say one damn thing that reminded her of the preacher. Instead, Odell simply stared at her, eyebrows raised so high above his thick glasses that rolls appeared in his forehead. The grounds went into the coffeepot and were promptly followed by the lid. In the coffeepot the water began to sizzle – the sound was louder than Merete's breath, than the beating of her heart. A burning scent spread through the kitchen.

"You weren't a mercy," he said, turning to watch the coffee bubble through the glass lid. "Neither one of you."

When the coffee was done, Odell poured as much as the china cup could hold. He raised the cup to his lips, then stopped, looking over the rims of his glasses at her. His hand extended the cup toward her, but his feet made no move to follow. "You want any?" It was the first time he'd ever offered.

She shook her head and lowered her arms to her stomach, satisfied. "No. I can't. It's bad for the baby."

The cup sought his mouth again, and he drained it in only three swallows. If it scalded his mouth, he gave no sign. A light brown drop trickled from the corner of his lips to his chin.

"If it's a boy," she told him, "we ain't naming it after you."

"All the better, then."

After the pot was emptied, Odell dropped it into the sink for her to wash. He didn't say another word. Nor did he go into the back of the house looking for Eli Mahoney. Merete had hoped the boy might wake up, so she could tell him about the baby in front of her daddy. But he stayed on the bedroom floor, unconscious and collecting dust, and her daddy strayed from the kitchen only to watch the six o'clock news. He went outside at six-thirty – to bring in his suitcase, he said. The dogs barked and howled, and Merete remembered she hadn't fed them for two days. There was a high whimper – her daddy's foot having finally connected with one of their heads, and then the truck started up. Headlights pierced the living room curtains. On the kitchen table Merete found a wrinkled fifty-dollar bill.

Eli Mahoney didn't believe her about the baby. She didn't tell him for another two weeks, wanting it to be a surprise, wanting to be sure. He had taken her money when he left the house but said he hadn't spent it yet. Frequently he promised to return it and then forgot.

Her daddy never came back. Merete didn't call after him. That woman could have him. The school could have him. She kept feeding the sick chickens until they died, the two hens together and the cocks five days apart. She meant to bury their scrawny corpses, but the dogs got to them first, leaving only their spines and feet. They dug up the last pig's body and salvaged what they could from it. When they ran off, she stopped going out into the yard.

Eli Mahoney spent most nights at the house. He refused to sleep in her bed, refused even to come into her room. He took her daddy's bed and her daddy's books. If she was quiet, he let her come sleep next to him under the big green quilt.

The white dress wasn't there anymore. She draped it over the bathtub to wash one evening and left it for several days before she finally noticed its absence. It went as quietly as Odell did, thread by thread, until there was nothing left. She didn't cry for it.

"Do you want to feel it?" she asked Eli Mahoney, as he sat beside her on the couch watching college basketball. She reached for his hand to put it on her belly. He jerked away and looked for a moment as if he might hit her. "Stop it." He spit onto the floor – it was, she had noticed, a compulsion for him. "There ain't no baby in there. I never touched you like that."

"There's a baby," she assured him, patting her stomach. "God wants us to have one."

"How do you know what God wants?" He turned to face her, peering into her eyes with more intensity than she'd believed him capable of. She felt as if he were looking at her for the very first time. "How do you know anything about God? Huh? You don't go to church. They don't want you down at the church. You know what the preacher says about you? Says you're not right in the head, says your family's never been right. They're all inbred. Says it was God's own mercy your mama died when she did. Says you're practically an *in-val-id*."

She moved before she knew what she was doing. Her hand flew wildly up into the air and fell, a shot bird, onto his cheek. She felt his skin peeling under her nails. Red scratches appeared on his face. The boy cried out and, trembling with the shock of her own anger, she slapped him again, clawing at him, using both hands against him. Her fists hardened like stones. Feeling her lips curl into a canine snarl, she pummeled the boy, leaving no pause between blows. His feet moved to kick her, but she offered no soft spots for purchase. The bony knuckles of her right hand found his eye. The boy screamed. She aimed for his open mouth. He deserved it, didn't he? He was a rotten and decaying thing; he was not human; he had tricked her –

A flash of agony in her belly crippled her. She went down on her knees, panting and gasping for breath. She clutched her stomach. Her eyes bulged from her skull.

The boy just stared at her, pressing his weak and useless hands to his wounded face. His eyes bore into her as if he didn't know her name.

"The baby's hungry," she said. "We need to find more food."

Eli said nothing.

"Well?"

"I'm sorry," the boy whispered. He wiped the blood from his face with his shirtsleeve and he slid off the couch. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to." But there was no recognition in his voice; his apology was just as empty as the ones her daddy occasionally gave her. The boy moved toward her on his knees. His fingertips pressed her clammy flesh awkwardly. She shivered but didn't push him away. He fumbled with her shoulders and she slid her skinny arms around him, searching for a proper fit. Was this what a boy was supposed to feel like – this nervous and wounded mass that tried to encircle her? Was this what their bodies were supposed to do? Pushing her nose against him like a dog might, she brought her face to his chest. Tears burned her sallow cheeks. She heard her own sobs echoing the empty house, and beneath them, the boy's heartbeat.

She didn't resist as he gathered her up off the floor. "The baby's hungry," she reminded him.

He pulled her into the hall and into Odell's bedroom. She didn't resist.

Merete's belly began to swell. The protrusion was small and soft at first, a low ridge above the line of her underwear, but with the passage of another month it grew harder and round. She patted it frequently and decided she should learn to sew before the baby came, else it would have only her moth-eaten baby clothes from the cellar. Her breasts became sore and seemed to swell, too. Many mornings found her hunched over the toilet, clutching the bowl against the nauseating cramps and hoping she didn't shit herself.

If it was a boy, she wanted to name it after Eli Mahoney. Eli Mahoney, Jr. Little Eli, the product of a white handmade dress. But if it was a girl, she wanted a particularly special name, one that sounded beautiful and would make her beautiful. If it was a girl, she prayed it wouldn't have her eyes.

Her daddy never came, and neither did the woman from the state. A quiet escape. She existed to no one, save for Eli Mahoney. She couldn't check the mailbox down at the end of the drive for fear that the dogs might come back. She heard them barking late at night sometimes – it was their mongrel voices but with a different tone, a wolf tone, a hungry tone. Maybe they had taken up with a pack of coyotes. It happened all the time, although her daddy told her the state denied releasing coyotes on the mountain after they had almost died out years ago. Their packs

were getting thicker every year. She couldn't tell Eli Mahoney that the dogs had gone feral, though, for then he might be too frightened to come back to the house.

She thought perhaps her daddy might be driving up to get his mail every so often, or maybe he'd had it forwarded to wherever he lived now. That woman's house, more than likely. The electricity stayed on and no one came around to collect a payment. The phone never rang.

Her clothes got tighter. She let them out as best she could, but without a sewing machine the work was tedious and she lacked the patience or energy for it. She felt tired all the time. The morning nausea gave way to afternoon nausea, and she found herself unable to eat very much before the sickness returned.

The baby was hard on her, but that was her trial, what God had put before her when he decided to endow her with Eli Mahoney's child. The baby was hard, and she feared it would get harder yet as her condition progressed, but it was only so that she might be truly grateful for it when at last it came. She thanked God for it every day: *Thank You for my house*, *thank You for Eli Mahoney and his baby, thank You for my baby, and please don't let me die here, don't let the dogs get in and find me*.

Eli Mahoney came around when he could, when his schoolwork wasn't, he told her, suffocating him. He still intended to get the hell off the mountain one day and she intended to go with him, so long as he found a good neighborhood down there for the baby. Whenever she reminded him of their future together as a family, he got quiet and stared at the wall, kneading his hands and spitting out the side of his mouth. He hadn't told his parents about the baby, hadn't even told them about Merete. She wanted them to see her when she was prettier, after the sickness had passed, even if her stomach was big as a pumpkin by then. Right now she looked terrible, like a dirty, tubercular waif nobody would want to wife their sons and mother their grandchildren.

Whether or not he was happy about the baby yet was questionable, and she prayed about that, too. He stared at her stomach and felt it often of his own volition, but never tenderly, never like a proud father or a lover. His fingertips pressed too hard into the swell and when she cried out in pain he studied her with that familiar, almost academic, scrutiny. He asked her a litany of questions whenever he came – Was she all right? Was she eating? Was she still tired and vomiting? When she told him, giggling ecstatically, that she'd felt the baby kick, he rose from the bed and slid his pants back on, then proceeded to stare at her stomach a while longer. He said he was trying to find a way to talk to his mother about her. He said he hoped to get an answer to his question soon.

Merete awoke on a cold morning with the need to piss. Eli Mahoney hadn't slept with her that night. She propped herself up on her elbows and slowly lowered her feet to the floor. The muscles in her pelvis contracted and she almost fell; she clung in desperation to the side of the mattress. The pain flared once more and faded, and her belly tightened with the promise of its return. She rubbed the swell of her baby as she staggered to the bathroom. The truth was she hadn't been eating well, despite what she'd told Eli Mahoney, and it occurred to her that her insufficient diet might have caused a kidney stone or something of the like. It would be hell to push out, but it couldn't hurt the baby.

She sank onto the toilet with all the weariness of one who has walked for years on end: Lancelot, at the end of his journey, beholding the Grail. Nothing left her. Another cramp gripped her pelvis and her vision blurred. The pain doubled her. Her forehead touched her knees. She screamed for help and realized she was alone. Her thighs were hot; she felt sweat rolling off of her, burning her, burning –

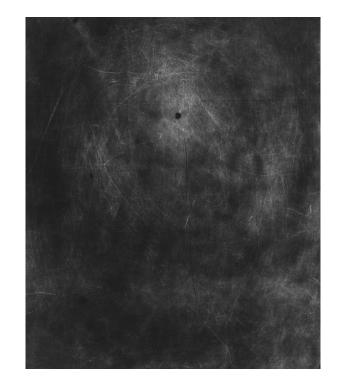
It greeted her with no glory, no sound but her own cries fading in her ears. The red spot on her underwear had come quietly in the night, taking form and shape in the emptiness that filled the house. Odell and the white dress had left a place open for it.

She bolted upright. The movement tore her muscles again and another rush of blood coated her thighs, staining her pale nightgown. The panties slipped down to the floor, white cotton now an obscene red. A wet scream caught in her throat and she tried to run. Something within her seemed to burst and she pitched forward, clawing at her swollen stomach.

The door was not locked. She grasped the knob and flung herself outside into the cold dark. Far past the trees she made out the dim shape of Eli Mahoney's house – miles away, countries and oceans away, God and His Heaven away. All its windows were dark, its occupants gracefully asleep. The blood coursed freely down her legs to pool at her feet with each halting step. She could make it that far, surely, surely, surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and the baby and oh God the baby ...

She collapsed in the chicken yard. A final sound tried to leave her lips and stopped – a nonsense word, a word spoken in a pleasant and fleeting dream – as the poisoned cells that had blossomed along the banks of her womb for fifteen years ruptured. Her hands sought the last warmth of the dirt. Somewhere on the mountain a dog let out a long wail and fell silent.

Brandon **James**



Text by Joshi Radin Special Thanks to Jordan Kessler Cesco Light 6 Brandon James **B**RANDON JAMES is a romantic with equanimity. Weighed down with an 11 × 14 camera, he leaves behind the visual clamor of the digital age and hikes into the woods to shoot landscapes. Ponds. Trees. Sand.

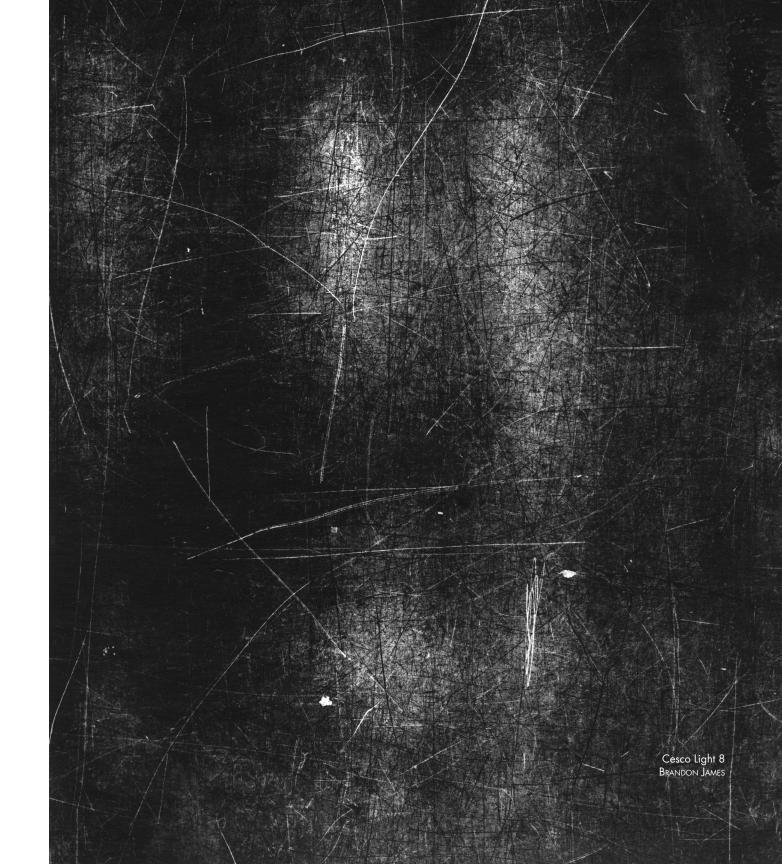
He quietly thrives on the technical challenges inherent in the photographic process, whether it's perfecting chemistry blends to achieve a perfect black, building a better print washer, or using a 20×24 stationary camera to photograph chemical residues.

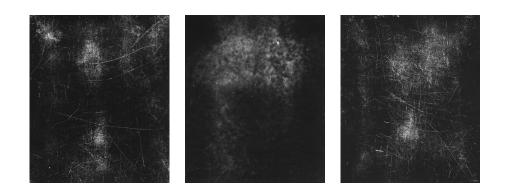
Inspired by the pioneering nineteenthcentury photographers who went out to California carrying plates of glass to capture awe, adventure, and the newer spaces of a young country, James brings this sense of exploration to concerns closer to home.

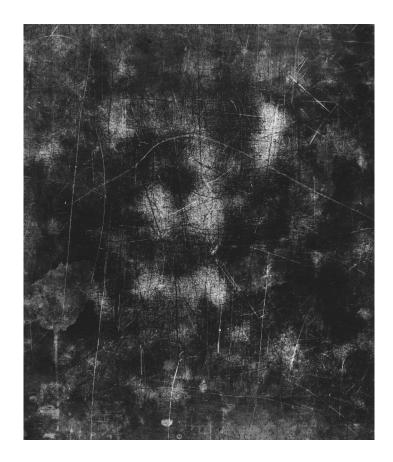
No part of bringing out these compositions is simple. From moving a threehundred-pound camera (requiring its own room to serve as the film back), to developing the final prints, the process takes a wealth of dedication, patience, and a love for the journey.

The *Cesco Light Tray* images are dark, rhythmically illuminated by scratchy highlights or softer, cloudier grays. Abstracted from all scale and context, they achieve a generative ambiguity.

In the void of the obvious, we bring our own sensibilities to bear, and the images – photographs of histories of photographs-in-the-making – come to be something that is as much about what the viewer brings as anything the artist reveals in the textured forms.

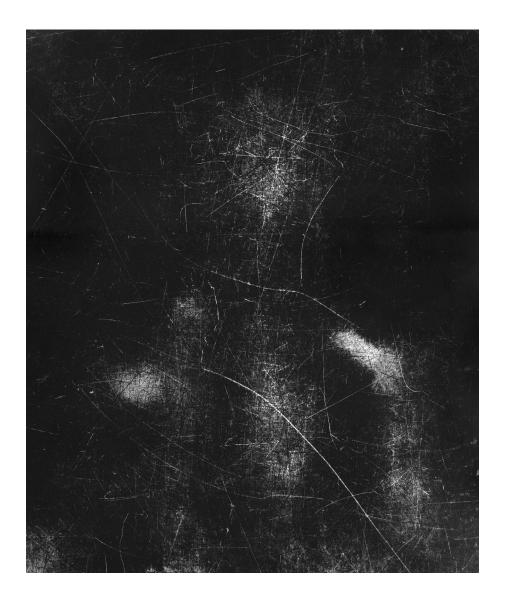






Cesco Light 2 Cesco Light 4 Cesco Light 3 Brandon James

Cesco Light 1 Brandon James





Cesco Light 5 Brandon James Cesco Light 7 Brandon James

GERALD SOLOMON

After The Raid

Dust, ashes, cracked glass, all that's left from the fire. Something by my shoe, singed picture's wide sky for a scene natural as odd.

Purity blue, controlled empty heaven. (So large.) Arezzo's barefoot angels who stand about like columns of waiting stone.

To contemplate clarity. Calm, austere, resolved, attending what will not be hindered. Unreadable mouths, deep eyes.

White courtyard, all open marble – palace, temple, flat city square. The required Jewish palms.

At a tasteful distance, a youngish man waits, exact as naked, made ready for the official scourge.

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Right here and now though, new rain come and gone. My London burnt and only one cloud in the sky. Our sky, cobalt as an eye, open to harm ...

All too natural. I'll go back home – narrow house, field of stubble, field of wheat. You and I have stood there long since. Wind molecules brush ripening crops. Shadows go, come, go away, traces ...

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No thought has been so clear. A sense of truth finally invented.

A long illuminated cloth, unwinding ... Help as unison.

Last Days of Summer

N THE BEGINNING OF AUGUST, the last month of those long, hot summer L days before the inevitable trudge back to high school, before I started the tenth grade and no longer had homeroom with Tina and Aimee, who had given me the brush-off for no good reason after seven years of friendship, in this month I got a call from Stacy Lynn telling me that we needed to hit the beach. We had spent most of the summer hanging out behind Royal Farms, meeting up with friends she knew or catching a movie and then throwing rocks in the river. One time we snagged some weed from Stacy's brother and smoked it next to the tree carved with our initials in Pemberton Park. We spent hours pulling up blades of grass, pinching them between our fingers, and blowing a sharp, high note that sounded like a rabbit dying in the woods. All this, and we'd only made it to the beach a few times. We would park at Happy Jack Pancake House on Twenty-Fifth Street, one of the few places that wouldn't tow your car, and then lie sprawled on the just-warm sand for hours before trolling the boardwalk for Fisher's popcorn (always caramel with peanuts) or a cup of Thrasher's fries, oil-slicked with the sweet tang of vinegar, throwing the leftovers onto the boardwalk for the seagulls to fight over. Every once in a while, we would drop a few coins in a game of skee ball, but we were careful to put on our bored and ironic faces in case someone we knew walked by, and we never, ever actually spent the tickets on a cheesy keychain or stuffed bear.

When Stacy Lynn called, I was watching a rerun of *The Price is Right* and feeling increasingly gloomy at the old white-haired women, who could barely stand, attempt to spin that giant wheel, pinning all their hopes and dreams on making it to the final round and winning that living room set. Both of my parents were at work, and my only dinner option was a Stouffer's lasagna crusted with freezer burn, so I was pretty thankful when Stacy said she would pick me up at seven and then drive us to the Wawa on Route 13 so we could load up on soda and snacks for the drive up to the beach. Stacy and I were in the same grade, but she had been left behind in kindergarten, so she already had her license. Around six-thirty, I left my parents a note and jumped into my bathing suit. I covered it with a tank top and jean shorts that I had cut myself from an old pair of pants to give it that authentic look.

At Wawa, Stacy led the way. She grabbed candy bars and pastry snacks and five bottles of soda, not even bothering to get a handcart, just loading the snacks into my arms.

"We gotta get ready, Lace," she said and threw some Slim Jims onto the pile. "This night is going to be epic."We never called ourselves Lacy and Stacy or any other dorky combination. Instead, she was Stacy, Kat, GiGi, or the Carnivorous Wombat. The last was a name she earned when she ate an entire Grand Slam breakfast in five minutes flat. Her voracious appetite was just beginning to catch up to her in a slight pudge of stomach and increasing roundness to her cheeks. And I was Lace, LaLa, or Monkey Tits. In ninth grade, I had stuffed my bra with Kleenex for the Homecoming dance (being so flat-chested I was almost an innie). I was doing my bend-over move with Scott Birch and a wad of tissues began to fall out. Stacy, noticing before anyone else, screamed, "Monkey Tits!" – drawing everyone's attention away so I could shove the wad of tissues back inside my dress. I asked her if she was trying to warn me, and she laughed so hard she spit. Since then, I've been "Monkey Tits."

After a forty-minute drive, we reached Ocean City and had to crawl along the main stretch of road leading down to the water. Out the window, I could see the lights coming into view on the fairway, the dome of the Ferris wheel just visible over the buildings. We stopped and puttered forward and stopped again. A constant stream of people ducked around the stop-and-go traffic in bathing suits and chic little sundresses, holding surfboards or oversized bags with towels drooping out like tongues, their legs and arms and the soft white tops of the girls' breasts bared in the fading light. Beyond them, the sky flashed pink and purple and red like a bruise. Every time we came to the beach, there seemed to be more and more people packed into the same fifteen-street radius, flicking their brightly-patterned towels onto the sand to lay claim to increasingly smaller patches of beach. After Stacy pulled into the parking lot that used to be nothing more than metered spaces (now guarded by two squat ticket booths), I dragged the bag of snacks onto the still-warm sand, trying desperately to keep up with Stacy's long-legged stride.

"So what's the plan?" I asked once we were on the boardwalk. "Want to get a slice of pizza?"

"As if," Stacy said, and I felt momentarily dumb for even suggesting it. "We're meeting some guys here at eight."

I glanced down at my pink and purple top that hung flat against my chest and wondered if I should have traded the bathing suit for a push-up bra. I could see the way Stacy's terrycloth dress hugged her curves, the strap of her bathing suit suggesting what was underneath. Even my cutoffs looked silly and childish in comparison.

We sat on the stone wall that separated the boardwalk from the beach and watched the people walk by. It was almost eight, but the boardwalk was still packed. The tourists were easy to spot in tank tops and shorts in loud, primary colors. They clutched whining children, each set of voices equally tight and hysterical, and dragged them down the endless wooden planks with red faces flash-fried by the sun.

"When the guys get here, don't tell them we're in high school," Stacy whispered as if they were crouched below the brick wall, eavesdropping.

"Should we make up names for ourselves, too? I could be Natasha Petrova, your Russian pen pal visiting you on summer vacation."

"Your Russian accent sucks. Besides, this isn't dress up," Stacy said. "This is serious."

At ten after eight, two figures separated themselves from the throng of people and strolled over to us. One was toned, with floppy brown hair. In his board shorts, he looked like every other local, minus the surfboard. He was the kind of guy who could be eighteen or twenty-five – it was impossible to tell. The other guy was older, in his late thirties maybe, with thin blond hair and tiny features that made him look sharp and rodent-like. I knew immediately which one was meant for me.

"Evening fellas," Stacy said. "Out for a stroll?"

"You know it," the guy in the board shorts said.

"Your escorts for the evening await," the older man said with a little bow. At least mine was somewhat articulate.

We hopped off the wall and followed the two guys back onto the boardwalk. I learned that the guy in the board shorts was named Tommy and that he came to the beach every weekend. The older guy was Steven, and he worked at a small software company in Delaware fixing lines of code. Stacy told them that she worked for Bath and Body Works and left the rest of her life open to interpretation. I followed her lead and told Steven that I worked at Dollar Tree, which was almost true, as I had worked there last summer. For a moment I allowed myself to image a life of retail: an unending series of days spent ringing up sullen customers and unloading freight stacked high over my head, like forty-something Barbara who was undoubtedly still there. She had one of those severe faces that seemed incapable of joy, and she hated the teenagers who worked there, especially me. She hovered near the endcaps so she could watch me ring up customers, just waiting for me to make a mistake serious enough that she could report to the assistant manager, the position she was obviously gunning for. I imagined walking into that store day in and day out, my entire life contained within those four dirty walls for six to eight hours a day until I too cared deeply whether or not the new girl rang up the giant jawbreakers as two for a dollar rather than three for a dollar. When I emerged from my reverie, Steven nodded and grinned, revealing a front tooth curved longer than the others.

Around Twentieth Street, the crowds thinned and the shops became sparser until they disappeared entirely. We stopped, briefly, and gazed out towards the ink-black sea.

"Want to go for a swim?" Steven asked. His hands hung like two meaty paddles by his side. Stacy and Tommy hung back; Tommy's arm was already slung around her waist, claiming her.

I nodded, even though the last thing I felt like doing was diving into the icy water. We shed our clothes, and underneath his pale blue polo, Steven was surprisingly taut. He caught me staring and flashed me another snaggletoothed smile. Down at the water, I dipped my toe into the endless black of the ocean before allowing the waves to wash over my legs.

We waded out until the people on the boardwalk became tiny specks of brightly-colored fabric. He slid beneath a wave and swam over to me, his body a dark shape under the water: silent, predatory. When he emerged, the moonlight hit his face at odd angles, highlighting the deep wells around his eyes, the point of his chin. He looked like an actor from an old black-and-white horror film: Boris Karloff or Bela Lugosi emerging from the black lagoon.

"So what's a pretty young girl like yourself doing with a dork like me?" "I don't know," I said. It was the truth.

"I can't imagine you're too interested in the finer points of writing code," he said and smiled. Drops of water glistened on his forehead like tiny points of light, and I had the urge to reach out and touch them.

"I don't really know much about it."

"It's pretty simple. You just have to know what you want the program to do. The hard part is fixing other people's code. There's more than one way to write a command, and finding one error in a sea of functions can get a little tricky. But you learn to recognize other people's tendencies, the types of errors they make. It's like psychology."

"Oh," I said. "Do you enjoy it?"

Steven shrugged. "All things considered, it's not a bad job. It pays the bills." He peered closely at my face, as my mother sometimes did when she was scrutinizing a cluster of pimples. "So what about you? Do you like working at Dollar Tree?"

I laughed, but it came out more like a bark. "Not really. It's pretty boring and the little kids are really obnoxious."

"I bet." Steven inched closer. "So what do you really want to do?"

I opened my mouth and then shut it again. All of the answers that sprang immediately to mind would destroy the illusion that Stacy had worked so hard to create for us: graduate high school, get out of my parent's house, move far, far away. I pictured myself in a little café with a cup of coffee and a book, a light layer of snow on the ground and the day turning quickly to dusk. Some guy wearing funky glasses and skinny jeans would approach me and casually inquire as to the book I was reading. Slowly, slowly I would put down the book (it was imperative to make him wait) and offer a searing in-depth critique in just five sentences. After a twenty-minute conversation (I didn't bother imagining this part), we would walk back to my apartment, a light dusting of snow falling across the lamplight and muffling our footsteps. Then, we would have another cup of coffee on my sofa surrounded by artifacts from my world travels: a clay pot from Brazil, a mask from Zimbabwe. He would touch my arm, lightly, and I would lean forward and his lips would meet mine, and then the rest was a pleasant blur, creating a solid center of warmth within me.

When I snapped back to the present, I felt the chill of the water. "I'd like to get out of Salisbury. Maybe travel the world."

"What's stopping you?" He inched until he was right beside me. My breath quickened.

"Nothing."

"Exactly. A girl like you can do anything she wants. I bet you have guys lined up outside your door."

"As if," I snorted. "I'm not exactly popular."

His finger slid up my just-wet arm and I shivered. "Now I just can't believe that." He snuck a finger around my bathing suit top, brushing the skin inside.

"What are you looking for?" I whispered. What a stupid question.

Just then, his finger grazed my nipple; I nearly jumped out of my skin. "Found it," he said with a grin.

I stood stock still while his finger continued to explore my tiny breast, and I wondered how long it would take for him to grow bored and begin scouring the beach for blond bimbos. But he remained where he was, his eyes cast off in the opposite direction as though distracted by something more interesting. Maybe it was better this way, more anonymous, so I shut my eyes. I felt a terrifying rush when he let his hand slip below the water. With my eyes closed, he could be anyone, even Scott Birch with his perfectly tousled blonde hair who had said he liked me "just as a friend" at the end of the Homecoming dance before walking off arm-in-arm with Nikki Anderson. When he pulled back the fabric of my bathing suit bottom, I felt a rush of cold, salt water and my eyes popped open. I said, "Not here."

"You're the boss," he said and let my bathing suit snap back into place.

We walked out of the water and up the beach in silence; I felt a light buzzing in my head. When we reached them, Stacy and Tommy were leaning up against the wall, Tommy's hand brushing Stacy's thigh, Stacy's chest thrust out as far as it could go. Tommy whispered something into Stacy's ear and she laughed her high, fake laugh, the one she had studied from *Days of Our Lives*, a show she would never admit to watching to anyone (except to me). All at once I wished we were back in Pemberton Park, just the two of us, the long, empty night stretching before us.

When we approached them, Tommy kept his hand on Stacy's leg. He turned to us, and his dark eyes flashed. "What are you kids up to?"

"Came to ask you the same thing," Steven replied.

"Feel like getting a drink?"Tommy asked, directing his question to Stacy. "We can't," I said before she had a chance to reply. She shot me a

withering look, but I pretended I didn't see her. "We're not old enough." "Whoo-ee, Big Daddy," Tommy said, "You're really robbing the

cradle tonight." "Don't I know it." Steven placed an arm around my shoulder. "Besides,

we weren't talking about a bar. We've got a room not far from here." "A hotel room?" Stacy asked, a note of breathless excitement in her voice.

"You know it."

My heart began beating fast, and I was certain they could see the pumping through my shirt. The last thing I wanted to do was go to a hotel room with these guys, especially when Steven's earlier eloquence and gentlemanly demeanor seemed to have all but disappeared. But if I said no, I would probably have to take a taxi home and I didn't want to leave Stacy all by herself.

We took Tommy's car, an old beat-up Toyota filled with fast-food wrappers, balled-up plastic bags, and various other objects I decided not to look at too closely. Steven placed a hand on my knee gently, almost primly, and stole surreptitious glances in my direction as though assuring himself I was still there. Part of me was flattered, but the other part wanted to whisper to him that I wasn't his. The hotel was a sand-washed yellow three-story with a white marble staircase. I headed for the staircase immediately, not noticing that it ended at a pair of long, high windows. Steven slipped an arm around mine and guided me away.

"So how long are you boys here?" Stacy asked in the elevator.

"Two weeks. I got our rooms as a timeshare back when the hotel was new. You'd pay an arm and a leg just to rent a room for a night now."

I glanced at Steven's face and tried to count the wrinkles at the sides of his eyes like rings in a tree. Did anyone still purchase timeshares, or was Steven from a time when the word was foreign and new, a promise of never-ending beaches sliced into affordable chunks of time?

Steven and Tommy each had a room connected by a door, and we congregated in Steven's room. His was the cleaner of the two – Tommy's was a mess of dirty towels, piles of clothing, and trash, just like the floor of his car. Steven pulled a bottle of rum, a bottle of tequila, and a six pack of Coke from the fridge. "What can I get you ladies?"

Stacy arranged herself on the edge of the bed, and I found a chair. "Gin and tonic, please." I stifled a laugh – no way had Stacy ever had a gin and tonic. The most either of us had drunk were cans of warm Bud Light nicked from her parent's basement. She had probably just heard it on a TV show and thought it sounded grown-up and cosmopolitan.

"How about a rum and coke?" Steven handed us each a large glass filled with the black liquid bubbling like tar. I took a sip, my first real alcoholic drink, but it just tasted like really terrible coke.

"A toast," Steven said, and we all lifted our glasses. "To the two lovely women that have graced us with their presence tonight. I'm not sure what we've done to deserve such beauty, but we'll take it."

"Here here," Tommy said and downed his entire glass in one gulp. Stacy, not to be outdone, did the same. Both guys hooted like construction workers when Stacy was finished.

It was at that point that my surroundings came sharply into focus – the painting of the sea in muted colors, the same kind of painting found in every hotel; the water stain creeping across the ceiling and down the wall like fingers reaching out for us; and the bedside table with the drawer slightly ajar, as though something had just been placed inside of it or removed. Something about the ordinariness of these objects brought the whole evening down on me with a terrible clarity: We were both in a hotel room with two complete strangers, and Stacy was well on her way to drunk.

"We can't stay here," I said suddenly. Everyone stopped and looked at me. "They'll be wondering where we are." I couldn't mention our parents without shattering the illusion that we weren't in high school.

Stacy hopped off the bed and walked me to the bathroom, calling out, "We need to visit the ladies' room."

Stop speaking in clichés, I wanted to yell, but instead I said, "There's only one toilet."

Inside the bathroom, Stacy ran the tap and used the water to smooth back her hair. "Tell your mom you're staying with me and I'll do the same thing." She gripped my arm tightly. "And don't ruin this."

After Stacy left the bathroom, I pulled out my cell phone and called my mom, certain that she would see through the obvious lie, certain that she would hear the guys talking and the clink of glasses in the background and, in a fit of panic, would drive the forty minutes to come pick me up. The sound of her anger would be a comfort, an s.o.s. cast into the dark and answered.

Instead, all she said was: "Okay, sweetheart. Be safe."

Why was it never easy when you wanted it to be?

After two more drinks, the edges of the room became a pleasant blur. Steven and Tommy got out a deck of cards and taught us Asshole and Circle of Death. I kept getting the rules mixed up – or Tommy kept changing them – so every few minutes, Steven would whisper in my ear what I was doing wrong. His voice was throaty and wet.

After his third straight win, Tommy led Stacy, drunken and stumbling, through the door that separated their rooms.

"Where are they going?" I asked. Steven grinned. He stroked my leg and all I said was "okay," and again "okay" even though what I meant was "knock it off." Why couldn't I just tell him to stop? Why did it feel like I would be doing something wrong, like I would be scolded? My body felt slow and numb, like I was entering a long, deep sleep. I lay down on the bed, grabbing the comforter and pulling it until it covered my entire body. "I'm sleepy," I said and rolled onto my side. All at once, I felt a pressure that I slowly recognized as Steven's growing erection. "Hope you aren't too sleepy," he said.

"Actually, I am," I said, peeking over my shoulder. "Sorry."

"Let's see what we can do about that," he whispered in my ear. His breath smelt stale, like flat soda and peanuts. His hand snuck under the cover and began tickling the hairs of my legs, and I felt my body respond like dry lightning, a dizzying lift that was part elation and part revulsion. Then, his hands were pulling off my shorts, and I helped wiggle them off, my eyes firmly held on the water stain of the ceiling like a point of focus before spinning and spinning. When his finger slipped between my legs, I understood what all the fuss was about. I could feel a gnawing itch blooming inside me, and the sound of the waves outside mirrored the motion of his fingers. When he removed his hand, in the brief moment before he would disrobe and thrust himself inside me, before I would lose my virginity and be finally, irrevocably changed, I felt regret like cold oil poured over my skin. *Wait*, I wanted to say, *stop*, but my mouth was dry and filled with sand and I didn't say anything. A moment passed, and another moment, and then I felt soft, fleshy skin against mine. And then his fist banged against the headboard and he yelled "Damn!"

When I peeked over my shoulder, he was lying perfectly still, arms crossed, the comforter pushed away and a sheet spread thin and flat across his body. I could barely keep the relief out of my voice. "Are you all right?"

"It's the medication I'm taking. It has a few side effects."

"Oh," I said. "Sorry."

"This doesn't normally happen to me."

"Okay."

A pause, and then, "Guess I'll be going to sleep, then."

"Goodnight," I said and hoped it didn't sound too relieved.

I listened to the water outside, unending waves clawing at the sand before retreating. I thought I would probably stay up all night and watch the sun rise, but before I knew it, I was asleep, the night's events shifting into the dizzying images of dreams.

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I was in the middle of a dream in which a man I couldn't see was trying to cover me with blankets – they were soft and wet and smelled of the ocean – when I heard a noise like muffled crying. After a few moments I opened my eyes and the shifting gray shapes focused into the nowfamiliar objects of the hotel room – the brown-rimmed glasses, the dusty television, the painting of the ocean in muted shades of green and blue. I listened, but I couldn't hear anything, and after a few minutes I allowed myself to fall back asleep, certain that I must have been imagining the sound, that it was a remnant of my dream.

When I woke up again, Stacy was standing over my bed, completely dressed, her mascara smudged and an empty look on her face. When I sat up, she thrust my purse at me. "Ready to go?" she asked, her voice carefully nonchalant. I looked over at Steven, his thin hair slicked across his forehead and a small bead of sweat across his upper lip; I wanted to toss the comforter over him to hide his existence. We left the hotel room without saying goodbye.

We walked for what felt like an hour in silence. I wanted to ask Stacy what had happened, if she had done it, but she walked with her arms crossed tightly under her chest, which meant she wasn't in a chatty mood. After we reached Twenty-Fifth Street, I asked her if she wanted to grab some breakfast. She nodded. It was barely seven a.m., so the majority of the customers were tourists with sleep-encrusted eyes, trying to get on the road before traffic got too heavy.

We ordered ridiculously large breakfasts, and when Stacy's mountain of pancakes with hash browns, eggs, bacon, and sausage was set before her, I said, "All right, Carnivorous Wombat, want to break your old record?"

Stacy smiled without showing her teeth. "Mmm. Not today."

While I waited for my food to show up, I decided to finally broach the subject, the one that felt taboo, even though nothing was taboo between us.

"So, did you guys ..."

Stacy nodded and continued to shovel food in her mouth. Same old Wombat.

"How was it?" I asked, curious about the mechanics of it all, if that feeling that Steven had created (a pleasant knot in my stomach at the memory) would continue until I burst or if it would flower into something completely different, something unimaginable.

"It was good," she said and wouldn't say any more.

"Did he ..." I began, uncertain what I was actually asking.

"No. He didn't," she said and looked me in the eye before returning to her food. I had no idea what had just transpired between us, but I knew in the pit of my stomach that this exchange was meaningful and that this was the last time we would talk about it.

Just then, my plate of equally mountainous pancakes arrived with a side order of bacon. On the menu it had looked delicious, a feast to commemorate the evening, but now that it was sitting before me, the pancakes looked soggy and misshapen, drowning under globs of butter. Stacy's looked even worse: a battleground of sticky syrup and pancake remnants torn open and left scattered on the plate. I knew with a sinking certainty that when I got home, I would confess the entire evening to my parents. I could feel the childish tears building up behind my eyes, ready to leak out when faced with my punishment. And I knew that this wasn't what I feared the most, that what I feared had been left in that hotel room: a half-open drawer, a painting of an ocean held paralyzed, and a water stain that would creep toward us endlessly. I imagined one long hallway after another filled with those rooms: quiet, still, just waiting for me to return.

Resa **Blatman**

Text by Jess Barnett

When I was a child, I loved mysteries. Curled up on a couch in Vermont's cold silence, I devoured mystery books along with chocolate chip cookies. Locked in Time was one of my favorites. Lois Duncan's novel tells the story of a teenager who moves to the Louisiana bayou to stay with her father and, true to the genre, uncovers a dark family secret. Resa Blatman's work reminds me of how I imagined that bayou – long trailing vines, elaborate in their disarray, and insects buzzing, hidden along with scampering creatures. Yet the lushness of the natural imagery in Blatman's work is tempered by its cut-edge shadow effect, creating a feeling of dissonance and longing. The colors she uses purple plum, strawberry red, and walnut brown - are tactile and inviting, and the swirls, loops, and cobwebs create layers of depth within the pieces. Ripening, the standout of this set, features a landscape with flies the size of mice and arachnids as large as bats and birds. In the purple-red heart of the space, spiders weave a nest around a chandelier of grapes. Like all of Blatman's landscapes, this one lures you in with luscious colors and organic forms, but then snares you in a latticework of melancholy and mystery.



Ripening. 40 × 77 in. Oil on cut-edge panel. RESA BLATMAN





The Ultimate Whorl. 38 × 59 in. Oil, glitter, beads, gold leaf, graphite, and acrylic on cut-edge panel. RESA BLATMAN

Scintillating Swamp. 39½ × 59 in. Oil, glitter, beads, graphite, and acrylic on cut-edge panel. RESA BLATMAN



Little Sparkly 3. 11 × 23 in. Oil, glitter, beads, and graphite on cut-edge panel. RESA BLATMAN



Woven. 32 × 59 in. Oil, glitter, beads, glass, and acrylic on cut-edge panel. RESA BLATMAN



Little Sparkly 3 (detail). RESA BLATMAN



The Golden Mean. 96 × 176 in. Oil, glitter, beads, graphite, and acrylic on cut-edge panel. RESA BLATMAN





The Golden Mean (detail). RESA BLATMAN

M. RATHER JR.

MERCEDES LAWRY

Mythological Lust

Why do you follow me? – Any moment I can be Nothing but a laurel-tree.

"Daphne," Edna St. Vincent Millay

Because dendrophiliacs understand sublimity through bark shavings caught in the pubic mat,

and the hemophiliac understands awe through a nagging fear of paper cuts.

Because the scientist sees existence as a space somewhere between the paper and the bark.

Apollo understood becoming through laurel leaves that crumble

in his pants pockets. Daphne believed in belief.

She had been born with an excess of pheomelanin,

a belief in transformation. She knew her toes could become apical meristem.

And You Cannot Prepare

A shout from the fog. Echo swallowed in fear, prickles at the neck. The trees are dumb holy men who've turned the corner. Evil hums in the long night picking its nails. Lock and double lock or recite prayers, what keeps us safe is magical thinking. It is the nature of surprise to woo us from our warm beds. The tragic astonishes even as it sits on your chest watching every bit of breath hiss from your open mouth.