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The Moon and the Scientists Below

after Forrest Gander

I am an alchemist who prays for gold and ends with an alloy.
As a tired quillworker pulls whispers of porcupine through dye,
we move through, count to three and three again.

You dragged me through a pocked sky by the rope in my mouth
when blending metals got old and I ran low on formulas.
The thin flame that shivers above my laboratory burner went out.

I tied down ropes to ground my imagination.
Loons in nickel colored lakes were just loons,
you were just a clumsy drawing on an otherwise empty page.

I know copper and tin bind to bronze but I try anyway.
Would you scold me for using useless materials?
Metal makers are as much magicians as dancers.

Before the neutrinos could react with matter,
you peeled away like a snake's ill-fitting skin,
a golden shell some squatting child will scrape
into a plastic bag and show the whole first grade.

My Grandmother's Fluidity and an Afternoon Waiting For the Ferry

At the dock, my grandmother dropped five dollars into the ocean. She screamed, waved her straw hat, and we scattered in search of help, though we knew she didn't need the bill and just wanted to see the dock boys scramble. My grandfather was inside watching a golf match—he couldn't remember the difference between the tournaments, but followed them all the same. Years ago he might have been mistaken for a dock boy. It was the shoes, you know, the boat shoes. He told us he didn't mind the mix-ups: He'd always felt like an off-duty boatman, anyway. Finally a boy came and dropped the ladder off the dock, one of those ladders that you see and think: When will they ever use that? And your father replies that it doesn't matter and to please pass the ketchup. But they use it, one of the loading boys abandons the luggage and drops into the ocean. By then the bill is sinking, and a crowd has gathered, and everyone except for us is holding their breath. But he can't get it; it slips into the soft green water. Electric disappointment flits through. When the boy climbs back up the ladder, his Dockers and polo shirt soaked and filmy, he apologizes and tries to offer a free ferry ride for his failure. It feels like the end of an episode of any sitcom, when everything's been resolved and Barry loves Jan again. You know there is nothing more to see, but you keep sitting on the couch anyway. My grandmother's still smiling and refuses his apologies. She pulls out her wallet and hands him another five.

The Progression of Disease

I imagined you had an incurable disease. We were deciding the ingredients for brownies and I offered to bring rainbow sprinkles and you said, “It just doesn’t seem right.”

We liked to pretend we were animals. You always picked first and got lion, wolf. I was the frog, the turtle, the rat. You scratched my arms with your plastered nails that you claimed were claws and snarled between make-believe teeth.

We told each other secrets and I told you mine about the 5th grade spin-the-bottle. You never told me yours—you just asked about technique.

We were both deceptive once. Sometimes when I glanced behind my seat you liked to squeeze the view of my head between your thumb and forefinger with the tips of your make-believe claws.

When you were paralyzed by pretend diagnostics I let you die. I liked to say it was only old age when you turned thirteen and ran towards boys with 99-cent rings and fake bouquets. Your body decayed like the cosmetics you tried to overlay: red and harsh.

Red, Wolf, Path

Once upon a time, the path to Grandmother's house was paved. It was a foreign sight among the dense evergreens and oaks, and Grandmother did not like it.

"Blocking the path blocks destiny," she said often to her granddaughter Carmine. "The forest will not have it. They tried to pave my path before and the roots of the trees ripped up the telephone poles! The trees that were cut one day grew back the next, multiplied by six! Vines crawled into their machines! I tell you, Carmine, they won't last long."

"I believe you, Grandmother," Carmine responded. Like her grandmother she was worried for the forest, but more worried for herself.

"After that they gave me back the deed to the land," Grandmother rubbed her hands together, her skin the same color as an acorn husk, but not the same smooth texture. "So I buried it. They came back and I told them the forest ate it." Grandmother's laugh scared the crows off the roof of the house.

Carmine was a sweet girl, shy but polite like a little princess. She was fair and gentle with a good heart and obeyed her grandmother. She feared wolves, because of her grandmother's stories. Wolves ruined lives.

"The Falun family has suffered at the paws of wolves for generations." Grandmother chopped a carrot while reciting to Carmine. "Your great-grandmother had that horrible music teacher who told her she was terrible, and would never be able to get her arpeggios right, right at the time of your great-great-grandfather's death. Of course she'd hang herself." Grandmother chopped with sick hurry. "Then there was me, and hah! Do I even need to explain to you what a bastard your grandfather was? Next, your mother who drowned in Egypt while with a crocodile hunter or

whatever. Then your sister! I don't even know her alive or dead! Went to the circus, met that gypsy woman and bolted.”

Carmine grew more uneasy as her least favorite part came up and tried to distract her grandmother, “Grandma—”

But she could not be stopped. “You! Someday you'll meet a wolf and leave too! I just pray you live; two died, two lived so you'll be the tie breaker. I tell you, Carm, we are all Little Red Riding Hood. We're all stupid broads who strayed from the path and met up with the wolf. Maybe you'll be different. Little girls need to find their paths and stick with them.”

Carmine excused herself and left the house to get fresh air. As much as she loved her grandmother, the woman confused her. Grandmother said there was no woodsman to come and save a sorry ass, only Red, Wolf and path.

“Why do I have to be Little Red anyway?” Carmine looked at the path ahead of her with a weighty sigh. Grandmother would realize she had cut the the vegetables too fine for the stew she was making, curse, and start over. It would give Carmine just enough time to go on a quick walk to clear her head.

“I will just walk in a straight line. I will not stray from the path,” Carmine said.

Carmine tread onto the asphalt with care, as she had never seen the likes of it before. The tar was still hot even though the sun was on the verge of setting and Carmine could feel it through her soles.

In the woods, Carmine heard the soft crooning of tree spirits, their single-noted songs telling tales of loss. Flickers of light puffed in and out between the trees as will-o'-the-wisps tried to enchant her into the forest. After a time, Carmine realized that she had walked so far that she could no longer see her house, for a fine mist had settled all around her. Fear grew within her as she heard footsteps approaching.

“Who’s there? Grandmother,” Carmine asked the abyss. The spirit of the birch tree giggled high above Carmine’s head. The sky was dimming quicker than it was supposed to, like someone had taken a quill and let the ink run through the parchment until all that was left was blackness.

Then her wolf appeared. He was not what Carmine expected. Her wolf was not a worker constructing the path, nor was he a crocodile hunter, gypsy or music teacher. Her wolf, was an actual wolf. His tail was charcoal-gray and bushy, his paws horribly clawed, and his muzzle fanged and wide; he could crush Carmine’s head.

He was a gentlemanly wolf, however. He stood on his hind legs at roughly six feet carrying a gold-etched walking stick in one paw. He had a fine, black silk hat with holes for his ears that perfectly matched his tweed suit.

“Ah, hello little one. I hope I did not startle you.” The wolf took off his hat and bowed to Carmine.

“Wolf,” was all Carmine could say.

“Yes, I am a wolf,” the wolf chuckled. “My name is Lupe. Pardon the pun, it is an unfortunate joke that runs in my family.”

“...You are a wolf.”

Lupe sighed and put his hat back on, “Well if that's all you are going to say, I must be going. I have urgent business to attend to.”

Lupe’s two steps before he looked back at Carmine were delicate. “Are you really not going to say a word?”

“I’m sorry...” Carmine mumbled so low that if it were not for Lupe’s wolfish sense of hearing he would not have heard her.

Lupe grinned and his tail started to swish, “All will be forgiven if you just tell me your name.”

“Carmine,” she spoke.

“Carmine,” the name rumbled between Lupe's fangs, “Lovely.”

She felt her knees knock together as the wolf came closer. He was going to eat her. She stayed on the path and he was still going to eat her. She wasn't sure what was worse, the fear freezing her veins or the fact that Grandmother had lied.

“Please don't eat me,” she quivered.

Lupe stopped short, “Eat you?” After a short pause between the two, Lupe guffawed loudly, “Hah! You need not fear me, dear Carmine. I have never felt the urge to dine on human flesh. Admittedly, I do know a few out there who have eaten little girls, but let me assure you, they were banished from the wolf community. They also said humans are quite stringy, in any case.”

Carmine was not sure whether she was comforted by this news or disturbed by it, “O-oh. Well, that's good then...”

“Indeed! Now tell me, lovely Carmine, is it a straight path to the house of Madam Falun? Or does this path eventually have a few twists and turns?”

It took Carmine a second to realize that Lupe was talking about her grandmother.

“Oh! Yes, it's just a straight path to Grandmother's,” said Carmine, trying her best to seem less nervous and more polite.

Lupe licked his lips, “The famous Hester Falun is your grandmother? Well I do say, that is quite remarkable!”

“How? What did my grandmother do?” Carmine's curiosity finally won out over her fear as she placed a petite hand on Lupe's coat sleeve.

“Well, lead me to your Grandmother and I will tell you, sweet Carmine.” With great flourish Lupe hooked his arm in hers, and the two marched back towards Grandmother's house.

“Why are you going to see my grandmother, anyway, Mister Lupe?”

Lupe chuckled, his tail giving the littlest of wags, “Please, little Carmine, just Lupe. And in order for me to explain why I must see your grandmother, first you must understand what your grandmother is famous for.”

The tree spirits slowly lowered their songs to little hums, and cracked branches as they followed the couple from up in the trees. The spirit of the birch tree, who had not stopped giggling since Lupe’s arrival, hushed, perhaps at the behest of the other spirits. Though the path was still covered in fog and night had stolen the sun, the will-o’-the-wisps lined the trail for Carmine and Lupe to see.

“Quite some time ago, wolves had a very bad reputation. I do not blame humans for these bad rumors, for most of them are based on fact. Actually, I do have some distant cousins that are part of that Mexican Lobo Drug Cartel, but we do not speak of that. Anyway, when wolves were still quite the menace to pigs with unusual houses and girls in red, there were those that would seek out and hunt my kind. They formed a band of wolf hunters called the Woodsmen. Your grandmother was a particularly good Woodsmen.”

Carmine tore her arm away from Lupe’s, “What!? You must be mistaken. My grandmother *cannot* be a Woodsmen. We are all Little Red Riding Hood.”

Lupe's lips twitched in humor at Carmine’s sudden outburst, “Pardon? Why are you all Little Red?”

Carmine clasped her hands to her heart and looked down, “Grandmother says all little girls are Little Red. We must find our paths and stick to them, or else get eaten.”

Lupe's ears tilted downwards as he shook his head, “I believe that is what she tells you to protect you, fair Carmine. She does not believe the words. If she were confined to one path herself, she never would have stopped being a Woodsman. Or become a mother, or a grandmother!”

“Carmine,” Lupe reached out and tilted up Carmine's chin until their eyes met, “it is not that path that matters, only the destination. Where do you want to end up?”

Carmine took Lupe's great fluffy paw and held it for a moment before she started to walk again, “...My grandmother was not a Woodsman,” she said.

Lupe's ears drooped further, but he still marched by Carmine's side. “I must object, she most certainly is. I am going to see her just for the fact that she was once a Woodsman.”

“Grandmother says there are no Woodsmen. Just Red, Wolf, and the path.”

“What she says and what she believes are clearly two different things. I can prove that she killed my great-great-grandfather, after all.”

Carmine shook her head, “I don't believe you.”

“She did kill him. However, he was killed for mentally torturing some poor young girl. Though it was acceptable to eat a girl back in those days, it was not acceptable to ‘play with your food’ if you'll pardon the phrase, *and* he never ate her anyway! After my great-great-grandfather was killed my family moved away and we all changed our surname. Recently, however, I've been dabbling a bit into genealogy. In order for the research of my family to continue, I need to find out his name, and the true surname of my family. Your grandmother will be able to help me with that.”

As they walked, something clicked within Carmine, “Is it possible that your great-great-grandfather was a music teacher?”

Lupe's ears pricked up, “I believe that's exactly what he did! How did you know?”

“My great-grandmother killed herself because her music teacher said she was never going to be good enough to be a concert pianist. Perhaps it was your great-great-grandfather that drove my great-grandmother to suicide, and to avenge her mother, my grandmother hunted him down.”

Lupe nodded thoughtfully, “But your grandmother did not like the path she had chosen for herself, and was determined not to let you go down that path, so she never told you.”

Carmine paused in thought, “I’m not sure but it seems plausible; unless you’re lying.”

“Darling Carmine, I could never.”

The spirits in the trees chattered at the sudden change of events. The birch tree spirit howled and a gust of wind blew through the forest, clearing the fog off the path. Carmine flinched as suddenly they were in front of the house and Grandmother was on the porch.

“Leave,” Grandmother told Lupe. Carmine distanced herself from Lupe so she could watch the both of them.

“Madam Falun, I came to inquire about—”

“*Leave.*” The will-o’-the-wisps sputtered like candles and changed shades at the rising tension. Carmine had a feeling they were cheering for Grandmother.

“—my great-great-grandfather, who you—”

“*Leave!*” The spirit of the birch tree cackled from above.

“—apparently killed.”

It was silent as Grandmother regarded Lupe, and Lupe her. After a time, Grandmother broke away to look at Carmine, “Come here, Carmine. You’re lucky he didn’t eat you on the path, foolish child.”

Carmine shook her head, “You always told me that by staying on the path I would be protected, kept from wolves, yet I still met Lupe.”

“It was a metaphorical path, Carmine. Now *come here.*” Grandmother did not seem as strong as she once was to Carmine, more like a superstitious old woman.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were a Woodsman?” A tree spirit deep in the forest gave a breathy moan.

Grandmother hissed, “Get in the house, Carmine.”

“You said there was no Woodsman, Grandma! Only Red, the Wolf and the path. You *lied*,” Carmine growled, using Grandmother’s own fierceness against her.

“I told you that because the Woodsmen were cowards!” The woman shouted, “I killed the wolf that killed your great-grandmother, I won't deny it. Then I met your Grandfather. Got me pregnant and left. I have your mother and she grows up and goes down the same path as me, only worse because she got knocked up twice. First with your no-good sister, then you. Does my life sound like a good life, Carm?” Grandmother shivered, and for the first time in her life, Carmine saw her falter. “It’s better to be Red, Carmine. I've been a woodsman, and just...Just look what happened.”

Carmine rushed up to her grandmother, and clutched the old, frail woman to her chest. As tears escaped Grandmother’s eyes, the will-o’-the-wisps faded into the dark. The tree spirit of birch booed from up above; she was hoping for more drama.

“I don’t want to be Red, and I don’t want to be a Woodsman, Grandma. I want to be a Wolf.”

There was a rustling as the spirits mourned Grandmother’s sorrow at losing another granddaughter. The birch spirit cooed in delight.

The old woman was weeping in Carmine’s lap, but the girl did not flinch. She looked older and prouder as she turned to Lupe.

Lupe, who had been standing in the background the whole time, grinned, revealing sharp, sharp fangs. He swallowed, and extended his paw. Carmine gently placed her grandmother’s small form on the porch, and strode over to take his paw.

Red and Wolf took the path without a blessing.

Delicate Danger

To watch an orb weaver construct its web
is to admire the sun's rays
from a few feet away.

To listen to a widow wail,
as she keeps her grip on the web stem,
is to see a widow eat her mate
whose legs struggle,
bound by her silk.

To let the harvestman perform
his balancing act is to celebrate
the success of an exhibition.

After my observation
is the conclusion:
an arachnid
is such a delicate danger.

For when I run into the weaver's web
it panics on my left cheek
as if it is burning to death.

So when my body feels light and warm
I allow the widow to crawl on my arm
until it digs its head through the hairs,
and sinks its fangs into my skin.

I cannot help but witness
the destiny of the harvestman,
which is to walk across a fire ant pile
and have all of its eight legs
torn from its body,
poisoned and then devoured.

Enshrined

I

I will remember when I was a lobster
and you were a bird. Not a turkey or a chicken,
but a family pet the kids forgot to feed.

I would watch you sleep, your head under your wing.
You seemed prostrated and removed,
your wings yellow and green, shedding
into the bottom of your cage. They are of too much value
to be discarded between the bars
with newspaper shreds and excrement.

In the air between my bag on the counter
and my bag in the freezer, I saw you again.
This time I thought of my mother and her love of creatures
warm-blooded. She claimed my father was a cow,
his photo just above the piles of
butcher-wrapped pink we stared at from our tank.

In the freezer I thought of you and hoped
that you were happy and I hoped
that they would throw pieces of my body
into your cage to sustain you.

II

The night I first saw you
my shell was crushed into the flowerbed
with the lettuce and other things deemed useless.

I waited and sank into the earth
until your shoebox
was buried in the garden with a prayer
and a new pet request.

The first time it rained, the cardboard you slept in
fell away and we made love beneath the topsoil
surrounded by tulip roots.
We slept and loved in the dirt,

making tiny saplings, yellow and green
like their mother's wings, a touch of burgundy
from my brown to boiled red skin.

I will remember that you were a bird
and that I was a lobster, but we will only be remembered
as the parents of our child the tree.

Tenochtitlan, 1570

Santa Maria with her hands clasped and mouth barely closed
fades into the adobe chapel. Two sticks tied in a cross slant above her.

I measure my steps as the red clay between us
evaporates just like the well water.

Her eyes like brown stones look at mine. She is just as lost as I am.

She knows why I am here, why the Aztec temples
no longer suffice. She knows I must stay.

Too much jewelry for a funeral, not enough black. He is my first
death in the family. I do not go inside.

In the barrios, fever still burns like a falcon coming in on the breeze.
A verse of *Cuando el Pobre* vibrates, a celebration of the dead.

Somewhere in the distance there is a festival with warm food and music.
I turn to join it. *My apologies, Maria.*

She looks at me with the eyes of a young mother.
Don't.

Canis Lupis Familiaris

The dog is in the yard again,
its head between its paws
in the cropped grass.
These days, there is little purpose
in rollicking, little reason
to revive a forgotten refrain.
The pack has disassembled.
Red meat is only a nagging memory—
someone else's bundle of rope.
Where has the fury gone?
Nestled, perhaps, in the downy cloud
closest to the skin.
Those diminutive pools of fur
it fathered—what hands
run through their thick coats?
Whose lawns do they lie in?
There is nothing,
nothing that is their own.

Summer of 1967: Expelled Indefinitely

He came home draped in flannel,
a cigarette filter tucked behind his ear.
You watch him from the porch—
let the wind chime drown his voice.
Remember the way weight molded
your bodies into the grass fields
only to be blown back into the current of winds?

In the Ford, sticky vines grab rust.
You still smell the tan skin bench,
the warm tang of beer on his breath.
He never will let you drive the truck
without wheels. You, the passenger,
were the oil and he the water that
rushed through—settled low in your gut.

Rough hands brace against the fence post,
red dirt under his nails.
A mocking bird sings behind his left ear,
like the girl in his car, fiddling with his radio.
She is you, three years ago—captivated.
The screen door clacks behind you.
Soon, he will teach her how to fall.

A Toast

—*after C.D. Wright*

Let's be realistic. We are never coming back:
to the flower girl, to her headband and lace.
To the bride and groom, may they learn
to tie ties and to make up their bed.

The food is by the double doors.
Try the crab, and if you wake
with a pinch then you'll know
he was a fighter.

If you start to dance don't stop.
Dodge the photographer and
you won't need worry whether
she was awful pretty.

When she kissed him I was bawling.
And when the garter comes off,
I'll leap at the chance.
Don't we all want to lose ourselves
in something large and weepy?

May he learn to run the washer when
she's shackled to a baby.
May she finish his sentence when
he forgets himself.

If we wish them the best
they will never come back.

The Weather

A string pulled
tight. Shining.
You danced
below, each step
a grain of dust
in hurricanes.
We watched,
scissors in hand
as you moved
like planets;
our moon
the circle
we drew
in the
sand.

A Normal Life

A briny metallic flavor
clung to the ring as I swallowed.
He did not protest
as it slid down my esophagus,
hoping it would have the same effects as Advil
but I was well aware it wouldn't.
The metal would sit in my stomach
or maybe in my appendix,
a pustule, protecting me.
The emergency room won't be kind,
my skin turning sallow
as I fill out useless paperwork;
the nurse refusing to accept marriage
as the source of my condition.

The Dictionary Definition: Fountain

Pearl coated water droplets dance
like Chicago steppers,
rhythmic and ambient.

Light bulbs lay under glass,
a cluster of translucent fish eggs
frozen within and unable to hatch.

Chartreuse algae skim the surface,
flecks of peridot absorb sunlight
greedily in haste to reproduce.

Plastic wires and tubes tangle,
a squid's suckered arms
coated with opaque ink.

A cyclical exchange
turns it round and round.

Spring

The sun will rise over the once dark land
to open an aviary of song
from which a joyous band rings not long.

The rain came.
Its light percussion on the blossoming pear,
on the flowers of flame—
they enjoy the gift without a care.

The planting of seeds
began with the plows breaking the earth.
The sweet water fell in beads
to convince the seed to give birth.

The land is full of song so sweet,
but soon the summer will bring defeat.

The Dangers of Having Long Hair

Once upon a time, there was a girl who refused to cut her hair. She had wonderful hair, the color of sienna, and soft when she brushed it. Strands of her hair turned red when they caught the sun rays and she loved the shivers she got when it brushed across her shoulders. She liked her hair long. She tied it back with ribbons or curled it with a curling iron so that it framed her face and brought out the green in her eyes. She braided it down her back, letting it bounce against her spine when she walked, or put it in a ponytail and felt it swish back and forth as she walked. There were no other girls with hair like hers.

But her hair grew fast, faster than her grandmother's cabbages.

At first it was manageable, a long cape of locks that kept her warm. But her hair grew so long that she had to braid it and wrap it around her waist like a belt. It grew long enough to make clothes out of and the girl began to wear her hair as clothing, weaving shirts and dresses and stockings out of her hair. She would unravel her hair each night and weave it into a new outfit in the morning.

Soon, the hair grew too long for the girl to braid or weave, too long for her to wash. She would wash a section of hair and start a new section, but by the time she finished the second section, the first was already dirty. She gave up showering altogether.

The hair grew so long that she began to find it in odd places around her room: in the closet under her straight lines of shoes, curled up in the bathtub, and under her dresser. The grandmother became anxious about the girl's hair. She said, "Your hair is getting too long. We will have to find a bigger house if it continues like this."

It did continue like that. The girl's hair got so long that the girl woke cocooned in it every morning. It took her nearly thirty minutes to get out. She began to lose track of the hair and her

grandmother would find it tangled in the yolks of the breakfast eggs, clogging the pipes under the house, or behind the stove in the kitchen. The girl and her grandmother became accustomed to picking the hair out of the watermelon as it was sliced, checking all the pots for hair before boiling pasta, and putting extra softener in the dryer to make the hair shine.

For a time, the girl and her grandmother were resigned to living with her hair. But the grandmother's attitude towards the hair became more negative as she began finding it strutting about in her clothes, wearing her jewelry and switching channels on the TV when she wanted to watch *Jeopardy*.

"Your hair is out of control," the grandmother said to the girl.

"Perhaps you should charge it rent," the girl said.

The grandmother thought this was an acceptable plan. She decided to charge the hair only ten dollars a week, since it was part of the family. She even drew up a schedule of all the TV shows that the hair was not allowed to switch channels during and which times it was allowed free range of the remote. After a few weeks the hair was too broke to pay even the menial rent the grandmother asked, so it began to do the housework in exchange for food and shelter. It vacuumed the carpets, washed the dog, cooked lunch and dinner (it didn't wake early enough to make breakfast), and washed the dishes afterwards.

The grandmother appreciated this. She was old and hadn't realized how tired doing these chores made her. Having the hair take over the housework gave her more time to finish the quilt she was sewing; she had more time to go out to bingo with the ladies down the street, and she was able to stay awake for CSI on Wednesday nights.

The girl was glad not to have to do any chores at all.

Soon the hair became a spectacle. The bingo ladies would coo over it and comment on how they wished they had hair to do their chores for them. The hair began to market its house-keeping

abilities to the old ladies around the neighborhood. It charged five dollars a day to clean, cook, and give foot massages to the ladies with bad circulation. The hair did very well for itself, and soon it was making more than the grandmother. As its business grew, the hair began to slack on the chores at home. The grandmother began to demand rent again.

“You’re doing so well now, surely you’re able to pay an old lady fifty a week for gas and heating,” she told it in a sugary tone. “I’ll even take on a few chores myself if you need time for your clients.”

The hair felt put out by request, but gave in.

The girl was grateful for the hair’s helpfulness and for the extra money coming in for them. Her only qualm was the hair’s movement. Every time the hair moved too quickly, or bent in too strange a position, the girl felt the tug on her skull and had to reel some of the hair back in to gain slack. As the hair’s business grew out of the neighborhood and into the suburb beside it, the girl was subject to more and more pulling on her scalp. She often woke to a yank from the hair as it dusted a neighbor’s desk or pulled weeds in the garden of the woman who lived next door. She complained to the hair, but the hair rebuffed her for being an ignorant girl unlearned in the ways of business and refused to stop catering to the edges of the neighborhood or even just the suburb down the street.

When the girl insisted upon the hair’s cooperation, the hair became angry and moved out. It bought the house two yards down and across the street and moved in immediately. It ordered a stainless steel stove and a new refrigerator, and renovated one of the downstairs rooms into an office for its house-keeping business. The girl would have been alright with this, as she would now have the bed to herself again, but the hair’s moving meant more tugging instead of less, and her follicles were starting to bleed.

The hair’s business grew. With the other neighborhood’s new additions, it was getting triple the customers, increasing the hair’s salary almost tenfold. The hair did so well that it began to buy

the other properties on its side of the street and the acres of land and woods behind them. As its profit increased, the hair became unsatisfied with the small bungalow it resided in. It had contractors come in and take down all the houses to build a three-story, Georgian Colonial mansion with a gated driveway. The hair threw fabulous parties for the other well-off families and held charity dinners in its formal dining room. By this time, the hair's tugging was so painful that the girl didn't have the strength to do anything except cry in her bed. She refused to eat, saying it would only fuel the hair's ego, and only moved from her bed to use the bathroom.

When the hair knocked at their door one late morning, the girl was elated. Finally the hair would come back to her and stop hurting her. The hair was standing at the door holding a bouquet of roses, red for romance. It asked to see the girl and she readily invited it in. They sat on the couch and the hair listened as the girl cried over the pain in her head. She showed the hair her bleeding follicles and made it listen to her rumbling belly. The hair was sympathetic. The hair agreed not to tug on her head and gave her a ribbon to tie back her hair with enough slack to prevent any further pain.

The girl was so glad to be rid of the pain and in her good mood invited the hair to stay for dinner. The hair accepted graciously. The girl and the grandmother and the hair sat at the table, with the red roses in a vase in the center, and talked. The girl and the grandmother laughed at the hair's jokes and the hair and the girl shared secret glances across the macaroni and cheese.

The hair became a frequent visitor and the grandmother only giggled when the girl and the hair would walk off to the girl's bedroom. The visits began to get longer, from afternoon drop-bys to all day hang outs. The grandmother was even kind enough to allow the hair to spend the night, on the couch of course. Thus it was no surprise when the hair proposed to the girl at the kitchen table. The girl was laughing and crying at once and the hair hugged the girl tightly to its chest.

A Becoming Of Night

In the evening I shed my mother in tweed layers
and sweep her into the compost. I lay on the pavement
palms to the sky, cleansing myself of stale coffee,
sticky mousses. I share my hair with ants.

My muscles relax and my extremities are vines,
I lengthen the drive to the yard; I root.

The grass rises from trample, her midday gardening
eases, the blades stand. I bloom,
moonflower.

An American Child: Through the Eyes of Your Mother

You grew surrounded by hostas
in a Michigan back yard with a playhouse
your father bought pre-made. Your father
loved the Packers and was raised in Iowa
surrounded by corn fields. He wanted
a '57 Chevy because that was the year
he was born. His dog Schomer
stole chickens from the grocer, who shot him.
Your grandfather grew up American,
ate apple pie and gnocchi, black coffee in his cereal.
His father put out cigarettes on his palms,
tough as a ball glove from building houses
because he couldn't do anything else.
He loved the Hawkeyes, the clarinet,
and Christmas with tinsel trees,
but wore a tweed scally cap in the winter
like the men back home. Your mother
tells you these things as she braids
her thick black hair,
one fishtail on top of the other.

Ellipse Number Three Hundred and Eighty Seven

The whole universe is wavering,
collapsing towards the black hole in the center—
the one I've been trying to conceal
beneath my folded valleys of skin.

The naivety of thinking gravity had no affect there.

When Newton watched the fruit fall he felt nothing but lust.
The apple he pulled from the tree slipped from his hands,
hit the ground and sent motes flying into the air.
They circled around his eyelashes and landed like butterflies.

The far reaches of my spiral arms have grown visibly close.
When I reach for a few stars I'd forgotten,
my fingers pass through them.

They seemed so solid once.

For A Grandmother's Senility

There will always be the voices
that someone's grandmother heard at night
as she stared at saplings in her yard.
She will always regard these voices
as the thieves of birds,
glance at the homeless men
throwing shoes, allow the world
to turn from green to red without fading.

The saplings will grow
because they are the children
of a lost generation of fir trees;
disembodied and yearning.

Someone's grandmother will pray:
for her bills, for her children,
for her dentures to stay in while she eats.
There will be no god to answer.

Elena

On Thursdays we ate spaghetti, and when I say that we ate spaghetti I mean that I pulled out a can of tomato sauce and pre-cooked meat and poured noodles into the pot of water I'd left sitting on the stove that morning. I told my mother about it once on the phone when she asked how I'd been keeping up with recipes and such, and she said it sounded lovely but that she preferred shells to noodles.

I was thinking of if I had time to throw a few frozen breadsticks in the oven when I walked in to the living room and found Elena standing there channel-surfing. Elena had died two years previously of a pulmonary problem or fallen down the stairs or been hit by a delivery truck, one of those unpredictable but ultimately forgettable deaths. I wondered how she'd come to be here, because she lived in Atlanta, loathed taxis, and didn't own a car, so in previous visits we'd been forced to ferry her to and from our house. I wanted to ask her eventually how she'd finagled her way here without our help, but I decided it'd be rude not to ask her her opinion on the breadstick situation first.

She laughed and said she'd gone vegetarian now and would much appreciate the bread, as otherwise she'd have absolutely nothing to eat. I asked her how she'd managed this new diet when she'd been habitually told by her doctors when we were growing up that she needed to eat *more* meat. Her expression fell slightly and she said if it was the same to me she'd rather not share her medical information with everyone in the world.

I invited her into the kitchen to watch me cook, as it seemed rude to leave her alone so soon. She declined and asked where we expected her to sleep. This stumped me. We lived in a small apartment; there were only two bedrooms and my husband used one of them as an office. But the

office did have a couch that folded out into a bed, and as he wasn't currently home and Elena was I told her she could have that room.

She stayed upstairs until my husband got home at exactly 6:30. The timer signaling the readiness of the spaghetti also went off at exactly this time; over the weeks synchronization had become my own kind of contest. He walked into the kitchen as I was plating the food, put his bag on the counter, and asked how long I'd been planning on leaving him. When I asked him why I would've cooked if I was leaving, he only impatiently dragged me into the living room and pointed towards the suitcases on the couch.

I told them they belonged to Elena. He asked if I meant Elena, my sister. I said yes and that she'd come to visit but that I didn't know for how long, and that I had to go tell her dinner was ready. After I'd told her, she rolled her eyes and said that she resented being expected to come when called. I pointed out that I hadn't called her, only mentioned that there was hot food downstairs if she cared for some. She said if it was all the same to me she'd be down right behind me.

While we were eating my husband mentioned he'd been wondering for a while how it felt to be run over by a car, and if she had any thoughts. I gave him a look, intending for him to remember how crude it was to ask questions like that during dinner. She just laughed and said she couldn't help—it was a common misconception that being hit by something and being run over by it were the same thing, when in reality they were entirely different. The taxi in question, she went on, did not actually run over her with its wheels. The bumper merely hit her waist as she'd been walking and then she'd been thrown easily over it, landing on some construction debris. As for how it felt, she could not say, because at the time she'd been on painkillers for another problem and had been entirely numb to pain for days. She only remembered that she'd been unprepared for so much yellow.

After dinner I called my mother as she expected. I told Elena she was free to watch TV or do the dishes or whatever else she pleased, as my husband generally went out for a few hours at night and I was flexible when it came to schedule. She only said that I was too kind and then quickly left me alone in my bedroom. When I mentioned to my mother that Elena was visiting, she again echoed my concerns about her transportation and then suggested I ask Elena if she'd consider paying back some of her funeral bills that my mother had covered two years ago. I told her that her manners were reprehensible and it was a wonder she hadn't just buried her in the backyard like a childhood pet.

At that point Elena walked into my room and insisted that I call my husband and make him come back. When I asked why, she said she'd always hated the feeling of being alone in a house. I pointed out that I was there and she insisted again that I make him come back. I told her he would not, that he was having his time, that I would be unkind not to lend him a few hours of his own each day. She walked out again, this time slamming the door carelessly behind her. My mother had by now hung up the phone and so I did too.

In the morning I checked in on her as I was preparing to leave for work. She was awake, and moreover she was dressed and applying lipstick in the reflection of my husband's computer screen. She smiled excitedly when she saw me and said if it was alright with me, she'd like to go out for breakfast. I mentioned that I needed to be leaving in about ten minutes, and she said it was no matter, she'd explain to my boss when I had to be late. I supposed my work would understand and directed Elena outside and into my car. My husband had left an hour earlier, or so I assumed, as he hadn't wakened me.

She told me she knew a nice little café a few miles away and I asked how she knew anything here. She laughed and said she had friends here too; I wasn't the only person she knew in the world. I asked why she hadn't visited before and she said she'd hoped not to bother me but that it became

inevitable. When we arrived the waitress greeted her by name and asked her who her guest was, at which time she introduced me. I felt odd and said if she didn't mind, I'd like to run to the ladies' room before I ordered anything.

When I came back they were leaning over the table, Elena laughing while the waitress talked. I stood at the end of the table awkwardly and the waitress got up half-heartedly, yelling that she'd be back in a minute, don't worry.

"So," Elena said, "where'd Robert go last night?" I shrugged and picked up a menu. "I don't drink coffee anymore," I said, trying to change the subject. Elena said she guessed he went to a bar, she'd never liked him, really. I pointed out that she'd told me she was in love with him the night before our wedding. Elena frowned and said things had been different then.

"But he doesn't go to bars", I said. "He hates the way alcohol tastes."

"Regardless," she said, "it was weird." She would never have put up with Doug keeping her out like that, no she wouldn't.

I pointed out that Doug was gone and Robert was still around. As I looked out the window I saw a little girl emptying a bottle out onto the pavement. She screamed each time the liquid splashed back onto her feet, but continued pouring. I wondered if she thought we were crazy for wanting to stay married.

The waitress came back and asked what we wanted. Elena smiled and leaned back and said she'd like coffee and some toast. I said I hated the way coffee smelled and wouldn't have anything. The waitress looked at me a little meanly and I wondered what Elena had told her while I'd been in the bathroom.

"Doug just felt weird after the accident," Elena told me. He asked her how he could be expected to enjoy being a widower when his wife was still around. I told her she had to grant him

that it was a good point, as we are taught that death will change everything when in reality it changed nothing. I imagined it could be a little disappointing, for a man.

“Once,” I said to Elena as the waitress poured coffee into her mug and dropped a plate of toast on the table, “Robert stayed home all night. We both woke up with raging headaches.”

“But what about the children?” Elena asked me.

A man wearing thick brown boots walked into the diner. Their thumping reminded me of a thunderstorm that happened when I was twelve, when lightning had struck our tree and killed our dog that was standing underneath it. Elena had tried to close its eyelids with a stick while I sat in the grass and cried. “We don’t have any children,” I said.

“I know,” Elena said, stuffing half a piece of toast in her mouth. “They’re trapped.”

Her toast made me hungry and I was late to work. I’d probably smell like coffee for the rest of the day and I wouldn’t be able to sleep unless I took a bath.

“Well, we thought you were trapped too,” I said finally. “But here you are.”

She smiled hugely with bits of toast in her mouth. She told me she was just saying, just because you couldn’t see someone didn’t mean they didn’t already exist. She’d been personally insulted when people assumed she was gone forever when she died and she was sure my children felt the same way. It was rude of me not to acknowledge them.

“Mom wants you to pay her back,” I said. “For the funeral.”

By now the toast was gone and her coffee cup was empty except for pieces of the grounds. I waved to the waitress, who saw me and then walked the other way. My eyes itched and I considered smearing my makeup to rub them. I doubted anyone would care.

“What funeral?” Elena said too loudly, pushing her dishes towards the end of the table. “She buried me in a box in the ground and you guys stood around for a while and then you went out to eat.”

“You saw that?” I asked. It had never seemed to me that Elena had stopped existing, only that she existed somewhere else. She was not watching us from heaven or following us, she was just living in a different situation for a while. I thought of it as a process, like college or pregnancy.

“No,” she said. “But you just told me I was right, didn’t you?”

When Elena nodded toward the waitress she smiled and put down the check she’d been writing to come over and ask what we needed. I frowned inwardly. Things were happening too slowly.

Finally we paid and left. It felt to me like there were hundreds of people just waiting for me to pull them into the world. I was selfish; it was my fault for only seeing what was there.

I dropped Elena off at home and then went to work, in the mailroom of a paper company. I stayed late to finish what I’d missed at breakfast. When I got home, Robert was there but Elena wasn’t.

“What did you do with Elena?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I think she took a taxi.”

Cut Piece

after a performance by Yoko Ono

Well-placed incisions—
As though beauty
Can be measured in loss.

Empty-handed ocean child
Askew in tattered garments,
And still much more must be cut off.

An imaginary five shillings
Paid to hammer an imaginary nail.
“They’re going to crucify us,”
He would tell you,
Then smile.

Strawberry is now its own spectrum.
In your world
It is the color worn to die.

You were standing close.
Did that strawberry homing pigeon
Land on your shoulder?

You were being cut away,
Your covering cast off in snippets
For the sake of art,
All to the tune
Played by the man whose name
Alludes to a bird’s prison.

You will run through fields eternal
And with your own two hands,
You will hold
The fabric that keeps the sky in place.

The Movement of Ancestry

There's a rabbit in the sky.
My brother traced it with his fingertip
three times before I saw its ears,
its tail bound to the moon.

He pushed his shoulders back
when I asked, did he draw the outline?
A Chinese legend, some sacrificial hare—
his explanation was scrambled.

A cloud dimmed the moonlight,
improved its own light.

My brother shifted his fingers
around patterns that may never change,
constellations that lost detail
in the street lit haze. The cloud bent:

there was no moment to capture.
As the moon surfaced
I focused on the rabbit,
and traced its frame
for my brother,
who nudged my finger to the left.

Train Tracks to the Left of the Mill Where I Passed on My Ticket for This

after D. A. Powell

downtrodden street: some place where Black Tuesday met the Big Band—swing daddio— two blocks
away.

Maybe too far from where I'm supposed to be: where the street lights never quit hitting
the steel

and all the things that might float into a bent silence, heavy as lead and coffee.
When

we never could tell the difference between depression and a speakeasy soul: moonshine or
tommy guns—

cure enough for us. All the kids birthed into the edge of a century growin' up
backwards

never enough time for the Sinatra albums to fall again: a lifetime on tape. *Start spreadin' the news, I'm
leaving today*

I see myself, face too young, pants too high on my way to the fault lines: all my fallbacks, drawbacks,
top hats

pointed north, pockets full of shiny pennies.

you see—the days when a nickel got my grandfather to Boston and shoe shine next to Shirley Temple—
winkin' at the bearcats

were memories of brighter days. Now a sorrow that we forgot to mention, or maybe just
plain

old forgot was lost in those pages—yellowed from time —the humph of planes found
missing

remnants of poignant history—those old things; gone, daddio.
gone, gone, gone.

Great Ruth

In those last years,
her hair was dull, salmon pink.
Arms and chest like soft dough—
I wanted to sink my fingers into her skin,
feel the weather.

I used to laugh
when she lost sight. Called me
Grace, and asked for another scotch.

To laugh like that, is to push eggs across a table.
Barely catch them before they fall from the edge.

Then, there was that night
in her room, bathed in the amber
of her dusty lamp, when I found her
dancing—her sagging dough arms
softly molded around her husband
who died seven years ago.

Her pink head rested on his shoulder.
From the doorway, she looked younger,
swept away from the crunchy sheets and
puree dinners—the scotch.
I did not wake her up.

A Salmon Finds a Television in the Midst of Her Stream

It seems an over-ripe fruit
released and tumbled
to rest on the pebbled bottom.
The salmon—like a pitcher
filled to the lips
with sanguine pearls—
does the only thing
it knows how, and swims
around the only thing
the river has not yet rounded.

Scientists have mapped
the travels of salmon
for thousands of miles
in red ink, yet they still
cannot calculate the
precise quantity of passion
in each pitcher.
Is it a quart? Two?
One scientist recalls
the proportions of kool-aide.
Some have not even thought
to estimate, though the bears
are keenly aware of what
they are removing from the world.
Where is the continuity
in your struggle? bears say,
scarcely giving them
a chance to reply before
stamping out the small fire
of a salmon with paws like
ping-pong paddles,
and tearing it with teeth
as thick as an infant's fingers.

My grandmother will not eat
farmed salmon. It'll make you
lazy, she says. It'll put
abscesses in your brain.
Instead, her monthly check
goes toward wild salmon.
It'll make you wiser, she says.
Like the bears, she says.

Hag Ridden

At night I turn into a horse.
Hecate comes for me whenever the moon
is in the middle of the sky.
She takes me to a crossroads.
She meets the fey.
They dance until Helios
peeks up from the horizon.
Only then am I driven back home.

I know my coarse mane,
my polished horseshoes
that mirror each star,
my new found love of salad.

If I am insane,
I die a horse.

Sharkhead

Last year a shark bit my old friend Ken on the head. The beach trip had started out so nicely, eighty-five degrees and we had just purchased new towels. I slept while Ken swam, and I woke when he returned, the shark attached to his head, small and at a jaunty angle.

“Just latched on!” he said. Blood ran down his forehead and he shrugged.

I told him, “Well, get it off.” We tried all sorts of things. We pulled its tail, poked its eyeballs, tickled under its gills. A girl suggested we stimulate its genitals, unfortunately for the new towels. None of it worked.

While Ken shared his cranium with the young sharp-nose, his wife complained of their wet pillows. Ken acted as a child with a new pet. When she left, he spent his hours at home, alone with the fish.

I visited, sometimes for breakfast. Ken sunk in a worn velvet chair and spoon-fed his skull’s parasite. He named the shark Sampson, and he told me that Sampson enjoyed only peanuts and kippers, together and not separate. Sampson had grown a fat belly.

When the shark’s tail lengthened to the floor, Ken used a walker to cope with the weight. I suggested a separation. I told him that the ocean is just as suitable as the city, especially for Sampson. Ken’s hands flew above the fish’s gills as if it had ears.

“I’m not ready for this,” Ken huffed when Sampson’s tail swung over onto his chest.

That was two months ago. In the time passed, Ken has not left his home. I know this as he says so in his postcards, photos he sends along with scribbled messages. The one on the fridge depicts him dangling by his feet from a zip-line over a large tank, Sampson zinging him forward.

More recently, Ken has been calling. Each call regards only the shark; I think he calls only to hear himself. He relays his fish's issues: Sampson doesn't sleep, he bathes less, he has a short temper. I tell him, "Give him space." Ken doesn't.

"I'm almost out of peanut butter," he says.

Evenings Before Elba

Napoleon liked his women
the way he liked his pastries—
cold, plump, and custard.
He liked them at night in a tent
before battle. His favorite lovers were
Josephine, a bejeweled slave, romanced
on her back in a garden,
and Marie Louise, an Austrian princess
acquired for her fertile womb.
Napoleon preferred Marie Louise
to éclairs, and Josephine
to them both. France adopted
the women and Napoleon
stopped eating sweets.
He moved on to Chicken Marengo,
consuming it night after night,
discarding the carcasses. Upon occasion
left them untouched, golden on a silver platter.

Napoleon in His Study

Napoleon stands tall
and simple: white pants,
blue and red jacket. A general
and an everyman. His hand
is hidden in his pocket
for the sake of clean lines,
or perhaps it is clutching
a Danish, cheese-filled,
because it is early morning
and he must be done posing
by twelve o'clock.
Because his horse needs
to be ridden the way
he rode his ex-wife,
the saddle
like a tumult of skirts
and clouds of dust.

The National Razor

Marie Antoinette spoke of love
for pastries, but never of cake.
She danced with enemies of France,
changed protocol and ejected courtiers
from her bedchamber when she gave birth.
She disliked the doctor and being watched.
Mostly the doctor, whose hands tried to stretch
her womb, the doctor who nearly bled
her to death. She failed at politics
and motherhood. The revolution came
and so did prison. Her charges: inciting orgies,
plotted murder, lesbianism, incest.
Her son sold her to a woman who wanted
her entrails for a souvenir. She was sheared
and stripped, placed in a tumbrel, and driven
to the guillotine. Her last words—
“Pardon me, Sir. I did not mean to do it.”

St. Helena Is Lovely in the Evenings

Napoleon's feet kissed
the crags of rocks, kicked pebbles
into the sea below. The island
was quiet here. He imagined Corsica
from the top of the stones, an excuse
for a beach long eroded. Napoleon
would stand at the overhang from sunup
to set and watch ships sail by,
ships that kept him in. He praised
the island's coffee, had two cups
each morning, and considered planting
a garden. Perhaps he would send for seeds.
Napoleon grew cold as the sun dipped
below the ocean and retreated to a stone shelter,
a dirt floor and a cot; his new Trianon.
Napoleon went to bed with a tonic
in his hand, hoping it would calm
his stomach. He went to bed without a pillow
complaining of the inevitable: aged croissants
for breakfast. Perhaps there would be sausage.
He said his prayers, out loud, watching the ocean,
the hiss of the waves decaying on the sand.
The wind shifting the foam into forms
reminiscent of Josephine's hands,
delicate and white.

Parenthood

Wave-torn, windswept, Mississippi river scales
are lost under rocks as I shed and breed,
my children a pink among the pebbles.

They will remember me for their numbers
because all of my children had one father.
He was religious about hurricanes;
I prayed for rain, not afterlife.

I left them in the riverbed; fertilized,
to be comforted, as I was, by their placentas
as I swam up the river with the other mothers.

We will mourn to leave but my children
understand my best intentions.

A Drink

Water washes the sides of the basin,
granules floating in the underwater tumbler.

He mixes you a Tom Collins
on the rocks

of a Tuscan hillside. With a twist, lemon trees
corroding the mountains.

Earth surrounds you, rocks
bundled to mark

what you may or may not
have achieved.

The Indications of Stars

She said she was unique and I could not believe her because it was a disclaimer. She had tattoos on her back and arms and ankles, this is what attracted me at first, because when I was young I was interested in tattoos. I say young like it was childhood, but it could not have been more than a few years ago. She said her name was Dani, which I believed with out hesitation.

Despite all of this I could not find her unique.

When I first saw her she perched on the hood of a blue sedan, in the park near my house. Music gurgled from the radio. I stood in the clover below her, and watched her watch the sky.

“This is my favorite band,” she said. I hadn’t asked. I suppose she assumed I would have, had I been given the chance, but she would have been wrong. I would have just watched her, and made up my own stories about who she was and where she came from. Those tend to be more satisfying. She turned away without asking for my name and I thought about leaving, with just the imprint on the clover be the only thing she knew about me. But I couldn’t, because she had tattoos and a name like Dani, and claimed to be unusual, even though she wasn’t.

“My name is Charlotte,” I offered. I felt like I should add something else, like a clue. “My favorite band is Yes.” It was close to the band strumming on the radio, so perhaps acceptable. Dani just nodded, she didn’t turn to look at me or offer her opinion on my music tastes.

“It’s a new moon.” I said. She stared at the sky

“Yep. Makes it easier to see the stars.” She paused for such a long time I wondered if she had turned to stone. “I love stars,” Dani said finally. “It makes the infinite seem much more plausible.”

“But even stars don’t last forever.”

“They last a hell of a lot longer than people do.” There was another silence. “How old are you, Charlie?”

“Charlotte. And I’m sixteen.”

“Charlie fits you better.” I wondered how she knew, we had barely even met. “So you’re about eighty four years away from dying. And even if that star dies tomorrow, even if it’s already dead, the light won’t go out until long after your life time. And behind that star is another, and another. The whole universe full, as far as we know, infinite.”

“Hey, hey, hey it’s eleven p.m., and here on WIQK radio we are all stunned by Eminem’s performance....” the radio said, trailing off into insignificance. We were not stunned. But the time woke me.

“Eleven, I’ve got to go.” I said. Dani nodded, slow.

“Me too. Probably. Parents, you know?” Of course I knew, but I was surprised that Dani, who called her self unusual, was restricted by something as mundane as parents. She bounced off the hood of the sedan, opened the door.

“Need a ride?”

“Nope, I just live up there.” I pointed to a scruff of trees up the road: their branches concealed my house.

“Nice. A witch’s cottage.” Dani grinned, “See you around, Charlie.” She waved once, before peeling off into the night. The headlights flashed into my eyes. I saw stars.

My mother was asleep, and she did not wake when I let the screen door bang shut on my heels. I crept into the living room to find my father was home. He was slumped in the leather recliner, drinking a beer and watching a rerun of some Hallmark movie.

“Why aren’t you upstairs with mom?” I asked him. He took another swig of beer.

“She kicked me out. Said I smelled bad, and snored.”

“Oh.”

“What are you doing down here so late?”

“I was going to get some water.” He grunted, apparently satisfied. I tiptoed towards the sink. The woman on screen started crying. She appeared to be in a cemetery. “I didn’t know you watched Hallmark.”

“There isn’t much else on, and the chair is too uncomfortable for me to get any sleep.” I nodded. The woman fell to the ground. She was sobbing now; there was a zoom in of the grave she knelt in front of.

“Who died?”

“What?” My father looked confused.

“Never mind,” I took my glass of water, and as a second thought, gave my father a kiss on the cheek.

“Goodnight, sleep well.” His voice was gruff, from lack of sleep, but it sounded like he had been crying.

“Night dad,” I went back up stairs, preferred to think of my father as a man who stayed up late and cried at Hallmark movies.

“Charlie,” I whispered at my reflection in the mirror. It did fit.

I saw Dani again a week later, swinging on the swing set in the park. She rose and fell, rose and fell, the creaks marking when she had gone too high.

“Trying to reach the stars?” I asked her. She saw me and smiled, jumped from the swing.

“Ha, I wish. Really I’m just bored. What do you do for fun around here anyway? There doesn’t seem to be anything to do but watch the stars.”

“Thought you loved stars,” I teased, but it sounded like a strained assault.

“I do. But I love to watch them. You can’t do much with just a star. What do you *do*?” I couldn’t think of much that we did, once I had to. I walked places, watched people. But that was a mostly singular activity. There was television, but if Dani was bored of watching stars, I hardly felt that television would suffice to entertain her.

“Well, we go swimming...” I offered. A crooked grin came over Dani’s face.

“Have you ever been skinny dipping?”

“Skinny dipping...that means no clothes, right?” Dani laughed and I could feel my face redden.

“Yeah, but I’ve never tried it. It sounds like fun though.” Fun. Right. “We should try it tonight. It’s late; there won’t be any one there to see.” I would be there, I thought, to see her. And she, to see me. I thought briefly about suggesting some other endeavor. Participating in gang activity, or vandalizing the Baptist Church. These activities struck less apprehension in me than the thought of swimming, naked, with her— what would happen? But it was too late, she blew me into her car and we drove off, towards the lake that everyone called the “watering hole” though there were never any elephants and to drink it you would have to be crazy.

We both stood —fully dressed— next to the edge of the murky water.

“You go first” she said.

“It was your idea!” I felt like a kindergartener again, arguing over who would tempt the lake monster.

“Well, you suggested swimming!”

“And you suggested doing it *naked*.” We both fell silent.

“Fine.” she pulled off her shirt. I looked away, embarrassed as I heard the thump of her bra hit the ground, followed by what must have been her pants and underwear.

“Oh! Gosh it’s cold!” I turned to see her immersed waist deep in the lake. Her skin was prickled with goose bumps, and the tips of her hair flailed around her. She smiled at me, in assurance that the lake monster would not swallow her whole. “Come on!” she called. “Chicken!” I rolled my eyes.

She was right, the water was cold, and it lapped the crevices of my body in strange ways. Dani kicked back and rippled her body towards the center of the lake.

“Do we really have to go any deeper?” I chattered.

“Baby” she called, and splashed me, and I was obliged to follow her, because of the pressure her audacity had on my soul.

“The water is a philosopher” Dani said, after a moment of swimming in silence, her words full of thought.

“What do you mean?”

“The water’s being represents all of the philosophy anyone has ever theorized. It is without thinking, it does with out the action of doing.” I wasn’t used to such analysis, and so was silent, waiting for Dani to continue her thoughts. But it appeared she was waiting for mine.

“I think...I think the water just is. It doesn’t philosophize. It just, moves.” Dani smiled at me, a coy glance.

“Exactly” she dove under the current.

I dreamed of unicycles that night, one Dani was riding. She was wearing a flamboyant tutu and carried a parasol.

“Come with me, Charlie!” she called, as the unicycle jumped over a tightrope. “Come with me!” But the tightrope was so high, and I was too scared to do more than place one foot out on its edge. Dani balanced in the center, the parasol was the only thing to catch her fall. “It’s not that

hard!” she laughed and rose slowly, first on one leg and then on the other, so she stood on the pedals like a giant.

“I can’t, it’s too high” I said, but Dani just laughed again, reached out impossibly and took my hand. She pulled me out onto the tightrope, and the audience, unseen before, gasped. Dani made a motion, much like a bow, still on the unicycle, still holding my hand.

“Be amazed, ladies and gentlemen, be amazed.” she called. The audience applauded. Then, as suddenly as it had appeared, the tightrope and unicycle and audience disappeared, and it was only Dani and I.

She didn’t let go of my hand.

The lake was mostly quiet, and still but for the refractions of ripples. I remembered last night, the skinny dipping, and Dani and mine’s conversation. There was another philosophy about water, I thought, the ripples. I wondered if, like ripples in a pond, there was a way to calculate what would happen next.

“Hey stranger, whatcha doing returning to the scene of the crime?” I jumped, and turned, and there she was, smiling at her ability to shock me.

“Dani!” I exclaimed, as if it needed exclaiming.

“That’s me.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I like swimming. Why are you here?”

“I needed to get out of the house.”

“Oh, I understand. Are you doing anything important today?” She asked me, and I shook my head. Of course not. “Let’s go on an adventure. I need an adventure.”

“Where?”

“Anywhere.”

Blue Sedans do not get very good gas mileage, but Dani filled it up at the Shell station on the outskirts of town. “Let’s see how far this baby goes,” she said, as if that was the test. How far could we go, on one tank of blue Sedan gas mileage?

“What did you say that band was that you liked?” Dani asked me.

“Yes” she started rummaging through her CD case. “Watch the road!” She put the CD in, smiled at me.

“I forgot my dad had this” she told me, as the music rang out through the car.

“Awesome!” We drove with Yes as our theme music, like super heroes, round and round about in our little blue Sedan. There were jokes passed back and forth, we stopped and got Pepsis and caramel chews and Dani held a cherry clove cigarette between her lips without actually lighting it.

“Its to much work to drive and smoke” she explained, “I just want to savor the taste.” I hadn’t asked.

“Does it taste good?”

“It’s rich. It’s expensive. It’s unhealthy and forbidden and therefore cool. So it kinda tastes like all that. I suppose, you could say, it tastes good.” The paper at the end of the cigarette had melted a little, so that a brown pulp oozed out of the corner of Dani’s lip.

“Where are we?”

“Does it matter?” I didn’t respond because I supposed that well, it didn’t, not really. We passed a sign that read “Public Beach, twenty miles”.

“We’re near the ocean?” I didn’t feel it had been that far of a drive, like the road had taken us without privilege, and by stepping on the gas Dani had given us up for fate.

I didn’t mind.

It was dusk by the time we stopped next to the stand of juniper bushes that marked the beginning of the Public Boardwalk. A flock of sandy children and beach toys cascaded from the boardwalk entrance.

“No, no, Sam! Wait right there! Sam!” The mother called at a little boy, who was parading sticky fingered towards our car. Sam stopped, turned, and looked incredulous at his mother.

“I never want kids”

“I do.” Dani said. “I mean, not for a while, or what ever. But I think they’re fun. And yea...isn’t that what we’re meant to do? Perpetuate? Create?” I was a little shocked, that Dani wanted children. It didn’t seem to suit her unhealthy, rich, forbidden-and-therefore-cool style of doing things.

“I didn’t think you’d be one to settle.”

“It’s not settling its expanding.”

We waited until the family had left before untangling our selves from the Sedan and trekking across the boardwalk. The ocean was calm, without glorious waves and crescendos. Dani took off her sneakers and stuck her toes in.

“Its cold” she said, and I looked down at her purple toenails outlined like seashells by the ooze of wet sand. She swirled them around so the sand rose and fell and choked her ankles. “Did you know I’ve never seen the ocean?”

“Really?”

“Yea. I moved from South Dakota, no ocean there. I really wished our little town was closer than five hours away.” We were silent. “I feel that a life with out perpetuation, creation, is like...an ocean with out waves. You know? There isn’t any movement.”

“Yea...like, when you drop a rock in a puddle, and it makes ripples. Like that scene in Pocahontas.” Dani laughed.

“Yea. Like Pocahontas. That girl had her philosophy damn straight. We’re all connected, and all those sappy songs, it makes sense, when you think about it. A lot of sense. Not much makes that much sense any more.” She stared off into the ocean, consumed.

“The ocean covers seventy percent of the world.” I told her, just to fill the silence.

“So huge,” she whispered. “I’ve never seen anything this huge.” I stared with her, watched the waves swirl around our feet.

“The stars.” I said. Dani just nodded. I matched my breaths to the pattern of the waves; in, out, in out. I could hear Dani watching the water, in the same way that you could hear empty rooms. It was a deafening sound. “Dani?” I asked.

“Yea?”

“What do you think?” There was a long silence.

“I... I love it.” She promised. She stared for a moment, and then ran down the length of the beach, splashes of water following her. I stood where I was and watched the moon rise. Dani appeared beside me again, her pants were soaked and her hair was in disarray, but she was smiling.

“Tag” she tapped me, sprang off again. This time I followed her, chased her until I was able to confront her and knock her on the shoulder.

“You...I...Uncle!” she gasped.

“You should stop smoking those cigarettes.” I told her. “Else, you’ll never win.”

“I could smoke a thousand cigarettes and still beat you. I’m just...a little out of shape tonight. Had cake for breakfast.” Her eyes glittered in the moon light, that was the only light, the moon and its reflection on the ocean and her eyes.

“Should we be getting home?”

“I suppose. It is late, and it’s a long drive. Unless you just want to stay here all night?”

“I have to make it home for breakfast.”

When I got home my dad was not on the recliner downstairs, and it seemed as if I was the only one in the whole house. I crept into my parents' bedroom, where I could see two hulks outlined on the bed. My father grunted in his sleep, he had one arm around my mother. I smiled at them, as if they were children, and went to my own room. I shed my salt-caked clothes and passed out on the bed, visions of seashell toenails dancing in my head.

I didn't see Dani again until the circus came to town. She stood on the side of the road, staring up in awe at a poster taped to the telephone pole.

"Dani?" I asked. She turned towards me.

"A circus!" she gasped. "I love circuses!"

The circus was one I had been to every year since I was three. It was set up in the high school football field, which was probably inconvenient for the football team, and not healthy for the grass.

"We can go, if you want. It's not very good, so don't raise your expectations."

"I definitely want to go. When?"

"It'll be here until Sunday."

"Let's go Friday. I have to entertain my parental units until then, but Friday, ok?"

"It's a date." I promised. Dani laughed and hugged me and ran back to her car. I smiled, in awe.

The night before the circus I went to the park to find her. She wasn't there, but the stars were, and I lay in the grass and watched them glisten, and thought of Dani, always trying to reach the stars. They looked like eyes.

"Are you watching me?" I asked them, and the stars blinked in return. They were never this bright in the summer, or so I thought to remember. A car passed, and its headlights shattered the illusion.

The next morning, Dani *was* waiting for me in the park. She had sparkles on her eyelids and offered me some. I took the sparkles and perched on the shotgun seat. The city we lived in was small, so finding the high school and conjoined circus set up was not difficult. Dani leapt out of the car and I followed, the ground swirled with dust and we were mashed between the limbs of other circus-goers as we headed towards the entrance. Dani insisted that she pay for tickets.

There was a while before the circus started, so we walked through the crowd of compressed limbs, stared at the various animals shown on display. An elephant, parched in this weather and tired from travel, stood in a small enclosure beside a pair of camels.

“All the animals look depressed.” I pointed out.

“Would you, I mean, you’re kept in a small cage and forced to— Oh my god, who is *that*?” Dani pointed to a group of acrobats standing together and smoking. The one she was drooling over in particular was a male contortionist, dressed in turquoise hose and leotard.

“He is *amazing*.” Dani moaned. I nodded in agreement, but was not much intrigued. Dani took my hand, and pulled me into the group.

“Wanna share that?” She asked the boy, gesturing to the cigarette.

“You guys legal?” He asked.

“Well, we are, I mean...” she glanced at me.

“Ha. Just kiddin’. I don’t care.” He pulled out a pack of Pall Malls and Dani took one. He held the pack out to me.

“Oh...I...”

“She’s new.” Dani said, staring at me. I took a cigarette. Lighters were passed around. I held the cigarette as if it were a snake. Dani inhaled hers and blew out the smoke. I took a careful drag, and then another. This one was deep enough and tasted like hot gravel. I choked and spit the

cigarette on the ground. The acrobats appraised me with raised eyebrows. The boy laughed, and picked up the butt.

“Guess you are new.” He laughed, and gently dusted off the cigarette. “Still a lot left.” He put it back into the pack.

“Gross.” I said. Dani laughed.

“Why, you got a disease?” The boy asked. I shook my head. “What’s your name any how?”

“I’m Dani,” Dani said. “And this is Charlie.”

“Oh, I coulda sworn you were women.” More laughter, the smoke was growing heavy. “I’m Jon.” The boy said.

“Jon.” Dani repeated, quietly.

“Well, the show’s gonna start soon, and I gotta get ready, but if ya’ll want, you can meet me here afterwards. There’s a party the crew’s hostin tonight. We can bring guests. I’d like to bring two pretty ladies.”

“I dunno...” I said, but Dani cut me off.

“We’ll be there.” She promised.

The circus was mediocre, as I had known it would be. There were flashing colors and lights, booming voices and the smatters of applause—it was enough to fall over me and drown me, like tidal waves. Dani was consumed with the energy of it all; I was filled with dread and could hardly lose myself. When Jon came into the ring, Dani pulled my arm and pointed at him.

“He’s amazing.” She whispered. I watched, and true, Jon was skilled, but I was not impressed. It didn’t matter. Dani was. She was entranced all the while Jon flipped and spun. I turned away. There were no tightropes, no parasols for me.

I was filled with dread.

Dani and I went back to the car before meeting Jon behind the tent. There, she reapplied sparkles, offered me some. I declined.

“Are you sure about this, Dani?” I asked her.

“Sure about what?”

“This party.”

“Of course. It’ll be fun!”

“What if something happens?” Dani turned to look at me, look *deep* at me.

“Nothing will happen, Charlie. It will be fun. Ok?” She looked away and finished applying lipstick. “Are you coming?” She asked. I swallowed, nodded. I followed.

I was filled with dread.

Jon was waiting for us, as he promised.

“The party is in the back tent,” he told us, and led us through the compound. Dani walked abreast of him, and I trailed behind. The daylight was just beginning to falter, and I watched their shadows. They shuddered and disappeared when we passed larger tents or trailers.

The music was a pounding rhythm, and laughing and shouting coursed above that rhythm. People I did not know stood in bundles, and soon Dani had disappeared, along with Jon. I found a corner and a suspicious drink, and stood there. Sometimes, I caught glimpses of Dani, and Jon in his turquoise get-up. They were kissing, dancing. Drinking. Dani threw her head back and laughed at something he said, and a moment later they had disappeared into the crowd. Just as I felt myself disappear into the wall, a boy approached me.

“Hey.” He said.

“Hey.”

“Why are you standing here, all alone?”

“I don’t know anyone here.” And it was true.

“Well, my name is Chris,” he said.

“I’m Charlotte.” We shook hands. He smiled.

“So formal. Would you like another drink?” Chris gestured to my cup, which was now empty. I glanced at the spot in the crowd where I had last seen Dani.

“Sure.” I smiled at Chris, and he led me to the drink table.

The dread started to dissipate.

Night had finally fallen and lights mingled with the rhythm of the music. Though time had passed, the moment stilled. Chris was a nice boy, I found. A nice boy, with nice lips. I had never kissed before. It was a new sensation. So was the alcohol, which he poured in my cup. It burned the throat and the chest, and created a new life where there had been dread. Chris led me outside, where people were passing cigarettes. It was calm there, quiet and cold.

“Are you enjoying yourself?” He asked me.

“I am now.” Wink, wink.

“Haha, good. I am too. Never thought I’d meet such a pretty girl at this party.” I laughed, the ground swirled around me. I fell into Chris. “Let’s go somewhere quiet.” He whispered into my ear.

“I concur,” I giggled.

I found myself in a trailer, on a bed. Chris was on top of me. There were undulating limbs and clothes were coming off. It was silent. It was strange. I could not feel parts of my body until his hands landed on them, cold and then warm and then cold, lips salivating every where. There was a hot tension in between my legs. The feeling of dread rose again in my throat. I pushed Chris off of me; he fell back against the bed.

“Stop, stop, stop.” I said. “This...this isn’t right.”

“Why not?” His voice was hot, like his hands. Full of dwindling ecstasy.

“Where’s Dani?” I asked him, growing frantic.

“Charlotte, you’re drunk. Just...just lie down and get some sleep.” He sighed, got off the bed and picked up his shirt. I couldn’t see his face. My vision succumbed to the dizziness of the alcohol. I tried to get up, but fell back. Nausea rose in my throat. “I’m gonna be sick.” I moaned, before passing out.

That morning I woke up in the same trailer, with a throbbing head ache. I moaned and rolled over; tried to remember the explicates of the night before. The details came slowly: Jon, the circus, the party, Chris, here. Dani left me. Dani left *me*. I moaned again, but this time it came out as a cry. Chris came into the room.

“Hey, you feeling better?” He asked.

“No.”

“Well, I was going to go get some cigarettes from the Quick Stop. If you live near here, I can give you a ride.”

He left the room and I put on the rest of my clothes and my shoes. I followed Chris out to a beat up Ford. The drive home was silent, Chris fiddled with the radio a little, but only that *stunning* Eminem song was on. He turned it off, tapped on the steering wheel. Every now and then his eyes would glance at the clock.

“When do you want to hang out again? Next year?” I asked him.

“I’m going to Tech in the fall.”

“Of course,” my eyes watered, but my voice was clear. “Turn here.” Another driver cut him off, “God damn it!” he cursed, and hit the steering wheel. When we reached my house, he let the Ford idle for a moment.

“Hey? Charlotte?”

“Yea?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Of course.” I slammed the door and didn’t watch him pull away.

I did not see Dani again, for a very long time. Summer ended, fall came with school and school-patterns and a normality that I hadn’t even remembered. I still walked and watched the stars, but I did not go to the park. I couldn’t stand to see that singular patch of clover. It was a solid time. When winter came, it was colder and the stars were brighter, and even more welcoming of their watchers.

The rock hit my window with a clarity that rang out apart from the normal sounds of the night. I sprang up and another rock hit. I crept to the blinds and opened them, opened the window too. Dani stood in the grass below, aiming another pebble.

“Watch it!” Dani dropped the rock.

“Charlie? Can you come down here? I need to talk to you.”

A few minutes later I stood next to her in the dew stricken grass. Her eyes were red, her lips chapped from biting. Immediately, I felt the resentment of the past weeks dissipate. She was *Dani*. I forgave her.

“What’s up?”

“Let’s go to the park.” She didn’t have her car, and the walk there was silent. Apprehension rose in my throat, it tasted like acidic bile, like I had eaten something nasty. Dani didn’t look at me; her eyes were focused on the ground.

“Dani? Are you ok?” She paused for a moment, eyes still focused on cracks in the sidewalk, she shook her head.

“What’s wrong?” I pleaded for her to tell me. But she only kept walking, eyes down.

“The park.”

The night was one of those winter nights when everything is as bright as day, the moon seems so close. I felt like the stars were watching us, to see if everything would work out, and this made me feel better, it made it easier if I thought someone else cared. There was a long while of silence, and standing, and staring at the stars.

“So…” my impatience was growing unbearable.

“I’m pregnant.” The words fell, became impossibly loud, like a thunder storm, and faded into silence.

“What?”

“I took a test and everything. There’s no mistaking the signs.” Dani didn’t look at me. She watched the stars.

“You’re not showing yet.”

“There hasn’t been time.”

“Jon?” I held onto my reason like a floatation device, as emotions surrounded me. My face burned with anger, and the sick feeling of apprehension growing in my throat became cold and solid.

“Yea.”

“He’s gone.”

“Yea.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Leave. I don’t have any thing else to do. My parents kicked me out when I told them, I guess it was just one slight to many. They don’t want to be known as the parents of the mother of a bastard.” I didn’t suggest other methods of dealing with pregnancy.

“Where would you go?” I asked. Not where, but who? Who would take care of you, Dani? I thought. Her eyes met mine and I felt my breath evaporate in my throat.

“Charlie” she whispered “I’m scared.” The thought of Dani scared was worse than the thought of her being *gone*.

“Don’t be. It will be ok.” Dani sighed, and threw back her head, as if the stars could answer her questions.

“What does that even mean?” I had no answers. There was a long silence, and I suddenly had the urge to kiss her. I wondered if the pressure of my lips on hers would be so preposterous that it would undo all of the last few months and leave us standing in a clover field, unacquainted and only stunned by stars.

“Where will you go?” I asked again.

“I don’t know. Somewhere with an ocean. Maybe Maine.” She placed her hand on her belly, as if that could compress the growth.

“When?”

“Soon. Maybe next week, maybe tomorrow. Soon as I can.”

“So...this is good bye?” I could feel my entire body contort at the idea. It wrenched my heart, to imagine my life, before Dani.

“I guess so. I mean, when I find where I’m going... I’ll keep in touch.” I knew this was a lie, but I nodded any how.

“Somewhere with an ocean.” She repeated, as if coming to terms with the idea. I looked away. Dani took my hands in hers and I glanced up. I caught her eyes, which glimmered like amber.

I took a deep breath, and held it. She didn't look away, and her lips parted just slightly. I don't know if to take a breath or in preparation, but I caught them too. I caught her lips in mine and I held them there. They were soft, like finger tips. She didn't resist and she didn't kiss me back, but we just stood there, joined by our lips and our breath. I pulled away first, and wiped the taste of her baby-soft lips off mine.

“Charlie— she began but I caught her words and twisted them away.

“Goodbye, Dani” I said, “I love you.” I left then, before I knew what could have been.

My father was up when I got home. He was watching another Hallmark movie; there was a chocolate lab on the screen, and a little boy.

“Why are you up so late?” He asked me.

“I had to say goodbye to an old friend.” I said.

“Hm.” He turned back to the movie. The puppy was apparently dead. The boy sobbed.

“Hey, dad, have you ever seen the 39 Steps?”

“The Hitchcock? Yea. I think we have it, somewhere.”

“Would you like to watch it?”

“Now?”

“Sure, why not?”

“Alright” he grunted, shifted in his seat. I found the movie, and turned on the DVD player.

The blue screen came on, silencing the boy's screams.

“Charlotte, after you put that in, will you bring me a Pepsi from the fridge?” I started the movie, and brought him the soda. He cracked it and the sound of the fizz reminded me of Dani's kiss. The movie started, and a black and white audience filled the screen.

Judgment of Idols

My business in South America had been completed. I had gone to Brazil to negotiate a trade agreement and been handsomely paid by the corporation. I planned now to return to my old home in the town. I was now a wealthy man and I was ready to show off my prosperity.

When I arrived in town, the women were objects. This much surprised, fascinated, and in a way sickened me. This was through no fault of the women, or, contrary to history, the fault of men. The women were now carvings, maintaining the feminine structure their lives once held, and carved by some unknown sculptor in a variety of materials. Victoria, my girlfriend, was striking in flashing black ebony. Abby, the house-servant, was struck gold in an interesting and evocative posture and the less-than-attractive Emma was beautified by shining-white ivory. Only the skin on the women was transformed, the clothing and hair remained in an organic state. Some pranksters attempted to disrobe the statues, but were apprehended and sent to the proper authorities. They received a minor rebuttal from our local elders.

The statues were found all over the large, remote settlement. Some were using the restroom at the moment of transformation. Others cooking, and some engaged in intimate affairs. One woman was playing a harp; a splendid sculpture. Several were out gardening. The sun shone off them brilliantly and the greenery around them made a nice accent. But some were ugly. Particularly the women who had been fat or old. They were carted off and stored in an old barn, away from where roving eyes might see them and be blinded.

It is an interesting scientific fact to note that those who were touching the woman during the time of transformation were also transformed, but into unsightly things like toads or worms. We lost most of the children this way. We had a real rat problem for a while before these unfortunate souls were taken out by an exterminator we hired.

A cure was found for the strange statue disease (if it can be called that), discovered by the town mystics. First, when the woman was to be restored, a small bit of the material on the forehead was removed and stamped into a coin or carved into a charm. The charm was placed in the middle of a playing field where the men would gather. Then a sport was selected at random from a large top hat. The hat was bowed to and the men would prostrate before it. When the sport was called out the men would gather the necessary equipment and play until only one man remained undefeated and/or alive. All the men who had the least skill in the selected sport would compete, and some men from neighboring villages would make the long trek to try to win.

After the match was won, the charm was taken off the middle of field and handed to the winner. The woman it belonged to coalesced back into human form and as long as the man wore the coin/charm in a necklace around his neck the woman was bound to him, responding to his every thought. The men rarely removed the necklaces. Laws were put in place that protected the necklaces. They began to be seen as symbols of power and status. Monogamy began to be considered shameful. Only the physically and mentally inferior, they thought, could even get two wives. But this was natural, as the winners of the competitions would pass their genes on, and the inferior would not. Very Darwinian.

Civilized men (myself included) were rather upset about this degradation of the opposite sex. We started to buy the statues and furnish our homes with them, rather than let them roll back into this kind of slavery. Entire art galleries started opening in the homes of the civilized wealthy. A social gap formed between the slave owning lower class who were filled with masculine athletic bravado, and the art-dealing upper class filled with money.

All went fairly well off for ten years. The lower classes and the upper fought in debate, but were surprisingly tolerant of the other respective camps. During this time I thought less and less of the women I had once known. I instead thought of the collection I had amassed. I was proud of

Victoria, and had her displayed by the fireplace. A fine centerpiece. things were looking on the up and up.

Then the trouble began. I was purveying my collection. I had amassed quite the gallery. I had statues in ivory, onyx, crystal, five different forms of wood, a gold sculpture, and several others. I had women from the prime age groups in the living room and bedroom, while the older girls in my collection I had stashed in the study and the basement. My collected works were superior to most others in my neighborhood. I was proud.

I walked around the latest shipment of statues in the foyer and I was struck at the beauty of one seventeen year old wood carving. She was intoxicating. Her hair hung by her waist, still growing. The bark of her lips curved into a slight pucker. She was round about the hips and waist. Her eyes were forever stuck in a kind of wink, as if urging me forward. I at first thought this feeling I possessed toward the statue to be love, but later realized it was only lust at first sight. I was nonetheless captivated, and decided to find a way to return the statue to a more responsive human form. But I did not think I could beat the muscular lower class in a battle of strength, speed, or endurance. I could only beat them if the sport drawn was chess, and that had had only ever been drawn once in more than two thousand competitions. So I began extensive research into the problem. I so much wanted to taste her fleshy skin, and not that dull oak and varnish.

My research came to naught. I made a few discoveries early on and was so overjoyed that I told a colleague about my progress. He became upset, saying any breakthrough I made would tip the political balance of the town. I hastily countered that it would not, each man could have a loving woman as his companion rather than a statue or possession, and that all would be happy because these women would respond with real love. I recounted to him my affair that I had with a Brazilian woman and how it had been successful. He gave me a skeptical look. I said that perhaps when I discovered how to turn her back, I could leave and take my work with me. He said that he did not

trust me, that I was of those stupid abolitionists who believed that hoarding women as statues was noble. He gave me the lecture I had heard a several times before from those of the lower classes. He said that all the statues should be transformed back, that they should be made into pleasant, obedient women, so that the town could be repopulated with children. Then the man, who I had thought my friend, or at least acquaintance, went to the local authorities. The elders gave me a minor rebuke, but forced me to burn and discontinue my work.

I was saddened and enraged. But I did not disobey the elders. They had respected me before my wealth; I was bound by honor to respect them now. I stormed back to my house and found her there, that perfect wink now taunting me with the unattainable. I could not bare that knowing stare, my anger escalated. My first thought was to sell her, but she was tainted by my previous experiments, no other collector would buy her. I could not stand the thought that any of those lower class weasels would get her, so I could not submit her to the competition. I had seen those proud lower-classmen with their gaggle of cooing wives walking the streets. No, I would not let one of those men have her.

I stared at her oaken body in thought and loathing her emotional distance. I could not have her torturing me like this, nor could another have her. The logical solution was her destruction. My garden is now nicely mulched.

The town authorities wanted to charge me with murder, but as she was not living at the time of the killing, I escaped the charge. I really hope they don't turn back. Then the charge will apply.