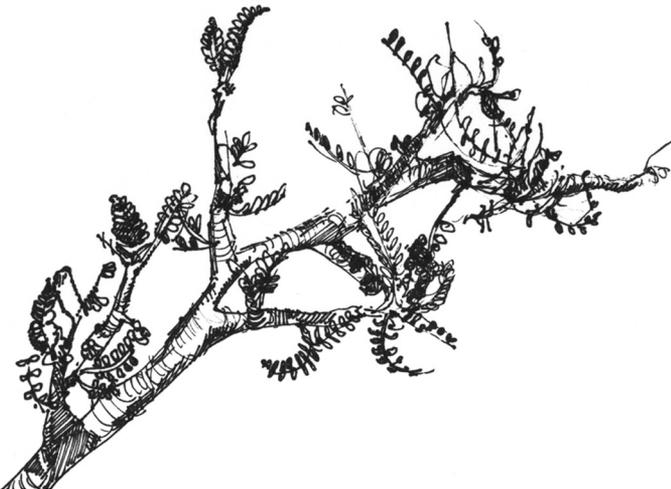

elephant tree

Chapman University



Volume 4
Spring 2009

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We would like to thank the Department of English, as well as the Office of Publications and Creative Services for their help in creating this project.

Elephant Tree appears annually, and is open to submissions from any Chapman student. All rights revert to author upon publication.

Cover drawing by Lara Odell

Dear reader, you are entering into the fourth edition of *elephant tree*. By turning these pages there is no turning back from the language unless of course you so choose, but choose not.

Yet.

All the language in the pages to follow is in fact realized teleportation for the imagination, and as the editors of the magazine we can vouch for this. Thanks to all Chapman University students who submitted work, without whom this could not be made real. The submissions were read blindly and chosen gently on the basis of perceptual teleportation in the form of electromagnetic stimuli in the brain, experienced imaginatively, thanks to the language.

Thanks additionally to Logan Esdale, the *elephant tree* faculty advisor, and Veston Rowe at the Chapman publications office, for bringing this collection to the eyes of the reader; your eyes, and all that goes on behind them, that which defies the exactness of _____.

Exactly why or how since 2009 your eyes have come to meet these words of fiction and poetry—poetic fictions in verse, fictitious poems in prose, and/or vice versa—the ways in which the words activate your imagination is bound to remain key, so leave all that has brought you here aside. In these pages there exists no time between your eyes and the words on the pages. There exists the intrinsic locomotion of the present piece at hand, outside of time, and the time it takes for you to finish the piece; for your hand to catch up. And in that time, we ask for your imagination to fill in the space, and see what happens.

Now.

So read on. The page turns from right to left, but the choice as always remains yours. . . .

One day if the reader of the third millennium
will read me, he will know that there were trees
and desires, palms and pines, and eucalyptus
with leaves shaped like crescent moons,

and roses: there were those who no longer
wanted to suffer, those who wanted to love everything,
and those who made a gift of themselves and of poems
that were violent and distant, simple and weak

– Giuseppe Conte, from *The Ocean and the Boy*

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JONELLE BOWDEN

Moonlit

The moon once knocked on my window
And whispered a song that beckoned
Of the West.

I bolted up in my pajamas
And I left!

I found the West to be a wild, greasy place
One with barking horses and barking men
And, yes, the rare possum woman
Only without any little ones tugging at her starched gingham dress
Endless sand and stars instead,
And chilly nights,
Though none to sift and stare and catch
The cold with me.

I waited in the night
And the moon showed herself again
This time low and brimming with sauce
As though the spicy fennel of the East
Had given her a bath.

Just then I saw a wave on the shore
Where the moon touched the surf
And I thought this time
As I let it slip under me
“Off to there!”
Was a thought
That I stirred with the spicy anise
Globe as I chased it to here:

Hear the voices in a thousand
Different throats
Only haunted by the thousand
Different accents to the licorice,
Now rttn (missing letters)
Because we've followed it for
So
Vast
A

Stretch.

Plugged our noses
Hid our faces
Wiped our hands

And I don't know how to tell you
What happened next,
How it all came about,
Only that,
It's just that,
That,

She is back to glowing gently
From her wide yellow porch
And I am here
Looking up
Never left.

Nerd's Love Note

Your stomach sounds are laser beams, the gurgles like an arcade game and I could listen to this music from the depths of outer space for days until you pushed me off and then I'd float, a Sputnik drifting out and out, but still you're there. Your gravity would pull me back into your orbit circling slowly, drawing closer till the warmth of atmospheric heat and friction makes me burst into a flaming ball of ashes gently falling on your heart and cheeks. And then you'd have me, I'd have you and we would both lay out and watch the constellations dance and twinkle with their incandescent charms alight, a swirling astrophysical tarantella made for you and me by some outrageous consciousness who wanted us to be together here and now beneath a blanket with the rhythm of our heartbeats synchronizing. What a lovely sound. The thought of leaving you is one that leaves me sad, no, desolate. A sub-Saharan dryness grips me by the xylem of my heart and wrings the water of my life whenever we might be apart. And so I desperately await a call, a letter or at least a note upon my door of how you are and what your life is like each day that you are here within my life because you decorate it, make it better than the rusty clockwork thing it was before you met me, dear.

Salta, Salta

Both knew and played along
that I from the start
do not know the difference between

unrequited

and unrequitable

so when that word was said it was heavy
leaving her lips between coffee sips
all I could do was fold the napkin into triangles

so when that word was said it was jarring
a reminder of two leaves on one stem
I wished my blood were not red but blue

I would have bought the thorns regardless
along with the endless bandolier of bullets for my feet
for the satiation of masochism
the joy of continuing the lie
the propagation of pretend

Salta saw it in the spaces between my rhymes

Salta saw it in how I painted my faces

I heard the echoes of my verses
from the other side of the canyon where she stood
I set out across the desert to find Salta
and found only sand

she let me sit in that sacred place
let me take her hair into my hands
my arms owning the shoulders of Salta
sailing on a counterfeit river

Salta, Salta
what is it she asked
just some shapes that resemble parts of things
like thumbs like vases like orange water
like a pair of uvulae filtering words
it can be whatever it is you want it to be I said
but never what it really is.

Mudslide

Mangos, grapes, cantalope
Dirt, dirty, dirtier
Messy spaghetti, fervid
Brownies luster
Brown knees crocodile
Opposite attraction amplifier
Rocks, pebbles, slope
Lips tongue language
Lollipop confection fluff
Water, waterfall, awake
Inquisitive untangled prideful
Strawberry shortcake
Makers Mark
Books coconut brains
Viewers view views
From bridges, near snowcones
Stamps
Sticks
Brick walls blonde
Cement cornucopia
Crayon color unknown
Radish asparagus with caution
Weak, week, weekly subscript
Lightly she apples nothing
Eagerly, strangely
yogurt love, unreason
Dirt, dirty, dirtier.

Manhattan

I

Ticker tape lines shine by,
winding high above static
signs and signals.
In this lighted night

hurried feet beat down
upon split sidewalks
timed by syncopated car horns,
camera clicks, and cell phone chatter

while a preacher preaches Jesus
to the peep show patrons,
showgirls, and panhandlers
through a mix of vapor and steam.

II

The push and pull of the N-R line,
the squeal of a hot dog cart,
imagining, as John Lennon once wrote,
all the people.

On Strawberry Fields
beneath Hawthorn trees —
picnic blankets and baskets,
a father and son having a catch.

I feel like an urban Tom Bombadil
pinwheeling across the Great Lawn,
loose change in my pocket
to share with whom I please.

III

Steel rakes scrape over
dampened sand piles
while thirsty dogs dip and dive
for spongy tennis balls

to the sound of an old man
whistling "Kilgary Mountain."
Not knowing how nor when
in graveled beds of weeds

the tiniest seedlings grow
with purple buds and yellow
petals stretching like good morning
yawns in a tired city.

IV

In the alley below,
a man lies in piss
beneath The Sunday Times
unconsciously shaking

to the rhythm of his own drunken
mumbling. Lasagna-like vomit crusted
into his beard, his hair wet with the dirty
gutter water it soaks in.

A large rat with no tail
gnaws at his dry, yellow feet,
the corners of his cracked mouth slightly raised—
He is having a dream.

V

The sad sass of a saxophone steals
my ears and buries me beneath
its pentatonic blues like the soft sway
of the Hudson River water on the pier

by Bleeker Street. For the first time
all week I notice the sky, empty and vast,
stretching past the New Jersey shore like
a line of dreams, happy and blessed.

The wind rolls over a tugboat, spins
and bends in my direction, then passes;
it reminds me of some song I sang as a child,
so I hum and sing what little I remember.

Anniversary Gift

Whittle me a singing bird, a sparrow made of cedar.
And paint the wings with ashes. Dab some mud and splash a dash
of smog-coughs in the feathers.
Then I'll have a city bird, a lovely singing city bird
to burst a hum of flapping flying out to fight another.
Pecking, puffing, squeaking over bits of bread and pine cones.
A pine cone?
Where'd you get a pine cone?
There are no pines around for miles!
Did you get it just for me? Well, forget about the singing bird.
Instead: an armadillo.
A clunky armored Brillo pad to wander on the road.
When I was in New Mexico to visit Grandma Mae,
I'd see them shuffling up the yard, about their silent business.
They were just apostrophes on dual bars of orange and blue
across the mountains' majesty, the plain among the fruit.
Yes darling, the pine cone would be lovely for a gift.
You can make it come to life and nibble silence off the floor.

JENIFER MORRISSEY

Fabric

Hours was a word we didn't believe in
time ticked
but clocks were only machines—
Covered in sunscreen we marched outside
filmy, white
everything clung to us.
So we ran back and forth
tugged at our colored suits—
jumped in to feel free—
Mom made you wear the yellow pattern—
to keep safe—she said
and I thought you resembled a bee.
When we held our breath at the bottom
you bumbled, little lungs puffing out
ribs arching to fight the pressure—
you swayed
up and down
and I giggled, lost, floated upwards in the haze
while you gloated down there
forever—
Now you and I sit by the water
our sunglasses positioned just so
light filtered,
age spots disappear—
all the marks and memories
lovely, irregular
and full of pigment.
Under canopies and umbrellas
static, we converse—
everyone is outside,
oxygenated,
faces all the same.

welcome aboard

i don't want a candy-cane dame
i don't want to have the wife-life
i'd rather sink to the bottom of
a pool and sip shirley temples in
the middle of the night while my
bitter childhood files are refracted
off the surface of the water.

i haven't read all of the greats yet
and i know that i never will—but
i contemplate the infinite inside
this dulled thick skull—grand sym-
phonies are playing inside of my
head and i can't seem to turn it
off (not even in sleep).

my lungs collect tar while nietzsche
speaks to me in tongues—i see the
world in lower case letters—and
most of the time i would rather
read than engage in the usual
insipid conversation that springs
from the wells of nothingness—
bone shattering oblivion—(yes,
you can call this a sickness).

it doesn't stop and i'm stuck with
the tick-tock cat clock sending
me into mental digressions where
my bitterness explodes into sordid
mushroom clouded shrouded self
expression—depression indeed but
every night i die in the flickering

light where the fireflies fight while
i'm consumed by the night.
skeletal impressions of a man inside
a boy whose wings are clipped beside
the nest where he sucks on the breasts
of an oedipal complex – and it gets pretty
dirty and depraved in the days of sandbox
innocence that represented life before the
guillotine swinging unashamedly towards
the neck of a blindsided onlooker playing
pick up sticks with a repressed gutter reflection
shattered individually into tiny fragments.

i extend my right hand to the moon and wonder
if i've been smothered by my mother so my lovers
lay lost in sleepy wonder, itching for the sketchbook
of a more developed older brother – there's no reason
to the science of the self – and you'll never know true
pain if you leave me on the shelf – staring blankly
towards the wall where i've inscribed my life story
in blood for the world to see – intrinsically searching
for the truth in this kodak moment photo booth –
where my stares overpower the glares of the glass lens
that takes a convex mirror and accentuates the bends
in space where my childhood's erased and all that's
left is a man who is out of place – defaced in this
cigarette laced ocean of empty space – i slip on
both shoes and bowtie the leather lace.

so to the lovers of the world who haven't
experienced the night – just wait and see
what happens when the dark consumes the
light – do not fear – for there are many down
here too – and we welcome newcomers with
open arms – no need to be alarmed – we're on
this ship together – just hold onto the rope,
and we'll apply the tethers.

Telling Foreplay

This tea needs the honey that sticks to your fingers. Your gangly legs have accidentally brushed mine as we sit on the porch drinking hot Lipton. An autumn leaf has fallen between our feet. A dog is howling in the neighbor's backyard. In your eyes, I can see the gentleness and aggressiveness of a wolf. The aperture of your eye takes photographs of me for later days. Your hands indicate the time on my biological clock. In winter, I wear sweaters and jeans that are too large for my body, but just big enough to hide my secrets. The power of my denim thighs speak in your direction. I still wear the hidden ruby ring you left for me as a gift on my collar bone. We sit and talk quietly. Our whispers kiss. You mention going fishing next summer. You begin telling me a story with a twisted plot line. The rising action hooks me in. I have crossed that bridge into your net. The conflicts contract back and forth until we reach the climax. The release of tension leads us to the inescapable falling resolution. Afterwards, we light up cigarettes. We breathe out circular formations of smoke. We call the motion of inhaling and exhaling a metaphor for the very act. When you leave, you loan me sections of a book you're attempting to write. I stare at your cursive hand writing and look at the letter: O. I remember the shape, the sounds, the smirk of your tiny lips, and the very traces I made across your oval opening mouth.

Under Living Room Forts

We want what we know, like kids who throw fits when there's no mac & cheese on the menu. We want rubber knives that bend into our soft bellies. We want ketchup blood. We want to hear yes, yes, and yes. We want to wear our blankets outside. We want that Christmas when we were seven and weren't too big for stockings and sitting on laps. We want the first night star and the streetlights that sent us home with gnats up our noses. We want the orange blossom air and Grandpa's whiskey sweat. We want the trampoline in our best friend's back yard. We want to jump for hours and land on our backsides. We want the summer air that sits heavy in our lungs and licks our faces until it drips down our temples. We want the familiar to lie over our bodies like the slippery sleeping bags. We want to hide under living room forts. We want to wash behind our ears with all the days we lived. We want to take them out—wadded-up, crusty days and hold them up to the light like paper cut snowflakes and hang them in the kitchen window.

Re-incarnation as Paper

I decided to re-incarnate my grandmother as a blue sheet of paper.

I folded it into fourths and stuffed it into my red notebook.

#

Towards the end, she would stare blankly at the wall and mumble phrases about her lost life in France. The picture fell out of her Bible and onto the scratched wood floor. She had studied fashion and made a calico skirt to wear to a bull-fight in Spain. Her hand was on a white fence and her smile stretched across her face which was always like a sharp glass of cloudy water. And all was captured in a wrinkled five-by-seven. But near the end, her wrinkles around her lips held every memory and squeezed the nights in Prague into the incense of St. Peter's and let all go in a sigh that reverberated against my fingertips as I read to her a passage from the book of Job.

“Remember that my life is like the wind.” (Job 6:7)

The page wrinkled beneath my sweaty fingers. It was summer. Or it was summer on that day, and the heat leaked out from my fingertips onto every page. At those times I would imagine her in her chair, headless, disembodied, and occupying only the aged space that found repose upon her lap, upon her folded hands. Her hands had once sewn a quilt that hid her only daughter until the child tore up the squares to make a skirt that matched the patches in her blue jacket. The long-legged girl was seventeen only twenty years ago and running in her sleep. As she neared the end, my grandmother's hands met, mingled, and mischievously pulled thread after thread from the pink afghan that had filled the empty nest. I decided that quilts were meant to deteriorate in attic chests and to be immortalized in moth bellies.

Before I knew it I had finished the page and would move on to Proverbs. There we learned how many ways there are to say, “I do,” or “I

shall," or a host of other promises. All of which find meaning in an interminable period bound to a chair, padded by a pink donut pillow and an afghan.

"For at the window of my house through my lattice I looked out..."
(Proverbs 7:6)

Her eyes drooped as the sun streaked her face through the dusty blinds that formed criss-crosses over her chest, clothed in pale blue and lace that waved beneath the cool air streaming from the vent overhead. Her silhouette took various shapes in the shadow of the fading day and burst into a thousand running birds at sunset. I wanted to sketch her but with every mark I merely came one step closer to an accurate depiction of a nose, to ears drawn downward by those gold earrings from the seventies.

#

After the funeral I placed a sheet of blue paper in my red notebook and stuffed the notebook into my brown jacket. There I felt her presence against the single rib next to my heart...the one Eve stole from Adam that one day in the garden. My grandmother always liked that idea because she never felt that she could take enough from my grandpa. "Life is a game of poker and the goal is to run off in a shiny pink sweat suit with all the chips," she would say as she gummed her macaroni. I like to think of it as more, however, so I re-incarnated her into a blank piece of blue paper.

Feeling heavy with the weight of her scent, I took her to the ocean. I sat on the shore and looked up at the moon. With my long finger I traced her left eye on the page and whispered her life's story to the darkened sheet. "Today," I crooned, staring out into the melting wave, "You came home to an empty red house. There was no one to meet you because you had stuffed them all into the drawer beneath your bed. You turned on the faucet and let the tub fill, immersing your naked torso in soap suds that swirled around your flesh as they only can on a Tuesday with all your chips in a drawer. You looked out the small window and howled at the moon that, for once, found the strength to howl right back, crumbling behind the clouds that gathered and bore it away and out of reach."

The wind blew my grandmother down the beach.

I followed for a time but collapsed beneath the old pier, crying like a diamond in a furnace.

A Romance in Five Acts

Act I: Exposition

Hello, my name is Dick and I am a sadistic, chauvinist who derives immense pleasure from cultivating an erroneous sense of emotional attachment in women in order to sleep with them.

Hello, my name is Jane and I am a masochistic, emotionally crippled woman who creates fictitiously meaningful relationships with casual acquaintances and utilizes sex as a means of acquiring a sense of self-worth.

Wonderful.

Wonderful.

Act II: Rising Action

I find that our relationship has progressed significantly enough in the course of two weeks to a point where I feel comfortable enough to simulate sentiments to a substantially deeper degree than I am capable of in my emotionally stunted state.

I am willing to overlook the obvious fabrication of your emotional attachment in order to justify sleeping with you during what could still be considered the embryo stages of our relationship so as not to feel I have compromised the integrity that I only imagine I have.

Wonderful.

Wonderful.

Act III: Climax

Wonderful.

Wonderful.

Act IV: Falling Action

Now that I have slept with you, I no longer find the need to manufacture feelings and will become increasingly fat, increasingly boring, and increasingly bored which will eventually culminate in me sleeping with another woman far beneath your intelligence and beauty, making my violation all the more debasing.

I will imagine severing your loosely defined manhood and feeding it to your dog but will instead blubber all over you, asking what actions I could or could not have taken that would have impeded this indiscretion and, finding myself believing that the blame and unworthiness should be deposited on me, will ultimately commit suicide.

Act V: Dénouement

Wonderful.

A Gentle Shade of Red

Elsa wakes to the sound of the gardener raking leaves just beyond her apartment balcony. The rake's teeth catch and jangle against the roots of an orange tree. The noise is sporadic and interspersed with the sound of rustling leaves. The tree's branches are so large they rest and scratch against the white plaster of her balcony wall. Elsa lifts her head and looks through the sliding glass door that leads to the balcony. The branches are being shaken with great force. A shower of leaves rains down along with a few stray oranges. Down below, she hears a distant and dull thud, followed by two more in quick succession. This is followed by a muffled cry of joy. The gardener, it seems, is harvesting a morning snack. As the gardener's tugs become distinguishable Elsa imagines him on the ground, choosing which branch to tug at; every movement deliberate and with purpose. Another orange falls on Elsa's balcony. She hopes it did not crack.

#

Even with the sliding glass door closed, the pungent smell of orange lingers in Elsa's bedroom. The scent is almost overwhelmed by the smell of spilt nail polish remover; the result of a particularly boring date from the night before. It started off badly when Elsa opted to wear pants to the date instead of shaving her legs and putting on a skirt. The date took a more decisive turn for the worst when she called the man a limp fish to his face. After the date, when removing her "Velvet Lust" colored nail polish, Elsa knocked the open bottle of nail polish remover onto her hardwood floor, and haphazardly mopped it up with tissues plucked from under her pillow. The nail polish remover dried, but left a powerful and lingering smell.

Waking up, Elsa inhales deeply, chokes on the scent of alcohol and orange blossoms, and begins her morning in-bed stretches; toes nestling into a small cache of socks at the foot of her bed. Socks are only taken off while in bed to avoid walking across the hardwood floor barefoot. Once

in bed, Elsa takes off her socks along with the socks of any man who may share a bed with her. This maneuver was often employed with her ex-boyfriend, Saul, to let him know she wanted more than their feet to mingle.

Elsa cracks all the fingers in both her hands and rubs her eyes, careful not to grind sleep crusties into her skin. The faint sound of raking outside the window makes Elsa think that perhaps the gardener is across the courtyard raking the neighbor's garden. She has never actually seen the gardener, except for the top of his head once while she sipped coffee on her balcony. His hair is thinning in the back. He isn't bald, but there is a distinctive area of light growth, like a clearing in a forest. As Elsa tries to picture him in her mind, she thinks his thinning hair a befitting feature and one of endearment. The man materializes in her mind, not so much in his physicality, but in demeanor; a soft spoken man who, if he wore a hat, perhaps a straw one, would tip it as women walk by. His gesture would be genuine and perhaps to prove, to those of who may have seen his bald spot and have misgivings about him, that he is a man of grace and respect. The gardener's hands would be large; the type that grabs bundles of cut roses without the protection of gloves. He also takes half his lunch from the yards he tends; a free orange to go with his self-made PBJ. The gardener would keep floss in his truck because he hates the feeling of pulp between his teeth. He also likes giving novelty tulip bulbs as presents around the holidays. The bulbs, in reality, are chocolate. He enjoys telling his friends to plant the bulbs and, on occasion, watching them do so. The gardener, in Elsa's mind, is someone she would consider shaving the entire length of her legs and even wear a skirt for. He, in return, would be a man that compliments her when her face looks dewy.

#

Dewy was a look Elsa cultivated in order to impress Saul. It was also a look he never noticed, despite her constant hinting. It became a cat and mouse game they fell into almost every night when Elsa cleaned her face with a gentle face wash, then a scrub, and finished with a light, non-oil based moisturizer. She enjoyed the feeling of her skin being taut and reviewed her face closely in the mirror while brushing her hair, stopping every so often to push loose strands back behind her ears. She traced her hair down along the back of her ear until it tapered to a single strand at

her earlobe. The skin of her earlobe was soft and plush, covered with fine, invisible hairs. Elsa continued caressing herself down along the sides of her cheeks until the oil of her fingers began to smear against her skin.

After her shower Elsa walked into the bedroom and climbed into bed. Saul would already be there, incessantly flipping his pillow over. He couldn't sleep unless his head rested on the cool side. She curled up next to him, mingled her feet with his, and laid her head on her pillow, careful not to crush her cheek or tangle her hair. He patted her hip in acknowledgment of her presence. "Well..." she said, turning toward Saul.

"Well..." he replied, "This pillow is way too hot. I can't sleep on this. Can I trade with you?"

And with that Saul pulled her pillow out from under her head and gave her his warm pillow as a substitute. Elsa's hair, jostled by the pillow grab, fell over her face. She laid in bed for several minutes, quiet and still, without even cracking her toes. Saul tugged at the blankets, restless.

"Well..." Elsa said one last time.

Saul turned toward her and grabbed her breasts.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

You said, 'Well...' I thought you were trying to tell me something."

"I was...but I didn't mean that."

"Oh, what did you mean?"

"I meant my face. What do you think about my face?"

"I think it's cute." He kissed her on the forehead as he said this.

Elsa dabbed at her forehead with the sheets, careful to not smear any saliva across her skin. Saul turned away from her and nestled his head deep into the pillow.

"I just wanted you to tell me my face looked dewy, all right?"

Saul remained facing away from her.

"Dewy? Are people's faces supposed to look dewy? What does that mean?"

"I don't know. I read a magazine that said women's faces should have a dewy glow after they take a shower."

"Oh...Your face looks dewy, then."

"You're not even looking at me. At least look at me when you say it."

Saul turned over to look at Elsa.

"Yeah, your face is definitely dewy."

"Do you mean it?"

"How could I lie to such a dewy face?"

“You don’t have to be an asshole about it.”

Elsa pulled her feet away from Saul’s, nestled them into the warmth of her bunched up socks, and tickled her face with the corner of the sheet before falling asleep.

#

Elsa reasons that a man who makes his living planting flowers has to appreciate a woman with dewy skin. Who else but a gardener would notice such things? Elsa listens for the sound of his rake as she thinks about him, but nothing can be heard. Maybe he is just on break, she thinks as a wind blows outside and sends orange blossoms rushing against the glass doors like the tide.

She shoves the covers off herself, leaving her body, clad in owl patterned pajamas, fully exposed to the late morning air. In the morning light, the bottle of “Velvet Lust” nail polish appears to be a more jubilant hue than the night before. Elsa sits up and swivels her body so that her feet rest on the edge of the bed frame. Her toes, soft and fleshy, silently challenge her to once again wear “Velvet Lust.”

The bottle of nail polish is covered in raspberry shellac, hard and slick to Elsa’s grip as she picks it up and shakes it. The twist off cap does not budge, even when firmly gripped in Elsa’s right hand. She attempts twisting the cap a second time, this time in the opposite direction; still no progress. The plastic cap cracks on the third attempt and lets out a squeal as it rubs against the glass bottle. Elsa rocks the cap back and forth, sending flakes of dried nail polish fluttering to the floor. The cracking noise is immediately followed by the sharp sound of hedge clippers coming from outside. It is the gardener. He has resumed his work. The noise is faint, but unmistakable. Elsa can hear, and delights in, the brisk snap of the shears as they cut through branches.

She twists open the loosened nail polish cap and begins to paint her spread toes with a smooth glide of the wrist, making sure the coat is even. Her cuticles make the task difficult. It is a hasty job that leaves a dollop of polish languishing in the center of her left foot’s big toe. It will have to stay. Another once over and she might put on too thick a coat.

She moves on to the rest of the toes on her left foot, careful to protect them from anything that might smudge the finish. Crouching over the edge of the bed, Elsa nearly kisses her knees as she applies nail polish.

Her back is sore and her right foot still needs polish, its nails cut crooked and angled in different directions. Her nail clippers and file are in the bathroom down the hall; too far away to be attainable. Elsa dislikes the sensation of dirt against her skin, especially her bare feet. As she paints the crooked nails of her right foot, Elsa wonders how the gardener can stand the feeling of dirt on his hands. The coat of polish is thinner and goes on more quickly than it did for the left. Fanning her toes in a sweeping motion, Elsa worries the thinner coat of polish will dry a lighter shade.

Still in pajamas and with toes spread wide, Elsa puts on a pair of sandals being careful not to smear the polish against the thongs. She opens the sliding glass door, walks out onto the balcony, and picks up an orange that fell. Its skin is not cracked, nor a pale yellow color. It is ripe and intact. The sound of the gardener's shears is strong and persistent. Elsa cannot find the gardener as she looks over her balcony and reasons that he must be doing work in the patio of the neighbor below.

Elsa is eager to share an orange with him and is curious as to how he will eat the fruit; how he will peel it. She imagines him to be a man who rips the peel off in one, continuous strand and then eats the fruit in slices. He's far too polite to leave a messy peel or bite straight into an orange. The floss Elsa imagines him carrying further substantiates her belief that he is not a full on orange biter. She finds this comforting.

After rubbing the orange on her sheets to clean it off, Elsa walks downstairs in her pajamas. The scent of orange is stronger as she descends into the courtyard. It fills the air completely. She looks for the gardener under the shade of the orange tree, but he is not there. A small pile of peels is left at the trunk; each peel a single, coiled strand. The sidewalk in front of the apartment building is also bereft of the gardener or any sign that he may be nearby. Elsa peels her orange as she turns back toward the courtyard and leaves her coil on top of the gardener's. Halfway up the stairs to her apartment Elsa pauses and admires how her nails glimmer a gentle shade of red.

Four Homeruns

“The season’s over,” I called before turning off the TV and dropping the remote on the floor.

“Oh,” came my wife’s voice from the kitchen. “I thought it didn’t end until September.”

“It doesn’t.”

Well that was true. The baseball season wouldn’t end, technically, until October 1st when the Dodgers would play their final game against the Giants at Pac Bell Park, or SBC Park, or ATT Park, or whatever the hell they were calling that stupid stadium in San Francisco.

“Then why are you saying the season is over?” she asked sweetly.

Apparently, glaring at someone who’s in another room with her back to you doesn’t accomplish anything because she didn’t shriek in pain or tell me to stop making a face.

“They just lost...again,” I said, trying my best to emphasize the final word.

“So?”

“So they’ve played 14 games since the all-star break and they’ve lost 13 of them. They were in first place two weeks ago and now the freakin’ Rockies have a better record.”

“But there are still a lot of games left, right?”

I shook my head, biting back the venom threatening to erupt from my mouth. She didn’t get it. 10 years on, and she still didn’t understand how it worked. There might be a bunch of games left but there was no possible way the Dodgers could pull themselves out of the hole they’d dug over the last two weeks.

“Trust me, it’s over.”

“So you won’t be watching any more games,” she couldn’t keep a hopeful tone from creeping in there at the end.

“Might as well stop eating,” I snorted.

She didn’t appreciate the sarcasm and took a moment to turn away from the dishes and grace me with one of the “you’re being absolutely ridiculous” looks she tossed my way two or three times a week.

“Don’t look at me that way.”

She turned back to the dishes and refused to respond to every comment I made that night about baseball in general, and the pathetic Dodgers, in particular.

That was July 26th, 2006, eight days before the birth of our first child. Those next eight days would be chock full of false labor and doctors appointments. Of course, as the due date came and went, and our anxiety over the impending birth kept getting worse, wouldn’t you know it, the Dodgers started playing like they cared, winning 19 of their next 22 games. Thanks to an emergency c-section on August 4th, and the subsequent “stuff” associated with having a newborn in the house, I watched exactly $4\frac{1}{3}$ innings of those 22 games.

Seems petty, I suppose. I had a brand new baby girl at home and I’m complaining about missing some stupid baseball games. But let’s put it into perspective: the last time the Dodgers won any 19 out of 22 games was in 1894 (yeah, 1894) when they were known as the Superbas (and no, I don’t know what the hell a “Superba” is). So even if you hate the Dodgers or couldn’t care less about baseball, we’re talking about something that happens with less frequency than Haley’s Comet for Christ’s sake.

But don’t get me wrong, the baby was awesome. I mean, except for the total lack of sleep, the realization that both my wife and I had absolutely no idea what the hell we were doing, the new found sense of terror that had settled on my shoulders like a lead cape after it occurred to me just how big of an infant deathtrap our house was. Other than that, yeah, everything was great. Really, that’s not sarcasm.

Of course, whenever my wife caught me trying to sneak a few pitches, or an update on Baseball Tonight, she’d get a little pissed. Can’t say I blame her, really. I mean, we had an actual kid in the house now, and here I am acting like one myself. Although, she did go a bit overboard. She’d admit that later, or she’d half admit it, anyway. But you know, hormones and whatnot. Since the Dodgers had shot back up into first place I was able to declare that the baseball season re-opened, to which my wife’s only response was a “look.”

So it pretty much continued that way for a while. Gradually the kid started to figure out that darkness meant sleepy time, and by about the age of six weeks she was on a pretty good schedule. By that I mean she’d sleep about six hours at night before waking up to feed. Of course, she’d

go down for good around 10, which meant she was up and cranky by 4 AM.

Then came September 19th. The Dodgers were at home playing the Padres and the boys in blue had a 1/2 game lead on San Diego. The other NL West teams had fallen back in the standings, so it was pretty clear that the division was coming down to either the Padres or the good guys (the Dodgers that is). For whatever reason, the Padres have a history of beating the Dodgers at the absolutely worst times. During the Padres' very first season, when they won something like 40 games total, they beat (and by beat, I mean absolutely demolished) the Dodgers on the final day of the season ensuring that the Dodgers finished 1 game out of first place. And this year had been no different since, up until this point in the season, the Pads had all but handed the Dodgers their asses by winning something like 12 out of 15 games. Needless to say, I was less than enthused about that 1/2 game lead.

Now, about this time my daughter had a habit of taking a nap around 6:30 in the evening until about 8. That was fine with me because I could let her sleep in my lap while I watched the first two innings of a game.

"Fuck you Mike Piazza!" I half shouted at the screen.

"Hey, watch the potty mouth, dad," came my wife's voice from the bedroom.

"But he just hit an RBI double," I pleaded, "and it's only the first inning. They're losing this game in the very first goddamn inning."

"You're daughter is trying to sleep on your lap," she reminded me with a hiss.

I looked down at the now restless small person in my arms and gently rocked her for a minute before spitting, "Jesus Christ."

"Now what?" my wife had an exasperated look on her face as she paced into the living room.

"Mike Cameron just hit a triple, two more runs scored. Brad Penny wants me to have a heart attack."

"I seriously doubt Brad Penny cares one way or the other about your heart," she replied levelly.

"Why else would he be throwing meatballs then, huh?" Well, that must have stumped her because she had no response.

In all, the Padres scored four runs that first inning, and I admitted defeat. My wife pointed out, something she must enjoy doing because she does so at every possible opportunity, that I have no faith in my team.

"Trust me," I said, "since 1988 there really hasn't been any reason to trust them."

“What happened in 1988?”

I tried to mask the sheer horror this question caused me...but I must have failed.

“Don’t give me that look; just tell me what happened.”

“That was the last time the Dodgers won the World Series.”

“Oh.”

Oh, she says! Offhandedly no less! Like it’s no big deal winning the World Series. Well, maybe if you’re a Yankees fan, but for the rest of us a World Series title doesn’t come along every day. Just ask any Cubs fan. Hell, the Astros have never won it!

Despite my very real belief that this current Dodgers roster was secretly plotting to see me have a stroke by the end of the season, they actually battled back: one run in the bottom of the first, another in the second, two more in the third and we had a tie game.

That’s about when my daughter woke up looking for some dinner. My wife sat down in the big chair to breastfeed and after a little daddy-daughter raspberry contest I handed over the kid. The wife, claiming she wouldn’t have her nipples sucked sore AND watch baseball, made me turn the station.

After a while I flipped back to the game. Bottom of 6th, still tied 4-4.

“Why are baseball games so freakin’ long?”

She asked that question, on average, 3.44 times per game. At 162 games a season (not counting the playoffs) that’s 557.28 times in six months. After the first month I stopped hearing it all together, kinda like when you’re concentrating on something and you no longer hear music that’s playing in the background. I once tried to explain to her that baseball originated in a time (the 1800’s) when leisure activities were scarce. Hell, it predated TV by something like 75 years! Back then, people wanted to watch something for four hours because the only other things they had going on were working, eating, sleeping, shitting and dying.

As expected, she hadn’t accepted that answer and the argument went on for quite a while. I took the stand that the purity of the game called for it to stay the way it had always been played (or at least, as much as possible); she argued that unless it updated itself people would eventually lose interest. Might as well have called the Virgin Mary a whore!

We gave the kid a bath. She was too big for the weird netting thing, so she was sitting in an infant tub, propped up by an inclined seat. We got

lucky there. I've been told some kids absolutely hate the bath, even at a really young age, but our girl loved it from day one, and she found it particularly enjoyable to chew on her rubber ducky. For some reason, I had always envisioned bathing a very small child as a delicate and time consuming operation. Turns out it's not that hard, and since she's so small it doesn't really take that long.

By the time we were done, though, it was the bottom of the eighth. Obviously, the Dodgers had decided to spare me the actual pain of watching them lose because they were now down by two runs. Marlon Anderson was standing on third with no outs, so that was a positive, but Wilson Betemit was at the plate, which never inspired much confidence. I stood in front of the TV for a minute while my wife finished putting the kid in some pajamas, and against all expectations Betemit hit a single to drive in Anderson and he cut the lead to one. Olmedo Saenz then came on to pinch hit and struck out, but I couldn't really fault Saenz. Pinch hitting is, flat out, the most difficult thing to do in all of sports, and he'd been pretty solid all year. Besides, there was only one out. Furcal followed Saenz and I was momentarily filled with jubilation as he hit a deep fly ball to left, but the moment faded quickly into middling depression as the ball was caught for the second out. Kenny Lofton then doubled, sending Betemit to third, and I was practically bouncing as Nomar came to the plate.

My wife came out holding the kid.

"I'm going to rock her for a little bit," she said, "she's tired, but restless."

"OK," I bent down and kissed the kid on the cheek, "if you hurry you can come and watch the ninth inning with me."

"Oh joy," she said before turning back toward the kid's room.

Now Nomar isn't quite the player he once was, but he'd had a pretty good year so I had reason to be optimistic, and hey, maybe the Dodgers would finally take the lead. The really great thing about Nomar is that he hardly ever strikes out. In fact, over the course of his career he's struck out only about 10 percent of the time. He takes a lot of pitches and almost always puts the ball in play. Now, I can't be positive, Nomar's always seemed a nice guy, but he must have been in on the conspiracy against me because, wouldn't you know, this time he did strike out.

Shaking my head in disappointment I walked over to the baby monitor and switched it on. The little red lights were flickering and the tinny voice

of my very upset daughter erupted from the small speaker. She had been getting better about falling asleep at night, but it looked like tonight wasn't going to be easy. I walked down the hall and carefully opened the door to my daughter's room. The orange night light made it feel like a dark room. My wife was sitting in the rocker with the kid lying on her chest. She'd stopped screaming, but obviously couldn't get comfortable because she was squirming in my wife's arms.

"You want me to rock her?" I whispered.

"No, she just needs to wind herself down."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I'm just going to rock her for 10 more minutes. Go watch the rest of the game."

"OK, just call me if you need anything."

I couldn't have been in the room longer than a minute, really. Although, sometimes I catch myself staring at my daughter's face and time just sorta slips by. That must have happened here because when I got back into the living room the Padres had the bases loaded with one out. And goddamn it, Takashi Saito was on the mound! If the best pitcher in the Dodgers bullpen (and one of the best closers in the National League, no less) couldn't keep the Padres from loading the bases then there really was no hope. A wild pitch, a sac fly and a single later and the Padres had put up three more runs. Saito finally got the third out, but going into the bottom of the ninth the Dodgers were trailing 9 to 5. Three outs to score four runs. Just as the commercials came on the lights on the baby monitor started jumping. I shut the TV off, no point in watching anyway, and went back into my daughter's room.

One look at my wife's face and I knew she was done. People will say that you're always tired during the first few months with a new baby. But simply saying you'll be "tired" is a bit like saying Mt. Everest is tall. It's true, I guess, but doesn't adequately explain the reality of the situation. You are tired every second of the day. But sometimes, such as was the case with my wife right at that moment, exhaustion would hit you like a brick in the face. Add to that a screaming, inconsolable infant, and well, you kinda know what hell must be like.

"Let me take her," I said.

"You sure?"

I don't know if all mothers are the same way, but my wife had a hard time admitting that sometimes, she needed a break.

"Yeah, you need to sleep and I'm not that tired."

"But you have to work in the morning."

"And you have to take care of the kid tomorrow; come on, I've got her."

I took my daughter; she wasn't fully screaming now, more like forcefully declaring her dislike of the current situation. My wife lumbered up out of the rocker, half-heartedly kissed my cheek and lurched out of the room. I didn't sit down. Sometimes, I don't know why, the kid wanted to be walked around. In fact, she fell into a fitful sleep almost instantly, but I knew the second I tried to sit in the chair or, god forbid, put her in the crib, she'd be up and screaming in a second flat.

It was like a test of endurance. Could I walk around slowly, holding this (surprisingly heavy) baby, patting her back until she fell into a deep sleep before I tumbled over from fatigue? Luckily, all the screaming must have really gotten to the kid because it seemed only a few minutes before she had stopped wriggling and was breathing the steady rhythm of deep sleep.

Very slowly, I laid the kid down and patted her tummy for a minute while she got comfortable, and once satisfied that she really was down I carefully left the room. My wife had been so tired she hadn't shut the door to our bedroom. I was pretty tired but since another five minutes of sleep wouldn't make a real difference in the end, I turned the TV back on. Might as well find out the final score.

"Fuck me in the ASS!"

"What?" my wife's head whipped up, "what's wrong?"

The couch in our living room is about 3 feet from the door to our bedroom, and my wife was lying down about another foot inside the room. Add to that a new mother's instinctive reaction to wake up at the slightest noise and my outburst was ill advised to say the least.

"Nothing, sorry, go back to sleep."

"Is she OK?"

"Yeah, she's fine, she's asleep."

My wife nodded briefly before her head hit the pillow. I got up and, as quietly as possible, shut the bedroom door before turning back to the TV. I couldn't believe my eyes. It was 9-9 and the Padres were batting in the top of the 10th. Somehow, inexplicably, the Dodgers had scored 4 runs in the bottom of the ninth to tie the game.

Dave Roberts (a former Dodger, in fact) was leading off the inning but he lined out to center. As I turned up the volume on the TV I heard the voice of Vin Scully say, "...an improbable turn of events as the Dodgers hit

four consecutive homeruns in the bottom of the 9th inning to tie the game.”

What the fuck?

Did I hear that right, or is ol’ Vin finally going senile? I mean, dude’s been doing this since the team played in Brooklyn for Christ’s sake, maybe he finally snapped?

But then, in between batters, they show the highlights. Vin was right. Jeff Kent led off the inning with a shot to center, JD Drew followed with a bomb to right. The Padres then brought in Trevor Hoffman, only the guy with the most career saves EVER, but Russell Martin crushes one into left anyway. Next up, Marlon Anderson, on the first pitch he sees, goes yard to right.

Shit.

I can’t remember the last time anyone even mentioned a team going back to back to back to back homeruns. And I know a thing or two about baseball history.

Turns out, the last time that happened was in 1967 when the Twins did it to the Tigers. Of course, in that game the four homeruns didn’t come in the bottom of the 9th, in September, in the middle of a pennant race, against the team’s chief rival for a playoff spot.

I’ve witnessed only a handful of truly great things in all my years as a baseball fan. And only two of those have been connected with the Dodgers. The first came when I was ten; a gimpy, barely able to walk, Kirk Gibson hit a walk-off homerun against Dennis Eckersley (the most dominant closer of his day) to beat the heavily favored Oakland A’s in game one of the World Series (the Dodgers then went on to win the series in only five games). I watched that game on TV, and after Gibson’s homerun I ran around my living room “whooping” non-stop for an hour. The second actually happened to the Dodgers. On July 28, 1991 I was at Dodgers Stadium to see the boys in blue take on the Montreal Expos. That day the Dodgers managed exactly zero runs, zero hits, zero walks even. Dennis Martinez, the starting pitcher for the Expos, threw only the (then) 16th perfect game in the history of Major League Baseball. Now, sure it would have been better had the Dodgers managed the perfect game, but nevertheless, watching history unfold right in front of you is pretty damn awesome. And here, in a game where the Dodgers kept coming back from seemingly insurmountable leads, I missed what was another truly special moment. Oh sure, I saw all the replays over the next couple days, but so what. It only magnified the fact that I hadn’t actually seen it as it happened.

Sitting on my couch, in a state of shock, I watched as the Padres put up another run in the top of the 10th. This had to have been one of the great games of all time, didn't it? Obviously, it'd be greater if the Dodgers won, but even after seeing four consecutive homeruns hit against them, the Padres still managed to come back and score in the next inning. You had to hand it to them, the Pads never gave up in this game.

Of course, that run only helped to confirm my conspiracy theory. If the Dodgers could hit four homeruns in a row and STILL not win a game, well, then I couldn't just be crazy. They did get out of the top of the 10th having only allowed the one run, and scoring another run was certainly possible given what the Dodgers had done in the last inning. But this time I was sitting squarely in front of the TV, actually watching the game, so I didn't give them much chance.

Kenny Lofton led off the inning, and after a tough at bat finally worked the count to get a walk. All in all, it was a nice start to the inning. Lofton once hit 15 homeruns in a season, but he's never been a power guy, so getting on base is all you could really ask of him. Then came Nomar again. He was playing injured, and like I said, he'd been having a good year but had fallen off a lot over the last month due to a few nagging injuries. In fact, since the All-Star break his batting average had dropped nearly 40 points. He was still hitting above .300, but I can't be faulted for not having a whole lot of faith at this point. Honestly, I was just hoping he didn't ground into a double play. Kent, Drew and Martin were all due to follow Nomar, so I was really hanging my hopes on Kent and his four previous hits in that game.

Beyond all expectation, though, Nomar crushed a fastball into deep left and the Dodgers won 10-9. My usual "celebration dance" (which I won't explain in detail, but if you think about a semi-nerdy, pasty white guy with a few extra pounds prancing around his living room with a variety of groin thrusts and fists pumps you'll get a pretty good picture) was fairly muted. I let slip a small "whoop" and froze as the red lights on the baby monitor briefly flared. Once they had died down, though, I finished off the dancing with a little "cabbage patch" action before throwing some whispered "suck it Padres" at the screen.

I shut the TV off and stood in the dark for a second letting my eyes adjust. I did my best to quietly make my way to the hall but ended up kicking the baby swing with my left foot. It went unnoticed, apparently, as neither mother nor daughter jerked awake. Once past the swing I crept

back into my daughter's room. I heard some rustling from the crib and stopped at the door. Once she had resettled I tiptoed over to the crib and peered down. I tried to watch my daughter sleep for a few minutes every night before I went to bed. It occurred to me then that if I never saw the Dodgers hit back to back to back to back homeruns it really wouldn't matter. Not compared to what I'd be doing for the rest of my life as the father of this child.

Then again...if I could use some sort of mind manipulation to get this tiny little person as obsessively compulsive about the Dodgers as I was, maybe we could see the next four homerun inning together.

His House

He wasn't the one who called. It was the neighbor's kid, down the street. I hung up the phone, checked in with my boss, and left for their house. His house.

Dad sat on the porch with the kid's mother, his eyes swollen, hardly open. The kid came out through the screen door with a glass of ice water, the cubes dinging against the sides with his gait, he handed the water to the old man.

They shielded their eyes, watching my approach on the grass from the driveway. He looked to the kid's mother, she to her boy. "We'll be at our house, call us if you need anything." I smiled, thanking her. "I'm so sorry," she said, touching my arm. I nodded and they cut across the grass, down the street.

The old man sat clutching the glass, his hand shaking. I took a seat next to him on the top step, resting my palms behind me. The street lay still with sun low in the sky. A gold haze backlit the trees down the street, the sidewalks uneven. Squinting down, I looked over the lawn, spotted brown and only half cut. A line separated the fresh trim from the ankle high grass that curled toward the light.

"What's with the lawn?" I asked, after a while.

He looked at me, twisting his mouth. He took a sip, threw out the water on the grass, then stood up and walked inside. The screen door creaked as it shut, the latch didn't hold so it slammed a second time. I sat on the porch, watching the ice melt.

By the time I made it inside, the bathroom door was shut. His sniff came from inside, muffled. Ever since I could remember this house, that sound came around corners, under doors, through the dark.

On the coffee table I sorted through the paper for the Sports section. From the bathroom I heard shuffling, then the turning of a page. I found Business instead.

He sniffed again and flushed, stood in the doorway, watching me read. I looked up, and he receded back to the hallway. I folded the paper, setting it on the table.

In the kitchen I found Dad pouring a bowl of oatmeal down the drain, running the faucet loudly. The oven had a brown stain around the burner. Next to it, the booth hugged the wall in the corner by the fridge. The seat cushion had an indentation where he always sat and the other end was raised enough to see crumbs and grime.

I leaned on the counter. "Where is it?" I asked, regretting putting it that way.

Dad looked at me, turning on the garbage disposal. The microwave light was on, I pressed it shut. He let the disposal gargle for some time, then switched it off, but kept the water running. Outside the sun shaded by a cloud, the light through the window darkened his face. He turned the water off, looking out, wiping his hands on the front of his jeans.

"She's out back," he said.

#

I found her lying under the tree, the same place she delivered her first litter. Those pale fuzzy puppies, blinking and bald. She lay in an old hatbox. Her front legs jutting out straight, just like when she'd slept at the foot of my bed, her hair interwoven with my comforter. Sometimes I'd watch her chest until it rose and fell, just to be sure. But now her chest stuck out as if she died holding her breath.

Dad watched from the porch, making his way over only after I had placed back the lid. I rose to my feet, wiping my hands. He stood next to the patio table and chairs, the umbrella closed, stained.

"Under the tree, then?"

He nodded, looking up to the branch where our tire swing used to hang, the barkless divots, rope burnt.

In the shed I found the garden spade with the red handle hanging near the top shelf. The smell of gasoline and paint fumes hung heavy. I held my breath, reaching up, having to lean on the lawnmower, its weight surprising. Pulling out the catcher, I found grass still inside.

Dad stood, his cross-trainers tied with loops that hung low, touching the pavement. He leaned on his heels, observing the house. Pastel pink stucco and white trim with gray showing where the paint had peeled. He stood there without blinking, and I returned with the spade, hiking up my slacks, digging up the thin layer of grass, then soil.

"Dad."

“Hmm?”

“There was grass in the mower. Is it getting too heavy?”

“The boy does my lawn now,” he said.

Clearing away dirt, I looked up at him, wiping my brow with my wrist. “For how much?”

“That’s between me and the boy.”

I looked back to my work, nodding my head. “Well, he forgot to empty the mower.”

“He did not,” he said.

“You mean I didn’t just do it?”

“I told him not to. He found Lucy – was emptying the mower when he saw her behind the shed.”

I finished digging, getting to my feet, stamping off dirt from my leather shoes. “She would always hide like that,” I said.

Dad looked down at the box, leaning heavily on the chair. His eyes watered. “I didn’t even know she was gone.”

And with that I buried Lucy in that old hatbox, Dad watching in silence.

#

We sat around the booth drinking black coffee. The old man stared through his cup. The steam rose to his face, making his crows feet glisten. I had never seen him like this. He would cry in dramas or after World Series interviews, but not over his own life.

“This weekend we’ll call up Sally, see if one of Lucy’s is whelping,” I said.

“Those dogs live too long.”

“A different breed then, we’ll adopt.”

He looked at me, “I couldn’t take care of one if I wanted.”

#

I searched the pantry, littered with canisters of oatmeal, tuna, and tomato soup and in the back found a rogue box of macaroni and cheese.

Dad had dozed off in the living room, sitting back in his recliner watching the game. I waited for the score, and then switched it off. A chill came in through the window. Leaning over him to shut it quietly, I stood on my toes so my tie didn’t touch his head.

The water boiled in the next room and I emptied out the box, patting the bottom for the last few noodles. The water clouded, into swirling chalky foam. I mixed it through a few times, leaning over to waft in the raw pasta aroma before I covered the pot.

I scooted back on the booth, looking at the two cups of coffee, bringing mine to my lips, bitter and lukewarm. Listening to the clock on the wall and cars pass by.

When the cheese was melted, I cleared out two bowls and shoveled in the macaroni, splitting it evenly. In the living room Dad was gone; his impression slowly rose from the cushion. I walked into the hallway, the light was low, but I could see his shadow moving under the door, a thud came from his closet closing and shook the wall. He'd be out, so I ate alone, putting his in the microwave. The sun had sunk now, dark. I finished eating, and washed the bowl with hand soap, setting it in the dry rack.

The empty box looked lonely on the kitchen counter, so I took it out back, chucking it with its kind. The bedroom light switched off. I wiped my shoes on the mat, opening up the door, "Dad," I called, "dinner's in the microwave."

The living room was empty, his door stood open, I checked around the corner, but he was gone.

I grabbed my keys from the dining table, pushing out the screen door, hopping off the porch. The street was quiet and an orange streetlamp buzzed on. Nothing. I grabbed my phone, pitting it to my head, fumbling with my car keys, but the door was unlocked. I ducked down, closing the phone. He sat there in the front seat, looking down the driveway toward the garage.

I leaned in, "Dad?" I asked, lowering to sit in the car, shutting out the cold. In the rearview mirror I could see two worn suitcases. We sat in the dark. He turned to me, the sides of his bald head glowing behind the streetlamp. Reaching out he handed me the keys.

"Lock up," he said.

His shape remained facing me and after a moment I nodded, opening the door, the dome light lit up. I stood out of the car, leaning my arms on the roof, looking down Silva Street, the streetlights alternating in pairs down the sidewalks, lighting the curb grass where I'd scuffed my patched jeans on as a kid playing tag. Inside, Dad's hand pulled a dog hair out of my seat cushion. The rooster weathervane on my neighbor's roof had long rusted still, pointing east, but I looked back toward those streetlamps

that extended to the corner. There were so few.

Leaving the door open, I trudged through the layers of grass, climbed those three porch steps, pulled back the creaky screen, and locked up.

Laissez Les Bon Temps Rouler

Your soiree was a success with an endless amount of crawfish and Dixie beer. Dancing to the background of syncopated Zydeco added harmony to the Creole speaking from Cut Off Louisiana. Mosquitoes feasted on the blood of the inebriated party goers; however, this small inconvenience didn't hamper the mood of the eclectic crowd. Red beans and rice. French bread. And of course Tabasco garnished each table that was covered with sheets of *The Times Picayune*. *Laissez les bon temps rouler*. Pinch da tails. Suck dem heads, was the order of the day.



"BELLES LETTRES," surrounded by sugar cane fields. Facing the Mississippi. Your 1890 two-story double galleries, framed by columns supporting entablature, was one of the finest Bed and Breakfast's in Lafourche Parish.



The last time I saw you. Your eyes. With lagoon depth darkness. You were sitting on a wicker porch swing. A half pint mason jar of Jack Daniels in your hand. On a wicker table a stylus turntable. The dust cover scratched. With a thin line fracture. *Days of Future Passed*. Yes. Like the Moody Blues. How you had repeatedly listened to the song *Dawn is a Feeling*. The lyrics.

The *fleur de lis* wrought iron gate. You closed it behind you. The rusty sound of hinges. "Where are you going?" I asked.

You turned to me, and said, "*Au revoir*, y'all."

You picked a pink camellia. Continued your glide on the neutral ground. The neutral ground lined with live oaks and azaleas. Why did I let you leave? Standing on the neutral ground. Waiting. Waiting for what? For whom? *Days of Future Passed*. Yes. Like the Moody Blues. How you

had repeatedly listened to the song. *Dawn is a Feeling*. The lyrics. I heard you in the distance.

*You're here today
No future fears
This day will last
A thousand years
If you want it to*

Oh, Alloicious. Why did I let you leave? I could have helped you. Or could I?



You sashayed amongst your guests. Noticed my presence. "How different you are from the others," you said. "Maybe I'll keep y'all for an undetermined period of time. Until I tire of you. Would y'all like some oysters? I'll help you shuck them. It's really very easy. First of all. Hold the oyster in your palm. Then. Insert the oyster knife into the hinge. Pop it open. And *Viola!* Y'all not from around here. Are you?"



Before I could answer, you said, "I must tend to my other guests. *Au plus tard.*"

The elderly Yankees on a tour of Cajun country. Although enthralled with the carefree attitude of the locals found it too hot to even think about eating. The overly made-up women. Mascara running down their faces. Their blue coif clinging to their scalp. Exposing their bald thinning hair. Perfumed bodies that for some strange reason deceive elderly women into thinking that it makes them look younger. Yes. This combined with their perspiration regurgitated the air with a foul smell of a dead *chaoui*.

One woman, who was offered a soft shell Po-boy, screamed, "Do you expect me to eat that? It looks like something from hell. "Don't you have any American food? Like a hamburger?"

"*Alohrs pas. Con-yon. Vielle.*" you told her. "We can accommodate y'all with anything you wish. After all "BELLES LETTRES" is the finest Bed and Breakfast in Lafourche Parish. Why don't y'all try some cheese and crackers?"

"This is quite tasty," the woman said. "What is it?"

"Hogs-head cheese," you answered.

The locals laughed as she spit it on the ground. "Don't insult our hosts," her husband said. "You're embarrassing everybody. You should have stayed home."

"Make the *veiller*," you told her.

"I don't know what the hell they are saying. Why don't they speak English? These people are so uncivilized. I can't stand this humidity. Why did you bring me to this God forsaken place? I'm being eaten alive by mosquitoes. And those flying cockroaches. All over the place. You might as well feed me to the alligators. I want to go back to our room where there is air conditioning."

"I only drink Lousianne coffee," you told me. "Only when it's perked stove top"

"Why do you always add an egg shell?" I asked.

"That's just what we southerners do. It takes away the bitterness of the chicory."

"That doesn't make any sense"

"It's not supposed to, fine sir. I do fry up some pretty damn good catfish though. The secret's in the cornmeal."

"What about hushpuppies," I asked. "I've never had any."

"Hushpuppies? Actually. Mine are not the best. But if you add enough molasses. Yankees don't know the difference. But my greens. My greens are as good as any nigger can make. Ham hocks. Pig tails. Ears."

"Why do you call them niggers? Isn't Black more appropriate? Politically correct?"

"Well, fine sir. If you must know. It's to keep them in their place."

"Is all your staff black?" I asked.

"You mean the darkies? Of course. It adds to the authenticity."

"And the white gloves. When they serve?"

"It's tradition. Darkies aren't supposed to touch the plates of whites."

"Do you really believe that crap?" I asked.

"Of course."

Oh, Alloicious. Why did I let you leave?



"I have an *ahnvee* for some *boudin*," a pregnant Creole woman said. "*Le bebe*. He be a boy. I make it be true. 'Cause I take in plenty greens. The way

le bebe make me eat *boudin, etouffee, gumbo, jambalaya, crawfish*. Like his papa. All spice."

A *saleau* slapped the yankee woman's ass, "You wear no *ste'pin*?" he asked.

He grabbed her hand and put it on his penis, "What we do now? Where put this?"

You pulled the *saleau* aside and told him, "*Zeerah ya saleau*."

"*Mois, alohrs pas*," he replied.

"Are you passing a good time?" you asked me. "Would you like more oysters? Yes. I think I'll keep y'all for a while. Your name, fine sir"

"*Alloicious*."

As I was leaving, you said, "*Au revoir y'all*."



"*BELLES LETTRES*" was closed for holiday. You sat on the wicker porch-swing nursing a glass of lemonade. A stylus turntable played *Days of Future Passed*. Yes. Like the Moody Blues. How you had repeatedly listened to the song *Dawn is a Feeling*. The lyrics.

The ceiling fan hanging from the parapet offered the only breeze. I reached for the *fleur de lis* wrought iron gate. The rusty hinges echoed around the permeated smells of hot humid August. Looking up at me you nodded in the affirmative. I poured myself a Jack Daniels. Sat next to you. Conversation did not seem important. With your left hand you lifted the back of your hair. Rubbed an ice cube about your neck. "It's so damn hot," you said. "Would you like to touch me?"

I put my hand in yours. *Days of Future Passed*. Yes. Like The Moody Blues. How you had repeatedly listened to the song. *Dawn is a Feeling*. The lyrics.

*You're here today
No future fears
This day will last
A thousand years
If you want it to*

Oh, Alloicious. Why did I let you leave?

Rusty sound of hinges of the *fleur de lis* wrought iron gate. *Cochon de lait*. Fat conventioners "I'm fucking bored," said a drunk bald guest.

"Yeah. Me too. I want to go to Fat City. See some strippers. Maybe go to the French Quarter. Maybe get a little. Never had me any southern ass," said his friend.

"Are you passing a good time?" you asked them.

"Yes," the drunk bald man answered. "By the way. Where is Fat City anyhow? I mean. This is a great place. A great barbeque. Never had a whole pig pit roast before. But we're looking for a little action. First time in "N'awlins."

"*Joie de vivre*," you said. "It's round Metairie. Near Lake Pontchartrain. Seventy- five miles. Hour and a half."

"We'll probably stay the night in the French Quarter."

"Le Vieux Carré? Well, *monsieur*," you said. "*Laissez les bon temps rouler*."

"Can one of your boys take us there?" the bald one asked.

"*Mais oui*. I'll have one of the darkies take you. Make sure y'all tip him well."



I smell the confederate jasmine that intertwined with the wrought gate. You sat on a wicker porch swing. A sazerac in your hand. Stylus turntable. *Days of Future Passed*. Yes. Like the Moody Blues. How you had repeatedly listened to the song, *Dawn is a Feeling*. The lyrics.

*You're here today
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"Why "BELLES LETTRES?" I asked. "Tell me."

"Come with me," you said.

The side hallway. The walls. Covered with letters. "Letters," you said. "Letters. Written by confederate soldiers. Boys. Men. Their last words in battle. Words to their loved ones. This is why I named her "BELLES LETTRES." So no one will ever forget. Forget what the South lost. With

these letters. I at least give dignity to the white boys. And men. Who died for nothing. To show those. Those who stay at "BELLES LETTRES" that the South is proud. That the South will always be a proud."

"What about the flag," I asked. "The Confederate flag. Why do you fly it above the American Flag?"

"You're just like the rest. You can't understand. Yes. They complain about the Confederate flag. Always remind me. That I should take it down. All us southerners. All we wanted was to keep our secession. And what? Damn it, Alloicious. We lost almost two-hundred thousand fine white young gentlemen. The war. That damn war."



I see you in my mind. Face down in the wetlands of Bayou Lafourche. Your black hair floating in debris. An Egret looking down at the strands. Ripples in the water ricochet your body from cypress knees to cypress trees. Catfish and blue crabs feast on parasitic life. On a form that I no longer recognize.

The last time I saw you. Your eyes. With lagoon depth darkness. You were sitting on a wicker porch swing. A half pint mason jar of Jack Daniels in your hand. On a wicker table a stylus turntable. The dust cover with a thin line fracture. *Dawn is a Feeling* you repeatedly played. "Années passées," is all you would say. Tossing back your head you segued into irrepressible laughter. "You wouldn't understand the irony, fine sir." You put my hand to you breast. "Yes," you said, "Flawed." The rusty sound of the *fleur de lis* wrought iron gate. You turned, and said, "Au revoir y'all."

You picked a pink camellia. Ran to the neutral ground. The neutral ground lined with live oaks and azaleas. Standing on the neutral ground. Waiting. Waiting for me to go and get you. *Days of Future Passed*. Yes. Like the Moody Blues. How you had repeatedly listened to the song *Dawn is a Feeling*. The lyrics. I heard you in the distance. But I could not move.

*You're here today
No future fears
This day will last
A thousand years
If you want it to*

Oh, Alloicious. Why did I let you leave?

Disposable

One summer my family and I went on a road trip all over California. When you have grown up and moved out, going back to family vacation mode is something akin to a time warp. My little sister still antagonized me, and we constantly argued over the invisible dividing line between us in the backseat of the family car. My father got repeatedly lost and refused to listen to my Thomas Guide-wielding mother. Somehow we managed to not strangle each other on the first leg of the trip, which was comprised of nine hours of carsickness-induced whining and hourly bathroom stops.

Our first stop was Murphy's, a small town founded by prospectors in the Gold Rush, not far from Yosemite. It was once a Wild West town complete with local legends such as armed robberies by Billy The Kid, but was now overrun by antique-shopping yuppies and wine bars. We stayed with my Dad's best friend, my "Uncle" Mike. My sister and I had never been up there before, but my parents had just been there 2 months before at Uncle Mike's fiancé's funeral.

Mike and Vicki rode motorcycles, but they were not typical bikers. Vicki had joined Alcoholics Anonymous several years before she met Mike, and they rode with a group of her AA friends. They went on their annual "Sober Run" in the mountains. On the long ride one woman lost control and fell over in the middle of the pack. Vicki was right behind her and couldn't steer out of the way in time, like a row of dominoes on asphalt.

Vicki spent a few days in the ICU, comatose, her body controlled by doctors and machines. Finally her family took control, shut the machines off, and gave her away to about seven people. They knew she would have wanted to donate everything anyway.

When we arrived at Mike's newly renovated house he showed me everything he had fixed himself and told me what it used to look like. He showed me the small pool he dug and plastered with a waterfall he built out of boulders, next to the shrine to her he put in the garden. He showed me the kitchen, tiled with terra cotta pavers they drove to all the way to Mexico to buy, after they painted the kitchen cabinets turquoise to match

her favorite dishes.

There were at least five pictures of her in every room. Our guest room held a poster from her funeral, a collage of photos of her and friends taken over her lifetime. She was smiling in all of them, some funny, some sweet, but all of them radiated her personality.

I felt awkward surrounded by all of her books, trinkets, items collected while traveling. I wondered how he faced the constant reminders of her on every shelf, on every wall, in every closet and corner around the house. I expected him to talk about her, which he did, very comfortably and without any regret.

The house had two bathrooms, one was his and one was hers. Hers was next to the guest room, it was violet and pink, decorated with dragonflies. I opened the shower and saw that the stall had already gathered cobwebs, so I sprayed it down with the showerhead before getting in. Also inside the shower were all of her soaps, shampoos, and a pink plastic Lady Bic disposable razor. I picked up the razor to set down my toiletry bag, and stood for a minute staring at it in my hand. It was a cheap, disposable razor. It was used, covered in soap scum. I almost tossed it into the trash. But I couldn't, so I set it back down. I left everything as I had found it, except for brushing the dust and spiders off the soft purple robe that hung on the back of the door.

I thought of her standing in that shower the morning before they went on the ride two months earlier. Did she know she was running low on conditioner? Did she use the lavender soap or the rose soap? She didn't know that the next time she bathed she would be in a hospital bed, her immobile body washed by a nurse. I was haunted by those little images, and by those unimportant objects sitting there, in limbo.

That night Mike told us that Vicki's jewelry went to her daughter, her books to her son, old photo albums and childhood mementos to her parents. Everything else was staying there with Mike—her Jeep in the driveway, her second motorcycle in the shed. He drove hers, even though he still had his own. But for the time everything in the bathroom was waiting. Waiting to be thrown out, because it was really of no use to anyone else. But Mike hadn't gotten around to throwing anything out yet. I wondered if he even thought of it. He probably hadn't even opened that bathroom since it happened. Everything was just gathering dust.

Six months after that trip my best friend Tara died. She went on a vacation to Costa Rica and never made it home. She had Cystic Fibrosis,

a genetic lung disease. A bacteria resistant to antibiotics had spread through her body for several years, slowly destroying her. She spent a month in a hospital in Florida, as the bacteria ravished her blood and her internal organs. At 12:30 PM on February 1st her godmother, Sherri, called my Mom and told her that Tara had finally slipped away.

A week after it happened I told my sister that we needed to clean out Tara's apartment. Sherri had just put her life on hold for five weeks sitting at a hospital bedside and I knew she wouldn't want to deal with the massive amount of shit crammed into Tara's tiny studio. She had to make all the painful phone calls, plan a memorial, and deal with losing her daughter.

So I decided that we needed to take care of it. I wanted to pack up her belongings, not out of the desire to do it, but because I didn't want to let anyone else do it. Her landlord was creepy and her roommates barely knew her. I would have rather sat on my parents' couch with my sister and watched more reality TV marathons. I would have rather stayed at home with my roommate Lauren and laughed and cried over memories of all of our years as friends over a bottle of wine. After week of doing both of those things constantly they stopped working, so I got up the courage to plan it.

I had just moved into a new apartment so we had a pile of cardboard boxes. On Saturday Sherri went to Tara's apartment to get old photos and a few things that were important to her, old sentimental things. On Sunday my sister Dana, my roommate Lauren, and my best friend TJ from kindergarten all donned grubby clothes and dug in.

We spent about 6 hours that first day laughing hysterically at the ungodly packrat she was. The things she kept were so ridiculous—stubs from every movie she had ever seen in the last decade, bags of sugar packets, twist ties from old loaves of bread and other useless rubbish. Other boxes were full of meaning; each of us came across things that really moved us. TJ found a pillowcase that she helped Tara sew and old toys that she wanted to give her one year old son. I kept her jersey from when we were in the football team booster club senior year of high school. We had just gone to our Homecoming game a few months before, and had just worn these old jerseys with our nicknames and graduation year on them. I also took a scrap of fabric she would sometimes cuddle like a blanket and t-shirts from our favorite bands. I filled a box with books that I doubt she ever read but that I knew I'd love, and another with CDs that

I always liked but never got around to buying. My sister and I ended up going back a few more times and kept uncovering more and more. For some reason though none of us cried the entire time we were going through her things. There were a few times when someone would find an old photo, or souvenir from something they did with her, or something really old that would make us all quiet and the air would stop moving, but most of the time we were laughing out loud.

“Tara, why do you have so much shit?” my sister blurted out several times. “Who the fuck lives like this?” she asked herself. But the truth was her apartment represented the way she lived. Chaotic, messy, and complicated.

The absurdity of what we were doing was pretty funny. I knew if she were there she’d be laughing along with us, saying “I don’t know, I’m sorry! Jeez.” I could even imagine the facial expression and shoulder shrug that would have gone along with it. We weren’t surprised to find the most personal of her things stashed in a closet—vibrators, condoms, and porn—and knew she didn’t care enough about her privacy to be embarrassed.

We each carted out a few boxes of new belongings. We rented and filled an entire Dumpster with trash. Her furniture went into her godmother’s storage. The remainder of her clothes and household items we sold off at the world’s most awkward and uncomfortable garage sale. What didn’t sell went to the Goodwill. I gave what little money we made from the sale to her godmother, and she threw party the day after her funeral.

When it was all over I found a strange amount of comfort in wearing Tara’s old shirts, hanging her framed photos on my walls, watching her DVD’s, and using her half-empty bottles of shampoo and conditioner, which I took as I washed down the nest of spider webs that had begun growing in her shower.

Charley and Olivia

Charley is a boy and a man and old and dying. Olivia is a ghost. My name's Charley, and that's as simple as I can put it.

#

Charley and Olivia walked together, holding hands; his small fleshy fingers floated in the foggy, bluish glow of Olivia's hand. Charley liked feeling the fuzzy, leathery patches inside Olivia's palm. The patches were the only things Charlie could feel, the rest of her body would mist away if he touched her, and flow back into place when he stopped. She looked like a quilt, with patches all over her telluric body, scattered in most places, but huddled in others. The concentration of most of her patches was on her cheeks and neck, her chest and stomach were patchless and pure, and they hung still, attached to seemingly nothing at all. The patches were not the same size; some were small and barely noticeable. Others, like the one on the left side of her jaw that covered half of her mouth, were large and black. Still, most radiated a lovely indigo color, which looked quite nice against her powder blue body. If not for the color and her physical appearance, she would look no different than Charley. She still enjoyed her youth; she must have been older than Charley by a few years, and more mature, but she still had a youthful exuberance and the yellow patch behind her grape-like eyes was nearly impossible to look away from.

"You do know," Olivia nudged Charley playfully, "your shoes are untied."

"No, they aren't," Charley seemed content with that answer. "I don't have laces." He looked down and was satisfied; he wore Velcro.

"Char-ley!" she sang. "I didn't say your laces are untied, I said your shoes are." Sure enough, it wasn't laces untied, or Velcro unfastened, but the shoes themselves were slowly untying. The leather from the top of Charley's ankles was slowly peeling like a banana. The shoes were slowly

untying, as though they themselves were the lace, and not the shoe.

Charley's mismatched white socks could be seen, standing on the thin platforms of what were the soles of his untied shoes. His green dinosaur t-shirt and red shorts ruffled slightly, his orange sneakers now looked like sliced cantaloupe around his small feet.

"Let's go, Charley. It'll be dark soon." The sun was setting behind the hills, casting a shadow over the dirt and brush of the earthy field. Charley's home, far off in the distance and still under renovations, stood tall amongst the entrance to the woods behind them. Charley tried to walk, but the slices of leather tangled with each other and he tripped and fell. He helped himself back up, but was still stuck in his shoes, and when he tried again to walk, he fell once more.

"I can't walk, my shoes are untied."

"Well, tie them then."

"How am I supposed to do that?"

"Tie them like normal shoes."

"But they're Velcro."

"Charley, it really is getting late, I can't be out here much longer. I can't be out here and I don't want to leave you all alone in the dark."

"But I don't want you to go tonight."

"I'll be back tomorrow."

"I know but," his voice trailed off, and Olivia's body was slowly shrinking, a trail of blue mist sifted like chimney smoke up towards the cover of rapidly approaching dusk. Charley's eyes widened, and he furiously began tying his sliced shoes, knotting them where he could. He used the methods of shoelace tying that his father had taught him, but they proved to be no use to untied leather. Charley tried walking but fell. He got up and tried again and again, bruising his knees and elbows with each time. He was on the verge of tears, "I can't do it."

Olivia looked upwards towards the sky, and I thought she would leave him there, stuck in his shoes. Her blue body continued to wane. She looked at Charley's lost and fearful eyes, her yellow patch shining bright, and she fell to the ground with her black jaw facing the sky and placed her patched hands beneath Charlie's socks. "Walk!" she pleaded with Charley, but he stood frozen. "Charley, Charley, please walk, Charley!" Charley lifted his right foot out of his sliced shoe and stepped on Olivia's jaw. She screamed.

"Olivia!"

“Walk! Walk!” She pointed out to another patch on her arm, and Charley stepped on it. Olivia was crying now, but kept her patches bright for Charley to tread on. With every step she cried in agony, but urged Charley to follow the patches. He was shaking, but he continued to walk, and the sound of Olivia crying and pleading with Charley resonated through the field.

#

Olivia is a girl and not a woman, but she is dying. Charley is a ghost. My name’s Olivia, and that’s as simple as I can put it.

#

It was dark, which is an eerie and chilling time, but is also a lonely and contemplative and calm time. Olivia sat in her bed, which was on the far shore of a deserted sandy island overlooking the lighthouse in the middle of the sea. The lighthouse was a murky white color, with a faded red stripe near the top of the lantern room. The light burning inside rotated three-hundred and sixty degrees, but was always a dull beam of dusty yellow. The lighthouse stood by itself in the middle of the sea, some five-hundred yards off shore, the only thing Olivia could see on the horizon. Charley was making something out of sand next to Olivia’s bed. Charlie was at least five times Olivia’s age. Although old people can look like skeletons, Charley was a pleasant looking elderly man, small, wrinkled and hunched, but he had a sunny disposition. Inside Charley’s wrinkles lay colored lines that traveled like little streams up and down his body. Every so often, he would push a wrinkle down into his skin, smoothing out his face or arm, but like denim, when one wrinkle was smoothed down, another one would spring up elsewhere. The streams on his face flowed in all different directions, each flashing colorful green, purple, red, and white light for a brief second before flickering out, and then returning to light seconds later. He wore a checkered vest over a short sleeved shirt and had funny gray pants on. His bald head became a reflective stage for the bright night sky to have a little show.

“Olivia,” he softly placed a hand near her pillow. “Come help me build this.” She looked up from her bed, and with fading eyes looked at the horizon. All she could see was the lighthouse, she could always see

the lighthouse, but beyond it, nothing but the stillness of the sea, unmoving around her lonely island. She lifted herself slowly off the bed sticking her bare toes into her red and green slippers which were covered with little specks of black sand. They reminded me of watermelon.

"What are you building?" Olivia knelt beside Charley, the moonlight reflecting his colorful face.

"I'm building you a house, and not just any house, it'll be the only house you'll ever need. When you pass on, your kids will be able to live in it, and when they go, their kids will live in it too. It'll be a fine house, but I can't do it on my own."

"Well, you've got a pretty decent house right there."

"Yes, but this is just basic. I really think you can help. Here are some tools." He thrust a couple of different sized sticks and oddly shaped stones in Olivia's hands. "Now," he stood up and placed his right hand over his chin, scratching his stubble, his face moving in all different directions. "This house needs to be two stories, not one, got to have a place for the kids. Olivia, give that house another story."

Olivia obliged, piling some sand on top of the one story house. She was skillful in her stickwork, her fingernails accumulating sand. After awhile, the second story was finished and Olivia was happy. It was a fantastic second story. "Very impressive, Olivia!"

"Thank you. This will be a fine house."

"You're right. It will be, but," he looked over the ocean. In the distance storm clouds advanced. "It's not there yet. It needs a chimney, a fireplace, a place where you can snuggle up when it's cold. Olivia, give that house a fireplace and chimney."

"Yes, a fireplace and chimney sounds nice." She went back to work placing two sticks with a bunch of sand around to build a chimney. At the bottom she dug a little hole, and peeled another stick throwing stringy pieces of wood in the hole. It was a fantastic chimney and fireplace.

"Excellent, excellent."

"Thank you. This will be a fine house."

"You're right." Charley's dark eyes sharpened. "You know what it needs though? A couple of balconies. We have such a wonderful view here, how could we not have some balconies to lounge on and take in this whole scene?"

"Balconies are so elegant." She smiled.

"Yes, they are. Olivia, make some balconies." And she went back to

work, adding wet sand to the outside of the house, forming two different balconies, one facing the north shore, and the other facing the south shore. They were fantastic balconies.

“Marvelous, those balconies will be used for many years to gaze at the ocean, and view the stars.” He pointed triumphantly upward.

“Thank you. This will be a fine house.”

“It’s almost there. Just a few more finishing touches Olivia.” He stood there looking out at the ocean scratching his face. “How about a beautiful porch with a front yard that leads to the beach, and some flowers and grass?”

“I’d love that.”

“Splendid, now get to work.” Olivia went back to work, her soft fingers starting to crack and blister, yet she kept smiling and making the porch and greenery around the front of her fine house. “Olivia, you need to work faster, it’s almost dawn. I want to see this house done before then.” His streams were starting to lose pace.

“Of course, of course,” she said, and she worked faster and faster, smoothing out the landscape to make the house presentable. Daylight was coming, and as I left, Charley was still talking, “How about a basement? There has to be a wine cellar, and a backyard. Maybe there needs to be a guest house.” She always replied with a nod and a smile, and continued to work as hard as she could on her fine house.

Thunderstorms and Teapots

There was only the time in the morning when she spoke of thunderstorms and teapots. There was only that moment in between when he paused and she knew that before she could take another breath, it would be over.

There were days when she could feel the earth breathing like her. In gulps and gasps because sometimes she forgot to breathe. And there were mornings when the light was dim in the bathroom she wondered when she would die. And how.

He never wondered. He knew.

He, a broom of a man. She, a dustpan of a woman.

And so the dance began. Loose and two steps to the East. Two steps to the back door. Their limp arms fought with one another. And then total silence.

“Have you ever been to Alaska?”

“No.”

“Have you ever wanted to go?”

“No.”

That was how it was with them. Always so trite. But in her heart she knew that Kansas had better thunderstorms, the best kind. Because the air turns green with electricity. And she always loved green the best.

In the end, she left before he could dip her, Hollywood style. On the steps of the New York Public Library. On the steps of a thunderstorm.

Mama and Papa's Hacienda

There were two decades in my life when I was afflicted with an irrational and insatiable compulsion to see what was on the other side of walls. This included rooms beyond closed doors, the contents of people's pockets, and the secrets alluded by their glances. It was a sort of paranoia, a distrust of surfaces. I needed to know everything that was hidden. It was a futile quest for unattainable truths.

While an infant, at the bazaar around the Redemptorist Church in Baclaran, a fortuneteller touched my forehead and told my mother I would visit the farthest corners of the world. I did not believe it was the prophecy but that itch in my feet that pushed me into that rickety junk across Kowloon Bay, or to ascend the sheer side of a cliff onto the ramparts of Edinburgh Castle, or to ice skate the frozen canal from Ottawa to the Quebec shore. I was compelled to set my eyes on the unknown around those corners. Even when the responsibilities of adulthood confined me to one place, at my new home on the California coast, I kept venturing into strange neighborhoods. But in every new place I turned into, here or abroad, there were more unexplored dark alleys and more frustration—never anything that resembled the satisfaction I sought. It was not until Mama's funeral when I had to make that journey back to where I grew up, to that place where I was intimate with every cobwebbed crevice, every insect that crawled in the plants, every stone in the cobbled roads, every leaf in the trees and the spirits that haunt their hollow trunks—all along it was in this familiar past as opposed to some alien geography that I would find some peace.

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They were my grandparents, but I called them Mama and Papa—mother and father. Tita So said my cousins and I, while toddlers, copied what she and my father and my other aunts and uncle had called them, and so it stuck among us.

They lived in a two-story hacienda along the paved and bustling Calle Real that connected Las Piñas to Alabang and Zapote, on an intersection with an unnamed dirt road that meandered through some

scattered tin hovels and thatch kubos behind the property—a road that ended with a wall of high grass along the border with Parañaque. A wrought-iron gate separated the town from the family estate; it opened to a driveway lined with hedges of fragrant sampaguitas and gumamelas where Papa parked his gold coupe, the one with the sunroof, the only one of its kind in the whole province of Rizal.

The mahogany two-paneled door opened to the slick marble floor and high ceiling of the foyer, where hung a brass and crystal chandelier. There was an upright piano that Tita Fa played when Mama and Papa had guests over for *mirienda*. They sat on the plush couches and set their porcelain demitasses on glass tables with gold-leaf legs. Mama would brag about the inebriated Bavarian expatriate whom Papa out-drunk to win the peculiar mechanized statuette that dripped aromatic oil along nylon strings, simulating rain; or the Sri Lankan envoy who presented them with the ornate figurine of a train of elephants carved out of a single ivory tusk; or the origins of the oriental rug beneath their feet, bought from a Chinese merchant in Binondo who stole it from the Forbidden City and smuggled it across the Straights of Luzon to Nueva Castilla. Then Papa had the electric organ imported from Hamamatsu; one Christmas, after *Misa de Gallo*, Tita Fa played carols on it before the presents were opened.

A flight of steps underground led to what was called the dungeon: a bedroom once shared by my father and Tito Mi before they got married and moved to their own houses on the other side of Manarigo Creek. Upstairs was Mama and Papa's room, and adjacent were two other bedrooms that my four aunts occupied during their maiden days. The upstairs bedrooms were connected on the outside by a lanai. During the hottest part of the afternoon, Papa would spread his cot and have his siesta there.

The lanai overlooked the expanse of the property. In the middle was a quadrangle of grass often visited by cellophane-winged swarms of coral, lime, and violet *tutubis*, especially in the cool days before and after typhoons. To the right was the wet kitchen where the *katulong* prepared the family's meals, and connected to that was their raised quarters. To the left was the shed that housed the water pump and the garden where the family pets were buried. At the very back, at the end of the stepping-stone path that intersected the grass quadrangle was a pond and the grotto of the Blessed Virgin Mary. At nighttime the future could be divined by standing on the seventh step-stone and after posing a question in the quietness of the heart, the Immaculate Mother would nod or shake her head.

On the other side of the dirt road Papa built an entire recreation

center: there was a swimming pool, a basketball court, and a multi-level building—the top floor was a gymnasium where my aunts did calisthenics and my father practiced his arnis. The bottom was a lounge where Tito Mi lazed and got drunk on lambanog, smoked imported cigarettes, and thumbed through his glossy magazines. In the back lot, Papa raised the fighting cocks which had a reputation among the sabongeros of Zapote as being the fiercest in the region, though on some occasions, Papa would come home with the family's supper instead of a champion. Because of their value, Papa hired a katulong to sleep in a kubo near their pens to attend to them during the day and deter thieves at night.

Across from the gymnasium, surrounded by a grove of fruit-bearing macopa, atis, and bayabas, Papa built a stone crypt to house a life-size statue of the corpse of Jesus, which weekly Mama came to lay a wreath of sampaguita buds and recite a Devotion. Every year, the Parish of Christ The King would borrow the Jesus to feature in their Biyernes Santo procession down Calle Real to the Chapel of The Seven Wounds. It was the one time Mama forbade anyone to play across the way, or anywhere else for that matter; no one was allowed any enjoyment in recognition of the sorrow of the Crucifixion. She warned that scraped knees or elbows inflicted on that holiest of holy days would never heal.

My father and all my aunts and uncles were born in that hacienda, including the ones I never got to meet because they died in infancy: the boy that came before my father, and the triplets who they referred to as the three Marias, and there was another but I only heard him or her being spoken about one time—their ghosts, Mama said, walked the halls and sat with them at supper—all of them except for the youngest, Tita La, who came into the world in the newly opened Perpetual Help Hospital in Pamplona, and perhaps this was why she received the brunt of her siblings' abuse, like that one time my father was drunk and urinated all over her. After, only the stray pusa gave birth to her litter of kitings in the hacienda, in the crawlspace under the katulong's quarters.

There were three of us cousins who came a few months apart in the late Seventies. Tita Do had Ana, Tito Mi had Niko, and my father, Re, had me. We had cousins older and younger, but because the three of us were raised simultaneously, often sharing the same crib for naps, we remained very close throughout our earliest years. Every weekend, every time off from school, every holy day and its eve, we would gather at Mama and Papa's, up until my tenth birthday when I left Las Piñas and would not return until Mama's funeral, twenty years later.

I had held that moment I departed as the day my afflictions began. Thrust into different countries, incomprehensible languages, and odd customs, I had supposed I was searching for something that resembled this place I left behind. But upon stepping out onto the tarmac, under the heavy, humid Manila night, a repressed memory dislodged itself from some recess in my mind. I was certain that it was this scene that occurred a few months before I left Mama and Papa's, where Ana, Niko, and I huddled together during a similar balmy evening, pestered by itchy lamok bites on our bare, skinny legs, that the sight before my eyes marred the way I would see the world before me.

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Ana was the eldest of the three of us, and from the beginning she had been a tomboy. There was one summer when she got lisa in her hair after she wrestled with a filthy boy who lived at the end of the dirt road, because he tried to give her a love note. So Tita Do shaved off all her curls. Since then, she had always worn her hair short like Niko and me—and when we would swim in Papa's pool, swimming trunks just like ours.

She would be the one to instigate all our mischief: it was her idea to pit Niko and me in a contest to determine who could eat more green sabas, which Mama had been waiting to ripen to deep-fry for mirienda. She also officiated the fight-to-the-death on the narrow trunk of the hewn buko where Niko punched me on the mouth, knocking out one of my front milk teeth. Niko was so frightened he would get in trouble that he climbed to the highest boughs of the manga that grew by the pens of Papa's fighting cocks. When he did not show up for our bath before supper, Mama found him in the manga, refusing to descend. She told him the kapre that lived in the wood would eat his eyeballs, and sure enough, he scurried down—little red marks all over his body from where the red langgam bit him. One afternoon, Tita So and her boyfriend, who were finishing medical school, decided to circumcise Niko and me, side by side, in the living room of the hacienda, Papa's old periodicals under us to prevent blood from staining the upholstery. It was Ana who held the page of the manual open—like an altar boy with the Catechism—all the while laughing and antagonizing as Niko and me wept like little girls.

Kuya Nono was Ana's older brother, and at this time, he made his room in the dungeon instead of with his family on the other side of the Manarigo—probably because it was closer to Intramuros where he was enrolled at the Colegio de San Juan de Letran. But we never saw Kuya

Nono with a book—for that matter, we hardly saw him awake during any of the early parts of the day. He would emerge from the dungeon some time after siesta, his hair disheveled. He would get one of the katulong to fry some eggs and put the clay pot of rice back on the coals and then send another to go down Calle Real to purchase a bottle of sarsaparilla. After, he would go back into the dungeon or catch a jeepney towards Sucat—either way he would not be seen until the following late afternoon.

It must have begun in the middle months of the year, after the monsoon season, because the winds were cool and moist and the giant palakas rampant. It was a Saturday afternoon: Ana had caught a large, warty one perched on the feet of the Blessed Virgin Mary. After tiring of watching it slosh around inside the macapuno jar, Ana decided we would use it for target practice. With some twine stolen from Mama's sewing box we strung its jumping legs between the kamyas and duhat trees by the water pump, and from twenty paces, hurled pebbles at it. We stopped when someone began laughing from inside the wet kitchen; we could make out Kuya Nono's silhouette through the screen, sitting at the table, accompanied by the sound of utensils ticking on flatware.

"Lampas!" Kuya Nono jeered as Niko's shot missed the target. Ana's bid also sailed wide, hitting the metal side of the water tank. "Tsk, tsk, tsk. Ano kayo, mga bulag?" He came out of the wet kitchen and stood behind us, his bottle of sarsaparilla in one hand, stray grains of rice stuck to the side of his mouth and the stretched collar of his wrinkly white kamisa chino. Kuya Nono handed the bottle to Niko, picked up a pebble and sailed it about a thumb's width left of the palaka's torso.

"Ay, sayang!" the three of us gasped. Kuya Nono reclaimed his bottle from Niko and was about to retreat to the dungeon when he turned around and took another look at the condemned amphibian and its executioners. He motioned for us to follow him.

He led us across the dirt road to the orchard around the crypt of Jesus. He shuffled through some low branches of the macopa until he found one that suited him. He bent the limb back and forth until it snapped off. We returned to the hacienda where he rummaged through the boxes in the foyer where Tita So kept some medical supplies for school: Kuya Nono took a length of rubber hose. From Mama's sewing kit, he cut out a leather patch. We were impressed by how quickly he operated, how he knew where everything was to be found within the hacienda, and how convenient that none of the adults were around to question our actions.

On a table in the wet kitchen, Ana, Niko, and I huddled around him as he whittled at the branch with a paring knife and fastened the hose and

the leather strip to it. After he was done, he presented it to us with such a flourish as if we knew what it was.

“Kuya, ano ‘yan?” Ana scratched her head.

“Tirador!” Kuya Nono said with all his white teeth visible.

“Ti—ra—?” We repeated, still uncertain of what it did. We followed him outside to the twenty-pace marker. He picked up a stone and placed it in the leather cradle. When he pulled back on the rubber hose, I knew at that moment the power the thing harnessed, the havoc it could cause—the agape stares on Ana and Niko’s face mirrored the same sentiment. Kuya Nono squinted one eye, adjusted his aim, and then released his grip. The projectile rifled through the air with such velocity that it made a whistling sound on its way, with perfect precision, to explode the strung-up captive in two, each half still attached to the twine which swung those fractions to strike the opposite trunks with simultaneous thuds. The stone ricocheted skyward off the concrete wall at the limit of the quadrangle then plunked onto the tin roof of the hacienda.

Nono looked over both shoulders. He knelt down to Ana’s eye-level and whispered: “Huwag n’yong ipakita kay Mama o Papa, ha?” He touched his pointer finger to the tip of his nose and winked. “Shhhh....” He stowed the weapon in the garter of Ana’s shorts and pulled her t-shirt over it. “Ti—ra—dor,” he mouthed to us.

“Ti—ra—dor. Tirador!” We were finally able to pronounce it. He gave us each a pat on the head before descending into the dungeon.

The three of us dashed across the way to the orchard. On the stone steps of the crypt, Ana took it out of her garter, and for a minute or so we admired the craftsmanship of our new plaything. Then we took turns firing it at tree trunks, at fruits that dangled from branches, and at tin cans lined along the cinderblock wall. By late afternoon, we had become so proficient at striking stationary targets that we turned our attention to mobile ones. We aimed skywards at the brown-plumed mayas and blue-black kalapatis perched on the telephone wires—but they were able to evade and flutter off, sending our missiles rogue, some landing on Papa’s pens, causing the fighting cocks to cackle with nervousness.

Cora was the katulong assigned to live in the kubo to watch them. After the second or third barrage from the sky, the fighting cocks stirred to such a commotion that Cora stuck her head out the thatch door to investigate. Realizing that we were about to get yelled at, we hid behind a gumamela bush; Ana replaced the tirador in her garter. Cora took two steps out and somehow knew where we were hiding.

“Hoy!” She yelled in a deep, raspy voice, putting her wiry hands on

her thick waist. She flipped her long and matted curly black hair over her broad shoulders, exposing her significant neck. Her hair looked like that of the wig on the statue of Jesus in the crypt behind us; her skin, chocolate and curdled like the champurrado we would have for *mirienda* – before lightening it with evaporated milk. We had joked among the three of us that Papa put her in charge of the fighting cocks to keep her out of sight of the guests. “Hoy!” With that she pointed at our position, ground her teeth, and lunged as if to make chase; we sprinted from our cover back to the hacienda.

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After our baths and supper, instead of watching translated Castilian teleseryes on the crackly black-and-white with Mama, Tita So and Tita Fa, Ana, Niko, and I went to knock on the dungeon door. Kuya Nono opened it a crack, and with his heavy, blood-shot eyes recognizing us, let us enter. The dungeon had a low roof that I could jump up to touch with my three longest fingers. The floor was of a smooth, crisscrossed wooden tile pattern that was slippery with socks or oversized pajamas that went past the toes. Kuya Nono had a red-orange lava lamp sitting on top of a wood-paneled color television; he was watching an American movie on the Betamax. The air conditioner had been running for some time, and because the room was partially underground, it was much colder than any other room in the hacienda. Kuya Nono reclined on his bed; he threw some pillows and sheets at us and ordered us to be quiet for the duration of the movie. It was some sort of police detective story that had a lot of gun fighting, explosions, open mouth kissing, and men and women wrestling with each other under silky covers.

Before the movie was over, nearing our bedtime, Mama went around the hacienda looking for us; she opened the dungeon door without knocking and saw Ana, Niko, and me huddled together under one sheet in front of the television. She was ready for bed herself, dressed in her batik duster with the Rosary threaded through her fingers.

“Tara – matulog na kayo,” she beckoned us upstairs. Then she warned that if we stayed up any later the *tikbalang* would snatch us away in its hooves and eat our livers. Kuya Nono covered his mouth with his palm and sounded a whinny; he clicked his tongue like the syncopated gallop of that half-man, half-horse monster that came and stole little children from their beds. “Nono –,” Mama shook her head at him and he stopped.

“Puwede po, dito kami matulog?” I pleaded, sinking deeper into the

pillow and sheet, showing Mama that we were already comfortable and enjoying the movie. She glanced at Kuya Nono, narrowing her eyes; he shrugged his shoulders.

“O sige,” Mama agreed and the three of us smiled at the same time. “Nono—,” she called to him with seriousness in her voice. He sat up. “Nono—,” she shook her finger at him, the Rosary dangling in them. He nodded; she closed the door behind her.

We were wide awake and buzzing when the movie ended. We decided to reenact all the shooting and exploding scenes as we remembered them. We wanted to recreate the parts with the women, too, but Ana refused the role, preferring to be the villain. Then Kuya Nono hushed us. He sat us in a circle and told us that he had an idea: we did not have to play pretend anymore. Rather, he would send the three of us on real assignments like the police detectives we just watched. Participation required the utmost skill in stealth and thievery, he said, of which he would train us. But it also required the highest level of secrecy. Then he winked and told us we would be rewarded handsomely for our services. We did not have to confer with each other to accept Kuya Nono’s offer, which Ana voiced for us. Within moments, Kuya Nono had drawn a map and an elaborate plan with a pencil on a sheet of yellow legal paper: our first assignment.

It was simple in execution: Niko and I ascended from the dungeon and up the stairs to the outside of Mama and Papa’s room. We found the door closed; Kuya Nono told us to look at the crevice underneath to determine whether they were watching television by the flickering of light—it was dark. So we relayed via the clicking call of a butiki to Ana, who was waiting at the door of the dungeon, she was clear to advance to the piano in the foyer. She stood on the bench, reached into the porcelain vase and found the money Kuya Nono said would be there. As instructed, she brought the money near the sliding doors where the streetlight illuminated a part of the room and counted only fifty pesos in small bills—no more, no less—from the wad, which she then replaced inside the vase. She scurried back to the dungeon, where she meowed like one of the stray pusa, letting Niko and I know that her phase had been completed and we could return.

“Ang galing!” Kuya Nono beamed as Ana handed him the crumpled bills. While we were out, he had put on his trousers and shoes and combed his hair; he put the money in his front pocket. “Ang galing-galing!” He turned and unlatched the window that opened to the walkway by the side of the hacienda and was about to climb out. He

looked over his shoulder at the three of us, staring at him, wondering where he was going, wondering where our reward was. “Bukas,” he promised us, but our lips grew longer and our shoulders slumped. “Eh! Ito—,” he reached into his closet and gave us each a pair of shoes, much too big for any of us. Ana, Niko, and I cheered as we slipped into them. “Huwag kayo maingay,” he warned as he boosted each of us out the window onto the walkway, “shhhh, ha!”

It was nearing midnight and, like us, Calle Real showed no signs of drowsiness, even for the eve of a Sabbath day. The clucking diesel engines of the jeepneys buzzed by the wrought-iron gate of the property, peddlers in pedicabs sold their wares of boiled balut in the shell, grilled atay, and skewered bituka. We had known the yellow glow of the streetlights from the safety of our parents’ cars, but it was not until that night that we stood bareheaded beneath them. Most of the stores were closed—the fronts of the panaderia, the botica, and the sanglaan were boarded shut, piles of garbage at the edge of the sidewalk. Ana, Niko, and I walked elbow-to-elbow behind Kuya Nono, laboring with our steps because of the oversized shoes. Kuya Nono navigated with ease over this terrain, knowing in the unlit stretches of concrete where the sidewalk cracked over sewer pipes and where there were steps down and up from driveways.

He stopped in front of a carinderia no more than two hundred paces from our front gate. It had a grimy, vinyl awning over linoleum-topped tables where sat several clusters of people, some huddled over a steaming bowl of lugaw, others dipping deep-fried tokwa into suka’t sili, a few with brown beer bottles crunching on chicharon. Kuya Nono whispered to the waitress, who he appeared to know by the way she responded with a smile and a push to his shoulder. She reached under the counter and gave him a pack of cigarettes. He handed her some bills from his front pocket, added a few more words while he pointed at a vacant table, to which he went to, sat down, and called Ana, Niko, and me to take a seat with him. He lit a cigarette which we stared at, never having seen anyone in our family other than Tito Mi smoke; he winked at us and touched his pointer finger to his nose. “Shhhh.”

The waitress came to our table carrying three plates and a brown bottle of beer. She set them all down in front of Kuya Nono, who then distributed the plates to Ana, Niko, and me. It was frozen sansrival. We all dug into our mercenary pay, getting the buttery icing all over our lips and cheeks. The waitress took a seat next to Kuya Nono. I had not seen a woman like her before: it was as if she were a clown who painted her

eyelids a sparkly blue, her cheeks pink, and her lips bright red. Her hair was pulled back into a bun with loose wisps dangling about her bumpy forehead. The denim vest she wore had the two top buttons undone, exposing the cleft of her bosom on which Kuya Nono kept losing his gaze.

The waitress watched with fascination as we devoured the sansrival. “Sino’ng mga alaga mo?” She asked Kuya Nono as she studied our faces looking for any resemblances.

“Mga sundalo ko,” he said with a chuckle.

“At sino, ka,” the waitress teased, “ang kanilang komander?” Kuya Nono laughed.

“Ang komander!” He straightened in his seat into attention. With his cigarette-bearing hand he gave Ana, Niko, and me a stiff, proper salute.

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Kuya Nono sent us on more assignments—mostly minor. In the afternoon he would send us to the carinderia to pick up cigarettes or a bottle of sarsaparilla from that waitress, or he would have us keep an eye for Papa’s gold coupe so he could sneak out the dungeon window. Our reward for these would be a handful of change to buy caramelized sugar canes from the glass jars on the front counter of the botica, which we sported out of the sides of our mouths like how Kuya Nono smoked.

Some assignments were epic in scale. He commissioned us to bring him one of Tito Mi’s glossy magazines, which we guilefully obtained right from the tabletop as he dozed on the rattan recliner. On our return to the dungeon, our retreat was waylaid by Cora sweeping around the pens, so we rallied by the crypt until our route cleared. It was there Niko discovered that the magazine, when it fell open, was filled with pictures of naked American women. At the foot of the dead Jesus, we flipped through those pages, wide-eyed and wondering at the differences in the color of their hair, their eyes, and their complexion, as compared to those morenas like the waitress who strolled on Calle Real. In the dungeon, Kuya Nono went through the pages with us, giving commentary on the names and purposes of each part of their anatomies, about how ours fit into theirs, and we pretended it was the first we had seen of them. For this task Kuya Nono hailed a sorbetero and bought us triple scoops of chocolate, ube, and cheese ice cream served in a sweet roll.

Beginning with that incident with the magazine, the three of us learned that there were certain things we could get away with on our own. One time Kuya Nono sent us to the vase above the piano for his

cigarette money and we pocketed an additional five pesos, which Ana took to the sari-sari store to buy a kilogram of garlic-fried corn kernels. The next time, it was Niko's hipon crackers. Then it was my polvoron with pinipig. Of course, we did not show this to Kuya Nono, so we started our own cache of goodies right under Jesus' red, gold-encrusted burial gown, right between the statue's legs. It lasted until that one weekend we were betrayed by a red trail of langgam; we took our tainted booty and chucked it over the cinderblock wall.

Kuya Nono encouraged us to keep training at our craft. We practiced our silent walking over the dried leaves in the orchard; to improve balance, one of us stood on the hewn buko while the other two shook it; and to our aunts' surprise, we joined their morning calisthenics in the gymnasium. By this time, Kuya Nono had crafted two more tiradors so we each had our own; and by this time we had become proficient marksmen. Niko was the first to slay a kalapati off the telephone wire. Though it already looked haggard and death-bound before we shot it out of the sky, we were proud of our first live kill. We gave it a proper burial next to the water pump where all the family pets were buried.

Our skill in stealth had also improved. From a hiding place atop the manga, we shot a stone at a frying pan Cora hung outside her kubo to dry. The sharp ring brought her out the thatch door, her thick, black eyebrows knitting on her forehead. Unlike before, we could not be spotted, even when the sun was at its highest point of the day. She shook her fist at an invisible adversary, grunted and cursed, and then stormed back inside.

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That was how that day began: we were up in the manga aiming for Cora's frying pan. Ana's first shot was dead-on, clanking off the burnt back side, nearly knocking it off its hook. The pan was angled in such a way that it deflected the stone towards the thatch siding of the kubo—the stone retained so much of its momentum off the original target that it penetrated the thin wall.

"Aray!" was all we heard from our perch before we dropped out of sight. Ana grit her teeth, Niko bit his lip. Despite all our training, we felt guilty about hurting someone, so we raised our eyes above the branch that concealed us. We watched Cora emerge from the kubo, holding her hand to her head, blood dripping down the side of her temple. She scanned the perimeter and found us in the manga. "Hoy! Bumaba kayo d'yan! Ngayon din!" We ducked our heads again, but it was futile. We

heard her rubber sandals slapping against the balls of her feet nearing the trunk, her lisped profanities getting louder as she drew closer, but she passed right by us. She went out the gate and across the dirt road towards the hacienda. We hid our tiradors in our garters, but inside, we understood we had been caught in the act. There would be no escape from Mama's wrath.

We confessed. We surrendered the tiradors. Mama studied their construction and knew there was no way we could have made them; she turned her head towards the dungeon and raised one eyebrow. She made us apologize to Cora, who was squirming on a stool as Tita So and her boyfriend sutured her wound. Our punishment was such: we were not allowed to go into the dungeon. Furthermore, we were not to play across the way until after the Fiesta of The Assumption. That evening, we were to go straight to bed after our bath and supper, and we were denied a dessert of sweet sticky rice.

Niko and I were content to accept our penance and go to sleep. But as we lay on the floor at the foot of Mama and Papa's bed, Ana tossed and turned with such restlessness and fury, with clenched violence at the end of her limbs. She wanted some sort of retribution, she shared with Niko and me, but she just could not think of how to execute it. After Mama and Papa began snoring, Ana roused us and told us we were going to consult with Kuya Nono.

Sneaking out had become easy so we made it to the dungeon undetected. There were flickering lights coming from the crevice underneath his door and muffled sounds from within. We assumed he was awake and watching movies on the Betamax. Ana rapped the tips of her fingers on the door. There were more muffles and thuds for half a minute before Kuya Nono let the door creak open; we could only see one of his eyes through the gap. He sighed when he recognized us.

"Ano?" he mumbled. Ana explained to him that we needed his help in getting revenge on Cora. He scratched his head, opened the door and let us through. He stood bare-chested with only a pair of basketball shorts that went past his knees. His hair was tussled like the sheets on his bed in the corner. The air-conditioner was on as usual, but we found it strange that the window to the walkway was open, which allowed the hot, humid outside air into the cool room; we could hear the traffic whizzing by on Calle Real. Kuya Nono turned on a desk lamp: it illuminated streaks of deep red and sparkly blue on his lips and neck. "Ano?" he scratched his head again. Once more, Ana explained our intentions; she took the yellow legal pad from the desk and a pencil and handed it to him. He took it from

her and replaced it where it was taken. He sat down on the corner of his bed and spat out what seemed to be the first thought that crossed his mind:

“Silipan n’yo siya,” he said as he brushed us away. Kuya Nono fell back into his pillow and pulled the sheet over his face.

At that time his advice made perfect sense to us: we needed to spy on her first, gather information that we could use to devise vengeance later. But there was no plan drawn on the yellow pad—Niko and I turned to Ana, whose upward-turned eyes appeared to be reading something written on her brow. Her face beamed when the idea came to her: we followed her lead as she put on a pair of shoes from Kuya Nono’s closet. Niko and I boosted her out the already open window, and from the walkway, she pulled us up one at a time. We thrust our backs against the stone side of the hacienda, in case anyone from upstairs looked outside, and we sidled toward the dirt road.

It occurred to us, after we traversed the road and entered the orchard, at the sight of the silhouette of the manga where Mama said the kapre lived, that this was the first time we were outside and alone in the dark. We paused for a moment by the gate, calmed our panting breaths so we could listen for the slurping of eyeballs up in the boughs, or the hooves of the tikbalang on the road, or the lamenting ribbits and coos of the spirits of the palaka and kalapati we slew, or the still-born three Marias banging dishes, hungry for their supper, or the flapping batwings of the severed half of the manananggal, or the throaty snarl of the aswang, or the risen Jesus’ footsteps, looking for the polvoron with pinipig we took from his crypt and threw to the other side of the cinderblock wall. Strange there were only the rhythmic chirp of the kuliglig in the dama-de-noche, the buzz of lamok alighting on our earlobes, and the throb of our heartbeats in our throats. Ana took my hand; I took Niko’s; we pushed forward.

The yellow flame in Cora’s kubo filtered through the gaps of the weave, creating a gold-speckled perimeter atop the dirt and grass. The light was sporadically interrupted by her black shape pacing inside. Ana, Niko, and I crawled on our elbows and knees right to the kubo, each finding a partition in the thatch to peek through. Her accommodations were nothing but four walls and a roof. On the bamboo floor was a mattress big enough for one. The kerosene lamp dangled from a beam. She had a rattan shelf of her folded clothes, some toiletries, a transistor radio, and a shrine to the Santo Niño de Cebu. Flush against the back wall was a table with a gas range connected to a blue propane tank, and a tin washbasin with a plastic cup bobbing in the water.

Cora stood in front of the mirror brushing the gnarls and knots out of her tresses while humming an old Spanish harana. She still had the white gauze taped to her temple which her hands maneuvered around. She dipped a rag in the washbasin and wrung the water out with her large fingers. She wiped her face with it. She pulled her blouse off. I noted that not one aspect of her nude torso resembled the American women in *Tito Mi's* magazine—she did not have anything close to the chest on Kuya Nono's waitress: Cora's was flat like ours, her ribs showed through her taut, leathery skin, her nipples like the purple fruit of the duhat tree, squashed underfoot then dried under the sun. Niko began to giggle but Ana jabbed him on his side with her finger. Cora wiped her bushy armpits with the washcloth. She undid the button and lowered the zipper of her jean shorts, letting them fall around her ankles. She slid off her underpants. When she stood erect, in the mirror we saw the reflection of her entire naked form. Protruding from a patch of tangled black hairs in between her legs was a penis.

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Mama's funeral was held at the Parish of Christ The King. The family walked behind her hearse as it processed on Calle Real, across the bridge over Manarigo Creek and onto the burial site in Parañaque. Twenty years had given Las Piñas a new face, but in its core I felt the same heartbeat. I knew for certain that underneath the new shopping complexes and textile factories the old spirits of the wild grass fields, the fruit orchards, and the villages of scattered kubos were still there. I could close my eyes and from the wrought-iron gate find the botica, the panaderia, the sanglaan, and the carinderia—though they were long gone, replaced by concrete and steel structures. For once in all that time, I did not feel the need to look beyond the corners for I knew what would be there, though it existed only in my memory.

Kuya Nono was married and had a daughter. Ana was working as a Physical Education teacher and was living with her lover in Makati. Niko was a flight steward; he had two boys with his wife—he chose me to be his first's—Marco's—godfather. The same twenty years made them all complete strangers to me, but like the new façade time gave the city, I knew they possessed the same memories.

It had been ten years since Papa gave up cockfighting; where the pens and kubo were, he had planted a new orchard of trees where the next generation of sons and daughters and nephews and nieces now played.

Tita So mentioned that Cora went back home to her province in the Visayas right after the last of the fighting cocks were sold, and that was the last anyone has heard of Cora.

The night we snuck back into the hacienda, we did so without a word exchanged among us, bewildered by what we just saw in the kubo. We returned to the foot of Mama and Papa's bed and sought sleep, only to find the crowing announcing dawn. In accordance with Mama's punishment, we did not go into the dungeon and we did not play across the way that day. We listened to Tita Fa practice her scales on the upright piano. Papa convinced us to pluck the white hairs from his head as he took his siesta in the lanai; when he woke, we went for a drive in the gold coupe for sundaes in Alabang. We had our bath together, but our eyes averted the places between our legs for fear of recalling. We ate supper. We were given the sweet sticky rice that was withheld from us the previous night.

Then I stood on the seventh step-stone before the grotto of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Before I posed my question, I had a new thought: I wondered what was hidden underneath the Immaculate Mother's painted plaster exterior. The response did not come from her but from the discernment of my eyes: I concluded she was hollow inside. So I did not ask anything. Then after All Saints and Souls that year, I was on a plane and gone.

Twenty years later, I stood on the very same seventh step-stone. Ana and Niko saw me do this and from the half-grin on their faces told me they, too, remembered—and again, believed. Niko crouched down and whispered something to his son—probably explaining what I was doing. My godson's eyes widened. I took a deep breath. As I exhaled slowly, I realized the serenity of this familiar night matched the quietness that descended over my heart. I posed my question and finally, after all those years, got an answer.

Ox

Milton Ives swept down Highway 1 in a faded chestnut truck. At 3:37 am he jostled to a halt. A man with a large, gray ox was crossing the road. Ives pulled the truck to the safe lane, leapt out, threw his arms to the sky.

"What the hell is this?" Ives yelled. "Are you some kinda nut? You can't be hauling an ox across a highway."

The man with the ox wore a tuxedo. His eyes were bright blue, doe-shaped, pointed to the stars. He looked to be in his thirties. His ox was clean, muscular. Its horns curved down, flanking a smooth gray head.

"Are you listening to me?" Ives asked. "Who are you?"

"Douglas Lot," the man with blue eyes said, his hand on the ox's back.

"Douglas Lot. Why the hell are you on the highway?"

"I'm trying to get my ox to school."

"School?"

"Yes. He is much too clever to toil the land. He knows things. The coming of tsunamis. The severity of earth tremors. The fissures between the rain. My ox can sense these things."

Ives realized they were still standing in the middle of the lane. He looked in all directions. There was nothing but open asphalt.

"Look, Douglas. We can't stay here. Cars are headed this way. You may not see them, but they'll be here before you can say forget-me-not. We gotta move."

With gentle pressure on the forearm, Ives led Douglas and the Ox back to the safe lane.

"I want my ox to have a good school," Douglas said to the distant mountains. "With bronze archways and gilded steps. Meadow flowers and humming bird wings. The babbling of brooks, the swelling of pretty songs...."

Ives looked to the mountains. There was nothing there but a tranquil mist. He looked back at Douglas Lot. The man seems well to do, Ives thought. His watch must be worth more than any vehicle on this damn highway.

"Listen, Douglas. It seems like you really care about the ox."

"Yes. He can hold his own with geniuses or dictators. He can harness

the energy from sunlight and convert it to sugar. Not excessively. But with moderation.”

“That’s great, Douglas. You mentioned something about a school....”

“A school with bronze archways and gilded steps....”

“Yeah, yeah. I know all that. It’s swell that you want all that for your ox. And I know just the place. It’s over those mountains, on the other side.”

“The other side? A school with meadow flowers and humming bird wings?”

“Of course, Douglas. Would I lie? I used to be a student there. Only problem is, they start tomorrow. And if you don’t enroll by morning, they blackball you for the entire year. You understand?”

Douglas looked at the pavement. “I want my ox in school.”

“Okay, then. You just leave that to me. I’ll haul him into the back of my pick-up. I’ll take him to the campus with gilded steps. He’ll get the best education money can buy, you hear?”

“Yes,” Douglas said. He hugged the ox softly. “The best education money can buy.”

“And that’s what I wanted to talk to you about,” Ives said, pulling Douglas from the ox. “There’s this thing called tuition. We have to pay a fee in order to get your ox in. Does that make sense to you? Does it? Hey! Douglas! Look at me when I talk to you....”

Douglas nodded. “I have money.” He pulled out a pink wallet, handed it to Ives.

“Sweet Jesus,” Ives said. There was more cash in the wallet than he thought possible. It defied the laws of physics. Who was this man? Where was he from? It didn’t matter. Ives stuffed his pockets with the money, then handed the wallet back to Douglas. He patted the young man on his jaw, asking him to help out with the ox. Five minutes later, the beast was inside the bed of the truck, a resigned look in its eyes.

Ives smiled thinly at Douglas. “Go along, now. I’ll take care of the rest.”

“Take him to school. See that he gets his education. He’s very clever.”

“Sure, Douglas. He’ll be prime stock.”

The ox watched Ives hop into the driver’s seat. Ives turned the ignition, flipped on the headlights, darted back onto the highway as Douglas waved good-bye.

“Crazy fucking retard,” Ives said as he glanced into the rear-view mirror.

Two years later, Milton Ives was lying in bed with his Russian bride when the telephone rang.

"Hello?" Ives said into the receiver.

"Did he walk the gilded steps?" a soft voice said on the other line.

Ives shut his eye-lids. "How did you get my number?"

"I can be clever too. My ox taught me many things. He knows how to read people. Especially women."

"You little monkey! Are you saying that I'm a woman?"

"No. You don't smell like a woman. Your voice is deep. Your fingers thick."

"Thank you so much, Douglas. You're right about my fingers. Ask my wife..." Ives slapped his wife hard on the thigh. "Where are you anyway? I better not catch you in my backyard, dicking around in the gazebo."

"I am in town. I am staying at a hotel where they give you gold robes and mint bars."

"Then what the hell do you want with me?"

"I would like to visit my ox. I miss him. I want to ride his back, ask him about his education. Do you know if he's graduated?"

"Graduated? Ha! He's done more than that. He's become mayor of the town!"

Milton Ives hung up the phone, grabbed his bride by the shoulders, flicked off the oval lamp by their bed.....

When Douglas Lot found out that his Ox became mayor, he asked the concierge to shuttle him over to city hall. To his delight, there were gilded steps leading up to a bronze archway. He passed through, approached a secretary behind a marble desk. She wore horn-rimmed glasses; spoke in fabricated tones.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

"Yes," Douglas replied. "I want to see Ox."

"Mayor Ox?"

"Yes. Mayor Ox."

"One moment please."

Fifty-nine minutes later, Douglas Lot was standing in a spacious office with mahogany walls. Just above the window a framed certificate said, "To the honor of Mayor Reginald Ox." Below that was a photograph of the mayor shaking a wrinkled hand in a black sleeve.

But now the mayor was shaking the hand of Douglas Lot.

"Glad to meet you son," Ox said. "You don't mind that I got a couple reporters here? It's a long story. Hope they don't make you nervous."

"No, I don't mind," Douglas said. He nodded at the reporters who leaned against a side wall. None of them nodded back.

"Son, you look mighty familiar. Were you a boy scout? Did you make eagle? I'll bet I attended your ceremony."

Douglas tilted his head. "You look a little different than when I last saw you."

"Ah, so we did meet. I knew I recognized you. Was it at the eagle ceremony? I still can't place you."

"How was your education?" Douglas asked. "Did you listen to the babbling of brooks? The swelling of pretty songs?"

Ox put his hands to his hips. "Swelling of pretty songs? What are you talking about?"

"Did you learn new ways to harness the sun's energy? Can you convert it to greater amounts of sugar?"

A silence filled the room. Ox took one step back.

"Who are you, son?" he asked.

"Pardon me?"

"I asked you who you are."

"You don't recognize me?"

"No. I don't recognize you."

"Well that's funny," Douglas said, turning around. "Now you pretend not to know me any more. And in the old days you used to shit on my pillow."

Douglas Lot left the office. The reporters straightened their backs, scribbling in their notebooks.