

Spring 2019

## The ghost of Alvar Street

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# THE GHOSTS OF ALVAR STREET

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A Thesis

Presented To

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

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By

Daniel Spiro

Spring 2019

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Ghosts of Alvar Street		1
Libyan Silica		19
Present and Future Monarchs		38
The Biggest Orgy for the End of the World		44
Second Line		59
Loa		75
Vita		102

## The Ghosts of Alvar Street

When Marty and Lydia Maisel showed us the small black metal trunk they said they'd found in their attic, most of us were inclined to believe that its contents were real. What reason would we have for thinking otherwise? It was November of 2005, the first autumn back in New Orleans after the storm, and we were cleaning our houses. Bottom to top, stern to bow, port to starboard. We threw away, we swept, we scrubbed, and we found things.

Heliotrope Parnassus – she had only one eye and sometimes we joked that she'd come from the island of the Cyclops – discovered her third ex-husband's flute under a pile of mouse-eaten blankets in the hall closet. She took it outside and hung it from a tree in her backyard, and most evenings that fall she shot at it with a bb gun, the bbs arcing under the light blue sky, a sweet high-pitched *ping* sounding on each hit. She'd discovered the bb gun, along with a dust-covered box of bbs, behind a chifforobe whose wood had been so warped in the post-storm humidity that she decided to throw it away (later on, Leonard Carmouche, who lived alone, broke apart that chifforobe and used his lathe to transform the scrap wood into spoons for everyone on the block). While cleaning her youngest daughter's room, Gloria St. Fougere came upon a dusty pouch of coins with dates from the 1890s that'd been squirreled under a creaky floorboard. Alvin St. Fougere, Gloria's husband, took the coins from house to house showing them to us, the three-cent pieces and the buffalo nickels. He thrilled our imaginations at the possibilities of it: Had the coins been saved for a rainy day and never needed? Had the pouch been ill gotten? Did it belong

to one of the former slaves in the family who'd stolen it from a plantation? To one of the black bandits who hid out with the St. Fougere clan after Reconstruction?

Alvin's wild tales were a familiar comfort for us. He'd spent his entire adult life in the house where he grew up and his stories were like our local bible. He often claimed that his family had been the first Afro-Creole family to purchase a house in this neighborhood, maybe all of New Orleans. How many times had he told us of the tailor Alexander Krawtztoff, the Russian Uncle of the St. Fougères, the man who'd seen massacres and been a grave robber in the forest of Bohemia and been cursed by a blind woman? How many yarns had he spun about Grandma Bones, who rode a skiff from Haiti after the revolution and sang like a siren in the streets of the Quarter to capture a wealthy Frenchman for a husband? Grandma Bones, Alvin told us, was responsible for telling Grandpa Frenchman that there wasn't gonna be nobody called St. Foo-*jer* in New Orleans, that their name was heretofore pronounced Fou-*je-ray*.

The city reemerging from having drowned felt different from the one we'd left. Messier, slower, sadder. In those first days, when we weren't teetering between the many cliffs of despair, we succumbed to the numbness. We see now that Alvin's sack of coins, his raw enthusiasm at the new discovery of old artifacts, it reached down like a fishing hook and began to pull us up from the rancid mud our world had sunken into. Who did any of us on Alvar Street have then but each other? Those evenings while we cleaned, when Alvin came to sit with us in our houses and we listened to him dream up the origins of those coins, it all made us feel like there still stood, somewhere beneath the flood line, a bridge to the place that made us. Like maybe we'd finally come home.

It helped to talk about our ghosts. Evenings when the sun was dying and we were getting home from work or quitting our cleaning for the day, we asked each other, “Did our ghosts come back with us? Did they ever leave?”

Said Gloria St. Fougere, “Maybe we ran, but our spirits stayed right here!”

She said this late in the evening before the first Fat Tuesday after we came back. We all had drinks in our hands, costumes on. A nice breeze prickled the hairs on the backs of our necks. We’d gathered around the porch of the house right in the middle of the block, Marty and Lydia’s house. We cheered.

“This is our city!” yelled Lydia Maisel from her porch.

“Our granddaddies are watching us!” yelled Heliotrope Parnassus.

“The buddha once taught that life is suffering,” said Lydia, “Well I say, fuck the buddha! Today we are in love with our city and our neighbors and we refuse to acknowledge the existence of suffering!”

We cheered louder than we thought possible of ourselves, we cheered from the backs of our heels up through our bellies like we had megaphones attached to our lips. We felt flush and light and happy and we said to each other, “Our ghosts kept our spaces for us while we were gone. Our ghosts haunted our houses in our absence.”

#

Surely this feeling was what made us so eager to trust in what we saw in Marty and Lydia’s trunk. It was towards the end of that first season of cleaning, the first cold evening of the year, the sky a dark blue with a white pointy thumb of the fog-obscured moon sticking up out of the clouds. “It’s some kind of miracle, it’s

magic,” Marty said to us in our doorways when he’d come to gather us and lead us over to his and Lydia’s living room. We arrived at their blue shotgun house and stood around the coffee table that Leonard Carmouche had fashioned from the old attic door of a Mexican church, the little metal box sitting there, waiting for us. Marty lifted out each item and said, “This is really something,” before showing it. “We couldn’t really believe it ourselves,” said Lydia. Their find was *their* treasure, yes, but it felt like a treasure for all of us. We let ourselves feel wonder. We oohed and aahed. Alvin and Gloria gripped each other’s hands. The look on Alvin’s face was ecstasy.

What we saw: A few decaying pieces of fabric, an old tailor’s measuring tape, a pair of rusted sheers. We saw the white stain at the bottom of the trunk that looked like it very well could’ve been melted chalk. And then the letters. The big stack of them, a hundred pages at least, all tied together with an immaculately knotted fraying string, all dated from November 1903 to April 1905. In water-waved, yellow letters with looping cursive handwriting, we looked at the ancient words written by Alvin’s famous great-great uncle, the tailor Alexander Krawtzoﬀ, and we felt that fishing hook pull us into clear open sunlight.

#

We loved Marty and Lydia Maisel. Marty who put his arm around us to say hello, invited us to his shows, into his house, out for drinks. Lydia whose face stayed placid as a glacier and whose eyes filled with empathy, always checking in on the rest of us saying, “Oh Ms. Elliora, Mr. Alvin, Mr. Lenny, how is your world today?” And we told others about them too, their successes became our own: Lydia, a homegrown Orleanian, a scholar, the historian who made tenure at Tulane; Marty her zealously



loyal transplant husband, a man so talented at the clarinet he'd musically ingratiated himself with everyone from Wynton Marsalis to Uncle Lionel Batiste. Kind and classy, never arrogant, they were our neighbors, our people.

They hosted a party on Fat Tuesday every year which started around 7AM – right after the Krewe of Bones marched through the neighborhood with their pots and whistles to wake everyone up – and kept going right until we marched ourselves to the big dance in the Quarter. Marty cooked a lavish breakfast: fresh fruit, eggs with sweet onions, spicy sausage links on toothpick spears, brownie bites. Lydia prepared pitchers of mimosas and sangria. Most of us brought things. Misty and Elliora Fortier, the sisters who lived next to Leonard Carmouche, baked pies; Heliotrope Parnassus brought cantaloupe and played a homemade washboard with two bells on the bottom. With her homemade thimble gloves, she gave us a beat by which to eat and talk. Sometimes Marty joined her with his clarinet. When Alvin and Gloria St. Fougere showed up, they and the Maisels would sneak a few minutes in Lydia's home office to privately share a few drops of a fifty year-old scotch, or a newly imported tequila, or some other such novelty liquor, all while the kids – the three St. Fougere girls and Marty and Lydia's one daughter – raided the costume collection in the attic and emerged dying of laughter wearing mismatched butterfly wings and colorful wigs.

After they found the Krawtzoﬀ letters and tools, the friendship between the Maisels and St. Fougere only deepened. They ate dinners together, took turns reading the letters aloud over plates of corn and meatballs, schemed about publishing them as a book, a prospect Lydia, with her university connections, seemed able to make happen. When Gloria lost her job because the high school where she worked as

a guidance counselor was shut down after the storm, Lydia found her work as an administrator at Tulane. Marty's band played at Alvin and Gloria's eldest daughter Natalia's wedding, which was held in the Fortier sisters' backyard and was the first wedding any of us had been to since the storm. In Alvin's toast, he read from a beautiful section of one of the Krawtzoﬀ letters addressed to the tailor's daughter:

"The love I have for my daughter," Alvin said under the stars that night, "is so hard to put into words that I'm going to cheat just a little and read the words of my ancestor." We smiled dreamily. "*My dearest Lucia,*" Alvin read, "*for so many years I have been engaged diligently in the speedy doings of daily life, in the business of business: weekly I had the task of procuring fabrics, attending to customers, paying the incessant taxes to the city government, as well as fealty to the Quarter grocers as I had no intention of becoming another slab on the sidewalk with the Italians' bullets like poor Chief Hennessy*" ("I will tell you the whole sorry history of that," Lydia leaned over and whispered to us, her eyes beaming) *and of course sewing and mending clothes and costumes for the great variety of occasions that occur in this odd sliver of city on the Mississippi which has become my home* (at this, the whole party whooped and hollered). *In all of this time, this time you grew from a child into a young woman, and whatever else I have gained in this life, it is the greatest bounty I have known to see the person you have become.*"

We clapped, some cried, we drank. We could feel the love that night, how it could rise up from the dead and fill these spaces between father and daughter, between the closest of friends, between neighbors on a block. How it would save us, sustain us. What love it was, so ripe and plump and vulnerable to puncture.

#

Five years after the storm, in June, the story broke that the letters, which Marty and Lydia had indeed gone on to publish as a locally successful book, were frauds — “a complete, if brilliant, fabrication” wrote Albert Pochet in *Gambit*.

We were shocked, stung, livid. We didn’t entirely believe it.

The evening we found out was unusually cool for June, an unburdening breeze in the air. We sat out on our porches under the dusk sky colored burnt orange and deep royal purple, some of us holding homemade cocktails in low tumblers and watching the sky’s transformation of light; others half outside, letting the cool air in while pouring out bags of seasoned crawfish and potatoes onto the tables. Our doors hung open, inviting to each other, just like we’d always had them on Alvar Street.

Serena St. Fougere ran up the steps to our porches with a dwindling stack of newspapers in her hands. She arrived breathless, her nose running, her eyes a little pink and puffy. When we saw her, some of us couldn’t help but remember back to the day she was born twenty years earlier, when Alvin blew a trumpet from his porch to proclaim that the newest baby had come to Alvar Street! Gloria had given birth at home, Alvin told us later, his voice pitched with pride, just like so many St. Fougere women in that house before her.

Now Serena’s face looked once again as it had when she was the child of our block, knocking on any one of our doors when she twisted her ankle or hit her head on the low branch of the live oak at the end of the street.

One by one, Serena handed us a copy of the newspaper. “They weren’t real,” she managed to say, her voice holding in tears and shouts, her stilted breath

communicating despair and incredulity, “The letters weren’t real. Marty and Lydia made it all up.”

Heliotrope took it the worst. For months she’d been talking about the letters and the man who wrote them. She’d done a seance, talked to the old tailor, learned private things.

“Fakes?” she asked Serena, just as incredulous as the younger two-eyed girl, “What do you mean fakes!”

“Fakes,” Serena replied. “They lied to us. They wrote the letters themselves.”

“Who lied! Nobody lied!” Heliotrope was standing in her doorway with her arm around the bb gun which was standing straight up, its shoulder stock on the ground.

Serena held out the paper, but the one-eyed woman didn’t take it.

“Get off my porch! Alexander Krawtzoﬀ is real!” Heliotrope called after Serena, “I am his great great granddaughter!”

“Don’t matter to me what your professors and your politicians say,” she told us later that night as she went house to house, “I gather my own evidence. From all the directions it comes from. And I’ve seen what I’ve seen!”

This was a few hours after we’d gotten the news. We knocked on Marty and Lydia’s door, we banged. We wanted to hear what explanation they had for us, to give them a chance to apologize, to ask them *why*, but they kept their lights off. Maybe they weren’t home. Once we’d mostly calmed ourselves, we calmed Ms. Heliotrope, reassured her that we believed she’d seen what she’d seen, spoken to whoever she’d spoken to, that fact and fantasy had a way of intermingling in this city,

that it happened to the best of us. We told her what she needed to hear. And we also chided her for yelling at Serena St. Fougere. “Ms. Heliotrope,” we said, “can’t you see that girl’s heart is broken?”

#

A few months after the revelation of the fraud, on a night in the early fall, Alvin punched Marty in the face on the sidewalk in front of the Maisels’ porch. By the time we heard Marty’s howl of pain and ran to him, it was over. Alvin was walking home shaking his fist, and Marty stood holding his face, his eyes full of sadness and shame and liquor, his legs shaking. Only Leonard Carmouche, sitting on his handmade rocking chair on the porch next door, saw it happen.

None of us were really surprised. Except for maybe Alvin himself, who’d long been quiet about the whole matter.

Earlier that evening, while most of us sat on our porches letting the new season ruffle our hair and nip at our skin, Alvin St. Fougere stood in the soft yellow light of his kitchen over a bubbling pot of red beans with celery and bay leaves, brooding over what Marty and Lydia had done. The beans simmered in their sixth hour on the stove, and outside the kitchen window, Alvin saw the raw colors of the sunset singe the clouds and fog in a blooming purple. He was reminded of a story his mama used to tell him, in this very house, about the angel of evening and her gown with orange and purple tassels. The angel of evening coming to lay herself down upon us. Every night she comes, but only sometimes can you see the richness of her gown. And you know what else she brings? Clarity. The truth you can’t see in those foggy, hazy days, the things you can only see in the magic minutes between light and

dark. Three hours before, Alvin had dropped in the cut-up smoked andouille sausage and ham hocks and turned the temperature to a low and slow cook. Now was the time to raise it for a brief spurt and add the final spices – some extra salt and pepper, a little garlic salt, heavy cayenne, four splashes of Worcestershire sauce, and enough Tony’s Creole seasoning to land on each bean.

A stream of orange light cut through the window glass as Alvin put on the rice. Cooking was no match for the angel of evening. Nothing was. How does the angel of evening speak? His mama would ask him. Real quiet, he’d say. That’s right, real quiet, she’d say, because what she tells you is private, a secret. That’s the only way to hear something you already knew but didn’t want to know.

Marty and Lydia’s letters had enraptured him. He’d loved reading them. When they were published, he’d walked around with his head a little higher, felt the pride straighten his spine. He’d memorized the passages that matched up closest with the stories his father had told him when he was a boy, the stories he’d told again and again to all of us on the block, like how the Russian Uncle had gotten involved with the cult of graverobbers. *Now I am not a boar but a rabbit, read one letter, Scurrying from end to end with tiny hands, hobbled legs, red eyes. There are shadows along the walls, shifting about, and I know they are the souls whose paths I have interrupted, defiled, the ones that my monstrous hands forced into the fogs of permanent death as their bodies were dismembered and sold.* The words haunted him. Boy you ain’t want that juju that comes with stealing the bodies of the dead, no sir, his daddy used to say when telling the story. We respect the dead in this family.

The St. Fougere clan wasn’t big – his father had been an only child – but they

held to their stories. Our private stories, thought Alvin. Now here was the truth of the evening angel that Alvin could hear as he covered the rice and set it to a simmer: he was angry, yes, but he'd felt paralyzed for so long because on some level he'd known the truth, hadn't he? Of course, of course, he'd known these weren't the true words of his ancestor. But they were beautiful, so he'd let the lie live on. It wasn't *what* Marty and Lydia had done, it was that they hadn't done it right! Alvin felt his blood boiling. They'd gone and pursued the money, the fame, and they'd gotten caught! They didn't understand what they were doing, they didn't understand it at all. And now his stories, his family's stories, those links to his ancestors and future links to his descendants were called frauds. Even the newspaper said it! Yes he'd known the letters weren't real, but the stories were, and he couldn't have known it would end up like this. Their hubris! They'd robbed him, and that was what he couldn't abide. They'd turned him, moreso even than any of the rest of us, into a fool. And the pot had been simmering for too long. Alvin crushed a swath of beans against the side of the pot with his wooden spoon.

The St. Fougere house was at the far end of the block, so it was a matter of geography and timing that Alvin didn't cross paths with Lydia when she walked out of her house that same night. Wearing a yellow sun dress and carrying a plate of warm banana bread, she came to visit us while we sat on our porches. What was it about this particular night that drove these two to act? We can't say for sure, though there was a clearing wind and a crisp weaving of the orange and purple streaks of the evening sky. What we do know is that while Alvin brooded and planned, Lydia walked from porch to porch offering us pieces of the warm banana bread and talked

to us for the first time in months.

It felt strange to see her climb the steps onto our porches. She'd been silent for so long, invisible almost. Lydia, who we'd always known to be so open, so magnanimous in her socializing. We'd known she was in there, that of course she still lived in her house which sat, after all, right next to ours. But her absence on the block, on her own porch those spring evenings, this had been visible to us each night. So when she walked up the steps in the yellow blue light, we felt a little bit shocked, like we were seeing a haunted visage.

She began with all the old proper pleasantries, "Good night Ms. Heliotrope" she said, "Good night Mr. Pochet, Mr. Carmouche," she said, "Little Ms. St. Fougere, and what's the news in your world this evening?" We answered politely, we spoke of ourselves, and we took the warm banana bread from her plate and ate it. We didn't confront her or ask what we'd wished to ask those months before. Instead we inquired, in all sincerity since she was still our neighbor, and no matter our thoughts on the subject of her and Marty, when you see a neighbor's face in front of yours, you treat her just like the neighbor she's always been, "And how are you Lydia? How is it going with...everything?"

And after a few rumblings, mumbles, a hedge here and there, Lydia Maisel said what she'd come out that night to say:

"Listen, about these troubles me and Marty have gotten ourselves into. We know what the papers all say, and we suspect we know what you all say too. I don't wish to defend myself now, but I do wish to explain and apologize. Apology first: we're sorry that you've all been mixed up in all this. Those stories we wrote, the



stories of Alvin's family, we didn't mean to pass those off as our own. Those stories belong to all of us. For that reason we feel a need to apologize to you. Since the city believes that we made them up, it means they believe that only we, Marty and I, made them up. Yes Marty and I typed them, put them into a form, but we don't claim to have invented them. We know that these are our stories. When Marty and I were in storm exile, it was you we were thinking of, dreaming of. So, you see, it was you who wrote these letters too. We were merely the instruments, you see that, don't you?"

She paused and looked at us, through us, and we said nothing. She continued:

"We know we deceived, we know we lied. We're sorry for that too. We got lost in the stories you understand. We sit on our porches these evenings, listening to each other's lives, our tales of loss and grief, and we are connected to each other. Listening to each other, we become each other in a way, don't we? That's all Marty and I did, nothing different from what all of us do every night. We're sorry that the rest of the city doesn't understand that, we're sorry if you've been hurt by that. But the book itself? I must say: We stitched it together, all of us did, you do see that don't you?"

We listened with the warm banana bread melting into our stomachs, our own beers and cocktails washing the pieces down, and we knew then that Lydia had become lost to us. We have to admit that this made us fearful for ourselves in that moment, that maybe we'd end up lost like her before too long. We felt a coldness settling into our guts then. Call it prescience regarding the disintegration that would follow. It could not have been a coincidence, we see now, that in the moment when Lydia walked off the last porch, the quiet of the night was suddenly cracked by the

sound of Marty's jaw meeting Alvin's fist and the wail that followed.

Leonard Carmouche told us that Marty came right out after Alvin rang the doorbell. Alvin walked down to the sidewalk as Marty exited the door with a glass of vodka on ice in his hand.

"Al," Marty said, "I'm glad you're here."

Which were all the words that passed between them.

#

Just a few weeks after that night, Lydia kicked Marty out of the house. We can't say we know why exactly, but we suspect the stress couldn't have been easy on them and that shame played some part. He moved to Mid-City into the spare bedroom of one of the musicians he played with. He'd be gone from the block for almost a year before Lydia let him come home. In that time, the St. Fougères were forced to sell their house and move out of the city. It was a sad day when they drove away, the middle of January, raining, the last of the St. Fougère clan leaving Alvar Street. They'd seen it coming for some time. After the letters were exposed, Gloria quit her job with Lydia and found one in Metairie, outside the city proper. Alvin's work as a contractor increasingly took him out that way too. It made sense. He came around and said goodbye to each of us. He even knocked on Lydia's door although she didn't answer. A few months later, not too long after Marty came back, Leonard Carmouche sold his lathe and moved in with his brother on St. Charles Avenue saying he "wanted to be closer to his real family." Then, no more than a year after that, Marty dropped dead of a heart attack in Frady's poboyn shop on Dauphine Street. Lydia moved up north of Lake Pontchartrain to live with her brother's family.

Heliotrope left too. After Alvin punched Marty and Marty moved away, she grew lonely, angry. When Fat Tuesdays came and there was no party at the Maisels for her to play her washboard, she stayed in for the day. One day she overheard two young people who'd moved into the apartments that had been carved into the Abellard's old building talking about her. "Crazy Ms. Heliotrope," one said, "did you know she murdered a man with a hammer when he didn't like a painting she made for him?" Of course, that wasn't true, she'd never done any such thing, and certainly not about a painting. Once, Heliotrope chased away a woman who'd been sleeping with her second husband. She swung a hammer at her from the doorway and yelled that she saw the devil in her eyes. We can't be sure she was wrong about that. Sometimes we think we see the devil too.

How long do we get to say 'If only they'd done this' or 'If only she'd said this,' or 'if only I'd known' when trying to understand just how something ends? Everything that is consumed eventually runs out. And we must suppose that a neighborhood too – and we are speaking of a collection of buildings on roads, a community of people in a common area with all their memorial list of petty grievances, of celebrations, of commonly held griefs – is also a thing consumed. A neighborhood eventually runs its course. Now that all of us have gone, we admit to wondering what we even are anymore. Have we become ghosts? Are we a graveyard?

#

When they were in exile, Marty sat and wondered the same thing about him and Lydia. Have we become ghosts, he thought? He sat on a chair in the backyard of his uncle's house in Asheville, North Carolina. Lydia was inside. Two weeks earlier

he and Lydia had packed up their car and left their home to come here. Their daughter in school in California flew east to spend a few days with them and then returned to school. They felt so alone. For weeks they did little but watch the news. They'd grown sick of it, the helplessness and the horror, and Marty started drinking.

"I'm not really here," he told Lydia, "and I know I'm not there. Which means I'm not anywhere."

He sat on that chair in the backyard with his clarinet and a bottle and played until his lungs were sore. The days passed slowly, each hour offering a tick-tock beckoning into deeper pits of despair. Without work to do, without a place to be, he figured all that was left was time, and the only way to acknowledge time was with the right combination of liquor and music.

Lydia tried talking to him, but the moment she'd go quiet, he'd blow into the clarinet until she left, and then drink away his feelings of guilt. Her head stayed on tighter. She worried for him. When she talked, she reeled out the history of New Orleans; this was what she knew, this was her cement, and she recited it like a practiced chorus. Bienville and the Spanish and wars and Congo Square and etc. It lifted Marty just a little each time.

In this way, though both of them were broken for a time, when Lydia started writing the letters with the stories about the tailor of the St. Fougères, when she addressed those letters to the man's missing daughter, she saved herself and Marty from having drowned with our city. Those letters bonded them to each other when they had no one else by reminding them of us, their neighbors. So they created a reality for themselves in Alvin's family stories, and then they went out searching for

the items they could transform into the belongings of an old Russian tailor working in our beloved city. They found their solace in our ghosts and so kept from becoming ghosts themselves.

#

Whatever we are, we're still here on this block of Alvar Street. Just a few evenings ago, we became acquainted with Kira Johnson, the new tenant of the Maisels' blue shotgun home. She was crouched in the garden behind the house, hiding in the toil of a day of prepping beds and transplanting tomatoes. What was she hiding from? The confined space of the indoors perhaps, the confrontation with all that used to be there, all the questions that seemed to arise in such a space. How had she ended up in this new residence? How had she lost what she'd thought permanent in her life? She'd come to the city from Houston three years earlier and had proudly joined a collective of activist black women working to get juvenile offenders out of the parish prison. Now that had all ended. Her father told her on the phone to embrace the new paths that life presented, but how do you turn your arms in the direction of embrace when your head is spun in the opposite direction?

Kira held a partially rusted trowel in one hand, its spooned palm cupping a mix of soil, clay, and broken oyster shells. In the earth before her was a six inch deep hole for the final tomato plant, currently prostrate as a felled tree next to the hole. For the last few hours she'd been happily focused on the delicate breaking apart of root balls, the firm placement of tomato plants ten inches apart in a staggered row, the careful watering in of each plant. Now she found herself staring hard at the walls of the hole, the cells of dirt dribbling from the sides into the pointed bottom where the

tip of the trowel had culminated.

She understood then in this sight the remarkable presence of absence, its ubiquity, its unquenchability. Here is a hole, she thought, an emptiness, a space, and here I am trying to replace what once was with what might one day could be.

Maybe if we stay right here, we can find our way in all this emptiness.

## Libyan Silica

The back door must have been open still because the wind had begun to whip down the hallway, knocking framed photos off the paint-chipped walls, scattering papers from the study out to the patio where they flew off into the night. Inside loomed dark but for candlelight and the wind whooshed into the kitchen where the three sat, the half-brothers Alyosha and Benji Grant, and Ms. Heliotrope Parnassus, whose house it was. The house was old, made of ancient cypress, and so its collapse was unlikely from high winds or rain; and it stood near to the levee, on high ground, and so was unlikely to flood, or at least would be among the last to flood should the waters reach a height. While forecasts predicted little carnage, in the air for days had been that still, bottomless sense of calamity, it being the first hurricane since The Storm, on the anniversary of the very week.

Two days ago, carrying supplies and food from the little grocery on Dauphine, Ms. Heliotrope had found Alyosha on the front stoop of the small bungalow he rented from her at the mouth of the alley off Alvar Street. She peered at him with her good eye. His face looked stark white – a notable pale considering his parentage, Heliotrope thought – and he cradled his saxophone in his arms; the once rounded bell horn appeared to have been flattened, like metal gone through a forge.

“What’s that about?” She didn’t like the sight of him there, pitiful looking, like someone had been shot.

He looked up. “Oh hello Ms. Heliotrope,” he said. “I just found it like this,” his voice was quiet, even. “Went out to get poboys at Frady’s for me and Benji, come

back and here it was, lying in the street. Benji says he was out back, didn't hear nothing." The air pulsed thick and mauve from the change in pressure, and Heliotrope could sense in her bones the test of will in the ether that storms bring. There was unraveling afoot, the coming arrival of a chaos. And here sat her young tenant, the musician from the Feliciana parishes, the half-breed boy for whom her music-playing friends Gershon and Marty had requested shelter three months – was that all? must have been longer – maybe six months ago. She held her grocery bags in each hand tight against her sides.

"Who's the boy?"

Through the open doorway, she could see a little black boy sitting still on the couch staring at his toes. Alyosha turned and looked.

"Benji's my brother," he said, "half-brother."

Heliotrope cleared her throat. She stared at the boy. Her interests weren't racial but biological. She prided herself a student of heritage, of family. On their first meeting, with Marty present, she'd quizzed Alyosha on his quadroon color, having first to explain to the novice the meaning of the word. She made no judgments about the boy from this background, she was careful of this, not to be prejudiced, she simply logged it as pertinent, potentially useful information. Still he'd squirmed. Finally he said his mom was black and his dad was an asshole, which had made Heliotrope laugh, and she'd agreed to let him live in the tiny bungalow. We are products of a concoction of our ancestors, our time, and the pursuits we find worthy, she understood this clearly, and knew that few understood this as clearly as she.

She looked at the wilting, drooping bougainvillea tree growing over the fence



beside the alley, the heat fading its red to nearly the color of Alyosha's face. "You've got things for the storm? No, you don't baby," she didn't wait for a response, "Come to my house. The rest of the neighbors will be there too."

He stayed quiet and nodded, his grip on the silver saxophone tightening.

#

On the kitchen table at which the three sat, a lit candle remained still despite the wind. Benji watched it with suspicion. In the chair next to Alyosha and two seats away from Ms. Heliotrope, he'd also begun to notice that each gust seemed to be targeting the little hairs around his ankles, which meant it was coming in low. He imagined a rugged group of alley cats, maybe twenty of them, chasing each other around and under the table, clawing and screeching. Could it be cats? He looked down at his ankles, then sat back up and twisted his head to look down the hallway from the kitchen to the open back door. What else was out there? What else was coming in? One of the flopping banana trees in the yard split off its drooping half. The way streaks of water shot into the sky was the same way blood did from chickens' necks after Ronald, his father, cut them. Or did, that is, when Ronald was still around to slaughter the chickens.

The woman stood from the table. As she rocked back and forth on her feet a little as she stood, Benji could see shadows from the flickering candle light aligning on her face into the shapes of coyotes and water moccasins.

She began walking towards the back door saying, "Damn cats will run in and pee every goddamn place."

Cats. Benji shivered. Could she overhear his thoughts? He had noticed that

his body uncontrollably tightened and shrank whenever she looked at him. She seemed powerful. She was a large woman, wide across her shoulders, with dour sunken eyes and coarse blonde-white hair. Her mouth stretched into menace when she smiled, her eyes burning, her teeth white and spiked. Benji felt relieved at this short break from being in her presence.

He thought of her strange name, Ms. Heliotrope Parnassus. This house belonged to her. That was the most important thing to remember, Alyosha had told him as they walked over. We got to be respectful, he'd said. This was day six of Benji's visit from their home in Gurley. He and Alyosha had spent most of the time playing cards and walking along the river, except for when Alyosha took his sax to play in the backyard. Benji had only completely overcome his homesickness on day four when he sang a song they knew as kids from church classes, and Alyosha played along on his saxophone. Yesterday, Alyosha had said that the hurricane would hit New Orleans, and that they would spend it at the house of Ms. Heliotrope Parnassus with the other neighbors. "I don't talk to her much," Alyosha said, "People say she's a little crazy, and Gershon said he once he saw her screaming insults at a lamp, but Mr. Marty says she's all bark, no bite."

No other neighbors had come.

"You okay?" Alyosha leaned his head down at the table and spoke softly. Benji nodded.

"Listen, she's all right. Rough around the edges, but I'm not worried." Alyosha took a sip of the drink she'd made him.

Benji heard the slam of the back door and the creaking of the brown painted

wooden floor boards as the woman walked back toward the kitchen. Her legs were tree stumps rocking the house left to right with each step. Benji imagined her terrible face emerging from the shadow of the hallway. He guessed there might be snakes in her hair.

Just as she arrived back in the kitchen, the phone rang.

“Hello, what is it?”

Benji was surprised the phone worked. The electricity had gone twenty minutes earlier. Maybe the phone lines were underground here? “Yes you sonofabitch, it’ll be fine. This house is made of cement and chain mail, everything is hunky-dory.”

The woman turned her back toward Benji and kept the phone pressed against her ear.

The wind and rain lashed against the loose siding of the house. Benji looked over at Alyosha, who sipped a Long Island Iced Tea. Benji knew Long Island Iced Teas because sometimes in the mornings before going out to the farm where he labored, his dad Ronald drank little bottles of them that he bought at the Valero gas station just up Route 68. Ronald would walk over in his boots and sleeping shorts to buy them. Benji’s mom, who was a nurse in the town clinic, clucked at Ronald when he did that, and she told Benji that no good comes from men who drink in the morning. But Ronald had never been mean, not really, not to Benji or to his mom, and before Alyosha moved to New Orleans two years ago, Ronald wasn’t mean to Alyosha either, even though Alyosha wasn’t even his actual son. Still their mom didn’t like Ronald drinking, and she would say that that much alcohol is eventually

gonna kill a man. Which was what it did. That was one year ago this summer.

“You’re a real asshole,” the woman said.

Benji looked at Alyosha as he drank, his calm face hovering in the yellow candle light, inscrutable to Benji. He hated when he couldn’t tell what his brother was thinking. Probably something about music, or the people in his old band. Maybe he still felt angry about his broken saxophone. Benji’d heard Alyosha punching the couch and yelling the day before. He wondered if he was thinking about their mom, or his, Alyosha’s, dad, the white man who’d bought him that slick silver sax.

Benji wanted to be talking to Alyosha right now. Did he not see the peril they might be in? The shutters outside the kitchen window slammed into the house’s siding and shut hard upon the glass which quivered but did not shatter. Benji couldn’t ask anything now. He stayed silent.

He still didn’t know what all had happened with his brother. His mom had said he was “going through hardship.” She told him during the drive to the bus station that Alyosha wasn’t in his band anymore and that he needed some company. Benji was to be her spy, she’d whispered, and he’d groaned, but found himself trying to remember things to report back. He’d found out about Clarita three days ago. When Alyosha was out, she’d come by. She’d said, “Hi I’m Clarita, are you Benji?” She’d smiled at him. She had pretty, long hair and blue eyes. She stood tall. He liked her right away. He asked her how she knew his brother, and she didn’t say anything and looked sad. She had to go she said. “Hey Benji,” she said, “let’s keep this visit between you and me,” and she made him promise not to tell Alyosha that she’d been over, a promise he’d kept out of guilt in addition to her request.

When his mom had mentioned there was a girl involved, Benji knew what that meant, but he was still shocked. He'd never heard of Alyosha having interest in a girl before. When Alyosha wasn't around, Ronald used to tell their mom that he was peculiar. Benji had had a girlfriend each year since the second grade and Ronald had never called him peculiar.

#

"Listen," Heliotrope said, "get off my goddamn ear, this fucking storm ain't gonna do a dime of damage to your inheritance, okay? Goodbye."

She hung up and sat back down at the table.

She poured herself a drink.

"Children," she said, "Pretend they're calling about you."

She huffed and took a slug and said, "So boys, you believe this? Naming it Isaac. It's the sacrificial hurricane. This fucking shit. And this fucking week, of all the weeks." She didn't like coincidences, didn't trust them. Resonances like this one through time had a habit of bringing tragedy.

There was a loud clap of a tree branch breaking and falling onto what sounded like a metal shed roof.

"Forget about all that rattling," said Heliotrope, as much to herself as to the boys. She downed her drink and poured another. "So you got your sax flattened, and you got this darkie with you, your brother right?"

She noticed Alyosha grimace and the little one squint. On the phone, her son had been just a weak puff of condescension and rage, a whole sobbing story about the latest woman who'd wronged him by not loving him enough. He sounded like a

blubbing idiot, like a little pastry boy. “Are you sure the house will be okay,” he’d asked. She could hear him now across the state sticking out his chest and sucking in his gut. She wasn’t to blame for him. She’d loved him plenty. It was that forever-spoiling mettle of grown men. He hadn’t been like that as a boy, but surely that’s when it started, the corrosion. That’s what the world did to them, all of them. Now these two boys, these brothers.

“Gershon and me, um, parted ways last week,” Alyosha said, and she thought that his voice sounded weak, nervous. She smiled.

“You’re out of that asshole’s band? Good for you!” Heliotrope rocked forward into full light. Gershon was a pervert. The first time they’d met, he’d pressed himself hard right up against her back four times during a Fat Tuesday party. He’d been walking over to her with a hot red face for a fifth and maybe final squeeze when she’d turned fast and threatened to put a screwdriver in his neck. Marty had stepped in and apologized for his friend, made introductions, tried to smooth it so she and Gershon walked away still “on the level,” but she didn’t forget it, didn’t forget anything. Marty might’ve been the only good man she knew, but maybe that was because she didn’t know him all that well.

In a frank, sweeping motion of her long elbows, she swung up another long gulp of her refreshed drink and then set the glass down again. So Gershon had lost another one. Good for the kid. She said, “I knew Gershon when he was twenty-five and he was an asshole then, he’s an asshole now, and he’s been an asshole all the time in between. It was about one of the girls, right? That lecher, that pervert.”

Alyosha nodded. “I wasn’t even up to nothing,” he said, “She was coming

around to me, you know? I know it was her, I know she did something to my sax,”

Alyosha looked over at the boy, “But you say she didn’t come by? When I was out?”

The little one shook his head with vigor.

“I really don’t know what I’ll do now, I really don’t know. Just wasn’t my fault,” Alyosha said, and Heliotrope held back a sneer.

Whatever pity she had momentarily felt for her tenant drained away as she downed another drink. *Wasn’t his fault*. Blaming the woman again. And did he think that saxophone made him a man? Did he think he was entitled to it?

She looked to the clock whose hands showed nine twenty.

The two shared a mother, she could see that. The similar features of their faces were all feminine – cheeks like tulip bulbs, lean skin around the eyes, pretty noses that bulged fat and smooth.

She poured another drink. These two. What could they possibly understand of the worth of things? What did anyone understand? They were all just orbs of receptivity, black holes consuming a world too complicated to discern. They were powerless in the face of the chaos, of the spiritual corruptions that took them over, all the more powerful when the waters revolted on a schedule like they might do tonight.

Alyosha suddenly reminded her of the man who was her son’s father. The sonofabitch who’d been her second husband, the one who’d taken her eye out. He’d looked like Alyosha when they’d met. Lean, scruffy, the mess and sheen of an artist. She’d been in love with him when she chose this name for herself, this beautiful name. Heliotrope. A modest flower but powerful. *Heliutropiam arborescens*. Thee Heely-o-trope, spoke the light voice of her youth bubbling up from the depths. Its

buds grew to deeper purples as they moved towards its center, its core.

A blast of wind hit the thin siding of the house and for a moment all she could see was that pale rotten thick-browed face coming at her with scissors.

She laughed.

“Ms. Heliotrope?”

They were staring at her. Expecting from her, waiting, desiring, taking. From her. What did these two want? Things, trophies, anything they could possess. She downed another glass. She’d show them something. “Alyosha,” she said, “Another Alyosha. One more Alyosha. You’re everywhere around here, there are three on this block, Alyoshas.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Boy, you’ve got to get yourself together! You think Gershon’s just gonna up and offer you what you want!” she was nearly yelling, “Nobody offers things in this world boy, ain’t no offers. You’re pathetic,” she said, “and you better build a will to live here.”

The boys sat silently.

#

The woman’s outburst made Benji’s fear surge and he saw Alyosha looking at him in a bad way that made him even more nervous. The wind cracked another banana tree in the yard and Benji thought of the spurting water again. Alyosha didn’t move. Pushing her chair back, the woman rose and walked to the short kitchen bookshelf. She pulled up a thin looping brass horn from a low spot. In the candelight Benji could see that it was turning green inside the bell, rusting at the mouthpiece. He



thought it didn't look like any instrument he'd ever seen.

"What that is?" he asked, gathering his courage, "Don't look like any horn I seen before."

The woman teetered on her feet. "This, boy, is an ear trumpet, a trumpet for a deaf man." She put the tiny end up to her ear. He wondered if she could hear lizards from there. He'd seen a lot of lizards in the city, so silent and quick.

"It's not mine," she said, "Another family heirloom. Belonged to great great granddad." She handed it to Alyosha. Benji bent his body to peer at it.

"One hundred percent Utah copper."

Benji watched Alyosha turn it over in his hands a few times. He had strong fingers, big hands, a lot like Ronald's.

"But you can't play it or nothing, right? I mean it won't make a noise?"

"No you can't play it," she snatched it back out of Alyosha's hands, "Kid tried once, tragic story, what makes it special."

"What happened?" Benji asked quickly, before his brother could.

The woman sat back down and placed the copper piece on the table. She leaned away from them until the top of her head fell into darkness, and most of what Benji could see of her was the candle in her left eye, the eye closest to him. A thin gust of wind squeezed around the kitchen window and battered the candle flame into a chaotic swirl, and then she began. "Story goes that great great granddad took it with him to one of them mansions in Storyville. He was old by then, a veteran of the war you know, and with a few of the others who'd survived, they were down in New Orleans looking to get their old shriveled dingdongs wet," for a moment she turned

her head towards Benji, who turned to Alyosha, who sat unmoved. “So there he was,” she continued, “having a drink while the jazz piano played before going up with the girl he’d chosen, one of the mixed girls who those pricks like great great granddad called jungle fever, and he sets his ear trumpet down on the bar top while he drinks, and what do you know, a few minutes pass and he looks again and the damn thing’s gone. So he starts yelling and he’s got some old pals there and they get riled up along with him, and some of the other customers too. The piano stops, the madam can’t stop ‘em, and they start busting through the whole house, room to room, throwing the girls and their johns around looking for great great granddad’s stupid fucking copper ear doodad. Finally they get to the room with the girl the old man had picked for himself that night, and she’s been hearing the commotion out there and she’s all scared. And great granddad’s got this hateful menacing look in his face and he yells, ‘where’s the damn ear trumpet’ and this girl doesn’t say a thing but, you know, she kind of glances at the closet door, which is closed. So the men pull the door right off the hinges, just rip it right off, and hunched in there is this little black boy, sixteen years old, and he’s got this ear trumpet up to his mouth and he’s blowing into it with all his lungs trying to play. But there’s no music coming out! Anyway these men pulled that boy out of the closet and they marched him down Basin Street till they found a good solid tree.”

She stopped, but didn’t move her face out of the darkness.

Alyosha sat straight up. Benji saw that his eyes were narrow, seething.

“Why did you just tell us that story.” He cleared his throat. “Why did you just tell us that story.”

The woman’s face came back into the candlelight just as another thunderous

crash of the storm slammed the house. She downed her glass and poured another.

“You best know your history, boy.”

“Benji get up,” said Alyosha. He took his brother’s hand and pulled him from his chair. Benji’s stomach sank. He didn’t understand why the woman had told that story, but he couldn’t stop thinking of the boy in the closet blowing on that ear trumpet. He pictured him as Alyosha trying to play notes into his pancaked saxophone. Now came the wave of nausea, guilt. After Clarita had stopped by and left, Benji didn’t know why but he’d felt so angry at his brother. He’d wanted Clarita to return and smile at him again. He’d thought of how his mom treated Alyosha like he was a prince, sending Benji away when Alyosha had some little problems, spending all her extra time worrying about Alyosha. And that silver saxophone that Alyosha carried around like some crown for being born. Benji hadn’t even stopped to think, he’d just picked up the instrument and run outside to the curb. First car that drove by and he tossed the saxophone right in its path. He could hear the crunch of the metal in his ears still.

Now Alyosha was saving him from the woman, but he didn’t deserve saving.

Alyosha opened the front door to the fast winds and Benji’s cheeks pushed against his jaw. Before they could take a step a dead oak branch fell onto a powerline and Benji saw a streak of electricity set fire to the sideways skirts of rain.

“Get back in here you boys!” shouted Ms. Heliotrope, “At least stay until the worst of it’s passed,” her voice sounded to Benji like his mom’s after she’d unsuccessfully tried to tell Ronald to stop drinking, “No more stories,” she said.

Alyosha gave Benji a sorrowful look and closed the door.

The two sat back down at the table.

For a long time, no one said a word. The sounds of rain and wind filled the dusty space.

#

Minutes moved through like a handsaw making its way in thick wood, the wind whistled outside, and Benji had lost all track of time.

“Why are you so damn quiet,” the woman leaned her long torso over the table past Alyosha until her mouth spoke right into Benji’s face.

“I ain’t nervous,” he said.

“You lookin’ at my eye?”

Benji had no answer. Was he looking at her eye? What did that mean? He wanted to look to Alyosha for help but couldn’t bear to look at his brother. He shrank into himself.

She leaned back in her chair now, pitching her head toward the ceiling where a rickety fan hung still but for its occasional stirs when the house shook. Benji braced himself for the crash of her fall backward. She put her finger up to her face, under her left eye, and pushed hard on the skin. Benji felt his stomach rise into his throat. Mortified, he began to tremble uncontrollably. He pulled his knees up to his chest and placed his feet on the front of his chair.

The woman leaned forward again, her left eye shut now, and stretched her hand to Alyosha.

“Glass,” she said, her voice gruff, “Libyan silica.”

After a moment, she stood and walked to Benji. She towered over him and he

repressed a shudder. She held the eye in her thick wrinkled palm. He wondered then if she had a machine part for everything on her face.

“Look at it,” she said. He turned his face to the side. His dad Ronald had told him never to be frightened. That fear never had a good reason. This was two days after Benji cut himself good and deep in the foot with his small scythe prepping the field with Ronald. They were outside walking through a row of tall okra plants and it was hot and stagnant and the okra plants were tall with wide jungle leaves, whose prickles stung Benji’s exposed skin. “Can’t be afraid in this world boy,” Ronald said, the two sweating under the sun. “Don’t mean anything to be afraid. We had lives before this one, gonna have lives after. And, secret is, us Grants remember our past lives.” He finished the beer and crumpled the can with his large hand. “I been a railcar lady myself,” he said. “My poor little pecker,” and he howled in laughter.

The woman whistled a loud angry cuckoo above him.

“Damn Benji, where you at?” Alyosha hissed, looking right at him.

Benji snapped up straight, put his feet back on the ground, and stared at his brother dead-on. “I’m right damn here!” he said, and felt a hundred birds take flight from his heart.

He looked at the woman now, who was still standing over him, large body, hand open, her head shrouded in darkness. He peered down at the eye. There were faint red swirls that he knew were meant to look like eye veins. He wondered how they painted colors in glass like that. He stared at the kaleidoscopic hazel iris surrounding what he now saw was a large pupil. It looked beautiful.

Benji looked up at the woman and then he sat, and she shuffled back toward

the table's head.

"It was my grandfather's," she said.

#

She made to pull her chair out but it slipped through her fingers and broke into two pieces on the floor. The storm hit the house again. "Shit, goddamnit," she said. This was all too much. These boys. She stared down at the mess. She kicked at it.

"Stay as long as you want," she said, "I'm going to sleep." The liquor soaked her bones now and she could feel it there inside her telling her to hush, to get herself alone, to rest.

She walked over to the kitchen bookshelf and placed the eye on a small velvet cushion, and then placed her eyepatch over the socket. She made for the bedroom. The floorboards creaked as she moved, and when she got to the room, she swung the door closed so only a crack remained open.

She stood inside and stared through the crack. She would keep them whole for the storm, these two, although afterwards they'd be back in the clutches of a world far more cruel and arbitrary than her little tests. She hadn't meant to frighten them, not really, but she wasn't about to apologize for what she'd done, preparing them for all the storms to come. Now they knew. Maybe she'd gotten carried away by the horn, but there'd been a lesson for them in it. They needed to understand something about devotion.

They had sweet faces when they were young, but they didn't know what awaited them. She could see the little one wanted the eye, something shiny, just like Alyosha wanted his saxophone and her boy wanted her house. But none of them

understand that everything we have gets taken from us. She'd seen the world's unworthiness, such simmering explosive unworthiness, and once she'd seen it, she couldn't unsee it.

All she knew was that there were moments when you were supposed to be strong, moments that piled up on you and strained your neck, moments that put your mettle on trial, whose failures made you weak and mean. And they were all susceptible. She thought of her son's face. She'd loved him so much. Was it possible for anyone ever to be loved enough to get through it all?

#

Alyosha turned to Benji. He put his head down, shook it, and looked up again. "I'm a little tired too," he mumbled, rising from the table. "I'm just gonna lie down for a little bit. When the storm's down, we'll walk home, all right?"

Benji sat still while Alyosha walked to the couch.

He watched his brother doze off just like Ronald used to do after drinking all those little Valero bottles of Long Island Iced Teas. His mom used to say that not even the roof flying off will stop a drunk man from sleeping.

He was completely alone now.

The storm slammed down upon the house.

The ear trumpet was still on the table, the bell open to his face. The candles in the house were low, nearly out. Ronald used to say that at least the dead didn't have to worry about their livers when they drank. Benji didn't know why he'd thought of that.

He tried to picture starting school next week; he would tell everyone about

this storm and this monstrous woman's house full of trinkets and tinctures on sideways bookshelves against walls with half-torn wallpaper, the big cracks in the plaster. He was committing it to memory so he could paint every detail of the house for them, and they would be enthralled. He imagined her as a cartoon villainess, in a cave on a cliff somewhere, plotting with lowly henchmen who cowered at her presence. He would tell them about having been her hostage.

He shivered.

He stood up and walked over to the eye. It mesmerized him. Could he bring back booty? He bent so his face was close to it. He scrutinized just the iris. There were so many pieces, patterns and layers of dust and colors aswirl, and Benji began to trace them with his eyes. He looked at the spaces between the color and pattern and these spaces broken down into smaller spaces and these into smaller spaces still and in the smallest of spaces, Benji began to see fields, an orchard, snakes and Ronald chopping their heads off, Alyosha walking him to school alongside oak trees and tall cat-o-nine-tails and the time he stepped on a fire ant hill and Alyosha carried him the rest of the way home after they got the last of the ants off so his mother could give him Benadryl for the swelling and Tylenol for the pain, and his mother cuddling him every night, and he found suddenly that in the eye, he could see his father clearly, that he was once again with him, and he thought of Ronald's forearms and some of his torso, and his face, yes his face was there too. "Little man," Ronald said, "where you at?" Benji sighed. "I'm at the woman's house," he said, "I broke Al's saxophone," and he looked down, and when he looked back up his father was gone.

He felt, for a moment, like he would cry, but he caught himself. He was ten



years old, same age as Alyosha when he had to work out in the rows to support the family after Ronald broke his back for two months. Heroes don't cry.

My poor little pecker, he thought.

He could grab it, thief it, but it wouldn't be right to take the woman's eye. He knew that. The way it sat there on its tiny throne, he knew that it was powerful, that if only he could use it for a minute it might help him. The answer came to him in a flash. He could pinch it for just a minute from the little velvet cushion and hold it up close right to his brother's face. He would have to wake up Alyosha while they were alone, just the two of them. He could do that, and then he would have time to put it back before Ms. Heliotrope came out looking for it when she woke. She'd never even notice it had moved. "Do you see," he would say holding the eye at the tip of his brother's nose, "look close," and Alyosha would look and see like he'd seen and he'd feel right again.

## **Present and Future Monarchs**

Tonight, I'm sitting alone in my little house on Alvar Street while the mating termites swarm in clouds around the lights outside. They're like a big brown sponge out there, dangling low and jittery in the evening sky, soaking in the humidity of dusk. I'm staring at them out the kitchen window with pinched eyes, contemplating nonsense problems like the meaning of feet and what one does with empty hours. Sometime soon the mating ritual will be complete, the sky will clear of this mass of falling translucent wings and humping insect abdomens, and I'll be able to go outside again. For now I'm drinking a beer from the freezer and trying to keep calm.

There have been summer nights when, after a long, hot day fashioning wooden picture frames in the workshop behind the corner market on Dauphine Street, I've come home to my empty little sock-hot house, and spurred by unyielding heat-induced frustrations, burst out into the dark like an angry wasp. Swallowing air pockets thick as marshmallows, I take off on my bike, riding for the levy and the small relief of those warm breezes off the Mississippi.

One such night I ended up at the Vodou shop of Ms. Martha Arnaud-Green, the Jewish-Vodou priestess. I'd ridden halfway through the French Quarter when the bright letters from her shop window grabbed my eyes, and I saw the name in white lights: The Isle of Salvation. Like being caught in the traveling beam of a lighthouse on the dark sea. I thought of my grandmother's dry greeting when I used to visit in her uptown apartment before she died. "Voila," she used to say, and then add, "So he lives, and he remembers that others live too."

Inside the Vodou shop, the walls shined clean and white and a cold central a/c blew through the room. An electric violin played a slow-rock version of Pachelbel's Canon in D through speakers overhead. I found Ms. Martha reading a book behind the cash register desk. She's a small bony woman, her skin tan, her face marked by a sharp nose and wide, kind eyes. Everybody in the city knows Ms. Martha. Spiritual guide to the monied, old-blood elite and the poor, new-blood masses alike. Sometimes she holds huge parties in the mansion she lives in by the levee. I'd heard that she cured her own cancer some years ago.

That night she sat reading with her spine straight, a large dog sleeping at her feet. She was at least sixty, but she looked healthy, vital. Despite the heat, her face showed no torment, her sleepy eyes all light and ease and serenity.

The sight of her there so peaceful made me suddenly aware of a sense of containment in my own body. I felt strangely exposed. I thought of the solitude at the heart of my impatience with the heat, and the high register of the single electric violin singing in my ears sounded to me terribly lonely.

"Hello traveler," she said looking up, her voice soft and light as it broke through the music, "just browsing? Or have you come for a reading?"

"Reading," I replied without thinking.

She turned off the music and stood. The dog raised its head for a moment and then closed its eyes again as Ms. Martha locked the front door and turned around the "open" sign hanging on the window. A relief came over me at the quiet, as though the reprieve from sound had somehow eased the hardness of the border between the two of us in the shop. Ms. Martha beckoned me to follow and we went up a narrow

staircase into the attic. Sitting down at a small wooden table, she motioned for me to take the chair opposite her and I did. Between us lay a white orb the size of a cantaloupe. Beside that, an incense holder with a long stick of half-burned incense.

She pulled a zippo from a shelf beneath the table and lit the incense.

“So what do you do?” she asked.

“I work at Trina’s,” I said.

She nodded, not looking at me but at the incense.

“It’ll take me a minute,” she said, “but I’ll get into my trance.”

“And then?” I asked.

“And then,” she said. She smiled. “It’s different for every person,” she said.

“Once I’m in the trance, I’ll read your energy. I’ll ask the ancestors to speak through me. I never know what they’ll say beforehand. Maybe they’ll give you some insight into a problem you’re facing, or maybe one of your past lives will come through. I’ll say it, but it won’t be me, you understand. I won’t even remember it after.”

I nodded and sat still and watched the smoke swirl off the incense stick.

She closed her eyes and I heard her fall into measured breaths. She chanted something I could barely hear. Eyes tightening, her expression transformed from serenity to concentration to something that looked to me like agony. She continued the quiet chanting and kept her palms pressed hard on the crystal ball. Her head lolled around her neck like a bowling ball balanced on a pin. Her body shivered. I felt transfixed watching her, enchanted. The incense smoke rose to the pitched attic ceiling like a string pulled up by a helium balloon. It smelled of chamomile and pine.

After two or three minutes, her face relaxed and, without opening her eyes,

she spoke in a deep, stately voice. “Bless you Sir Hubert,” she said, “you are a fine knight.” The voice coming through had the same raspy tinge as hers, but it spoke from the 13<sup>th</sup> century. It gave no name, but said that it knew me well, that it knew my story. I’d been a Crusader, it said, but with little experience in battle. I had a love for travel and had become a collector of quilts and tapestries. The voice told me that my collection was beautiful. It went into details. I searched them out in the alleys of ancient cities from poor old women, and traveled to orphanages to find the ones stitched by the tiniest hands. I wore them beneath my armor, and they protected me. I lived long enough to bring the collection home to Brittany, in France, and I treasured it there. A look of concern came to her face. “It’s time to let it go now,” the voice said, “it’s time to find balance.”

I shivered. Something in the words felt true to me, but I couldn’t make sense of them. I’d never been much of a collector of anything aside from questions and frustrations. I couldn’t think of what I needed to let go of; in fact, I felt certain that what I needed was *more*. More people, more connection, more money, more understanding. An old confused fear returned to me. “What kind of balance?” I asked desperately, “What should I be doing different?”

For a split second her eyes opened and she looked at me with an expression I recognized as sorrowful. Just as quickly she closed them again and her face went back to its trance. “There is no *should*,” she said, “there is only here and now and the question of *what* is really happening.”

“What *is* really happening?” I asked.

She opened her eyes wide. “We’re trying to let go of everything that isn’t

essential,” she said. “We’re looking for a sliver of ground to stand tall on.”

Sometime after that, on a night when I was working my second job at the Valero gas station, an old vagrant burst through the doors raving about will and loss. “Will and loss!” he yelled. “Will and loss!” I was restocking the soda cooler. “We gone lost the balance!” He screamed it two or three times, and then he went quiet. He’d walked in mid-yell, and when he stopped, he looked as though he’d only just realized that he’d come inside. His face took on a serene expression just like Ms. Martha’s, likely because of the relief of the a/c, and he smiled at me. By then, Mr. Alfonse, my manager, had come out from behind the counter to chase the man away, but I put up my hand to gesture that I had it under control, and I led the man out. He trembled on his old legs, and I picked him up awkwardly at the elbow and walked him halfway down the block to another gas station with a/c inside. The liquor on his breath smelled strong. He wasn’t heavy at all, even drenched in sweat. “Hot as a motherfucker out here,” he said.

Will and loss. These termites. When two termites meet beneath the light, they crash into each other, and within seconds the wings fall off their bodies. They plummet. I wonder how many thousands die before they make it into their burrows underground? But still they undertake the risk, willing themselves into the air, willing themselves toward the light, toward each other.

That night after my reading from Ms. Martha, I rode my bike upriver on the neutral ground between the streetcar lines of St. Charles Avenue. I pedaled hard. Ahead of me, my bikelight illuminated the particles of water in the air, turning them the regal purple of the starless Louisiana sky, and I thought it must have been the

same color Huey Long stared up into when he said that famous line that all of us are kings. What a thing to say. What could it mean? Each of us sovereign, enthroned. Could it be simply that we refuse to suffer abuses? Or is it that our wills hold the force of royal decree? Or that our losses carry the burdens of kingdoms?

While the streetcars passed, my toes skimmed the grass of the neutral ground on each downward pedal, and I tried to move fast enough to keep up with the trains and slow enough to peer inside them. I wanted to see the people, their faces, all these kings and queens living here, my unknown neighbors, these collections of royal will to be eventually lost to time. Such solitude in our dominions, and yet here we all are beside each other, yearning for each other. I saw them sleeping against the streetcar walls, looking down at their feet, sticking their faces out the open windows, talking to the people sitting beside them. All those individual worlds held together behind sweating foreheads passing through this city sinking in heat and history. I imagined the multitudes of past, present, and future monarchs that make up the populations of our world, that strive and perish collecting experiences and then losing them. Solomons and Cleopatras, Napoleons and Tudors, Romanovs and Khans. After a while, the sweat dripping from my forehead stung my eyes and I lost track of my thoughts. I sped up into the light breeze and watched the foggy reds and greens of the streetlights grasp at the mist.

## The Biggest Orgy for the End of the World

It's this feeling like when you decide to walk downriver to see your friend Ollie to check up on him because he's in dire straits since his girl left him to go to California and join the circus – at least you're pretty sure that's what you remember him saying – and you don't have anything to do now that your cucumber plant died. So you light up a spliff that's about twenty percent American Spirit, if you had to put a number on it, and walk out into an evening air that's muggy as a rainforest, and you take the jaunt beside the levee to Ollie's place choking a little bit here and there on the combustion of smoke and humidity in your lungs.

When you arrive, the door's open a crack, and this guy's just totally oblivious to you letting yourself in, which is disconcerting because there *have* been a growing number of robberies in the neighborhood over the last year, and you and Ollie and circus girl – her name was Rosa – had some pretty heavy conversations back before she left, all about how things are going to shit everywhere. To which you'd shrugged, eyes down while rolling another, and said, "Well what's even the point," but Ollie and Rosa became nuts for security, getting locks and security cameras, the whole shebang.

So you make a little show as you lock the door once you're in as a signal of your respect for his values, and say loudly to announce your presence, "Hey." It's dark but he's there at his work station, three desks around him, which is where he writes reports or blogposts or editorials – something, you don't exactly remember what – for the news, but even though you've made the announcement he doesn't



move. “Hey!” you yell, “buddy! Come on up for air!” Still he doesn’t budge until you go over and punch him on the arm. “Ow!” he says and looks up, which is when you notice that bleak glazed look in his eyes. “Oh hey,” he says, and you notice how in the space of a few slow milliseconds the glaze in his eyes rearranges itself into recognition. “Sorry...” he mumbles “...just finishing up some work.” His face is the blue of the screen.

“What kinda work?” you ask. You’re trying to sound nonchalant, because you’re pretty genuinely worried about this guy. In the blue light he looks kind of jaundiced and gaunt, and you wonder how long it’s been since you last saw him like this, by which you mean all vacant and bad. So before he answers you kind of hulk him out of his chair and look to see what he’s working on.

*“After all the nukes kaplooey the whole world,” the words pulse, alight in your eyes, “the only people left alive will be those with deep underground bombshelters. Since the explosion of the nukes is planned and agreed upon by the majority of the human race, all the ‘bunkers’ (the preferred term for those with bombshelters) have just enough time to stock up on beans and rice and distilled water, which they’ll need for the long nuclear winter. When asked, a few of the bunkers expressed dismay - even incredulity - at how easily humankind took to the suicide pact, but such attitudes are squarely in the minority. Most folks interviewed have stated how happy they feel with the plan for a collectively ‘mindful’ self-annihilation. ‘We’re gonna die anyway,’ goes most reasoning, ‘wouldn’t it be better if we all died together, blissfully aware? Like we’re one big family, which we pretty truly are?’ The bunkers are not persuaded.”*

You turn from the computer screen with a face like “uhhhh.....?” but even though you’re a little concerned about what you’ve just read, you’re actually relieved it’s not a suicide note or worse, another sob letter to Rosa saying how he’s willing to leave behind his career and his friends to be a world-traveling puppeteer with her or whatever. And since you don’t want him to feel self-conscious or embarrassed about expressing his anger and hurt this way, you raise your eyebrows to look cool with it all, and you say something nice sounding like, “Imaginative story bud.”

But he gives you a kind of funny look, which is nice at first because it seems like he’s gotten a little bit of life back in his face, but also alarming because it’s a look that pretty clear speaks, “You’re the crazy person,” which makes you worry that maybe Ollie’s even further gone than you thought. But this turns out not to be the case at all. “You haven’t heard?” and you can hear it in his voice, all this pathos and gentleness, which stirs you up because you’re supposed to be the one talking to him like that. “Buddy,” he says, “they’ve done it, you know what they’ve been talking about for months? The nukes into the supervolcanoes. I think the CIA’s been setting it up all along.” He’s standing there looking down on you like you’re his child and his hand is on your shoulder. And now you’re nervous, maybe even shaking. Has he lost his marbles? Have you? Maybe, you reason quickly, he’s just joking, albeit weirdly, so you say, your voice piqued with a touch of anger, “Ha, ha, that’s a good one buddy.”

But his face is stone serious now. “Look,” he says grabbing for the remote and this is when he switches on the television and you see a press conference from a podium at the United Nations where a woman in a beige blazer is saying, “The first

true peace of humanity, and, of course, the last,” and it seems that sure enough, the bastard’s been telling the truth! You pass Ollie a newly minted spliff you’ve just rolled, and he does some rapid-fire switches between channels while he puffs. On every live feed there’s newscasters and crews partying hard, having a ball of a time, drinking and screwing and dancing on tables.

He lands on one and you see this guy with a priest’s collar nodding thoughtfully and staring into the camera like it’s his dying lover. He’s saying, “All we are is the Lord’s tool in his final punishment. But that’s it, no more after this one. Frankly Marianne, I believe we should let ourselves say a little hallelujah!”

For some reason the thought occurs to you that this priest has named his camera “Marianne,” but that doesn’t seem right so you ask, “Who’s Marianne?”

But Ollie shakes his head and says, “They’ve had this guy on four networks already.”

Now you’re starting to feel the heat. Even though the door is locked and the A/C is on, you’re starting to feel like you’ve been tied up inside a sock and thrown into a microwave, like you’re being vacuumed by a dust buster into a hot wet hug.

“So the world is ending?” you ask, and for a second some tears well up, but you can’t quite get them to come out, “Are we supposed to be sad?”

Ollie shrugs, “What’s the point?”

And you see this wise smile creeping into his mouth and eyes, which brings you a little bit of comfort. He says, blowing out some smoke, “Listen, it’s okay. We’re doing it the mindful collective way. I mean, it’s a bang right?” And then he says, the words faster, falling out of his mouth like a trainwreck, “Think about it like

this. You've just woken up, and the world is ending. This is it, you think. But then you keep on thinking, because that's the amazing capacity of a human mind. So then you think, so this it? And then you think: huh. Interesting."

"What?" you say.

And Ollie looks like he's not even sure what he said, but nods and then sighs and puts a hand back on your shoulder and says, "Maybe we oughtta get a sandwich."

#

You don't bother locking Ollie's door when you leave because, like Ollie said, what's the point. Your breath is still tight but it's better than in Ollie's house because at least there's airflow out here. You've decided to put out of your mind this whole world-ending business for a minute, so you're focusing on the hope that the corner mart still has a few of their hot pressed turkey sandwiches left with their in-house-cooked hot sauce. When you look down at the sidewalk you see that the cement is kind of wavery and is embedded with dirt particles that glimmer like diamond shards.

"You can also think about it like this," Ollie is saying, calmer now, "If you were drowning in a lake next to the president, who was there because he'd been thrown in the water after a coup at the hands of a radical supervillain, probably from the CIA, and this CIA supervillain is itching to launch nuclear attacks on Russia and Pakistan and North Korea, which would set off the Strangelovian-doomsday-annihilation-of-the-planet-machine that's kept in nothern corner of the Pentagon" – "Right, okay," you say, nodding – "and," Ollie continues, "it so happened that the pretty girl who you've loved forever – we're talking about the *one* here – comes along and has to decide whether to save you or the president, wouldn't it make just as

much sense for the pretty girl who you've loved forever to save *you* so that you two could be together as the nuclear sunset obliterated Earth? I mean," Ollie says, "wouldn't it make *more* sense for her to save you? You'd be dead either way, but in one of those scenarios you share the most passionate lovemaking ever experienced by any two human beings in history, which you know will never be topped, because history is ending tomorrow."

He laughs and says, "I heard that on the radio."

You nod, not because you have any idea what's he's talking about, but because you want to indicate that you've heard the words that have come out of your friend's mouth despite your hunger. And maybe it's the up-down motion of your head, or all this mention of "the girl you love" and history, but you notice that a coherent thought, the first one in a while, has shaken loose from the uneasy tumult in your mind, and since you can't remember what exactly Ollie was talking about a second ago, you decide to speak it.

"You know, I'm sorry about Rosa," you say, "all that circus stuff."

In response to which Ollie lets out something like a snort and tips his shoulders down like a running back and keeps staring ahead while he walks. "Who's Rosa?" he says, "Are you talking about Lisa? Yeah that was a circus all right. That's a good line man."

Now you're even more lost. "I thought her name was Rosa? And she went to join a circus?" and as the words leave your mouth you're thinking: how did I even get that idea? Wasn't Rosa a dental hygienist?

For some reason this realization of your own ignorance kicks you hard in the

stomach and you feel a little bit like you've devolved into a tiny dumb hamster. You feel like curling into a knot and burrowing into your own stomach.

But your friend shakes his head, "Yeah, I guess that's all true enough, when you stop and think about it. But it's been months, right? Since Lisa got pregnant and left at least. Who even cares about that now?"

You stop right there, right in your tracks. "She got pregnant? Was it your baby?" you ask feeling terribly concerned about this, although you can't exactly say why. You've never had a baby, although you had that cucumber plant that you would sometimes jokingly refer to as your "baby doll plant."

"No J," he says, "It wasn't. But don't worry about that kid. It's just another life to get old, to get tired, doomed to grow up and grieve like the rest of us." He turns to you and his smile is all of a sudden wide and open like a cave that's just been exploded in an archeological dig, "Except not anymore, right? Isn't this such a relief?"

#

It's once you and Ollie are sitting in the corner mart that the pangs start to hit you. Faces are sneaking into your thoughts, face of people you haven't seen for years – your parents, your older sister, a few former friends – but you can't see them clearly, they're like lepers shrouded in bandages and shedding skin, ears. You sense that there's more than a little heartbreak growing down there in your chest, but you also notice that these sandwiches are doing the trick to fill your gaping stomach, and you start to think that Ollie's been making some good points. You think: Would it even feel good to see those faces in person again? Wouldn't that make the pangs

worse? Would it matter at all or change anything? Also, you do owe a good amount of money in a few unsavory places around town, and there's some money owed you for that truck you sold last year, and it would be a major hassle to chase that down. Also your job cleaning the Mariposa Breakfast Nook two nights a week isn't the best, and you don't even have a girl who left you to mourn over, not one who left you for the circus or pregnancy or anything. Once, like Jonah in the desert, you had that single cucumber plant with robust and curved green leaves, and that was something you cared about, but it never even grew a cucumber and then it died, which was your fault because you didn't know that cucumbers won't grow indoors. Now you're thinking of all the mistakes you've made over the years, not just gardening ones but social ones, all the ways you needlessly and stupidly injured people by saying and doing the wrong things, and you think of all that time spent in the fruitless search for meaning about it all, and you consider the crushing loneliness. And that's just *your* life. Consider all the wars, the famines, the diseases, and yeah, the heartbreaks that everybody everywhere gets to avoid now.

You think: Don't even spend another second on this.

So you're starting to see the sound logic of this situation, and some of that peace-and-acceptance-with-the-end is making its way into your gut alongside that satiating sandwich. Your mind is clearing from all that tumult of earlier, like a cloud dispersing and falling into dirt. Ollie is a man of some wisdom you realize.

"So what next?" you ask your friend, and at that moment you both see scrolling across the bottom of the TV screen in the corner mart that only a few blocks away they're trying for the "Biggest Orgy for the End of the World, Everyone

Invited!” and Ollie gives you a little eyebrow raise and smirk, and you can tell that you both feel like a guiding providential pinky is at least a little bit involved in this whole situation. This is when you feel a surge of happiness at these unexpected developments of the evening because for the first time in months you feel like you have a genuinely strong sense of direction in life. Plus, you’re feeling pretty good about the camaraderie you and Ollie are experiencing right now, kicking off the world together, like brothers.

#

When you leave the corner mart, you pass people milling and partying on the streets, and a few religious folks who are holding signs with messages for Jesus and Mohammed and whoever like “I love you!” and “Save me!” and “Was meat okay?” and this is when you see Mildred, the woman with one leg on crutches who you know from the neighborhood. “Hey Mildred,” you say, “Are you ready for the end of the world?”

“Y’all are a bunch of criminals!” she yells and then spits, and the anger in her voice immediately busts your peace-and-acceptance high. “Destroying the world like that!” You have to admit, you’re a little shocked by her reaction. You’d have thought that a woman in her situation wouldn’t mind an end to the suffering she’s surely going through on a daily basis, so now all of a sudden you’re having second thoughts about the whole business — is it such a big deal to chase down that money? Is it really so hard to get a new plant?

“You telling me that after I been through all I been through and y’all are just gonna end it like this? Bunch of no good sons of bitches,” and this is pushing you



back down into depression because Mildred's not usually so angry, and maybe she's even right.

"What have you been through?" Ollie jumps in and asks, which is a relief because you were frozen as a tree.

"Oh baby," she says shaking her head and lifting one crutch into the air to point at the two of you, "What've I been through? Oh I've been kidnapped, that's for one. CIA took me, yes they did, and they done experiments, I ain't even gonna tell you about those. But that's how come I ain't got a leg, and how come I can see so good."

Ollie gives you this look like, "Her? She's gonna make you feel bad now?" but he sees that you're still underwater, so he turns back to Mildred and says, all light and knowing, "We're heading to a massive orgy, the biggest ever, for the end of the world....come with us!" and you see that, thankfully, this induces a pretty good shift in her attitude.

"An end of the world orgy?" she asks, and a grin slowly spreads across her face. "Well I ain't been to one of those in fifty odd years! Not since Myra n'em!"

Which, you have to admit, makes you feel a little better now that she's on board, but you're still only back up to confused. Usually when you and Mildred talk, you just let her go, but since it's the last day you ask, "Who's Myra? And what do you mean you've been to an end of the world orgy before?"

Ollie meanwhile gives you this "really dude?" look, but Mildred doesn't seem to mind the questions while you walk. "Oh baby," she says, "Myra, she was the most beautiful woman I ever met. Always carryin' round that big staff with her. I tell you

baby, down in New Mexico we had some times. Had our own baby together. And yeah baby, we been to some end of the world orgies, some beginning of the world orgies too.”

“What happened?” you ask.

“Oh you know baby, them CIA goons come after me, send their men with their mustaches and their leather shoes.”

You remember that this is why you love talking to Mildred, because she’s got these stories, and you can feel the burden lifting. Ollie’s into Mildred’s talk now too, especially after the second mention of the CIA, and he asks, “Can you tell us anything about the experiments?”

Mildred sighs long, through at least four or five hops on her crutches, “Oh I seen them do everything. Make horses fly, turn people into vegetables, and yeah, end the world a time or two.” She nods to you. “You never know what’s gonna happen on the other side though,” she says, “ain’t everybody coming back, that’s for sure. I tell you what baby, I do miss me my Myra.”

Mildred’s head drops a little bit as she says this and you place a hand on one of her bouncing crutches. You can’t explain it, but you feel comforted by Mildred right now, and happy to provide her a little comfort with that hand on her crutch. You’re grateful she’s with you and Ollie on this adventure.

#

So the three of you, albeit with five legs, get to the address where the orgy’s happening and without even a thought Ollie and Mildred strip down and jump in. Mildred tosses her crutches into the crowd like a healed woman in a revival tent.

After a minute you lose sight of them, and you feel that it's majorly hot in here, like way hotter than outside, like you've moved from the microwave into a volcano. Moans and sloshing/slapping noises abound. Sweaty body parts in all kinds of twisted positions are everywhere. Every fleshy hole is getting filled. You catch sight of one-legged Mildred in with five or six people, this look of utmost concentration on her face. You can't really see *how* they're all fornicating, but you can't deny that they are. You also see your buddy who's in with a big group as well, pelvic-thrusting every which way like it's the last day on Earth, which, after all, it is. But you're starting to wonder if maybe he looks a little absent over there, back to that glazed zombie look he had in his eyes in that darkened room where you first found him.

For a while you stand there, not sure what to do, trying to act like you're just casually seeking out your opportunity, but you're starting to feel more and more withdrawn, even a little ashamed that you're not into this whole business. Thoughts start cascading down to you from the suddenly reformed cloud. Like maybe the bunkers from Ollie's computer screen are right to go underground, or maybe for some reason you don't want to go out in a massive orgy, even if it is the Biggest Orgy for the etc. You put your hands over your eyes for a second and when you remove them again you notice this wildly cute girl standing kind of awkwardly on the other side of a moaning pile, her eyes shining like two green moons, and just the sight of her seriously gurgles the juices in your deuces. She's looking around the room with close to the same expression of discomfort on her face that you've got, and you immediately feel that holy magnetic pull and then she sees you too and, thank God! starts to walk in your direction just as you walk in hers.

“See any opportunities?” she asks, and, not believing someone so beautiful is even talking to you, you say “totally” and then remembering that it’s the last day and you don’t have anything to lose, you try to say something romantic which comes out, “We spend our whole lives misinterpreting our hearts, don’t we?” And she kind of shakes her head in small movements, like its malfunctioning in between the rungs of a narrow ladder, and says, “That’s really stupid.” And then she takes your hand.

The two of you walk out of the Biggest Orgy for the End of the World onto the street where it’s finally quiet, what with most of the people inside fucking or praying or whatever else. The air has cooled off in these final moments of existence, and there’s an orange twirl in the purple sky cutting through the clouds above you. You feel refreshed now, like you’ve just woken up, like you’re almost an entirely new person. Peering into her green eyes, you catch this glimpse of the mystery inside her churning like a roly-poly in deep soil, and while you can only see its outer layers at the moment, you’re suddenly overwhelmed by the elating sense that if only you had access to all the energy and time in the universe, you would surely use it to watch this unfathomable mystery unfold. And when she looks back at you with those relaxed bright eyes, it feels like she’s seeing something you’d forgotten was there, something unmistakably yours but long dormant, like the drive you felt way back when you first *got* that cucumber plant and desired more than anything to keep it alive. The two of you sigh in unison, sigh into each other and keep holding hands tight while your shoulders touch. Everything is pretty truly perfect now, and all you can do is keep holding hands for as long as humanly possible and hope to stave off the detonation of your hearts until the world ends, which is probably about another five minutes.

Sure enough, right on time like the trains in Italy, five minutes pass and the two of you watch in awe as the giant missiles fly just above the heights of the neighborhood houses and then start to dip down like sparks from a flame coming back to the fire, and you turn to stare deep into each other's eyes, all the way down to the soul until you're both completely lost in that deepest well of the universe which is the true mystery of one another, and your grips tighten so tight that you can't even tell apart each other's heartbeats through your palms, and then...*KAPLOOEY!*

#

You look up at the sky and it's the fuzzing snowy gray of a dead signal. There was definitely an explosion, you're sure of that, but aside from that fuzzing gray sky, nothing seems to be different. The houses are still there. The trees. Cars and mailboxes. You even hear some birds chirping. Now the sky looks like it's fading back into focus as well. Suddenly, you remember back to what Mildred was saying about worlds ending and beginning, about the CIA. A mosquito buzzes at your ear and you try to slap it, but you can't seem to raise your hands, or, it seems, even find them. Naturally, you think to ask your dream girl if she can help you. She's your true love after all, the one who's seen your soul, and you turn to look at her only to have your heart drop from your chest and break into a hundred pieces on the gray-lit street. Interlocked in the soft and delicate hand of your love is no longer your hand, but all of you, round and purple, a grape you figure, and a pretty sun-shriveled one at that. If you had to put a number on it, you'd say you're about forty percent raisin. And you see too that her face has creased into that of an elderly woman with a few dark circles under her eyes and a tired forehead. She tosses you up into the air where you spin

over yourself once and then begin to hurtle toward her open wrinkled mouth, down into her red elegant throat, in which you conjure a hope that this is maybe the tunnel to a new life. And even though you're pretty positive nothing like this has ever happened to you before, even though all of this seems perfectly new and unknown, something like a gong-chime warps in your mind and you think, "Oh boy, this again."

## Second Line

For three months I've seen Alyosha Grant every week or so and he doesn't say a word. He shows up evenings and roots at the desk on my porch and he stays there looking out on the sidewalk. I don't know how you describe someone in a state like that. He's like a gray gargoyle in silhouette against the dark blue sky, an owl on top of a telephone pole. He's hunched and ragged and quiet. He's like one of the old grandmothers in her nightgown on a rocking chair dispensing judgment with a silent puckered mouth. My neighbors say goodnight to him and his face raisins in concern.

#

"People got so much emptiness," he told me once, "And it's like a demon reaching out of their chests, grabbing after your soul or whatever you want to call it. They're always attacking."

"You're too hard on people," I told him.

"Always attacking," he said.

#

I don't understand him. I mean, I don't understand him the way my neighbors think I do, or seem to want me to. They think I'm his girlfriend or his mama. What's with that boy, they ask when he's not around and they want me to know but I've got no idea. All we do is sit in silence. Sometimes I read him sections from my play so he can think about the music.

#

When he's way off in his own head, I don't think I can bring him back. I've

thought about trying to shock him. I could get undressed and walk onto the porch naked and see what he does.

I look at him sitting there and think: I could seduce you, but then how would I know if you ever truly loved me?

I crack myself up. I write lines like these into the dialogue of my play.

#

He's over the evening Ms. Shirley runs up and yells that she needs my help with something. Her chest is heaving when she trundles up the steps. My neighbors are asking me to do things for them all the time. Ms. Shirley in particular doesn't leave the block anymore.

"You got to help me with something baby, ya heard me?" She's side-eyeing Al.

"Ms. Shirley," I say, "What do you need?"

"Listen," she says, "I got this here." Her rattled hands lift a grimy Polaroid. In the image, her late husband's standing there with his arm around a telephone pole. His tiny face smiles up. His teeth look like a toenail.

"I know it the folk and spirits make a to-do about a year since they dead," she says, "And it's coming up. A year. Gonna make an altar."

"What do you need me to do?" I ask.

"Make it big," she says. Her hands shake out like she's measuring a foot, "Make it a poster."

She turns to Alyosha, "You gotta help her," she says, "Help her do it."

"How big," I say.



“Full size,” she says, “Man size.”

I look at Alyosha looking at Ms. Shirley and I see that he’s a buoy in the ocean. I mean he’s narrow and distant and watching, but he’s not succumbing to the waves.

“I’ll try,” I say.

#

This past summer, we went on a floating trip down the bayou outside Breaux Bridge. It was the two of us and a group of my friends, people I grew up with, a close group, longstanding. This was back when Alyosha was the new guy after he met Jonas Bogardis at Maison on Frenchmen, where Jonas works and Alyosha used to play. The first time Jonas brought him around to one of our house get-togethers was about a year ago. I was drunk and when we were introduced I told him I was writing a historical play. I used to talk about it a lot when I worked on the Rivers for Congress campaign, before I worked in the poboy shop. I told him I wanted to rewrite history for the better, from bottom to top. I’d given the elevator pitch a thousand times by then. “From the swamp’s mouth to heaven’s ears,” I said, “We’ll do it better the second time.” He sat quietly for a moment and then said it sounded like I needed musical interludes. He said, “I want to compose for you.” Two drafts from the ceiling fan hit the little standing hairs on my arms before I realized he wasn’t joking. He said, “We’ll make it big, the people’ll give it a second line.”

A few months later I organized the trip. I wanted to get away after we lost the election. It was just for the day and I invited everybody. Al and Clarita Hernandez had been seeing each other a few weeks and came together. We took donut floats and

booze and a cooler of meats and buns. We were nine in all, women and men, three couples including Jonas and me, still together then. We'd been on the river for hours, and in the late afternoon we held up on a little beachhead where a stream piddled down a wet low green hill. A huge rock lay there, right on top of the stream, obstructing it. We were all drunk, sun drunk and beer drunk, and so everyone took turns trying to lift it. It was good fun, silly really. When it got to him, Alyosha refused an attempt. He shot this look of contempt around the group and then he stormed off up the hillside. I think every one of us was surprised. We watched silently until he found a dip in the hill to sit in for a while. Then Jonas said, "Well we've always needed a good subversive in this crew." Then he went after the rock again. When Al came back he was still hot. We'd dispersed somewhat by then, sitting in the dryer spots, eating soaked lunches and drinking more beers. He walked by saying, "Come out to fucking nature, do the same damn shit we do all damn day in the city." Then he took a swinging kick at the rock and broke two toes.

#

He told me that his mother named him for a character in a Russian book. "One of those big ones," he says. He says she told him the character was a man of pure soul, that all these others wanted to corrupt him but couldn't. I read *Brothers Karamazov* one summer I spent with my parents in Paris. I got sick and holed up in our little apartment and read it every day. I don't know if I understood it, but I loved it. Mostly I loved that angry punk Ivan. I wanted to be an angry punk too. I don't know if Alyosha's read the book. His mom is black and his dad is white. He doesn't know his dad real well, and his mom remarried and had another son before her second

husband, Alyosha's stepdad, died. He said his mama named him so his real dad would think him a good baby, a pure soul. He's angry when he talks about it. "For this man ain't met me but twice," he says.

#

You can feel it pulsing out of him all the time. Whatever it is that gives him the chip on his shoulder, the defiance in his cheeks. It comes out the way the grand inquisitor laughs at the innocent. Sometimes when I'm writing and he's over, I think of the armor Hephaestus makes for Achilles in Homer, with the cosmos and the vineyard and the cities and the sheep. It's a work of art and it's saturated and it's beautiful and it's for war.

#

I ask him, "What do you do with all this music you're thinking about? Do you go home and write it down?"

He just stares past me, out to my neighbors talking on the sidewalk. Mr. Laurence is telling Ollie and Beth, the new couple on the block, about a tall black-haired woman he met that afternoon in the junk thrift store on upper Decatur. He's telling about how he insisted on reciting one of his poems for her.

He doesn't wait for them to respond before he starts reciting for them as well:

*"The sun is a faceless monkey*

*the moon a bottomless duck*

*and in your eyes my bright star*

*I'm a rooster achin' to ... cluck"*

Mr. Laurence pauses before shouting the last word and then doubles over

laughing. Ollie and Beth laugh politely and say, “Goodbye Mr. Laurence.” I see Alyosha smiling and tapping his foot on the wood panels of the porch.

#

For his day job he drives a streetcar. Once he told me, “People, the wrong people, are sitting together.”

“Excuse me,” I said.

“Not that,” he said, “I mean this woman bounced on today and the way she bit her nails woulda been better next to the priest who kept fiddling with his collar, and the kids knocking their instrument cases shoulda sat in the seats by the old drunk who kept whispering about the devil.”

“It’s the notes,” he said, “A swung note when it should be blue, a blue note when it should be ecstatic.”

#

He’s only twenty-one years old and when he talks about his family I think he has too much age in his years and it makes my heart swell like a hive. He’s got these little pastures of disconnected facial hair on his chin and cheeks that make him look like a young Wookiee. I look at him and think: when he needs a place, I’ve got it. Food too. He’s kin.

#

“Okay tell me these histories,” he says, “How you think they should have been.”

This was our collaboration starting. I’d been working at the poboy shop about a month and he showed up while I was slicing turkey pastrami behind the counter.

“Okay,” I say, “Fine. You remember the massacre of Liberty Place?”

“No,” he says, “I don’t remember that.”

“It happened in 1874,” I say.

“I don’t remember that,” he says.

I tell him about the White League, the ex-Confederates who stormed the statehouse of the Radical Republicans and murdered innocent people. But in my version, the Radical Republicans have a hero who fights off the confederates, exacts real justice.

“Yeah?” he says.

“Yeah,” I say, “A woman warrior. I don’t know, maybe she’s from the future. She’s got muscle and smarts. Maybe she’s got a weapon. Maybe one of these meat slicers. And there’s music.”

#

When Alyosha still played I wanted to get him for a campaign event. The way he played made me hear things. It came out like it wasn’t right until you realized how much was inside it. He played so *fast* and made these *faces*. It looked like a hundred things blasting him at once from all directions and he was trying to catch it all and spool it out through the bell of a saxophone. And he had lungs, big lungs, you could see them through his clothes growing down into his abdomen. He could play all night. Sometimes he went off his own way, but sometimes he knew how to pull in the rest of the band. One at a time they’d take over and play out to somewhere you’d never see coming. It was all off-kilter worlds and sideways turns and it had rhythm. I don’t know how to describe it. Sometimes it made you dance. He could play.

#

When it ended between him and Clarita, I'm not sure I've ever seen a man hurt like that. Alyosha lost it. Sad and angry. He drank his body mass some nights. I worried he'd turn yellow from the jaundice. He told me she was the first girl he'd ever loved. I felt for him, but he deserved it. Clarita Hernandez is one of the best there is. She cares. I knew her way before Al. We were close as kids. You say to her, What's new Clarita? And she responds with this list of things – social justice and roller derby and painting nudes – and then she laughs like a waterfall. She's always been like that. Alyosha had been the one to end things after she told him that his band leader Gershon made a pass at her. He told her that he didn't know that she belonged to Gershon, that she should just go on with him now. I'm sure he looked like a fool when he said it. I'd have punched him in the throat. Clarita could've too, she's stronger than he is.

Alyosha doesn't know how to move on. These things he holds onto in his head. A certain look, a few words. "The restaurant is *actually* that way," is what he says she said when they were still dating, and somehow that 'actually' pushed him into a furnace. "The lack of respect," he says about it. "That's how I know she's fucking somebody else," he says. I point out to him that he's reading a little much into a word, and he eases off, takes a breath. We're on the porch and there's a breeze. It's spring. Then he says something about stickiness. He calls it a whole damned crazy mystery. "These things that stick," he says, "But you don't choose it. I mean, how does a thing get sticky like that? What makes it stick? Do you trust it? Can you lose it?"

“You ever notice,” he says, “How a kid will just start talking about something, like how they were playing baseball with their friends and one of ‘em hit the other with the ball right in the nads and their pants fell down or something like that, and they’ll be talking about it like it just happened a day or two ago, but it turns out it happened a year ago? Or longer? What is that? My little brother Benji, when he was six, he used to tell this story about his dad knocking a bird out of the sky with a scythe, just slicing it out of flight with a single swing. That shit happened when he was three. Every damn time he tells it like it just happened that morning. I don’t know how you unstick from a thing.”

#

A month after the breakup he tried to hang himself on a doorknob but he couldn’t even knock himself unconscious.

#

I’m glad he comes here. Before he lost his saxophone, he used to come over and we’d talk about what might happen in the musical. He’d start playing and I’d write lyrics. I think when he comes now it’s still because of the music. It gives him a task, something to make in his head. When the material’s flowing, I mean when I’ve got a few new pages, which happens from time to time, I’ll see his lips and eyes start to move a little, catch his fingers and feet tapping. That’s the only time I know what he’s thinking.

#

I’ve heard about Alyosha crying maybe five times, always from him. He says he cried when he left home for New Orleans, when he found his broken saxophone, in

high school when he had to punch a kid who said something racial about his brother. I've only seen him cry once. It wasn't after the first attempt. That time I got to his little house on Alvar Street after Clarita called me and I found him with the belt over his shoulders and the red welt around his neck. He was cooking lentils. The whole place smelled like garlic. "You hungry," he said and gave me a wide smile, thin eyes, smooth cheeks. I couldn't speak. "You fucking asshole," I said and he shrugged. Loud, fast, dissonant piano music played from a speaker. "Cecil Taylor," he said and raced across the room to jump three songs on the album. "A man who could hear life!" he said and let out a yelping laugh. He spun around a few times as he danced back towards the stovetop. I wonder if he even cared how angry I was. I wonder if he saw me at all. "Wasn't nothing serious," he said, still smiling, "Just needed to cut back on breath for a minute." I didn't laugh. He looked at me like I should be charmed and for a moment I thought that all he sees in people is what's missing in himself.

I didn't see him for a while after that. I heard that his mom came to visit and then he went back home for a few weeks. It didn't help much. By the time he came back to town, the boredom of the poboy shop had me working on the play again. I thought maybe he'd be interested and we met for coffee at Fairgrinds by the racetrack. He was morose. The whole time he spent staring at this old Japanese man at the next table.

He says, "You see those puffy pockets of skins under his eyes?"

"Yeah," I say. I'm thinking that Al's body looks scrawnier than before, his shoulders curving over his torso like a blade of grass in the wind.



“That’s where all his tears that he hasn’t cried have collected,” he says,  
 “Because a Japanese man will never cry.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Don’t matter what he goes through, it’s a dishonorable thing to cry,” he says  
 and I hear the splinter, a tiny crack.

A couple weeks after that I see him from two rows over at the Rouses  
 supermarket on Broad Street but I don’t say anything and he doesn’t see me. I could  
 see the second welt from where I stood. It looked like a deep burn.

#

This is the plot for *Liberty, Place!* which Alyosha and I came up with  
 together: a young thief in Storyville works the brothels and falls in love with one of  
 the girls who works for Ms. de la Fortier, the madam. The girl’s name is Hagar. They  
 want to escape together but first they need money, so one night while he’s in her  
 room robbing a man who’s sleeping, he wakes up. Shit breaks lose. They kill the  
 john. They’re trying to hide the body when they overhear he’s one of the ex-  
 Confederates arrived early for the siege on the Radical Republicans. They ditch the  
 body and decide to go on the run. Then big battle scene, music.

#

Al drives the Canal Street line. The day I go uptown to the Office Max to  
 make Ms. Shirley’s poster, I wait an hour for his car and when I get on I watch him.  
 I’ve spent time imagining his days. How he stops and opens the doors, closes the  
 doors and hits the gas, pushes the lever to increase speed, pulls the lever to decrease  
 speed, watches for cars, watches for people crossing the tracks, opens the doors and

closes the doors. Foot down foot up, arm across arm down, look twice.

I didn't tell him I was going to ride his car and when I get on he looks surprised for a moment and then gives me a nod. I say, "Hi Al," and his face looks soft and round like a buddha, but it's tired. He's missing the fat enlightened grin, I think. The blue shirt and necktie with the neon yellow and orange vest make him look like a crossing guard in the country. I take my seat and I watch. I want to see if he talks to the other people as they get on. If he ever says Hello or Have a good day, if he says anything back when the people speak.

Two old men sit in the seats closest to the driver and I sit beside them. They're dressed dapper. Overcoats, bowler hats. They could be actors or gangsters. Across from them is a pair of old nuns and this makes me the odd outlier in their symmetry. A couple times I think I see him looking at all of us in his rearview mirror. The old men are talking loud enough for me to hear and I get to listening. Their topic is politics in the Middle East.

"It's these Muslims and their autocrats," says one.

"Oh stop it with that nonsense!" says the other, shakes his cane a little, "We're the ones who go in and muck it up."

"Well maybe we oughta leave it all alone."

"Maybe we shouldn't be fiddling with what we don't understand anyway."

It warms me when I hear old folks talking passionately, I don't even care about what.

One of the nuns leans over out the open window and peers at street signs. It's one of the nice tropical days of early fall with a gulf breeze, and her habit flaps like a

wave.

I hear her say to the other nun that she thinks they missed their stop.

“Driver,” says the other, “Driver. What street did we just pass?”

My ears grow wide.

“Driver,” she says louder, “Pardon, driver.” She stands and walks up to the line. “Driver, what stop did we just make?”

He turns to her and I look at him and the sisters and the old men and I all see his sweaty silent face. I know he’s not going to say anything now, he’s somewhere else entirely.

“North Lopez Street sister,” says the old man with the cane.

“Thank you sir,” she says.

Nobody says anything for a moment and as the nun goes to sit I see him start to tap his foot. He makes eye contact with me in the mirror, just a quick glance like we’ve just shared something, and then he turns his gaze back to the street ahead. In the silence, I sit back and hear the city sounds and the wind and the rickety screeches on the metal track. It hits me that if you concentrate enough on listening, these tin train walls ring like the columned nave of a church.

#

That evening I give Ms. Shirley the photo and Al is there. I haven’t written anything down yet, but I’ve been running down plots for side characters all day. I tell him what I’ve got. The man that Hagar and the pickpocket kill would be a former colonel in the Louisiana Cavalry. Sometime before the siege, he returns home from two years in a prisoner of war camp in Kansas to find his wife remarried to a Union

soldier. They're starting a tonic business together. I was picturing a whole number focused on her having to choose between the men. First a few lyrics to set the scene, *on this bayou delta with my two husbands*, etc., then a grief-stricken lament as she recalled learning of the first man's death in a note from a messenger on horseback, then some instrumental, and then falling in love with the second man as they discover their shared interest in the magic of tonic-brewing. I thought she could sing, *if only there were a tonic to fix my broken heart*. At the end, the men would be fighting and drunk and she'd say something about men's lust for war leaving her cold. I tell him I think it could be a good opportunity for dark, dissonant music. He just stares at me and sits.

#

When I was a little girl my older brothers had a life-size cardboard cutout of Michael Jordan which they kept outside the upstairs bathroom. It stood 6 feet 6 inches, his official height, but if you looked close enough you could tell where they'd elongated the shins to make him taller. My brothers said, Maybe Jordan is shorter than he says, or than people think, but his greatness adds some inches. Ms Shirley told me that her husband had been 5 foot 9, but I asked the lady at Office Max to make the poster 5 foot 11. Why not give him the Michael Jordan treatment, I figured. The dead deserve our reverence.

#

Around seven thirty Ms. Shirley bounds up the steps. She looks expectant, her eyes are a little pudgy. I pull the poster out of its black plastic sheath and immediately my throat sinks into my stomach. I feel my face losing all its color. The elongating

has been stretched into the man's head. It's obscene. His cheeks look like pancakes. His face is gaunt as celery. I'm about to launch into apologizing and promising Ms. Shirley that I'll make a new one when Alyosha, also eyeing it, speaks.

"That's a damn horse face," he says.

"Excuse me baby," says Ms. Shirley.

I stand stupefied.

"My stepdad," he says, "He used to call men who were in love horsefaces. Used to call his friends who pined for their women horsefaces, said love made you long in the face."

Ms. Shirley lets out a hoot.

"Long in the face!" she says. She grins with her teeth and hugs the poster close to her small body.

She sways with it a moment and then, in a swift motion, grabs at Alyosha's shoulders and pulls his lithe body into a hug, holding the poster behind his back. Then she sways with him. The evening's grown dark and under the bright porch light they look like sad lovers dancing to quiet music. After a minute, she releases him.

"Thankya babies," she says.

His face is all screwed up, and he's breathing fast.

"I'm sorry he's gone," he says.

#

For a little bit we sit out there in a blue dusk light and the beginning of drizzle onto the sidewalk.

"You're back?" I ask.

He shakes his head, his face down but I can see his eyelids wincing. “It ain’t a war,” he says finally, “It’s all these damn rocks to lift, all this detangling we got to do.”

I nod but I don’t know if he sees me. While we watch the rain, I start tapping a quiet rhythm on the porch’s wooden planks.

## **Loa**

### **Theresa**

A loa opens Theresa's sight in the late afternoon of a cold day in April. She's sitting at a long conference table under bright bluish lights in the office of a divorce attorney in New Orleans. She's twenty-eight years old. She feels it first in her stomach and then in her chest. Her breath deepens and slows, her eyes roll back in her head and vibrate against her skull. She grasps the table.

She's had the sense of a presence since before dawn. In her early morning dreams, she saw red waters and thick storm clouds, her body floating on a large three-leafed jatropha plant. When she woke, it was to a day grim and cold. Chill bites of wind assaulted the gaps in the caulking of the window by her bed. It was still dark. In her nightgown, she passed by the open door of the room where Eduard slept under his blankets. She walked to the front of the house and opened the door.

She saw a heavy and wet fog overlaying the whole street, its twisting tunnels of white coiling into and softening the street lights' color to a pale yellow. The mist roamed atop the surface of the water through the long flood stilts that held up the houses of this town on the lake. Water, she thought. Everything here was water, from the ground to the blanket of clouds in the sky. Rain would come soon and hard.

She had no intention of missing her appointment. In the year she's been separated from Angel, she's felt free. She's found work that pays her well and makes her proud. She's bought a house for her and Eduard. She's rediscovered her heart, and

let it lead her into the arms of a good man who also lives on the lakefront. Nearly a month ago she saw Angel and told him all of this. She begged him to sign the divorce papers for her. If he loved her he would, she said. Begrudgingly he agreed, and in her gratitude she let him have her one last time.

She's driven over an hour in the rain and wind to the lawyer's office with Eduard sleeping in his car seat.

"Mama mama," says Eduard as he hangs upside down off the back of a chair, "Listen to me, the monkey's been eating all the fish in the sun—"

But she doesn't hear the end of his rhyme, because this is when it happens, the loa acts.

Darkness hits for a moment before her eyes pry open to hazy light. Materializing before her is the same fog from the morning only denser, wetter, its movements slower. She sees, emerging from the mist, heavy orbs like planets with the texture of smoke spinning upon a ground of forest duff, leaves and pine needles and branches of a late autumn pale color surrounding them. The spinning planets – there are four of them – move in fixed grooves of orbit through the duff and around long-branched oak trees whose thick trunks are dressed in greenish-brown resurrecting ferns. The grooves seem to sink and rise and the up-down-up motions of the orbs in the fog make her dizzy. She wobbles on her feet and falls into a deep space in one of the grooves and sees one of the spinning orbs bearing down on her and, before she can stand again, she's consumed once more in darkness. When she opens her eyes a second time, she's under the thin blankets of a hospital bed. She feels hot and has difficulty breathing. In the sterile room she sees Angel looking older



and tired, and Eduard, an adolescent now with a wispy mustache on his lip and a pained expression in his eyes, and she sees one more too, a little girl, small and round, no older than a toddler. “Mama,” says the girl, “I brought you ice.” Theresa coughs. She can feel the breath of life leaving her, and the darkness returns.

When she opens her eyes again, she’s back in the lawyer’s office. She’s sitting in the same chair under the same dangling lights at the conference table. She doesn’t seem to have gone anywhere and she didn’t fall. She feels a familiar nausea and begins to hiccup.

Angel is there now. A big man, he towers over her.

“What’s happened?” he says.

She doesn’t know how much time has passed or how long Angel’s been there. She stares at her husband’s large brown face, squarish and flat, his nose rounded to a nub from his boxing days. That’s what he’d been when they met, a boxer. She’s always loved the quiet in his face. The skin around his eyes looks weathered, though not as weathered as it will look.

“Answer me,” he demands, and she recognizes the pain in his voice. “You can’t do this,” he says.

She says nothing. What can she say? She understands that she’s seen her own end, so much sooner than she’d have ever thought. She looks at the clock. The walls in this office are trimmed with a slate blue paint and she thinks of the beige trim she saw on the walls of that hospital room

Eduard looks at her and smiles. The way he wears his baseball hat, slightly lifted off his head, like he’s trying to be taller makes her heart warm. He will be tall,

she remembers, especially compared to the other one. She puts her hands on her belly.

“I know,” she says.

“Jojo got me work. Out on the water with him.”

She nods. “You’ll be good with it,” she says.

It won’t be so bad for me, she thinks. It’ll be worse for them.

She leafs through the papers, but she knows she won’t sign them. She’s peeked under the great flowing veil of time, been given a sight of fate: whatever desires she remembers having that morning have no power to tip the scales against what she’s seen and her new knowledge of what will happen. She realizes that everything that’s come before this moment has become weightless. She’ll leave her new home, her job, the lakefront. She’ll move to the city and stay in Angel’s house.

In the weeks and months and few years to come she’ll find herself thinking back to this moment, after the first vision, when she leafs through the divorce papers and hands them to Angel. She’ll remember his look of confusion, then his understanding. She’ll think about weight. How it changes. How strange it is that the tiniest speck like a drop of mist can become the heaviest object. How even if you think you know how heavy a thing is or will be, it surprises you. She’ll remember the sound of him ripping the papers in half in the lawyer’s office, a gesture so leaden with feeling as to seem almost silly, and she’ll think of it like seeing the contract of her life with the present world destroyed, a symbol of the rules of time breaking. She’ll always remember it the same way, but the significance of the memory, whether it rests on her shoulders heavy or light in the moment it rises anew in her mind, that will

change each time.

One day, about a year from now, after the diagnosis, she'll tell her husband about the vision, how she'd seen all this before, the pale greenish halos of hospital lights, herself in an open gown, her skin translucent, bones pressing through it and visible. They'll be alone in the doctor's office just like they are now in the lawyer's. He'll tell her to hush, that they don't know anything yet, that she'll be okay. Watch out, she'll tell him, for all the tombs that look like tunnels. He'll squint at her like she's so far away.

But that will not be for some time.

Now, outside the law office, she shivers in the cold. Her stomach rumbles as the little nut of life within asserts itself like the dislodging of rocks in a great wind. She puts her hands on her belly once again. In this moment, while she looks at her husband holding their son in his arms on the gray street, she doesn't know if she's been cursed or given a gift. But she remembers every breath of her end. How the seconds passed like gravy, how she called both children to her bedside to touch her fingers to their faces. She's discovered so much today.

### **Angel**

It's mid December, his daughter's fifth birthday party. Delia, the children's Cajun live-in nanny, has organized the celebration at Jojo's house on Lake Pontchartrain because the girl asked for a party on the water. Angel knows that Delia

picked today because he's in town. She'd made him swear to her that he would be, and he'd sworn.

Angel is grateful for Delia – she's the one raising his children, he knows – but every time he sees her, he's reminded of Theresa's absence. From her hospital bed, Theresa had found the agency that recommended Delia, interviewed her, hired her, told her about Eduard and Clarita, trusted her with them. Whenever he comes home from work, Angel watches Delia with the kids and sees how she knows them better than he does, and he's reminded again of all that's missing with Theresa gone.

For the two weeks of the month he works, Angel lives and operates drill machinery on the Shell Company's Lotus Oil Platform in the Gulf of Mexico. The other two weeks of the month he splits between home and Houston. He tells Delia and the kids that he has meetings in Houston, but really he goes there to be alone and to keep straight. He's found that since Theresa's death he doesn't like being in the house, so when he's in New Orleans he goes out and drinks hard. He sees his old friends, goes to the poolyards and the bars, serves as muscle in fights those friends pick with other drunks, and then he drinks more. A few months ago he fell so deep in the hole that there'd been an incident while he was drinking on the water, and he'd been warned by the company. Since then, he takes the train west with the guys from Texas more often and comes home less. He can hold himself together when he's not home. He's told the other guys, only so they don't ask, that he has a sister in Houston he sees. In truth, he stays in motels and watches television. He orders food to his room and sometimes asks around about finding warm legs to sleep between for the night. He lets himself float away from everything. Sometimes he thinks about

Theresa. Sometimes, rarely, he thinks about the kids.

This time, for Clarita's birthday, he knew he had to be home, though he hadn't been told the party would be at Jojo's until that morning. Six years ago, before his wife revealed she was pregnant with Clarita, she'd been planning to leave Angel for Jojo. She'd told Angel this in the weeks before she died. She hadn't meant to tell him, but it slipped out in a feverish rant – "I never loved Jojo," she said in the pitch of a nightmare, "I never did" – and while she didn't remember saying it later, she'd confirmed that it was true. Angel had been aware there was another man during their separation, but he'd never imagined it was Jojo. Jojo, who'd been Angel's friend for longer than Theresa had known either of them; who'd helped him get this job that pays for his house, the kids' school, Delia; who now works for the management company that coordinates Angel's shifts on the drill, effectively making him one of Angel's bosses.

He'd been ready to kill Jojo when Theresea revealed the truth, ready to quit the job and re-enter the pit of despair in which he'd been living before she'd come back to him, but she made him promise not to. "You need to keep together," she said, "I love you and you are the father of our children." She spoke lucidly then from the hospital bed, a sharp practical edge to her voice. "Those children love Jojo and he loves them," she said, "I'm going to be gone Angel, but I can see how it goes, you know that. They'll need him. You can't take him away from them." When he calmed down, he knew she was right, and he promised his dying wife not to break the bond between the kids and Jojo.

In the kitchen of Jojo's house now with a cold beer in hand as the sun sets, he looks out the window. He's been here for most of the party, watching through glass all the kids enjoying the balloon animals and cake and games. A little while ago he'd watched Delia spin his blindfolded daughter around before she took a swing at a turtle-shaped pinata. Now, as it gets darker and he's a few beers deeper, he's lost track of the moving figures outside.

He hears a knock on the window. It's Jojo.

Angel had never discussed the affair with Jojo, and he has no plans to.

"Angel," Jojo says, "people are starting to leave and the girl is screaming."

So pick her the hell up, Angel thinks but holds his tongue.

When he and Jojo were younger, they used to drink and go to the horse races together and talk about women and life. Now, on occasions like this one when Angel's forced to interact with his former friend, he talks about work.

An hour ago Angel told Jojo that he's thinking about quitting.

Jojo shook his head.

"No you're not," he said, "I won't let you. What are Eduard and Clarita gonna do if you don't work again?"

They were standing in the kitchen talking. Angel had spent most of the afternoon drinking alone in the kitchen, and this mention of his children from Jojo riled his blood. He finished the beer in his hand and quickly cracked another. He knew that if he wasn't holding something, moving his hands in some way and keeping them occupied, he might punch Jojo in the face right there and then, a temptaion he often had to tamp down around the man.

“I’ll be able to spend more time with them,” Angel said through gritted teeth, “I’ll be home.”

“You’ll be down and out man, we both know that.” Jojo grabbed onto Angel’s wrist, which Angel twisted free. “It’s a lull,” Jojo said, “everybody has ‘em, just push through, you’ll be fine.”

Now Angel can hear his daughter’s cries. He puts his beer down and walks to the kitchen door to go outside. Two small speakers from Target belt out children’s songs in Spanish, his daughter’s favorite music Delia says, though he suspects Delia’s put it on because he’s from Mexico and, truthfully, he’d rather listen to her zydeco. Once he’s out there he sees that the party has fallen into a stupor, all dancing and conversation ceased. Jojo had not been lying, the girl’s screams are loud. The other kids look on helplessly, a few with tears forming in their own eyes. Some of the adults have moved toward her, but she refuses to let anyone get too close. They’re settling for hushing noises, light pats on the back that only make her cry louder. She has her head buried in a red beanbag chair that’s sitting in the grass. She’s crying into the chair, banging her fists into its sides. Her whole body convulses.

Angel walks quickly to her, lifts her up and brings her inside to the kitchen. He briefly makes eye contact with Jojo as he goes by. Do you see my daughter in my arms, he wants to say.

Back in the kitchen, he picks up his drink with his free hand. He notices how heavy she’s getting now that she’s five as he shifts her weight into one arm.

“Baby,” he says, “What is it? Are you hurt?”

She looks like she’s trying to answer him but every time she opens her mouth

wails come out. Delia told him that she's been cracking open like this at the slightest provocation more and more frequently. "She misses you," Delia said.

"It's the dark," Clarita finally blurts out through her tears, "it gets on everything."

Angel tells his daughter to hush, to be calm, not to worry. He sits her on the marble countertop by the sink and pats her head and looks around for Delia, who he doesn't see.

For a moment, he wishes he could fly away from all this. Back to Houston, back to a motel room. Or even back to the platform, his simple floating solitude. He rubs the girl's back and smiles at her and touches his nose to hers, smelling the beer on his breath against her cheeks. She keeps crying.

He knows he's not father material and he never has been. Before he'd gotten the work and found out Theresa was pregnant, he'd been broke, a mean drunk, terrible to his wife, barely existent to his son. He only became a good husband later. He asks God's forgiveness for it, but he knows he found it easier to be a husband to Theresa once she got sick. He brought her food, fed her, bathed her, kept her warm. Even when he most doubted her love, he still sat by her bedside at all hours and listened to her recount dreams she'd had. Visions of forests burning under moonlight, ancient judges holding trials of her ancestors, prophecies of their children consumed by wild animals. He didn't like them much and he couldn't interpret them, but he kept listening and sitting by her side.

The chill in the air has made Clarita's nose runny and she leans her face into his ribs and slobbers into his shirt. "I don't like it," she says through her tears, and the



sound of her sniffing back snot in her little nose suddenly warms his heart in that way he knows to be familiar but can never remember how to make happen on his own. Now he senses Delia watching him from the other side of the kitchen. His back is to her, but he feels her eyes on him, scolding him for his absences, his failures. I'm the one who pays you, he thinks, and it ain't for your scolding. He drinks from his beer and doesn't turn around. He picks his daughter back up off the countertop and holds her to his chest as he walks past Delia to Jojo's guest room where they can hide as the guests leave, and he can let her sleep for a while before driving home.

She's quieted now into a steady and low whimper.

He feels a stab in his stomach. Theresa had told him that the children would save him, that they'd be there for him if he was there for them. He doesn't know if that's true or not. He's not even sure where Eduard is tonight. Just two days ago, he saw the boy, thirteen years old, skipping school with his friends to hang around the Quarter. Angel had been leaving the bar on Dauphine and Governor Nichols around lunchtime with two fellow engineers when, from a distance, he'd spotted Eduard with his friends eating hotdogs, catching a wall under a balcony, listening to the brass bands play. He'd let the boy be. In his staggering state what could he have said? Go back to school?

He sits on a rocking chair and holds his daughter's head against his chest. This little girl. Not really so little though. It's clear enough now that she has his blood, his face. She's big for her age, tall and broad and heavy. Built like a pop warner football player, he thinks. She has some friends, Delia told him, but she gets into terrible fights. She has a temper. Afraid of the dark. He can understand that. Three in the

morning, on a drill shift, machines blaring, bright lights in the hold but outside, away from the equipment, the black gulf under a clouded sky, no ground, the sounds of lapping water big and powerful and impossible to see. An abyss. In over five years on the drill, he's had his share of night shifts. He's seen how the night can stretch itself out, creep into every opening available to it. "It gets on everything," she'd said. Four months ago there'd been an explosion on the left drill line. No casualties but he'd been the guy on watch, the guy responsible, and he'd been whiskey blasted. He'd heard the ripping sound, seen the flames climbing towards the sky and while he jumped on the alarms as soon as he noticed, he'd been slow, wobbly. The safety crew managed to quell the fire quick with hoses before it got to the oil drums, but while the alarms rang, from his perch he watched the bodies of terrified men jumping from the platform. After an inquiry in which his drunkenness was not uncovered, the company decided to call the incident minor and they let him slide. They said they knew it had only been three months since Theresa's passing and that he'd come back to work quickly when they asked him. They told him they put a letter in his file, which no one would look at unless something like this happened again. They also said that they liked him, that they considered him valuable, and they wanted to see him working with them for years to come. He'd been so terrified of being fired, but after they said "years to come" all he could think about was quitting. It stayed on his mind for all these months. Now he guesses it was decent of them, saying that they liked him.

"Time for sleep," he mutters to the little girl in his arms, "No monsters in here."

She whispers to leave on the lights.

He does. He feels her holding him down on the chair, keeping him where he is, there with her. He rocks, notices her eyes fluttering under their lids. He quietly strokes her hair and cheeks. He closes his own eyes, calm now, thinking of the long drive down along the river past the rivulets and the bayou to the coast the next day. He thinks of the loud chopper ride out to the island, the machines waiting for him to be operated, and his little wall space below deck with photos of Theresa and Eduard and Clarita pinned up. He thinks of his bottom bunkbed in the sleep quarters, snug and quiet, like this but darker and a little less heavy.

### **Clarita**

Clarita remembers her mom saying that the day she learned she was pregnant with a daughter, the loa gave her a vision of the woman that daughter would become. Lying in the hospital bed, her voice weak, she put her hand on Clarita's little head and said, "My little fish, the loa showed me you will be a woman strong, beautiful, and free."

Ten years later, in early May, during the waning days of her first year of high-school, Clarita gets ready for the last week of class and glowers at her reflection in the mirror. She does not feel strong, beautiful, or free. She feels, in fact, almost exactly the opposite: weak, ugly, encaged. She doesn't like school, doesn't like home, doesn't like living in her own body. Last summer she had a growth spurt that saw her sprout four more inches, making her five feet six inches tall, and she'd gained all the

weight to match. The whole year she's been bullied. Collossal Clarita they call her. Fatty Frida, Plump Penelope, Rotund Rhonda, Big Blubbery Beignet-Blasting Bertha, which eventually got shortened to the nickname that's stuck: 5B. "5B!" they yell through cupped hands when they see her in the hallway, "Make way for 5B!" She has friends that stand up for her sometimes, but somehow that makes things worse. "She's not that big," they say, and the other girls cackle into their lockers.

"Dumb loa," she says to the mirror, "Don't know nothing." She feels herself already getting angry for the day. When he's home, her dad tells her that her anger is something she needs to learn to control.

She's alone in the house and she fixes cereal with milk for breakfast. Her dad won't be home for another ten days, and Delia told her last night that she'd be leaving early in the morning to go home to Lafayette for the day to visit with her niece and the new baby. "Uncle Jojo will stop by in the afternoon to check on you," she'd said, "So don't get lost walking home or nothing." She said she'd bring back a pot of her sister's gumbo for dinner.

It's a mile walk to Sacred Heart of Jesus on Canal Street, the all-girls Catholic school that Clarita has attended since the sixth grade. On the way, she likes to stop at the yard with the brick wall in the back and a pond and look at the fish and bullfrogs in the water. Since her dad lives on an oil tanker, and now her brother's moved down to the coast to work as a fisherman and trapper, she likes to imagine life underwater. She's been learning about the marine ecosystem in her science class about ecology, which is her favorite class in school, taught by her favorite teacher, Ms. Elena, who's young and has blue eyes and has told the students to call her just *Elena*, despite the

other teacher's frowning about it. When *Elena* is up in front of the large classroom with peeling alphabet wallpaper, talking about abiotic and biotic factors in the ecosystems of water, Clarita forgets about all her anger and trouble and swoons.

Sometimes she loses the whole hour of class imagining getting close to Elena, the two of them breathing on each other, pattering heartbeats, sideways kissing, body rubs, tongue baths, humba rumbas in the tumbas.

She stifles her giggles.

She knows what it means that it's a girl she thinks about like that. She hasn't told any of her friends, but she did tell Delia.

"I think I'm a lesbian," she said just about a month ago while they ate a spicy shrimp remoulade for dinner, "They'll kick me out of school for it you know. It's against God."

Delia gave her a harsh look. "You're not leaving that school baby, *tu entends?*" she'd said, "Don't matter if you're a lesbian or a Martian or a cocker spaniel, your daddy pays a lot of money for that school."

Clarita kept eating and after a minute, Delia's face softened. She said, "Listen to me girl, God don't care none about who you love, and I don't either."

That night Clarita lay awake saying the words *Elena* and *lesbian* in her mind over and over again. She imagined Elena's fluid movements across her classroom like a flamenco dancer with her skirt floating around her ankles. She imagined her soft, low voice, low enough that if she added some heat, it might cook their tongues together. It made her skin tingle. It made her body feel light.

When she gets to school Clarita keeps to herself. Science is the last block of the day, which means getting through English, Math, History, Lunch, and Catechism unscathed. In English they're reading Hamlet, and Clarita doesn't understand what's going on, but she likes the way it sounds when their old teacher Ms. Henrietta reads it aloud. She likes the parts when Ophelia pops up, and when Ms. Henrietta reads the lines "Like sweet bells jangled, out of tune and harsh" she thinks of her dad complaining about people listening to music too loud on the water, and when she reads "Oh, woe is me, t' have seen what I have seen, see what I see" she thinks of her mom and the loa.

By the time she gets to Catechism, she's looking ahead to science class. She's eager to watch Elena teach. She's already seen her in the hallway once today at the end of lunch wearing her usual black skirt, but with a rebellious streak of green down the side. Clarita heard some of the girls whispering about it as Elena walked past their lockers. For a moment she and Clarita made eye contact and Elena winked.

But in the next hour, the day plummets. In Catechism, Sister Mariana tells them to open their bibles to Mark chapter 5, the story of the demoniac. Taking turns reading verse by verse, the class hears the story of Jesus and the man possessed by demons. "I am legion for we are many," the demons say before Jesus saves the man by exorcising all that legion to a herd of swine who run over a cliff into the sea and drown. While Clarita thinks about all those bodies of swine at the bottom of the cliff, somebody asks, "How could one person have so many demons inside them?" and without missing a beat, a girl calls out, "Why don't you ask 5B? She could eat a hundred demons if they got beignet powder!" The whole class laughs. Clarita feels

the heat rushing to her skin faster than a jet stream. Sister Marianna says, “Hush now class!” and, “Apologize at once,” to the girl who yelled. But by then it doesn’t matter, the damage is done. Clarita puts her head down on her desk and fights off tears of rage.

She slinks from Catechism to science like a hot jellyfish.

“Clarita,” Elena’s voice floats into Clarita’s ears at the end of class. She’s spent the class in what she thinks of as her cocoon. It’s a way her dad told her to calm herself when she’s angry. A place she can go in her mind that’s quiet where she doesn’t have to listen or talk to anyone else, and she can wait for the anger to pass.

Now that Elena has said her name, she feels herself lurching out of the cocoon. She’s disoriented. Around her, the other students are all putting their papers and books into their backpacks and hustling out the door.

“Come and see me please Ms. Hernandez, before you go.”

Her heart beats like a madwoman’s as she walks to the front of the class.

“Yes?” she says.

They stand together by the chalkboard with the words “Eco-habitat” and “marine mammals” written on it in Elena’s big beautiful handwriting.

Elena’s tone is soft, sweet. “Is everything all right today?” she asks, her eyes darting around to make sure others aren’t listening, “Did something happen?”

Clarita looks at her helplessly. She wants to pour her heart out, but she can’t. Only now is she realizing how *small* her teacher is. She’s shorter than Clarita by at least a few inches, and her body is thin and graceful like a dancer’s. Being close to her now only reminds her of how gargantuan she is, and she feels so much farther

away.

“No, nothing,” she says, the words falling out of her mouth quickly, “I’m fine.” She feels so much embarrassment at herself that she can barely stand it. She feels like she’s staggering. All she wants is to leave, to get out and go home and be done with this day.

“Well, okay, good,” Elena says and smiles again. The last of the kids have left and now it’s just the two of them. Elena opens her mouth to speak again. “I was wondering if you’d like to come with me to the Aquarium tonight? You wrote that wonderful essay about how much you love it there. Maybe you can ask your parents about it when you get home. Invite them along if they’d like.”

What? Clarita can’t believe her ears. She blinks wildly. Is Elena really inviting her out?

“You live on North Lopez, right? We can meet on Canal at the streetcar at 5:30?”

“Uh-huh,” Clarita pushes the sounds across her swollen tongue, “Okay,” she says.

Elena smiles with all her shining teeth.

#

Clarita bounces from terror to excitement and back again the whole walk home. She’s reeling. It’s the afternoon and the air hangs hot and still, the sun still shining through a thicket of clouds cooking up the tops of the streets into little tar mounds.

What will happen? What can she do?



When she walks into the house, she doesn't see Delia or Uncle Jojo around, but she finds a note on the counter next to a big paper bag.

It says:

My little bonita,

Tell Delia I dropped these off for you. Morning fresh.

Jojo

As soon as she sees the contents of the bag, she has a brimming, brilliant, wonderful idea.

#

Clarita knows the following about the loa: they live in grassy crossroads and old shacks next to train stations on the coastline and in the countryside. Most of the time they work for Bondye, AKA God but kinder than the God the nuns talk about in Catechism or during Mass. Sometimes the loa don't want to work for Bondye and sometimes Bondye doesn't have any work for them to do. Since they have their own free minds, they can decide for themselves what they do. If you ask them right, they'll come to the city to help you. They love food and alcohol. In particular, they love rum and oysters.

Aware of how little time she has, she decides to take the streetcar up Canal Street to the cemetery. She sticks her arms and face out the open windows to bask in the hot breeze. In her backpack she has a small wooden altar, a yellow votive candle, a lighter, incense sticks and holder that she took from Delia's room, a bowl of cornmeal she's just boiled, a handful of sparkling round stones she's collected from across the city, two white duck statues made of alabaster, and a book of spells she

found in an old bookshop two years ago. She also has a water bottle full of her dad's rum and eight of Uncle Jojo's oysters.

She goes directly to the eastern corner of the walled-in yard. She passes a few nuns eating sandwiches, a family of tourists taking pictures, a big teenage boy sitting quietly on a stone bench, the winged-angel arches belonging to the mausoleum of one Frederick Sage Boothington, and arrives at the familiar spot where her mother is buried. How she loves the beauty of these cities of the dead, even when the heat pounds sweat from her skin. The big stone casements, the ornately carved angels and gargoyles guarding them. Guarding her too, she likes to think.

She sets up the altar directly in front of the stone with her mom's name. She places all of the rocks on it, the cornmeal and the alabaster ducks. The votive candle goes in the center. She shucks the oysters and places them in a circle surrounding the altar. She pours a little rum into each half shell. She lights the candle. She opens the book.

"Oh holy loa," she reads, "just for today I will be kind, just for today I will be open, just for today I will be free. Just for today, just for today."

#

Everything that happens next happens fast.

Clarita sees it through a storm of dust that kicks up from the cemetery ground. The large boy she passed walking in is on his belly, a police officer holding his knee against the boy's back.

"Don't move a goddamn muscle, you hear me?" the officer yells. Everywhere there's dirt and dust swirling into mini-twisters in the air.

She sees the boy lift his face off the ground and the officer push it back down. Her heart gallops like a sailfish. She doesn't know what to do.

"What did I just tell you boy?" the officer says, "You're under arrest, just don't move anymore and it won't get worse." She hears the fizzling beeps of his radio. "I got him," the cop says, "St. Patrick Cemetery No. 1."

It's while he has the boy on the ground and is pulling his arms back to place him into handcuffs that the cop seems to notice the other people around. His head swivels as he scans the crowd. He notices Clarita and her altar and his head stops.

"Now what the hell are you doing lighting goddamn candles in here?"

She doesn't move. She'd been in the middle of the spell that calls for her heart and the heart of the person she loves to meet each other like swans in the stars.

"Leave him alone!" The sound of her own voice startles her, but it feels good to let it come through her mouth. Her yelling has also brought the boy back to life it seems.

"Yeah leave me alone!" he yells now, "I ain't done nothing! You're hurting me!" The boy starts kicking and struggling against the ground and the cop pushes his knee deeper into the boy's back. The boy howls in pain.

Clarita doesn't know, and won't ever know, what lights her fuse at this precise moment, when the boy howls, but she goes. Full speed, arms out, running at the cop as he's focused on holding down the boy. When she knocks him down, the boy starts trying to get on his feet.

"You fat bitch!" yells the officer, his face red and his sunglasses knocked off as he picks his shoulder off the ground. He lunges for her, knocking over the altar.

The candle goes out immediately, the stones scatter, the ducks break into pieces. As he trips up moving towards her, all eight half shells fill with black dirt. In the midst of all this, the handcuffed boy has started to run. Clarita turns and runs in the opposite direction.

#

Back in her room, finally breathing again without feeling sick, she goes into her cocoon. She lies on her bed and closes her eyes. Why is everybody so *stupid*, she thinks. Everybody picking on everybody because of their bodies, and it's all ridiculous. She imagines taking a big potato peeler and removing her own skin to swap it onto the body of someone else. The boy in the cemetery maybe. She could take his large hand and stick it onto her own thick neck. She could take the officer's torso and pop Elena's delicate arms onto it. It's all so stupid and random, she thinks.

She feels like she's getting angrier.

Her dad wouldn't be happy about that.

"The worst thing in the dark is your own mind," her dad says sometimes, "That's what makes it heavy." She resolves to become lighter. She tries to forget everything that happened, the whole day. She listens to the sounds that come unbidden to her ears. Creaks and distant clangs and drips from the walls. Traffic and people talking far away and shouts from the sidewalk. Anytime a thought or memory bubbles up in her mind she watches it rise and leave.

She realizes that the more she forgets what she remembers, the lighter she feels.

#

Clarita meets Elena on time. She's in a quiet daze, no longer petrified by the encounter, but, despite her best efforts, she's still seeing it in her mind, again and again: the cop, the boy, the dust, the feeling of her hands pressing into the starched sweaty uniform, sprinting for blocks without looking back. On the ride down Canal Street she doesn't tell her teacher about the cemetery or the loa or the officer or the push, but she does attempt to describe her thought about how people are just assigned bodies when they're born, how strange that is, how unfair of God, she says. By the time they arrive, the evening is running slightly cooler and the wind has picked up. Little bits of trash swirl around at ankle height, and the palm trees in the neutral ground look like they've regained some of their vigor.

Elena says God's ways are mysterious, and that Clarita has quite an imagination.

Clarita nods and says nothing. She feels empty now. Tired. She thinks of her mother in the hospital bed. Strong, beautiful, free, she'd said.

The sharpness of the muted colors in the dark aquarium makes Clarita's head hurt when they walk in. She lets Elena lead the way, but all her excitement about this moment has drained out of her. She stops at the tank with the cephalopods, lit overhead with a mild light but mostly dark. She appreciates the calming feeling of the semi-darkness in the water. She presses her hands up against the glass and feels it suddenly jitter as an octopus's arm-suckers leech into the space in front of her. The creature is bright red but the bottoms of the suckers on its dangly legs are brown from the soil on the tank floor. Clarita finds herself staring into one tiny suction cup pulling against the glass. She's trying to see deep into it, through the animal's brilliantly

colored arms up into its head where it thinks, where it knows things, where it decides on what to do. How do you know what to do? she wants to ask it.

Elena comes up behind her. “You know,” she says, “an octopus can make itself tiny. It can squeeze through the thinnest cracks without losing its big brain, it can turn itself sideways and inside out as the thinnest darkest living thing in the ocean.”

The thinnest darkest living thing in the ocean. Clarita repeats these words to herself in her mind. They make her feel better.

In the years to come, Clarita will think back often on the day Elena taught her about the octopus and its ability to squeeze and move through tight spaces without breaking apart. She’ll tell others about this special brilliance of the octopus. She’ll use it as a metaphor for her work trying to make political change in the world. She’ll preach the octopus way to her fellow social justice warriors during protests and direct actions for all the causes she’ll dedicate herself to. She’ll use it as a rallying cry. “Be like the octopus!” she’ll yell to big groups, and those in the know will smile in understanding and spread the message to those who don’t yet know.

But in that moment, in the aquarium, what Clarita thinks of are the many millions of species of fish of all different colors in the world of water. She thinks of their strange eyes and pea pod brains. She has this shimmering idea like a bulbous cloud pulsing with light on the horizon — every living person and animal at once as thin and as big as an octopus, every living body light and floating. She plays the same game she did earlier lying in bed, imagining taking pieces of one animal and sticking it onto another. They’re all up there, in the air, their parts free and ready to be moved

around, or, really, to move themselves however they so choose.

### **Eduard**

The truth was that his dad would bring home oysters sometimes that the fishermen in Venice caught. That's when it started, his infatuation with life on the water. The fisherman gifted the oysters in burlap sacks to the oil men when they returned from their shifts on the platform. Everyone said that the fishermen hated the oil men, but his dad said that wasn't true. They didn't always see eye to eye, he said, but they all understood what it was like to live at the mercy of the water. "*Anba dlo wa a*," he said, "the water is king. She used to say that, your mom. And it's true."

Eduard remembered.

He and Clarita would watch Delia shucking for hours. Once she had the oysters in her hard little palms, she could shuck twenty in three minutes. Eduard would time her.

Sometimes Delia picked one up, held the muddy shell in her hands and then threw it away.

"Why do you do that?" he asked.

"Gone rotten," she said as she shucked another.

"How do you know?"

Delia said that you could tell a whole lot by knowing how to feel and trust. She said that's what made a person smart, understanding the weights of things.

"What do you mean?" said Eduard

Delia handed him one of the oysters.

“You feel it baby? *Ce bon*. You let it rest in your hand a minute, and you make your hand light as you can make it, you see? And you let it move your palm up and down and you ask yourself, is it heavier than a stone? Is it lighter than two quarters?” She took the oyster Eduard held, stuck the shucker in flat and twisted until the shell popped, done so steady and swift he could barely see it but he heard it. Delia held the shell close so he could see the white gooey meat in the tiny pool of water in the bottom halfshell. “You see that size now? That’s a good big one, got some *langiappe* to it, and I knew it before I opened it.” She placed the fork back on the table and slurped the oyster right from the shell.

He tells all of this to his girlfriend Vicky on a foggy day in October when he’s thirty-one years old. They’re out on the water in his skiff and the visibility is obscured so that the other boats they spot look like smoky orbs. She’s asked him again, for the millionth time, why he fishes, if he really has to do it, if he can’t find something else, something with more stability, more security, more money, which they’ll need now. She takes his hand and puts it on her belly.

But it’s the truth, he wants to tell her again. He doesn’t say it though. He just looks at her and then looks out at the water, whose color beneath the fog he’s always thought of as a young blue, a new blue, the blue of beginnings.

“How can fishing carry three of us?” she asks.

He doesn’t have an answer to that. He’s not sure that he should have an answer to that. Why should he have to carry the three of them? His parents weren’t around much for him, and he’s done just fine, made a way for himself with this



fishing. He's damn good at it too. What does he have but this tiny thing he can call his own and no one else's?

He remembers a time when he lived just with his mom alone, he must have been seven or eight years old then, he thinks, only a few years before she died. He doesn't remember where his dad was, but it was when he and his mom lived on the lakefront, right on the water. His mom used to talk all the time about visions she'd have. Sometimes in her dreams, sometimes right in the middle of the day. She'd been born in Haiti, and she had the real Vodou in her, she used to say. She told him that she'd seen his future and that he'd get taller. Then she told him that, when it all got to be too heavy, he just had to remember that everything that happens today is a fantasy the moment after it happens, that what we do has already been and always will be stuck in the moment we've done it, and so the most important thing is always the next word. The truth, she told him, is a big beautiful fog, there and mysterious and always leaving you. So you have to keep chasing after it.

"What a wonder it is here," he says to Vicky. The fog on the water is beginning to clear, and he peers out to where the Gulf opens into the vast ocean. He looks at her and thinks about what's swimming inside her. Not heavier than a stone, he thinks, not lighter than two quarters.

**Vita**

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