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A Shower Muse

Put the soapy hand in the air, into the air in the sunlight
   In the opaque window (you’re washing your arm).
Open the palm towards the ceiling, beyond the molding,
   Pose, hold a trophy,
Better yet, imagine a perky city in your hand –
   A Turkish architecture,
People running beneath it thronging
   Along your callouses,
Think of the palaces growing bit by bit
   Along the populated palm.

Turn the city sideways until the soapy edifice
   Scrolls off the hand,
Make the steam wrap the streets up
   In some early morning fog,
Close the hand, wrap the city securely in a dome,
   Rinse the bustling marketplace
Down towards the dull feet and whistling drain.
Songs for You

Tonight it will change.
The horseflies will pollinate the Martagons,
The courtyard will stink like Chanel and Dom Pérignon,
And the prince will come along
Moon-drunk and jump
The fence for Rampion.

She slept for years
In a field of rye,
The whole time running
Her legs up and down
Until they grew strong as horses,
Until her body was sure of itself.

Love is only a dare to hop
The hill at eighty miles an hour
For a few seconds of flight followed by
An unanticipated, yet still appreciated
Collision with the guardrail.

Love is a dog that thumps its tail
All night long, until you’re forced to dock it.

On the Mayflower, one pilgrim says to the other,
If I’m right then we’re going the wrong way.
TAKE. ME. HOME. SICK.

Reporter: Could you give us some of your political beliefs?
— Pink Flamingos

I control all ants, the blowflies, my hands.  
So my love, when we finish touching,  
Decomposition will torch  
Its inevitable chorus and our error will cave  
All structures, a self-effacing self.

The wind unlaces the shutters,  
The gutters drop like balls,  
Cross-sectioning the household,  
I become the actress lobed like a nautilus,  
Speaking in top-shelf vodka, low

And behold, Gooble-gobble, gooble-gobble,  
It is only a stage. You pull  
A telephone from thin air  
And dial a number with your brain.  
Ring bearer, pallbearer, “HULLO?”

An inquiry to the Haus of Oddity, you order  
A curio big enough to crush me,  
Or better yet, a chest to shove  
Swords through, but I’ll emerge alive,  
Homesick and jabbering,

Grinding against myselves.  
White as flint and wonder  
I am giddy in the flesh  
And on the verge of ignition  
All limbs ring white
As Queen Anne’s
Lace
Fighting back time,
The newspaper will
call it a halo,
But it was more
Of a crop circle.

Morgan Anderson

Of Parts

plucked from morning glories
Hell stole the hummingbirds

their tongues given to demons
their beaks stitched to fingers
ripping skin from bone

their wings used to fool man
“we are angels,”
tasting nectar’s curses
The Cuban who lived upstairs fell over the banister and Charity pulled my face out of her crotch.

“Castro is dead,” she said.

I sat up on my elbows.

“I can hear him moaning,” I said.

“He’s lying at the bottom of the stairs bleeding out.”

“He’s fine, baby.”

She pushed my face away, sitting up on the couch. Her hand reached out, hovering an inch from the wall, fingers like a spider’s legs tasting the air.

“Last night I heard him cry out,” she said.

A heavy weight fell against the wall, then a creak on the stairs. I scooted forward on the couch, put my face in.

“It takes a long time to start to stink.”

But after a minute, she pushed me away, rolling off the couch.

“I can’t do it with him dying at the bottom of the stairs.”

She crawled across the floor for her pants. The stairs creaked slowly, by inches up the wall.

The next day I got back from Chickie’s late in the afternoon. When Castro pounded on the door I handed Charity the bag. He was standing in the foyer in his boxers and a bloody t-shirt, carpet fuzz stuck in his beard.

“Please, please call an ambulance,” he said.
Charity could smell him from across the room.

“Por favor, John.” His legs were shaky and he stumbled inside.

I used the phone in the kitchen. Charity grabbed my hand.

“Don’t call,” she said.

“You see the shape he’s in.”

“If they come, they’ll bring cops.”

“Not always.”

“Oh, God, he’s on the couch.” She ran into the back room.

I sat with him after I made the call. Castro pulled at his shirt to see the bloodstains better. He scratched viciously into his scalp.

“I been drinking for weeks, now,” he said. “I was going mad up there. I think yesterday I fell down the stairs.” He raised his t-shirt, showed me the bruise down his side. “I see a little boy in the doorways. He watches me but won’t come inside.”

Charity passed through the room to the kitchen and out the back door. I heard a distant siren when the back door opened.

“I offered him a peanut like a squirrel,” Castro laughed green teeth and fumes. He began to cry. “I heard you come home and knew God had sent you.”

When I heard the sirens at the front of the house I opened the front door. Two paramedics came inside and stood over Castro. They were big and broad like they were grown somewhere special. One took Castro’s pulse.

“He’s been drinking for some time,” I said. “He’s starting to see things.”

“You his drinking buddy?”

“I’m his neighbor.”
“You seeing anything that’s not supposed to be here?” the one taking his pulse said.

“If I see it how am I supposed to know it shouldn’t be here?” Castro said.

Another set of paramedics from the same batch came through the door. Castro pointed at the other two.

“Don’t worry guy, there’s supposed to be four of us,” the one who had taken Castro’s pulse said. “The guy’s drunk,” he said to the two who just came in.

They checked for broken ribs and Castro said the blood on his shirt was from a nosebleed. He asked them if they knew how to say ‘ouch’ in Spanish. After they told him no, Castro looked at them and said, “Ouch.”

They refused to take him anywhere and left. Castro went back upstairs; I waited for Charity. She called softly through the back door.

“They’re gone,” I said.

She stood in the kitchen doorway. Her hands pulled at her cheeks.

“He sat on the couch. Did you smell him? I can’t sit on that couch anymore.”

“We can’t throw the couch away for that.”

“I can’t sit on it anymore. I can still smell him. He’s soaked into the cushions.”

“I’ll get some air-freshener,” I said. “Where’s the bag, Charity?”

She shook her head, trying to look away. I grabbed her arm, pulled her round.

“What did you do with the bag?”

Tears fell down her cheeks.

“I can’t take this anymore,” she said. “What if the cops had come?”
“The cops didn’t come.”

It came out somewhere between a bark and whine. “I got to get clean, John.”

“We’ll get clean, then. What did you do with the bag, Charity?”

She whimpered, trying to back away from me. I wrapped my arms round her shoulders, her hair in my mouth, her face wet on my neck.

“We’ll get clean, don’t worry. Where is the bag? What did you do with the bag?”

“I got to do it for my kid, John,” she said.

“I know, baby.”

“I miss her, John.”

“She’s a good kid,” I said.

“We have to stay away from Chickie. Promise me you won’t go near Chickie no more,” she said it like something was pulling her hair out at the roots.

I tried to hold her still but she was shaking too much and pulled away.

“Chickie’s bad, John, real bad. He’s the devil and he’s selling evil!”

“Where’s the bag, Charity?” and I grabbed her by the arms, saying it again. She was stuck on “evil, evil” and she began to bawl, burying her head against my chest, barking into my shoulder until it ended, a wave crashing against a cliff. Her kid’s name bobbed up like something floating in the water and she was quiet a long time.

In a tiny voice she said, “I got a little shirt for her the other day at the store. Do you want to see it?”

Her eyelashes brushed my shirt.

“Sure, baby, go get it.”
Wiping at her eyes, smiling like a dying bird, she ran to the back room. I could hear her going through drawers. She came out with it held in front of her chest, a bright empty thing that had *mommy’s little champ* written across it. Her face over top of it looked like it was trying to smile through bad newspaper.

“You’re the best mom,” I said.

Turning it around to look at it, she nodded like she believed me.

“She’ll like it, won’t she?”

“Of course she will. The next time we see her you can give it to her.”

“We can get clean and I can get visitation rights,” she said. The bright thing spilled like water through her fingers.

“Baby, we can tell your mom how good you’re doing,” I said.

“We can tell her you don’t hit me no more,” she said. “And you got a job.”

“I’ll get a job, and I’ll buy her some nice things,” I said. “And you can go back to school.”

The bright thing had collapsed in her hands but a piece of it still flashed in her eyes…

…I ran down to the end of the street and watched the house from there,” she said. “I think I dumped it over the tracks.”

I wanted to say something that would be true. A great fearful thing lay around us, and I almost touched her, but couldn’t. I left when she began to fold the little shirt.

The alley behind the houses held garbage cans and old tires. At the end, it opened onto a street parallel the train tracks atop a raised embankment of crushed stone. I was out of breath by the time I got there. Climbing up and over I came down among the weeds and scrub trees. Raising my head over the tracks, I spotted the house where I lived between the two porches with their lights on. It was getting dark; the sweat on my back was cooling.
The weeds scratched my arms as I bent over searching for the bag. Gnats got caught in my eyelids. I scoured up and down the embankment, cutting my hands on brambles and thorns. Plastic bags, cans, Styrofoam cups, fast food bags, crumpled cigarette packs, god goddamn it…

“Christmas!”

A light flashed at me through the weeds.

“Christmas!”

“Jesus Christ!” I said, backpedalling up the embankment, bruising my knees on the stones.

The light hit me in the face and when it pulled away I saw spots for a long time. He was just a voice, cracking.

“Have you seen a little dog?”

“A dog named Christmas?”

“A white dog with a red collar,” the voice said.

I came down through the scrub. He was an old man in a worn jacket and jeans, no watch. Hands with big knuckles and no rings held the flashlight, the beam shattering in the tall grass.

“He got loose yesterday and I haven’t found him yet,” the man said, bending in the weeds. “What are you looking for?”

“My wallet,” I said.

He nodded, skimming the grass at his feet with his flashlight.

“If I find it, I’ll get it to you,” he said. “You live around here?”

I nodded over the tracks. He motioned behind himself at the thin string of houses that bordered a wide lot of fresh-cut grass. A warehouse once stood there but the city had crushed and shoveled it.

“Live just back there. I figure he didn’t get far,” he said.
“Since yesterday?”

“He’s old and blind,” he said. “Hears good, though.”

“Maybe somebody found him,” I said.

“How’d keep an old, blind dog if he weren’t yours? Besides, he’s got tags on his collar.”

I followed him as he moved along the embankment, wading into the weeds, flashlight sweeping in front of him, breaking on the scrub. Every few feet he stopped to bend and push the grass away, crying “Christmas!” before moving on.

Stepping away from the scrub, he shot the beam along the line of weeds where we’d just come from, casting it ahead in the direction we were moving.

“I opened the door to take the garbage out and he must’ve followed me and I didn’t even know it,” he said.

His lips trembled, eyes sliding down his cheeks. He dropped the flashlight and staggered forward, hands shooting out. We caught each other. His grip was fierce, clutching me to him, fighting the gravity of a greater thing. He shook violently, strangling something far back in his throat.

“I’ve had him so long I can hardly stand to be without him.”

As suddenly as it came, it left, and he released me, looking away.

“I owe him this much,” he said.

I stooped, handing him the flashlight from off the ground, and he sliced a wide arc over the field.

“Christmas!”

We waited in the dark for something to move. After a few moments, he stood like a man fallen down a deep hole. When I shuffled my feet, he looked up.
“If I find your wallet, I’ll get it to you. I’m in the blue house if you find my dog.”

He reached out and searched my face for something precious, patting my arm with a hand that was warm and weak and could be carried off by a big wind.

I didn’t notice how dark it had gotten till he drew away, a huddled figure casting a thin beam of light that skipped like the moon over water. Mounting the embankment, I followed the tracks, “Christmas!” coming from farther off, smaller, emptier, the echoes of some distant sin falling away. I stepped gracefully from railroad tie to railroad tie, as if I had lost weight or won the lottery. Looking back, the moonlight lay softly over the field like cream on a girl’s belly.

In the alley, darkness hid the garbage cans and tires. A television was playing in someone’s home. As I walked back to the house something gathered itself in a rush and leaned against the trees, the limbs heaving and shaking the wind from its leaves, releasing it to rush into a greater space, strands of it lingering, pulling, and I believed in other places.

The lights were on in the house but Charity was gone. The bright thing was folded in a small square on the bed and the front door was open. I turned the porch light on and stepped outside. The street was empty but for cars with spare change in the cup holders and houses with televisions on the other side of unlocked windows.

A white shape shambled in the front yard, low-hung head, tired.

“Christmas,” I said and it took a few short steps in my direction.

I stepped off the porch, calling again till it came to my hand and sniffed it. It let me pick it up, little legs dangling limply. I carried it into the kitchen where it stood still on the linoleum while I filled a bowl with water. It emptied the first bowl and some of the second. It snatched at a piece of bread I stuck under its nose. When it finished eating, it followed the sound of my voice into the other room, shuffling forward, stopping, “Christmas” and shambling again till it came to my foot.

I picked it up and placed it on the couch. Its head never moved, just kept that low-hung position; the hair on its face drooping like an old man’s
with eyes of blue ice. It shivered on the cushion, falling gradually into the back of the couch and trying to right itself.

I went into the back room and grabbed the shirt from the bed. The dog let me slip it over its head and fit its front legs through the sleeves. It snuffled, almost raising its eyes to almost look at me, falling again and trying to sit up with that bright thing wrapped round it, so god godawful…

…I wanted to pretend that it would work.

Looking at it a long time in the razor light, my lips cut themselves on its name. My leg began to shake and I shut my eyes to keep the thing building in my throat from coming out, sitting on my hands so I wouldn’t have to touch the horrible thing on the couch next to me.

Kara Dunford

Leapster

Claudette,

I was born under unusual circumstances. It’s suspected that my family lineage may have something to do with it. My Momma always said the delicate tango between the Sun and the Earth ruled our destiny; Daddy suspected Voodoo. I was born in New Orleans on February 29th 1904. With the turn-of-the-century enthusiasm in the air and Daddy’s new job as a steam-boat engineer, my parents were over the moon with excitement. Momma named me Siria Rae, Persian for glowing, bright, sun. Always a history buff, Momma could find a story even behind the housecat Sammy and his Egyptian origin. A little history on the family; you see, my mother was born on the Summer Solstice, June 21st 1879, and my father on the Winter Solstice, December 21st, 1873.
Doctor Laurent Dubois delivered me into this world on Saint Frances de Roux Avenue, in the infamous shadowy span of his private office. Momma said nearly half the French Quarter refused to get within a mile of the handle-bar mustache doctor because it was rumored he practiced Voodoo in the swamps every evening. Momma and Daddy said he was a kind-hearted man who was a bit on the eccentric side but a fine doctor none-the-less. Momma went into labor February 28th 1904, at eight forty-five P.M. Her childhood nursemaid, Rosa-Lee, was like family; she helped my swelled-bellied Momma waddle down the stairwell and catch the streetcar to Saint Francis de Roux Avenue. Daddy was out in Fontainebleau celebrating his promotion with the big shots at the steamboat company, so poor Momma only had Doctor Dubois and Rosa-Lee to comfort her as I refused to enter the world until the time was right. Momma would retell the story of my birth to me every four years on my “real” Birthday, as she cuddled me in her lap and pressed her fingers into my hand as if to say, “Listen up, this is real important.” Momma was in so much pain—as I was her first-born—that she said she barely noticed as Doctor Dubois lit bowls of herbs around the room, and waved a newspaper-sized bunch of sage around Momma’s head. This was not the typical home delivery room; dark yards of printed fabric were hung over the windows and candles illuminated carvings of figures placed on tables around the room. The doctor chanted above Momma as she passed out from the pain, reviving her with a sip of potion he wore in a vial around his neck. Momma found the strength to make the final push at two-twenty nine A.M. The kind Doctor told her, “You is one lucky lady, Mrs. Barbour. Only one out of every 1,461 babies born is born on a Leap Day.”

We even made the front page of the newspaper, First Leap Day Baby of the New Century. Daddy, smiling and proud, sat behind Momma and me on the front step of Doctor Dubois’ Saint Frances de Roux Avenue practice. This is the story of my life as a Leapster, and the unusual circumstances I’ve grown to loathe and accept over time. I am twenty-seven years old, living in Saint Louis now; there was nothing holding me back in New Orleans, as everyone I once loved is now dead and gone. I’ve started a job as a historian at the Saint Louis Society of National Landmark and Preservation Council. Hillary Durham, President of the Society, was so impressed with my knowledge that she hired me on the spot after meeting up at a café for my interview. Mrs. Durham asked me, “Ms. Barbour, how on earth do you know so much? Did you spend your childhood buried nose-deep in the history section at the library?” “No, Ma’am. My mother taught me everything I know.” I responded. Mrs. Durham then got me
talking about the advent of the gas turbine and its possible demise of the Mississippi steamboat golden era. “Daddy always said that as long as the Mississippi was still running and the tourist were still coming the steamboat would remain a staple in New Orleans culture,” the muddy waters of the Mississippi ran through my veins and I couldn’t stop. “Daddy even made a trip to see the retirement of The Belle of Louisville in 1914, the oldest operating steamboat on the western rivers.” I instantly regretted my words. “Your Daddy, huh.” Mrs. Durham chuckled. “Oh, I’m sorry for the confusion, Mrs. Durham see, my family has referred to my great-grandfather as Daddy for generations.” I tried to recover quickly. “Hmm, must be another quirk of the Creole culture,” she said. Thank God, saved by the notoriously odd Creoles yet again, I thought. I returned to my apartment that evening and pulled out the photo album I’ve carried everywhere with me for so long now. I opened the red leather cover and gazed into the eyes of those I’ve loved over the years, some long gone, others still around but who will never know of my existence. Faces I’ve loved and cherished; babies, children, adults, cats, dogs, and birds. So many faces, so many stories.

Only five other people on this earth have known who I really am; only one is still living today. Momma, Daddy, and Rosa-Lee, of course, because they spent nearly every day since my birth with me watching me grow, watching me stay the same, but they are gone now, I carry their love and lessons about life with me everywhere. The other two, Doctor Dubois, and Magnus Scott Wilhelm, my dear first husband and one true love; only one of these two men is still walking this earth. I’ve strolled through my life on autopilot for a while now. The pain of losing everyone and everything you once knew and loved is enough to make some people consider ending their own life. I admit I’ve come close to the edge before; while living in Chicago a while back I intentionally put myself in the line of danger many times. Too cowardly to take my own life, I believed this to be my only option. Something or someone always intervened, though, right at the moment before something truly horrific was about to happen to me. Whether it be in a dark alley, on the edge of a high-rise, on a bridge, railroad, something always prevented me from getting what I thought I wanted. Now I realize that my time here on earth has only just begun; at twenty-seven I have only just started my journey, a journey that I felt before should have been snuffed out many years back. Magnus and I were married in Daddy and Momma’s beautiful backyard during a time of free spiritedness, love, and flowers. I was eighteen, Magnus ten years my senior. We met at university; he was stunned that
at my age I was working as an adjunct professor already and pursuing my doctorate. Magnus was on campus to protest the Vietnam War. Vice-President of the Loyola University chapter of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, he was a man on a mission. I spotted Magnus handing out flowers on campus, as I was exiting my History of the Mississippi Steamboat Evolution course. His unkempt appearance was frightening to me at first: What on earth is wrong with these people? Where I’m from you don’t want to look like a vagabond, I thought, as he approached me with a toothy smile and outstretched arm, offering me the brightest of his daffodils.

“A flower for peace and solidarity, sister. Why don’t you join me at the sit-in tonight?” I was taken aback by his forwardness; I can remember a time when men would go to a young woman’s parents for permission to court. “I beg your pardon?” A sudden thrill of spontaneous desire shot a wave from my head to my toes. “We need support, especially from a beauty like yourself,” he continued in that smooth lullaby Creole voice. “I, I guess. I am free this evening,” I managed to utter, caught off guard. “Great, do you live on campus?” he asked. “No, I live on Saint Frances de Roux,” I said. “That’s not far. I’ll catch the bus and we can go together. The sit-in is on the steps of the Judicial Building; the suckers won’t let us inside after closing hours so we’re pulling an all-nighter. The plan is to line up in front of the entrance so in the morning the suckers can’t get in,” he pressed on. I couldn’t help but to admire his enthusiasm, as he explained his objections to the war, and how as V.P. of some hippie extremist club he was going to convince the state of Louisiana to write up an official statement to the White House declaring a withdraw of all Louisiana born soldiers from the war. “Ok, don’t keep me waiting Mister…?” I was starting to feed off of his exuberance now. “Oh yeah, promise not to laugh because it sure isn’t no John, Paul, or George kinda name,” he chuckled out. “I would never!” I responded in mock offense. “The name’s Magnus Scott Wilhelm, pleasure to meet you,” he said, stroking his overgrown bird’s nest of a beard. “Siria Rae Barbour, kindly noted.” I grinned.

We spent the evening, and wee hours of the morning, talking about Loyola, our friends, and family. I told him I was orphaned long ago when he asked about Momma and Daddy, which held a very different meaning for him than me. I had experienced many years to make peace with their deaths, and learned to accept the hands of time. Magnus on the other hand viewed my loss with a heavy heart, detrimental to my development as a young adult. He made it a habit to bring me home to his parents
every weekend so I could experience the love of a family. Little did he know my “young adult” development had sailed through this vessel many moons ago. We married after graduate school, bought a little row house on Saint Charles Boulevard and spent many cherished years together. Our love produced two beautiful children, who grew and developed at a perfectly normal rate; I couldn’t have been happier.

I left him seventeen years later when I knew I was pressing my luck; I later learned he died of a heart attack only two year later. Decades of forgery and cover-ups had prepared me for this day. I had been dreading for so long. I still shudder at the thought of Magnus reading the morning paper, expecting my return from a weekend bed and breakfast getaway: Car Plummets into the Mississippi, Woman Driver Rests in a Watery Grave. I’ve spent most of my life remembering those I’ve loved through pictures and my journals. Rosa-Lee started recording the comings and goings of New Orleans for me, and when I was able to suggested I keep a journal because the passage of time was a little bit different for me, and she didn’t want me to forget who I was and where I’d come from.

This is not the life I asked for, or the one I expected. Living such an extended life sounds great to the average person, until you must deal with the heartbreak of watching those you love fall ill and die. The hands of time are brutal, bringing disease and decay. I have been forced to lie to almost everyone around me about my true identity, leaving husbands, children, friends, and careers behind to shelter them from a truth they would never believe. I am not a heartless woman; I have watched those I love from a safe distance as they age well beyond me. Those husbands, children, and friends I have brought into my life out of greed over the years still receive anonymous gifts of monetary support from me. As I have spent decades upon decades working and saving to ensure a better life for those who have brought joy to mine. You may say I am a selfish woman for bringing others into my life for my own comfort and joy, but I have learned a great deal about human interaction over the years and have given up on long-term companionship, aside from one old soul I can’t seem to shake from my life.

March 5, 1905, was the day Rosa-Lee started my journal: The Barbour baby should be starting to walk now and she look like she nearly just came outta the Misses a few minutes ago! All pink and tiny, can’t hold her head up and drinks nothing but milk that I gotta buy by the bulk from the farmers market year round. She look nothing like her Momma, Lord we
been begging Mr. Barbour to let us take her to the doctor but he gets all funny acting like we can’t take the child out of the house.

March 7th 1905: They gone and done it, took that child to see Doctor Dubois on Saint Frances de Roux all wrapped up like a Christmas present in her blankets. I scurried behind Mrs. Barbour carrying the milk bottles. That fool doctor took one look at Siria Rae lit a bowl of some of that Voodoo magic, put his hands on her head and started laughing! Like he was real happy this child not growing! He looked right at Mrs. Barbour and said, “I told you, you is one lucky lady, Mrs. Barbour.” The doctor said he’d explain it all to ‘em, but I had to leave the room because this was family business and the fewer people who knew the better. Mrs. Barbour refused and said, “Rosa-Lee will stay, she’s family, besides she’s been with the child every day since she arrived on this earth.”

Momma started adding to the journals over the years too, a delicate mixture between Momma’s looping script and Rosa-Lee’s square chicken-scratch grace the pages of the journals I treasure. February 29th 1916: Today is your third Birthday, Siria Rae, your father and I am so proud of you. With Doctor Dubois help we now understand what a challenge today must be for you. Your exterior is that of a three- year- old, your mind that of a twelve- year- old. Rosa-Lee and I promise to record your life for you until you are able to on your own, if you wish that is. We image you will have the dexterity sometime around 1928, that sounds a world away to you doesn’t it? I should be a grandmother by the time my own daughter can write her own name. I am so sorry for this condition your father and I have bestowed upon you. If we had only known. I am not mourning your existence by any means, Siria Rae; I never want you to think this. I am mourning the experiences you will be denied because your father and I are not like you. We will be long gone by the time you begin your journey into this world as a functioning human being. This revelation has caused a great deal of sleepless nights for your father and me. This is why today, on your third birthday, we are naming Doctor Dubois your guardian. He has trusted us with the secret of his identity, therefore we trust him to provide care and guidance to you when we no longer can. You will forever hold my heart in your tiny hands.

Love your mother,

Claudette I. Barbour
Daddy passed away March 20, 1936, the first day of spring, on that beloved steamboat he found so much joy in. Momma followed twelve years later, on September 22, 1948, the first day of autumn, peacefully while needlepointing a hankie in the sunroom. The coincidence of their birth and death dates was yet another prediction Momma had made years ago; “The delicate tango between the Sun and the Earth rules our destiny.” I had celebrated seventeen birthdays when I went to live with Doctor Dubois on Saint Frances de Roux. He has always been like an uncle to me, my parents frequently visited him, and we even took vacations together to ensure my comfort with the handle bar mustache doctor. He explained the importance of keeping our secret from the world by sharing his life lessons with me. “Trust no one with the secret of yo’ gift, young lady,” he said with piercing eyes directed at mine. “I made the mistake once…an’ it landed me in a decade long stint as a lab rat.” He diverted his gaze from me as if trying to press back a painful memory.

It was Doctor Dubois who suggested I move from New Orleans, the only home I had ever known. He taught me the means of survival for our kind. “Don’t get too familiar with folks. If they study yo’ face too hard they gonna know yo’ ain’t aged but a day since they met ya.” Words of wisdom from an old pro. He has helped me cope with the fact that my mind will always be years ahead of my body. He taught me to appreciate the short amount of time we are granted with those we love, to live without anger and hate, for this gift or curse we have been handed is rare. So I began my journey hopping from city to city, working odd jobs, attending numerous universities for a variety of disciplines. We meet up every several years; the doctor based his headquarters out of New Orleans, aiding the ill by day, searching for those like us, old souls, through the night.

Today I keep to myself; it is exhausting to stay current with all the latest changes in society. I have witnessed so much progression, so much pain, and so many deaths. It is 2012, a world I would have never imagined living in, a world so different from the one I was born into. One in every 1,461, that is the chance one has to be born on a Leap Day; Doctor Dubois and myself are still searching for the chances of being born like us, slipping through the cracks of time. That delicate tango between the Sun and the Earth Momma talked about, producing a child born on a day that only comes around once every four years. Some may say Voodoo, like Daddy; others may say fate. I guess we still have plenty of time to find out. Enclosed are my journals, decades of a family history you have never
known until today. I know you will cherish the secret your great-grandmother created in a world as foreign as a history book to you. I have been watching you my little Leapster grandbaby.

Love your grandmother,

Siria Rae Barbour

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**Elena Elder**

**Lila Hill**

Her fingers curled through the chicken wire, and she stood up on her tiptoes to get a better look. The chickens came at her with cocked heads, clearly curious about this little figure imposing on their space. They inched closer. She shrieked with pleasure, and ran into her grandmama’s waiting arms. She closed her eyes to make this memory. Grandmama always smelled sweet – of coconuts, lemon, and sugared dough. Three white hairs poked her eye and made it water.

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Her eyes continued to water as she tiredly pulled her head up from the bathroom floor and quickly laid it back down again. Her body lurched forward and she hurled the contents of her stomach into the cold toilet...
in front of her. Beads of sweat formed on her face and she shivered as they dripped down her body. Grandmama wasn’t helping anymore. She cleared her throat gently — it was raw and sore from the vomiting that had occurred just moments ago. She pushed her long, straw colored hair out of her face, wiped her eyes, and slumped back down onto the floor’s cool tiles.

. . .

The sound of the ocean broke through. Squishing the sand between her toes, she lifted her head and breathed in the smells of the boardwalk. Corn dogs, funnel cakes, fresh-made waffle cones, and kettle corn wafted their scents through the thick, salted air. She felt like she was five again as she skipped to the lemonade stand. The lemonade was tart and made her lips pucker tightly, but it was strangely refreshing. Walking along the shore, she watched the afternoon sun glitter on the water’s surface. Mesmerized by the sun’s dancing rays, she stopped and placed her beach towel close to where the ocean was lapping against the sand. The sea foam crept ever closer, threatening to soak her towel with each new wave.

. . .

She shifted her position and plucked at the sheets where they were damp. Her clothing was damp as well, and her skin was dewy, but the inside of her mouth was blistering and parched. The ocean wouldn’t do. She desperately tried to call to Mama, but her lips were badly crusted together, and she could make no sounds. She was uncomfortable and needed water and dry clothes. She made another attempt at calling to Mama. Rolling to the edge of the bed, she stabilized herself on the end table and hoisted her body to a standing position. One step, two steps… the door was getting closer. Her world turned topsy-turvy, and she gripped the post at the end of the bed. The room seemed to get bright and then suddenly dark. She sat down on the floor. The water would have to wait.

. . .

The sun poked out from behind the large, fluffy clouds, and she picked up her sunglasses from off of the swing cushion perching them on the top of her head. A gentle breeze danced through the yellow daffodils in her backyard. She adjusted the white knitted blanket that covered her and dangled her leg off of the swing to give it a little push. The soft rocking
motion was soothing, as was the sweet song that came from the Yellow Warbler that sat in the tree beside the porch. She heard her dog burst through the screen door and watched as he jumped around in the soft, green grass. His playfulness beckoned her to join him. She put down the book she had been reading, took the blanket off her lap, and ran to the yard. As she sprinted cheerfully toward the bouncing pup her foot caught on the garden hose. She tumbled into a mud puddle that had been created by the sprinkler.

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Her head was throbbing as she sat motionless, staring in the dark at the ceiling of the vehicle. She wished she could make it stop, the movement was unpleasant, but they kept telling her she had to go. She realized in that moment her dog could no longer soothe her. Lightning flashed in the sky and briefly lit up the world around her. She didn’t recognize anything. Mama was sitting in the back with her, massaging her limp hand when she felt it coming on again. She concentrated hard – so hard that she didn’t notice the tires flying over the potholes in the pavement; she didn’t notice the angry horns blaring in all directions – but it happened anyway. Her eyelids fluttered, rapidly mimicking the way her heart felt on the inside, and she shook. Her muscles became rigid, like she was stretching out after a long night’s sleep, but instead of feeling good, it felt like her muscles were elastic bands stretched so tight that they were bound to snap at any minute. Slowly, it began to pass and as soon as her body relaxed the vehicle’s breaks slammed on.

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Her hand gently grasped the bar and she gracefully lowered her body toward the ground. Plié. She scooped her other hand daintily toward the grass and plucked a small white flower. Relevé. Carefully, she released the hand that was still holding onto the bar and tucked the little flower into her hair. She felt beautiful. She felt the earth strong underneath her feet as she set into motion. Gran jeté. Pirouette. Piqué. Piqué. As she spun her body gracefully in the open field the colors of the trees became blurred. They transitioned from the vibrant greens of the spring into the warm hues of the autumn. Her arms rose to fifth position and back to first. Curtsey. The audience seemed to be cheering for her – they wanted more – but she was too lost in her silent reverie to notice. The soft cheer grew to an insistent roar and she brought her hands to her ears to drown out the noise.
A machine blared sharply as she cringed and pulled the rough, crinkly blanket over her head. She was aware of the many people around her - they were poking at her and invading her space. She wished for that adoring audience once more. A woman in blue pulled back the blanket and bent over her face, forcing her eyelids open wide and shining a bright beam of concentrated light into her eyes. Someone else was prodding at her feet with a sharp object; she flinched. She couldn’t understand how such cruel treatment could be considered helpful. A small man with a friendly face had slipped a tube into her arm. She had felt the initial coolness of a liquid being pumped into her bloodstream, but now her veins began to burn and she whimpered in pain.

The morning dew was still wet on the leaves of ivy that curled around the tree. She sat in a small patch of grass underneath this shady canopy unwearyingly braiding her long hair. Rays of sun glinted through the leaves of the trees. She fell back gently, resting her head on the grass, and looked up at the sky. She could see a few white clouds where the tree tops separated and observed the abstract shapes that they made. Slowly, the clouds fell down upon her cradling themselves around her body. It was pleasantly cool inside as she drew in a deep breath and allowed the clouds to daintily lift her off of the grass. The cool mist of the cloud quickly turned cold, becoming very bright as it traveled past the treetops. Shivering lightly as a few snowflakes formed on her body, she put her hands up near her face to shield her eyes from the ever intensifying light.

The room was freezing. The smell of rubbing alcohol and sterile instruments burned her nostrils. The bright lights made her squint. A man with a face mask stood next to her trying to explain something, but she could not hear him. Her heart began to pound. A host of people gathered around her, adjusting wires and tubes. One woman stroked the top of her head, but she found this less than pleasant. She wanted a piece of Grandmama’s lemon pie and to be left alone, but she could tell that no one in this room would agree to let her have these things. A rubber mask was thrust onto her face. She breathed in the smells of ether and synthetic strawberries. She wanted to gag, but before her reflexes had time to react,
her eyes drooped with a heavy tiredness. The sounds of the room became a high-pitched whir, and the bright, white lights began to fade into black.

...  

She lifted her head toward the sky as the swing carried her higher; she was so high that she felt as if she would burst through the stratosphere. The sun was setting - its purples, pinks, and golds meshing with one another and melting into the horizon. She pumped her legs vigorously, kicking off her sandals as she did so. She heard them rustling through the tree tops as they fluttered toward the ground. The fireflies danced about her head sparkling brightly as they began to emerge from their daytime slumber – a prelude to the show of stars that she had come up here to see. She giggled softly when one landed upon her nose. It lit up, casting a celestial glow upon her face. She crossed her eyes and smiled at the tiny creature. Returning her eyes to normal, she could now see that the sun was fully set and the stars had come to light. She bid the swing to go higher, the fireflies pushing her toward the heavens. She reached out and ran her fingers through the stars creating a trail of shining dust. As she closed her eyes to make a wish, she felt her body tilt forward and slide off the swing. With no way to catch herself, she descended slowly into the darkness.

...  

Her back arched high up and then her body slammed itself down on the bed with a thud. She heard something noisily charging up next to her bedside, but it was turned off just a moment later. She would have rather continued her free fall. Something about this room she was in felt frantic. People ran in and out – all of them peering over her face and body and a few calling her name. She wanted to tell them that she was right there – that she hadn’t left yet – but she couldn’t. Even as she conjured up all of the strength that she had in her body, nothing was signaling to them that she understood. There was something stuck down her throat impeding her ability to speak. She tried to give a little cough – anything – to get their attention. The pain was bad now and she thought it would be nice to let her mind drift off once more. She could still hear people talking to her...
But she rounded the corner anyway. The sight was brilliant. She wondered why they hadn’t followed her. Mama would love this place. There weren’t many distractions around, but there were people everywhere – on the street, on their lawns, in the sky. They all looked so happy to be here and they all radiated such welcoming warmth. Her clothes had slipped off her body, but instead of feeling ashamed, she felt free. The farther she traveled the less noise she heard. It started to rain gently, but there were no clouds above. The rain was a milky white and felt soft – like silk. The rain enveloped her; rather than rolling off her skin it stayed draped around her. She felt like a goddess. She looked down for a moment, observing the way her feet gracefully skimmed across the soft ground. When she looked up again she realized she was in front of a large shade tree. A smile began to spread across her cherub-like face. She knew she had found the perfect resting spot. She slid off the sheet of silken rain that was still attached to her body and spread it out underneath the tree. Before sitting down, she plucked a twig from the mighty arbor and carved into its trunk. The white, woody flesh of the trunk proudly displayed its newest gashes. Lila Hill gently lowered herself onto the ever evaporating blanket of rain and closed her eyes.
Generational Incantation

Barren as the treaded yard
Of a demolition derby –
Dust bowl
No rat would nest in –
The tractor-pull
I first learned what fuck meant –

A gross negligence
Strewn from the mouth of babes
And egged on by antecedent –
Kids raising kids –
Like hell in the pickup bed.

I’ve always thought pickups
Were such queer machines,
Operandi that fishtail
A little too easily for my soiled tastes –
Asshole especially wheeled
With a superciliousness
That only its virgin tongue
Could swallow.

The happenstance of shit,
Mixed with the sound of hyena
Gave me my first monkey crate –
Hurling virago,
Fishwife,
And bitch in Gomorrah;
Abominations in the parking lot.

I was labeled hellion,
A four-year-old that found love
In cunt –
Meted even in youth;
Remembered only through incantation.
Old Soul

Don’t settle
For whittling your snapped bones
Into wedding rings
For remembering memories of nightmares
Before all your dreams of pretty things
For contemplating piety
and miscalculations of future steps
you guess but you never check
and kiss the feet of those never met
Old Soul
Don’t Settle
for pathogens with pseudonyms
who go to church to forget the hymns,
because they know damn right what you are up to.
For adapting to every adjective
while still describing the frustration with all the same descriptions.
Old Soul
Don’t Settle
for the echoes of your tin can heart,
not all the whispers are true.
There’s something bigger wrapped inside of you.
ART CLASS

In between the white milky soot
of polymer clay and tap water,
first grade fingers mold
their favorite zoo animals
into perplexing mounds
that could make Picasso squint.

Mine however, was a perfect replica
of a buffalo grazing across the plains.

I scraped my plastic knife against his
soon-to-be hooves and wafted
into a daydream.
I was Pocahontas

Until John Smith across the table
burst my reverie—

“What’s that supposed to be?”

A buffalo.

“It looks like a monster from Where the Wild Things Are.”

Your flamingo looks like a two-by-four.

“Why is your voice so low? You always sound like you have a cold.

Why do you sound like you’re from Alvin and the Chipmunks?

“You’re an only child?! You must be a spoiled brat.”

I like to call my parents my older siblings.
“Why is your hair so big?

I’m going to call you Curly Sue.

Your hair is bigger than Curly Sue’s.

Did you put your fingers in a light socket?”

Shut up.

“Were you adopted?”

No.

“Then why is your Mom a different color than you?”
We had a fight. A big fight – the kind where a microphone descends from the ceiling and bells ring and Nicolas Cage is in the audience gambling… I’m not sure about that last part, I’ve never actually seen Snake Eyes although I feel I should have and I would, but it’s been so long since everyone else saw it that I’d have no one to discuss it with – and not in that fun, intellectually superior way like after seeing The Birth of a Nation or any Kurosawa film that takes place in the century in which it was made. More the “I’m 15 years late to this party” kind of way that makes people feel sorry for you – and not in the good, I-wanna-have-sex-with-you kind of way.

It wasn’t a physical fight; I’d never hit a girl. Well, that’s not entirely true because I would so totally hit a girl if, say, I didn’t know she was a girl or if she was coming at me with a hacksaw or a circular saw or a bone saw or even a machete – or any serrated object, really, whose purpose was to make things un-whole.

It happened three years ago. Dani walked into the living room and said, “I’m leaving.”

“Like to go to the store? ’Cause I need cheese.”

“Like I’m going to grad school.”

I may have said, “Hmm.”

“At Stanford.” I could hear the whistle, but couldn’t yet see the train.

“That’s not in Ohio,” I said unintelligently, my voice devoid of emotion, except confusion, which is a shitty substitute for emotion.

“Aww,” she said, putting her hand on my chin, an act she did not see as condescending. “You’ll be okay.”
I guess I should say the only fights I’ve ever been in ended with me empty of breath, being run over in slow motion, like a deer in the headlights of a freight train – but I guess trains don’t have “headlights” in the traditional sense; they have… cowcatchers. Like a deer in the cowcatcher.

Okay, so we didn’t necessarily “fight,” in the traditional sense. But to me, a fight, and more specifically losing a fight, can be measured by similar feelings of humiliation and wanting to crawl in a hole – so chalk up a win for seven years of grade-school basketball, public restrooms, my senior prom and my first ill-timed kiss, or, to put that a different way, my first kiss.

My first kiss was actually with Dani – and I don’t care if it was an 8th grade dare because we went through with it, so it counts. The ruling on the field stands. The mistake I made was planting it on her right there in front of both my friends and hers, embarrassing her to where she needed a defense to distance herself from it. That defense became my deplorable skills as a kisser. More than ten self-conscious years later we dated for an awkward month before we – and by “we” I mean “she,” with my relenting agreement – realized we worked better as very close friends “without benefits,” as she so cautiously put it, her second nuclear strike on my sexual self-confidence.

We moved in together about six months after breaking up because we both needed a roommate, and in all honesty we did work pretty well as friends. It lasted eighteen months before stupid Stanford and their lame tree mascot came calling. I swear to God, the next time some crazy chick charges me with a saw I’m going to knock her out, take the blade, and de-limb the first redwood I find.

Our friends told us we were crazy splitting an apartment so soon after breaking up, but our benefit-less relationship has always had a strange resiliency. We had our separate lives, but we hung out whenever we had a chance – sitting on the couch on a Saturday night watching black-and-white movies, her head on my shoulder or her legs propped up across my lap, in need of some kind of massage. I know she knew how hard she was making it for me. She’d run her hand through my hair and tell me I was sweet – then she’d go on a blind date set up by a friend. And then follow-up dates after that with it all fizzling out rather quickly. I hoped it was because she was comparing the market to the goods at home and nothing measured up. I hoped. We’d talk in the kitchen while making dinner and she’d catch me staring like the grade-schooler I was the first time I saw
her. I could see her smiling to herself. She knew. She knows.

I’d seen her three times since she moved to the West Coast and every time it’s like we picked up right where we left off the day before. Even though the day before was many months prior.

I’d dated, briefly, in the meantime, but the inescapable feeling of Dani being it has never wavered in my mind. Dani’s personality consisted of a rare mixture of intelligence and fun. She was a math whiz who could do things with numbers that I couldn’t even explain with words. But the way in which she acted toward the outside world reminded me of Holly Golightly – the epitome of female style and grace in film. I’d tell her this and she’d shrug. “It’s Breakfast at Tiffany’s. You should see it.”

Another shrug.

“If you loved me you’d see it.”

“Ha!” One terse, sarcastic cackle. That’s all I got.

If our high school yearbook staff could’ve taken a break from smoking out behind the dumpster, they could have thrown those horrible superlatives into the book. Most likely to succeed. Most likely to become a professional wrestler. Most likely to drown. Dani would have been most fit to become a model. She was so beautiful, tall and tan with long brown hair always done up in some informal way, as if to prove that she was the down-home all-American girl everyone knew she was. She was the “It” girl throughout school. She was Rachel. And I, tall and lanky, though not preoccupied in any way with dinosaurs, was always pegged as Ross. There go Ross and Rachel. Endless seasons of will they/won’t they with friends openly hoping that they will. We did, and it lasted a month before she convinced me we shouldn’t have. If Ross and Rachel could go “off” and “on” and by the finale, end up “on,” then it was meant to happen. But I guess I should’ve taken it as a divine sign that she called me Chandler.

The last time I saw her before she left for Stanford, she hugged me tight – like hand-me-my-inhaler tight. She wasn’t crying, but her face was a mixture of happiness and nerves. I refused to cry, but was throw-up-on-command nervous and selfishly unhappy. While we embraced she whispered in my ear, “I release you, Nick. You’re free. I’m going far away so you can move on.” She rubbed my shoulder, gave me a peck on the cheek while
letting go, smiled her radiant smile, grabbed her suitcase and wheeled it out of the now half-empty apartment. I knew then that she had moved on without looking back long ago. And I knew that I never would.

A lot can happen in three years. I started a career, or, well, I got a job – writing product copy for a company that sells cake decorations – decorations like those horrific little clowns on grocery store display cakes, those little clowns that have been around forever and just won’t die. On the evolutionary timeline of cake decorations, they are the cockroaches. But people love to buy birthday cakes with clowns on them, even though most kids in the age range the clowns are marketed toward are, in fact, terrified by clowns.

I was reluctantly becoming an adult. My feelings for Dani were buried deep enough that I was able to date seriously, or at least semi-seriously, for a respectable, or at least semi-respectable, period of time. Dani and I communicated over the years via rapidly evolving forms of social media. There were phone calls at first, but the calls eventually stopped. I knew, through the online invasion of privacy we call “being social,” that she was dating and had graduated with an advanced degree in some sort of mathematics I was and still am unable to comprehend. She was also moving home, serious boyfriend in tow.

Within a week of learning she was homeward bound, I saw her standing an aisle away at the grocery store where we used to shop while living together. She stood there like Lady Justice or whatever that girl’s name is with the scales, a loaf of bread in each hand, weighing them for purposes unclear to me as I’d never known anyone who felt shortchanged by the Wonder people.

A sudden feeling of I-don’t-know-what washed over me – some strange wave of emotion – and I was suddenly dizzy, clutching at the nearest thing for balance. That thing was an ancient cardboard cutout of a long-retired Rusty Wallace trying to sell me Miller Lite. Cardboard people are not great for catching your balance, and I ended up more or less wrapped around him like I was about to dip him in an erotic tango.

“I see you finally found someone,” she said, smiling, having made her way over to me while I flailed about.

“Dani, God it’s nice to see you.” I dropped Rusty.
“It’s good to see you too, Nick.” She came in for a hug.

“How are you?”

“Pretty good.” She was all smiles.

“I’d love to talk – to hear about your wild days on the West Coast.” She rolled her eyes. “You wanna grab something to eat or… something?”

“Well.” She looked at her watch, “it’s still too early to go to Tiffany’s. I guess the next best thing is a drink.”

I couldn’t help but smile. “You finally saw it.”

“Mmm-hmm. Come on, let’s get lunch.”

I didn’t notice the rock on her left hand until we slid into the booth at Frisch’s. She must’ve seen my face droop, and she wiggled her fingers and thrust her hand toward me. “Whaddya think?”

What I thought was, “This is the most perfect woman I have ever known, and she’s marrying someone else. This cannot happen.” What I said was: “Damn. That is one huge blood diamond.”

“It is not a blood diamond.” She laughed, taking her hand back and inspecting it as if to make sure.

“So who is she?”

“Funny. His name is John. He’s in med school, but he’s from not far from here.” She sensed my mood fouling as she began to talk about her pride and joy. “What?”

“Nothing.” I put my hands up, proving I meant no harm. The waitress brought us drinks I didn’t remember ordering. “I’m sure he’s really cool,” I said, my voice taking on a solid hint of sadness. If I knew one thing about Dani that I didn’t think she knew I knew, it was that I could get her to tell me exactly what I wanted to hear. If I made my voice sound a little pathetic, she’d try to cheer me up. It always worked. Almost.

“Oh, please. Cool is overrated nowadays. Ask me to describe the man I’ve
been dating for almost three years and have every intention on marrying and cool is like at that bottom of my list. Nerd is probably the first. He’s never been cool… and I’m okay with that. He is who he is. He’s comfortable with being a geeky introvert and I’m comfortable being the vixen extrovert. It just works somehow.”

“He’s the Hall to your…”

“If you’re about to say ‘Oates,’ I would stop talking.”

Mind reader. I rubbed the back of my neck and scrunched my nose, grinning.

She giggled and stirred her drink with the straw. “Look,” she said, placing her hand on mine for a second before rescinding it, “We haven’t talked a lot since I went to California, and that’s pretty much my fault.”

I nodded but then tried to take it back.

“But I still think I know you pretty well.” And she did – though she no longer knew the ins and outs of my daily life – she knew me – like we’d spent an entire past lifetime practicing nothing but secret revelation. “You’re unique.” She sounded like the parent of a talentless child trying to raise morale. “People have to get to know you in order to get you. Trust me; there is someone out there who will get you and is so perfect for you that it will blow your mind when you find her.”

What I didn’t say right then will haunt me forever.

She looked at her cell phone and grabbed her bag. “You don’t have to feel sorry for yourself, but you don’t have to change who you are either. I got lucky. You will too.” That smile. She stood up, ready to leave, her thumb on her right hand under the strap on her bag, adjusting it. I guess I had the check. “You gonna be at the wedding? It’s not going to be weird for you or anything?”

“Oh course,” I smiled. “I mean, of course I’m going to come to the wed- ding. It’s not going to be weird. I can imagine no weirdness.”

Her look did not say “I believe you.”
“It would be nice, however, to receive a formal invitation.”

“Well I haven’t mailed any of them out yet; it’s still about six months and four days away. We’ll talk again before then.” She half-winked at the last part.

“I’m so happy for you. I mean that.” And I did. I couldn’t remember a time she seemed as happy as right then.

She said thanks and waved awkwardly with the four fingers not under the strap of her bag – as if one of them had a serious weight imbalance, which it did. Watching her walk out the door of the restaurant felt like watching her walk out the door and on to Stanford, out of my life and into the life of someone else. And now she was back, so close. I couldn’t let her walk out of my life again.

They’re a weird thing, weddings. There’s this beautiful woman – this beautiful person – and you’ve known her and have been in love with her since the day you met her back in the third grade and you know that spending the rest of your life together is how it’s meant to be – how it’s supposed to be – it’s fate. And then there she is, your best friend in the whole world, and she’s genuinely happy – you just know – happier than you’ve ever seen her before, so radiant in that dress – that flowing white gown of a Greek goddess – and she’s smiling that stunning smile of hers as she glances out into the sea obviously looking for someone, out into that sea of friends and family that have gathered here for her on her big day, looking for someone she can’t readily find so she turns back and takes his hands, and as the priest asks for the rings, you silently sneak out the back door.
(UNTITLED)

I could compose in an hour
In a blink of time
All broken all, down down
Down in the windowsill
There is, there is
There is!
A cloud of dust;
Where I had cleaned
But only an hour ago
Where is the light,
The clock with hands ticking
Tocking, tick tock tick tock
A sound I have never heard,
I hear a,
knock on the door

All other clocks are silent
Without hands, where have they gone
Gone down into the antique shop
A floor below

Last I had remembered
This time is the busy
Hour, a time when I
Looked out,
What can I do
I do what can
Bring back a lonely time
With snow falling
A giant bell
Tower, where have all,
My street lamps,
They are all,
Gone
This is the last day of Jasper Pond’s life. Not in a melodramatic way, his death will be an accident. The specifics don’t matter yet, but just know that it was not intentional. He will not be leaving much behind. His mother passed away two years ago, his father died when he was 15. His older sister, Holly, will mourn for a series of months and think about him on holidays. His neighbor Cheryl will take his dog, a Welsh corgi named Scooter, and her children will love him and take him to the dog park twice a week. Holly is allergic.

Now, Jasper Pond has not ridden his bicycle for exactly eight months and four days. This is the very day his fiancé of three years, Beatrice, told him she was leaving him for a much younger, much wealthier accountant in Baltimore. He was a friend of hers from college she spoke to on the phone from time to time and visited a few times each year. Beatrice told Jasper that she had been sleeping with Larry, the young accountant, for a number of months.

Jasper was not a sentimental man. He had not ridden the bicycle since that day simply because he had shoved it so deep into the recesses of his cluttered garage that he had been unable, or unwilling, to dig it out until now. Jasper dragged his bicycle from the piles of cardboard boxes and rusted lawn equipment. It banged through the clutter and he kicked cobwebs and dried leaves from its frame. His neighbor, Cheryl, looked up from the lawnmower she was crouched beside.

“Hi there,” she said. She wiped her hands on her jeans. Her palms smeared dark grease along the faded denim.

“Hello,” he said. He wheeled the bike onto the sidewalk and adjusted the seat. It stuck on its metal perch, making it difficult to position. He wondered if it had begun to rust.

“Going for a ride?” Cheryl said. She rested a hand on her hip. Her cheeks were red and patchy.
“Yup,” Jasper said. He nudged the kickstand up with his heel and swung a leg over the bicycle. He gripped the handlebars and worked them beneath his fingers. They felt stiff and dry.

“Nice day for it.” Cheryl held a hand to her brow and squinted up through the trees that hung over the quiet street. The sky was clear and blue.

“Mm,” Jasper said. He kicked off the sidewalk and began to pump the pedals. He wobbled in a loose circle around Cheryl, straightening the bike shakily. She turned slowly to follow his progress.

“You’re a natural,” she said.

Jasper began to broaden his circles, swooping past her in slow, wide arcs. He thought he might ride around the lake in the park. It was always nice in the park. He did wish there were more trees, though. The sun was always so bright around the lake. It heated the stagnant water and roasted the goose droppings that littered the sidewalk. It made the air smell like swampy garbage.

“Good luck getting your mower running,” he said. He began to pedal down the street. He leaned back some as the road tilted steadily downwards.

“Come over for cocktails when you get back. We’re having Betty and Todd over,” she called after him. Betty and Todd lived about 10 minutes away in the neighborhood across the park. They were newlyweds and they made Cheryl feel young. Since Richard had left her, she needed constant reaffirmation that she was not, as she feared, “old and used up”. These were the kinds of phrases that ran through her head at night when she laid awake and watched sitcom reruns on mute. Her children told her she wasn’t, but secretly believed she would never remarry. Not because she was too old, but because she was too stubborn.

Betty and Todd did think Cheryl was too old. Betty had met her in the organic food section of the local supermarket two months ago and they had talked for nearly 20 minutes. Betty was eager to get home where Todd was preparing their dinner of chicken marsala and basmati rice. So when Cheryl had asked her for her number, Betty gave it to her. She had felt sorry for Cheryl and told her she and Todd would come over for dinner that Saturday. It had become an almost weekly event.
Jasper pedaled down the sidewalk that ran along one of the main roads. He could see the lake as he reached the top of the hill. There were a number of people milling about, as it was an exceptionally lovely day. Anyway, it was exceptionally lovely in comparison to the rain that had bombarded them for nearly a week.

But Jasper wasn’t thinking about the sunshine. He was thinking about the last thing Marcus Faraday had said to him before he left work that past Friday afternoon. Marcus Faraday was Jasper’s boss whom he had known for nearly six years. Marcus was a small, sweaty man who spoke quickly and owned three cats. Jasper didn’t know about the cats, though. He just knew about the smallness and sweatiness and the fact that Marcus hardly ever let anyone finish their thought before butting in with his own. That past Friday, he had paused beside Jasper’s cubicle and leaned his elbow on the corner of the entryway only moments after Jasper had returned from the restroom.

“How’s it going, Jasper?” he said. Jasper swiveled toward him in his chair. He had taken three bathroom breaks in the last 45 minutes, simply to kill time before the end of the day. He had been rather bored since lunch and could only think about the vanilla latte he planned on picking up from the coffee shop two blocks away on his way home.

“It’s going okay,” Jasper said. “How have you been?”

“Oh, you know,” Marcus said. He tugged at the collar of his dress shirt. His red neck rolled over the starched rim. “I’ve noticed you’ve been taking longer breaks lately.”

“Aren’t we allowed an hour for lunch?” Jasper glanced at the clock behind Marcus’s head. 4:43pm.

“Yes, but it’s not like you to take more than 30 minutes,” he said.

“I can shorten them if you like.”

“No, no. I just want to be sure it’s not having a negative impact on your work. Everything going okay in the office?” Marcus shifted his weight. He could feel his undershirt sticking to the small of his back.
“Everything is going fine,” Jasper said. He glanced at the clock. 4:45pm.

“Good to hear. See you Monday, Jasper.” Marcus slapped a thick palm against the side of the cubicle and nodded. He paused as he turned to leave. “Oh, and Jasper, don’t think too much.”

Jasper nodded once and tried to smile. Three hours from now Marcus would be sitting on his deck, sipping gin and tonics and listening to the ballgame on his portable radio. Jasper would not cross his mind. Not that he ever did.

The lake was wide and shallow. A few ducks bobbed on the surface. A man and his son sat on a bench slowly reeled in their fishing lines and watched the tiny ripples fan out in their wake. Jasper swung around their bench in a wide arch and nodded at the man. He thought he recognized him. Maybe from the bank. Or the Post Office.

Jasper hadn’t spoken to Beatrice in three weeks. Up until that point, he had called her quite frequently, usually in the evening. He had often had a few glasses of Merlot by that time and would be feeling a bit more confident. This last instance, three weeks ago, he called her on a Wednesday around 9pm. He was on his third glass.

She picked up without saying hello and waited.

“Beatrice?” Jasper said.

“I’m here,” she said.

“How was your day?”

“I’m in bed.”

“Is Starkey doing better?” Jasper said. Starkey was Beatrice’s 14-year-old poodle. He had suffered a minor stroke two weeks prior. Starkey had lived with Jasper and Beatrice for the six years they were together. Beatrice had gotten Starkey when she graduated college. Starkey didn’t like Scooter much, whom Jasper had gotten a year before he met Beatrice. Scooter liked to chase chipmunks and go on walks around the lake, whereas Star-
key mostly just slept and whined at the door when Beatrice left.

“He’s home now, thank you,” she said.

“I’m glad.”

“I’m going to go to bed now.”

“Can we get lunch this weekend?”

“It’s a 12 hour drive, Jasper.” Beatrice was living in Baltimore, with Larry. Jasper still lived near Ellsworth, Maine. He had moved a few times in his adolescence, but had always lived somewhere in Maine. His mother’s family was from Rockland.

“I can meet you halfway.”

“I think we should stop talking,” she said.

“Could you maybe fly out sometime?”

“I don’t have the money for that.”

“I want to see you.”

“Jasper.” Beatrice leaned up in bed and shot Larry an ‘I’m so sorry’ look. He glanced at her over the rim of his book. He hadn’t even noticed she’d picked up the phone.

“I think you need to stop calling me,” she said.

“I still think about that time we went to Edinburgh,” he said. “For our third anniversary. With that big castle at the top of the hill. Do you remember that?”

“Goodbye, Jasper.”

“The whole city was built on that hill. And the road went all the way to the sea. I never even knew Edinburgh was on the sea until we went there. Can you imagine? Not knowing something like that, when it’s been there all along. Getting along just fine without you.”
She hung up the phone. Beatrice would ignore Jasper’s phone calls from that night forward. She would not think of him again until she got the call from Holly saying Jasper had died. She would stare at her phone for a few seconds before picking it up. She had not saved Holly’s number and did not recognize it. She almost let it go to voicemail.

Jasper did not see the fruit truck coming. It was on its way to Mijowski’s Fresh Market, a local produce store in town. Seamus Mortimer, the man driving the fruit truck, was listening to the radio and thinking about his daughter, Stephanie. Stephanie was seven years old and would be starting first grade in the fall. He had been worrying about how much her school supplies and book bag and new school shoes and school dresses would cost when Jasper’s body collided with the front grill of his truck. Jasper bounced off the windshield and rolled beneath the truck, missing the wheels but knocking the back of his head quite sharply against the pavement. He was dead before Seamus’s foot touched the break.

The fruit truck, let it be known, was on it’s side of the road, going the speed limit. Seamus, as distracted as he would convince himself he was that day, was obeying all traffic laws, more or less. He may have been going a mile over or under the designated thirty. But it doesn’t matter. What matters is that it was Jasper that was not paying adequate attention. Jasper had strayed slightly from the lake, drifting off the sidewalk and onto the road. The road ran along the far edge of the lake and wound its way into town, which was only about a two-minute drive from where the accident occurred. Jasper had drifted into the road by choice, when he easily could have remained on the sidewalk.

But Jasper was not thinking about the road. He was thinking about the sound a television makes when it is dropped from a three-story window. He is thinking about the feeling of a wine glass shattering at his feet. He is picturing himself, lying face down on the comforter with the phone at his knees and the bottle of Merlot at his head. He can hear the dial tone and smell the vomit that will soon cake and dry at the corners of his mouth.

When the fruit truck came to a stop, Seamus jumped from the driver’s seat. He knelt beside Jasper along with a small throng of onlookers. A woman dialed 911, but it would do no good. Jasper’s eyes were open. The sky was clear and blue.
The Sky Was Clear and Blue

Dry, stiff handle bars.
I kicked off the cobwebs
and pulled it from behind the mower.
Worked the pedals beneath my feet
with all that concrete below.

When I called to ask about Starkey
you told me I’d better hang up.
I tried to remind you of Edinburgh.
But you didn’t want to remember
the way the stone streets spilled into the sea.
Or why this had happened at all.

Riding my bike along the lake.
The stale garbage stench of sunbaked goose droppings.
But all I can see is the phone by my head
on the sheets and
all I can hear is the sound of
the dial tone on repeat.

All I can hear in this moment is the sound
of a television
hitting pavement from three floors up.
And the shattering of a wine glass at my feet.

And now all I feel is the back of my head
against that pavement.
The same pavement the bike tires hummed across
only moments before.

With a growing crowd and a dimming view.
The sky was clear and blue.
At the Aquarium

At the aquarium,
you went straight for the horseshoe crabs.
You reached your hands in
and scooped one from the sand.

Its belly was slick and dark.
With sliding plates and snipping claws.
The pointed tail swirled and
whipped in figure eights.

You held out your finger and
let the crab hold it
in one of its pincers.
You said it didn’t hurt at all.

On the grass,
this was months ago,
on your back with your
arms and legs spread wide.

You said the stars looked fuzzy,
smeared in a cluttered
bundle to the right.

We will never know,
you said,
how close they really are.
We just know how they look to us.

And you looked so relieved.
We are breathing in close proximity, 
our bodies intertwined 
beneath the sheets—

like the horseshoe crab 
balancing between your thumbs, 
saltwater cold and 
glossy on its shell of a back.

Your sleeve got wet as you 
lowered it into the water 
and it buried its face in the sand.

That night after you lay in the grass, 
I lay beside you beneath the sheets 
and breathed your hair in the dark.

Can we just be here now?

You started to cry and it scared me. 
But you told me you didn’t want to sleep, 
because if your eyes were to close 
who would open them up again?
someplace space arrested time,
encroached upon and drove me in
a carriage spurred by catholic incredulity.
arms linked we marked a path along a river,

if there is an infinite aspect to space,

Belarus,
Lukashenko’s coffee on your mind, an
effort to cross some wayward line because

it is not its expansion,
but its reductions.

I was decidedly particular.
I told you, the rest of my life
ends simply in a snowy Scandinavian home:
white dog
cluttered shelves
walls (angular, definitive)
tactless paisley linen, and

if only because the reduction of space,

I said, “this whole situation may
or may not
involve other people but that really isn’t the point.”

oddly enough,

there we lay,
fettered by wood paneling
windows open, room to breathe.
a bottle of wine hung over your head
eight zloty and it began to
rain. Catalan songs heard faintly through
reductive wires, faces red

the world at rest atop my tortoise frames
your head in focus,
I stepped above the windowsill.
in blue abrasive boots I touched the wall

is always more coherent. it’s

then I hated the way your breath smelled

better structured and has more names:
as if I were looking for a reason to want to keep you

a cell, a closet, a grave.¹

as far away from me as possible.

______________________________

¹ Joseph Brodsky, In a Room and a Half
the station is
bare. Your schedule hangs precarious
on poxed walls, mixes with paint stained
damp yellow threatening to eat
the next departure. Fresh tags read
“pierdole system,” it will give you a laugh.

Three boys drink beer at the tracks
and a woman in springtime kitsch pastel
beats the rain on the other side of the glass.
She spends hours either waiting for her train
or scrubbing at graffiti done in Sharpie
she’s never heard of.

You may glean comfort at the sight of these
collisions, but won’t know it while you
ask your friend, who is filming the woman,
why we prefer these places.
I am wrapped in
snow/houndstooth placemat
otherwise conducive of
words, were it not draping
me. flat atop upholstered
rust, smaller-than-
Twin bed. big flakes, ones
you can differentiate.

speculum in waiting,
princess. Or press together
with our soles, ready to
be snapped into

place, teased
with nonpartisan
touch, your office is
a place I had, it seems,
already sculpted
into my other,

Preferable, room
Incursion on the Corner of McMillan and Vine

Light flits across this broken-glass, crystal pavement.  
Don’t knock it, ‘til you’ve heard  
The raucous coo of the midnight sirens,  
The insidious slither of telephone wires—  
Rooftop to dilapidated rooftop.  
Pained cries of one-way traffic: my lullaby.  
And the bark of rogue children: my alarm.  
We are strangers here.  
Matriculated from our gentrified ‘burbs,  
White-knuckling your ergonomic can of Mace.  
Are they the intruders,  
Or are we?

Ariana Rinehart
It occurred to me in bronze words of Drevniok, Brother Francis, Narnia; How the familiar longings feel quenched, Full, in the warm airs of Story; in Kairos, heralding the noble deaths of self-worth and repletion; And in dependence, giving proof for Kingdoms uncharted and familiar, Beyond vast skies and cosmos, perched heavy in the souls of children, vulnerable, content to be Named; in quiet awe. Here I stretch my roots, strong and deep. I callous my fingers at the plow. I find rest in weary labor. I see proof, shown momentously in the bright-eyed instances of Clarity and assurance, when time surrenders to passion, All the Real arcing behind, indicting, pledging their benedictions: Until we taste true life, We'll see by shadows in the dim light Of the new worlds — be at peace, be still; be Pregnant with meaning. Wade in calm waters. Drink to your fill.

These are streets unpaved with sadness, Gardens tended by strong and gentle hands; Indeed, beyond all Art and reflection, Clearer, more teeming with holy light, Beyond the baptisms of December, the wide eyed joys of new life And luminosity, though all true they may be; The Real beckons, pure Truth, I Am, untamed beauty – There, in lands unseen, gleaming in the poise of feral curiosity.

There, I will tread over lakes when I am called; I will embrace a fierce and wild hope.
A Fairy Tale

The day was bright, the sun shining through the branches, when I heard the sound of your horse, Shadow, trotting along the path to my cottage. It was a typical Saturday, just like any other Saturday when you sneaked away from the castle to visit me. It could only be on Saturday because that’s when my sisters would be gone, having flitted off to the castle, to visit your mother and father, and to bestow their fairy gifts upon the townsfolk.

I already had plans, I had told them, to visit the fair the next town over. There’s to be a really talented fire-dancer I want to see, I had said. I wanted no part of their silly rituals.

You called them obsequious once, my sisters; you were right, as usual. Except for Alba. You never said that about Alba. You never said anything negative about Alba. I didn’t see it then. I didn’t see the looks you gave her behind my back when we attended your family’s masquerade ball. You knew of our powers, what my sisters and I were capable of, and yet you continued down that dangerous path. If only I had seen; the heartbreak we all suffered.... Ah, well. What’s done is done, they always say.

Living the life of a fairy meant that my sisters and I were revered by the royalty as well as the common folk; they were always inviting us to a ball or a feast. We were almost like royalty ourselves. The thirteen of us had lived together there in the cottage. But we were very seldom home at the same time, which made the four-room abode bearable. What our parents were thinking leaving us there to fend for ourselves is beyond me; we could’ve killed each other, accidentally blown one or the other up. But that’s neither here nor there. We’ve moved on; and so have most of my sisters. Only four of us are left now. But you knew that. You knew more about my family than most humans. We all looked up to you, admired you from the time you were a little boy skinning your knees in the creek bed until... well, you know when.
Since Alba and I were the youngest—she being a couple of years younger than me—we had to share the top bed of the bunk beds when we were small. We never minded, though. That was our chance to practice our spells. We’re only able to cast spells with the aid of our wands, but we can conjure up the most beautiful gifts or the most horrendous monstrosities your kind has ever seen. I once turned Alba into a goblin, and only Mother could get her turned back again. She may never have forgiven me for that one.

Don’t force it, Mother had said. You’ll get better, stronger, once you get a few more years on you. And we did; well, I did.

I want to be just like you, Alba always said. You’re so good at spells; how do you get the rocks to look like real diamonds?

I showed her and walked her through the steps, but she never got the hang of it. I realized too late she didn’t want to be like me. You knew only too well, she wanted to be me. Or, at the least, have the things I had. I used to think we were so close. I loved her best of all my sisters, after all. We shared everything; all our little secrets. She used to have a crush on your cousin, Ernest—I’m quite sure you didn’t know that—until he ballooned up to the size of a small house.

So, tell me all about what Ernest did today, she would say after I returned home from teaching him harmless magic tricks to impress his friends.

Oh, you know, the usual, I would say. He’s not very talented. I don’t why you think he’s such a catch.

He’s always been nice to me, when others... haven’t.

Then she would get very quiet, and I would go back to practicing my spells. Occasionally, I would glance back at her and catch her staring at me with an odd expression on her face before she noticed I was looking at her. She would then smile and ask if she could practice with me.

That was how she came to find out about you, by the way, our secret sharing. She came home early one Saturday; you and Shadow were just rounding the bend in the path. Unfortunately, she caught a glimpse of Shadow’s tail before it disappeared.
Who's the stranger, Alba asked.

No one, I replied.

Liar, she stated.

Okay, I whispered.

There was no sense in arguing with her; Alba was always able to charm anything out of me. Like I said, I loved her most. But you probably already knew that, too. Another game for you to play; and where was the fun in it if the stakes weren't high?

... 

Shadow pranced along the path toward my home to drop you on my doorstep. I watched you meander for quite a while—I, tucked safely away behind the drapes, you, absorbing the sun shining down on your glorious golden locks. Oblivious to what would happen later that evening. I knew better than to fall in love with you. I was a fairy. You were a human. It couldn't last. But even knowing that couldn't stop my feelings from taking over my thoughts. Of course, it was easier when you were a boy, gangly and uncoordinated, but then you became more than that. A man, barely out of your teens, already able to enchant every girl in the kingdom. You, a mere human, had such power over me just with your smile. Finally reaching my door, you knocked ever so gently, once, twice, then three times. I'm not sure why you insisted on that ridiculous knock. As if I didn't know it was you. It could not have been anyone else. Disentangling myself from the drapes, I let you in to seize me up in your arms and swing me around as you always did.

Henry! I'm so happy to see you.

My love, Gemma! I am blessed to see your shining face this wonderful Saturday, you said. But alas, I forgot, this Saturday was different in one way. You had news for me. My dear Gemma, there is to be another ball tonight so I cannot stay long, you said. You took my hand in yours, brought it to your lips, inhaled the sweet orchid and lily scent at my wrists, and then kissed my palm ever so gently.

Ah... yes, I said, weak with the power of your touch. But what should I wear?
Oh, my love. But, alas, you cannot attend the ball tonight, you said before releasing me. I am so sorry, but my parents thought it best this way. They plan to debut my sister, you see. Today is her sixteenth birthday, and she is being introduced to the best society tonight, you said. You practically glowed when you told me this.

Am I not part of the best society, I asked. My bottom lip trembled slightly. You stumbled a little and sat down on the stool in front of the fireplace. I am considered almost royalty by your kind, I said.

Of course you are, my sweetest, you said, your voice catching in your throat so that you had a coughing fit for a good few minutes. May I have a glass of water, you asked. I went outside to fetch you a dipper full from the pump. You drank it quickly and asked for more.

So, I asked again. Am I not part of the best society?

Dear sweet Gemma, you began. You know you have a large family, many sisters—

Yes, thirteen including me, I interrupted.

Y-yes, you said and averted your eyes. Thirteen, but with your sisters scattered to the four winds, and unable to attend this very special occasion, my parents didn’t want to offend them by asking only you. And, uh, Alba. Alas, this is why they could not invite you, you said. You looked at the floor, then back at me. A regular ball, yes by all means you could attend without your sisters, but as I mentioned, tonight is very special and an occasion that would require all of you to be in attendance. Please understand, you said. Besides, I knew I would get to see you today, my sweetness. And I thought that as long as we got to see each other today, you would be all right not getting to come this evening. Was I mistaken, my beautiful lily flower?

Of course not, Henry. I understand. So, what will you wearing to the ball tonight, I asked. If I can’t actually see you dressed in your finest attire, let me at least imagine you in it.

Oh, that’s the best part, you said, gleaming again. Mother has decided to theme the ball in red—“roses” for the lovely Princess Rose. Everyone is to wear red. I will be dressed in my finest regalia. I am sorry this visit
need be so short, but I must be off. I am happy you understand, you said. What a fool you looked, smiling at me with your overflowing exuberance.

Of course, I said. Shall I see you again on Saturday next?

Ah... I cannot say for certain, my love. Always know that you are my sweet lily flower, you said. And then you were out the door; you and Shadow, sauntering down the path, to your castle, for your party, without me.

... 

I still do not know how I managed to keep my anger in check then, but after you left... Well, a fairy tale could not hold all the bad things I wanted to wish upon your golden-haired head. Fortunately for you, I was able to hold my tongue, for a while anyway, until your party.

It was Alba who did it, of course, in her sparkling ruby red dress fit for a queen, and the slippers to match. The dress could have only come from you. She could not have conjured up such a magnificently bejeweled gown. A gown made to look like the sunrise, or the glow of a full moon; yes, she was capable of producing those types of items with her magic. But, gems? No. Those were my specialty. I could create gowns and shoes adorned with such exquisite gems that would make even the most qualified gemologist guess whether they were real or not.

I was not supposed to have seen Alba that evening. She forgot your sister's gift, and had to come back home for it. She tried to sneak in through the back window of our bedroom, but her wand hit the windowpane and instead of making the glass disappear, it shattered, the shards falling to the floor, flashing a prism of sunlight across the room until the slivered glass landed like confetti on the stone tile. I watched her as she tried to make up her mind whether to come in or not, but I suppose she figured she might as well since the damage had already been done. I was by the window about to clean up her mess when she finally decided to fly through, sending the pieces of glass skittering out of the way and back up into its frame as if it had never broken into a thousand pieces. The flying spell she stole from me; we can't fly, not without our wands anyway. Only the most gifted of us can fly without enchanting other objects on which to sit, so I was surprised that Alba had picked it up so easily.
Oh! Hi, she said. How was the fire dancer?

What, I asked, and then remembered I’d told her I would be going to the fair today, to cover for you, my loving prince. Ha! Loving prince. I no longer thought so after having the day to myself, alone, to think. Ah! Yes, I said. Boring. Not the fire dancer, but the fair. They’re quite mad aren’t they—your fire-dancers? The fire caressing their body with each swing they take, it’s slightly erotic in the way they move. For a human to be able to control the capriciousness of the flames, even I was impressed. I left right after he performed, I said.

Yes, well. Don’t mind me, Alba said. I forgot something that I, um, needed. So I’m here to get it. And then I’ll be on my way... small party... for the prince’s cousin, Ernest. You remember him? She was leaning over, reaching under the bottom bunk, and trying to pull out something.

Of course, I said. Can I help you with that?

Oh no, thank you, dear sister. I can manage on my own. My, but you are a sweet lily—sweetheart, aren’t you?

I stumbled slightly and sat down on the bed.

Are you all right, she asked.

Yes, Alba, I’m fine.

All right then, I must be off, she said as she finally grabbed a silk-wrapped box, and stuffed it into her bag. She took a step, the tip of her shoe catching the uneven stone tile, and fell forward with her dress landing up around her thighs.

Oh my! she said. Alba flipped herself over, trying to catch her breath. The last of the sinking sun shined through the window, and glinted off the large ruby on top of her slipper, casting a red glow around the little cottage.

Beautiful shoes, I said.

Thank you.
Did you make them, I asked.

Uh... she flushed.

They look like my handiwork, I said.

Um... no. I mean, no, they’re not mine, but they could possibly be yours, she said. I found them in the closet, and they matched my dress so perfectly, I thought I would wear them.

Oh, I said. I cannot truly say if the pink glow of her face was her own or from the sun glinting off the large ruby of my shoe that she was wearing. She left without another word. My dear sweet Alba. I will truly miss you.

I followed her. Dressed in the slinkiest black dress I could conjure up and thigh-high black stiletto-heeled boots, I headed out. Of course I knew she would be with you. She wouldn’t have known that you told me about the ball, but I was still surprised to see her in your arms, dancing slowly, in her ruby red dress with the ruby red slippers shining brightly on her dainty little feet. I tore in through the window, smashing the glass into a thousand dancing shards, keeping time with the musicians before being crushed beneath the bejeweled feet of you and Alba. You both glanced at me at the same time, your fear clearly visible behind the jewel-encrusted red velvet masks you were wearing on your perfectly made-up faces. The ball, I could have made peace with, even after seeing the darling princess standing in front of the crowd, with all her gifts from my sister and half the kingdom surrounding her. I could have even made peace with seeing Alba in your arms. Perhaps it was just one dance you shared, and the brief kiss I glimpsed meant nothing. But alas, it was not meant to be. I absolutely could not forgive you for pushing your true beloved behind you to protect her from whom I thought was supposed to be your true love, me. The way she trembled behind your back still makes me a little sad to think about now. But what could I do? You two betrayed me. So, I started to cast a spell on you.

The king’s son, Henry, shall fall down dead—

No! she screamed, moving out from behind you, showing a backbone I didn’t even know she possessed. I mean... She faltered. She looked at me,
and then at you. Something began to strengthen inside her again as she pushed you out of the way and raised her wand to me. The evil wish will be fulfilled, she said, but not against Henry. She drew back and I could see the spell she was thinking written over the scrunched features of her face. I released a counter spell before she even had a chance to speak. It should not have harmed her, but my dear sweet sister, Alba, was not so lucky. Since she hadn't had the chance to cast her spell out loud, my counter spell burnt her to a crisp on the very spot she stood—beside you. I was crushed. She was my sister. I loved her despite all that she had done to me. She would have appreciated the look of terror on your face, by the way. I think she would have known that you truly loved her. I could not face you then, so I fled. I had barely made it back to my cottage before you showed up, Shadow drenched with sweat and foam from the grueling ride. I met you on the doorstep, my wand raised high.

Wait! you cried. May we please speak first before you destroy me like you did your own sister, you asked. Your words stopped me; the quiver in your voice plucked at the strings of my heart that had not yet snapped. Moisture gathered on the small lashes below my eyes, but to my regret, not a single drop fell. I lowered my wand instead.

Say what you have to say.

I did love you at one time, you said. I raised my wand again. I-I still do, you added quickly and raised your hands in defense. But your sister, I don’t know what to say. She bewitched me, you said.

We can’t do that.

I know. What I am saying is that Alba was so charismatic that I felt like she had literally bewitched me to fall in love with her.

I can understand how her beauty could mesmerize you, I said. She may not have any magical talent, but she was exquisite. Was that all it was, though? Did I not mean more to you than that, I asked.

Yes, yes, you did. But once I had fallen for her... Alas, there was no going back.

You are more of an idiot than I could have thought possible.
All right, I can see your point. Just please give me a second chance to explain—

A second chance! I practically threw the words back in your face.

I don’t mean a second chance at us, you said, just a chance to explain what happened. She loved you, as her sister, but she was naïve in the ways of couple love. Yes, dear Gemma, she knew of our relationship, but not from only you. I told her about us, convinced her you didn’t really care for me like that. She believed it was just a game between us, and then between you two.

Why, I asked.

Alba had always looked up to you, but always from in your shadow. She wanted something she could claim as hers; something she could do better than you, you said.

Sorry, I said, believing but not wanting to believe you. I raised my wand to strike you down, but something in the look you gave me, knowing you were about to die....

... It was surprising for me, really. I didn’t even know I possessed that kind of power. To stop myself from killing you. But here you are, my little frog prince, and here I am, in the dungeon of your family’s castle, with only you and the mice to keep me company.
First Born

Like a fly trapped in a fridge,
you folded in on yourself,
brown insectile legs curling,
your black eyes roving
over your red world.

They were all
waiting for you,

they could not stop you
from taking yourself apart.

You did it delicately,
peeling back your spongy skin
like cellophane, your spine
clinging to the walls,

little electric
spider webs,

little neon bones
glowing.

She cried to her mama
on the phone over you, (you
traveled to Tennessee on phone lines)
maybe her Southern voodoo
could’ve saved you,
the unborn first,
the bad egg.
They knew by the year 2018 that the human race would become an endangered species. The world as we knew it would come to an end. They knew before I did that I would have to save the human race. They knew I would become a slave for them.

... We lined up in a single file line as we boarded the transport. It was like stepping into the belly of a big metal animal. Maybe a deformed elephant, if there were still elephants. From the outside it looked like a box of lead with four wheels and a door. We stepped into the beast one girl at a time with the more experienced girls in front. They knew where the good seats were. They knew not to sit over a wheel and to stay close to the fans that kept the air moving. It wasn’t going to be a long ride to the reproduction building but when you’re sealed up like we are, the air gets thick. I wasn’t the last one to board the transport that day but I was close to it. As I took my seat only two rows back, the keeper shut the glass door that sealed us in from all the dangers of the outside world. It was made of a heavy glass that I could barely see through. I saw a blur that I assumed to be the transport operator come in and start the massive machine.

Our informers told us it started in Japan, the end of our world, and spread to China and then to America, England, and the rest of Europe, consuming the entire planet. Infertility. Technology was now our enemy. Our informer said that the separation year between infertiles and pre-infertiles was around 1985.

The transport erupted into life with a roar and a rumble. A tremble ran through my spine. There was no way I could have stopped it. We were on our way. Through the glass I saw the operator pull something from his boot. It lit up in the operator’s hand. He appeared to be talking to it but I couldn’t hear any voices. I knew the device was illegal. I hoped that the glass door was keeping me safe. If the operator had been caught with that
thing he would be arrested for treason. The glass made it difficult to tell if the operator was male or female. Most likely female, but I hadn’t seen a male in over a year. I wanted it to be a man.

It had become a competition between companies to make everything small enough that it could fit in your pocket or on your lap. The items were held too close to the reproductive system. Heat from things called “lap-top computers” and transmissions from a device called a “cell phone” were relentless. I heard rumors of a company called Apple that single-handedly crippled hundreds of thousands of people. Some people from the time before were completely consumed by technology and in some cases the people became disfigured: their bodies riddled with tumors and cellular growth.

The ride to the reproduction building wasn’t more than five minutes. I remember thinking that the operator could have lasted five minutes without using the device. I had to wonder if the operator was one of the mutants we had been told about. This forced me to look harder through the glass. I thought maybe it wasn’t the glass that made the person disfigured, but that they themselves had become unnatural. Was the operator still human? It was no wonder the U.N. feared the survival of our race. It was no wonder why I had been kept safe. And now, at the verge of my virginity, the only thing standing between us is a six-inch glass door.

The U.N. decided that for the survival of the human race, all people who were of the proper age and able to reproduce should be collected and brought to the New Hope Centers where they would live and reproduce, safe from the forces of technology. I was more valuable as a breeder than anything else.

By the year 2020 the sounds of newborn children were nowhere to be heard. Sperm banks ran dry and women learned that they too were cursed. Artificial insemination was out of the question for it, too, was controlled by unsafe means. Technology had become so strong that the only fertile people left came from places where the electronic pulses couldn’t reach. I was born in such a place. I was born in Katentania, a small village in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

I had not been outside of the walls since my arrival at the New Hope Center just over a year ago. I remembered the trees that grew when I was a child. Thick, round and massive trees covering the horizon in every direc-
tion. I remembered my family. My father had a beard that grew as large as a bush in the winters. My mother was a wonderful woman. I never told her that, I wish now that I had. I thought my mother hated me. She used to look at me as if she were ashamed to have a daughter. I was just a child then. I didn't know she was trying her best to protect me.

My mother, who had heard of the U.N.'s decision from her family in Kinshasa, did everything she could to prepare me for the future I was to be a part of. Instead of keeping me in the house doing woman’s work, she told me to go out and play with the boys from the village. I thought she just didn’t want me around. One boy, his name was Ishmael, he spent the most time with me. Once we were playing seek and find, and while we were hiding behind a bush from the other children, he kissed me. It was quick, he didn't say any words to me, he ran out from behind the bush yelling, and he left me there alone and confused. I told my mother what Ishmael had done. She told me to hold on to it. She said to remember that kiss. She could no longer hide the destiny that was waiting for me. That night she told me the truth about what was going to happen.

Not long before the collection, a fire had broken out not far from Katentania. The once lush and beautiful jungle had become a barren wasteland of ash and dust. It fell from the skies in dark clouds. It poisoned the water for days and made everything taste of a stale age. On the other side of the heavy shields of the transport or of the center walls was a world I did not know. Were there still trees? Was the ground covered in the same fake layers of dying grass as the New Hope Centers were? Was there anything more than the corroding lives like that of the operator? I didn’t know. I would never know.

... 

The U.N. forces reached Katentania in the year 2024. I was twelve when they collected me and put me on the train. Ishmael had been collected too. He was placed with the other boys in the back of the train and I was taken to the front. It was a long journey and the seats were not kind. The motion of the train and the smoke from the engine that crept in through the windows made me sick more than once. I was taken to the South African New Hope Center in Eastern Angola. At the time it held just under fifty thousand breeders and was the sixth largest center in Africa. I stepped off the train. The steam and whistle blew into the air around me and a fog settled deep in my lungs. The past I knew in Katentania was over.
The voices of the girls in the back of the transport were chopped up by the swirling fans. Their laughter gave me a slight hope that the silence of the girls in front did not. All the older girls spoke English. Some of them did so perfectly. Most of us still had strong accents.

I lived at the center for one year before I was called into duty. During that time they taught me how to speak English and do mathematics. I slept in living quarters 36 with twenty-four other girls. There were girls my age and younger, they were the girls who were afraid. There were the older girls. They seemed the happiest of us. I was right in between these two ages; too old to be afraid, but too young to be pleased. Then there were the older women; they had been broken. They had spent years in the center and had been torn apart from the children they had produced. The breeder only stays with the child for as long as it's in her womb. Some of them had already bore children before being brought to the center. Some of their children were old enough to be here at the center with them, also saving the world. But no one would know a single individual out of our presence as a whole. Every evening a group would be taken to the reproduction building, where they would perform their duty. Those who became pregnant would be taken to live in separate quarters and more girls would replace them.

Our informers had trouble saying our names; most of them were white, from America or England, so they gave us other names or didn't call us anything at all. The informers taught us about having children. It was our privilege to save the world, our duty to the human race. They said we should be proud to be among those protecting our future. Our informers showed us the proper techniques for performing intercourse with the most likely chance of achieving pregnancy. As the female we had two options of positions.

**First Position:** the female lies on her back with her legs straight and spread apart. The male inserts his erect penis into the vagina to begin intercourse. It is important that the male firmly holds onto the female's upper thigh, near the hip, to optimize penetration.

**Second Position:** the female is positioned on her elbows and knees. The female may want to have a pillow or blanket under her head and/or chest for comfort. The male inserts his erect penis into the vagina from behind the female to begin intercourse. The male may hold onto the female's waist or hips to optimize penetration.
• If possible, both the male and female should orgasm at the same time to increase the chances of pregnancy

• For the sake of ritual, both the male and female should be nude for their performance. This is not a necessity for performing and it should be agreed upon by both parties.

The doctors would tell us, when the time came, which position would be best for us.

A sudden stop sent me fumbling to stay in my seat as the transport came to a halt. With his device securely back in his boot, the operator exited the transport as quickly as he could. The transport was sprayed to avoid contamination, and we sat inside just waiting for the radiation to disappear, until it was declared safe. A keeper then entered and opened the glass door and a rush of cold expelled the heat that had filled the transport. I wasn’t aware until then how thick and humid the air had become during the short travel. One by one we exited the transport and in the same single file line we marched.

…

Snow was rare. On the day I was first called into duty I was led to the other side of the center to a large white building. It stood in the middle of a field that was slowly being covered in an icing of snow. The ground crunched under each step I took. The building was ten, maybe fifteen stories tall. There were windows on only the top floors and bottom floors. The rest of the building was flat concrete. There was one sign made with gold letters that read, “South African New Hope Center: Reproduction Building. Life Starts Here.” Security guards stood watch outside the building, as they did at most buildings in the New Hope Center. One of them looked at me as I walked past him and he gave me a nod without smiling. Did he know that I was afraid? Could he see it in the way I held my coat close to my body and tried to keep my head low? Or did he believe I did this because I was cold from the wind and snow?

I was taken to a room where I was told to undress and put on a medical gown that covered only my front and sides and not my back.

“Wait here,” the nurse said as she took my clothes from me. “The doctor will be with you shortly.” She turned and opened the door. “You can have
a seat on the table if you like,” she added and left the room.

The room was small and square. The table took up most of the wall. The walls were white with a few scuff marks that showed their age. The floor was cold white tile etched with black markings from the single chair in the corner. The door was white with a cold metal knob. The knob had white scratches on it from where it hit the wall when it swung open and the wall had the same dark scratches from where it was hit. One wall was completely covered by a mirror from top to bottom and from corner to corner. Against the mirror stood the metal table with a thin plastic cushion on top. I sat down on the table, which was covered by a thin sheet of wax paper, letting my legs hang over the side and shivering every time the back of my calf touched the metal. In the mirror over my shoulder I could see the dark skin of my back and the round fleshy crest of my buttocks. The wax paper crackled with every movement I made.

The door opened and the wall collided with the knob. The doctor entered and tried to close the door but failed on the first attempt, for it had begun to glide open again before the doctor shut it completely.

“You must be Katentania,” he said, mispronouncing the name.

He called me by the place in which I was born. A male doctor was something I did not expect. At the center, males and females are kept separate from each other to prevent unsupervised mating.

The doctor was a large man. His hair was short, dark and straight and his eyes were deep. He had no beard; I had not seen a beard on a man since I had left my family. Like the other doctors, he wore a white lab coat and a light blue button up shirt and khaki pants held up with a belt. His voice was calm and nurturing which I did not expect. I knew that as a girl I was supposed to be attracted to men. Was this the type of man I wanted?

“Do you mind if I call you Kat?” he asked.

I shrugged. He was a man and part of me wanted to make him happy, mother had always told me that was important.

“I see you’ve been here just over a year and you’re almost fourteen now, so that means you are eligible for active duty.”
I didn’t respond and he became annoyed that I hadn’t spoken. I was ashamed that in my one year at the center my English was still considered to be faulty. I felt a need to impress this man.

“Do you speak English?”

“I speak little English,” I said.

“Well I guess that will have to do then. There’s no need to speak while performing.”

He chuckled and grabbed the chair from the corner and pulled it over in front of the table across from me.

“I assume you know why you’re here,” he said. “We have to make sure your body is ready for performing.”

“Yes,” I said.

He looked down at the chart he was holding as if he hadn’t asked these same questions thousands of times before.

“Have you had your period yet? Your informers should have told you about this.”

I nodded and shifted. I knew that he could see in the mirror the same thing I had seen. The paper wrinkled and cracked beneath me.

“Have you had any unsupervised intercourse in your life?”

“No.”

“Alright, that’s not a problem. Have you ever seen a penis before, other than the pictures the informers should have shown you?”

I didn’t answer him. The question didn’t seem important to me. I hadn’t seen a penis before and I didn’t want to share this with him. I would look away when the pictures were shown but I could hear the other girls joke about how small that one was or bite their lips over how big another was. What did it matter whether I had seen a penis or not? It didn’t matter to them as long as the performance was done.
“Have you?” he asked again.

I shrugged, acting like I didn’t understand the question.

“It’s important that you understand what’s happening during the process.”

I shrugged again. I could tell he was growing impatient.

“Alright, fine.”

He set down the clip board on top of the wax paper and stood up from his chair. He unbuckled his belt and unzipped his pants. With his left hand he pulled the elastic rim of his underpants away from his body and with his right hand he reached down into them and pulled out his penis by the shaft.

“This is a penis.”

He waved and jerked it about in front of me making sure I had seen it in full.

“Now you’ve seen one.”

Why would he do that? Was he trying to excite me or scare me? Was it a test to see if I would run away or fight him? They should have known that I had accepted my fate here long ago. He put it away and refashioned his clothing. Was this the moment I had been preparing for since that day with Ishmael? I couldn’t help but smile and blush at the action he took upon himself.

“I’m glad you liked it.” He must have noticed my blushing. “Why don’t you take off that gown and we’ll take some measurements,” he said.

I took off my gown at first with some hesitation for I had never exposed my naked body to a male before. The doctor reached into the left pocket of his lab coat and pulled out a coiled tape measure, which he let unroll until it stopped having almost reached the floor. I sat up straight and tried my best to thrust out my chest and hoped that he would notice that my breasts were larger than those of other girls my age. He told me to stand and turn around and face the mirror. So I did as he asked.
In the mirror I looked at myself and I looked at him and I thought about what would happen if I bent over the table and presented myself to him for second position. He told me to stand up straight and I did. He was much taller than I was; the top of my head nearly reached the bottom of his chin. He looked up and caught me staring at him in the mirror and smiled.

“Hold your arms out like a bird and we’ll measure your chest,” he said and I did. “This is so we can compare your breasts now and when you’re producing milk.”

He held the end of the tape measure in the middle of my back on the spine with his right index finger. I couldn’t help but think that that had been the hand he grabbed his penis with and how it was caressing my body. With his left hand he led the rest of the tape measure around my side and then out in front of me. He asked me to hold it there for him while he switched hands because one hand wasn’t enough to make it all the way around. He was now using his left hand to hold the tape measure in place and his right hand was coming across my front to grab the tape measure from mine. As he pulled it tight across my chest his hand grazed my right nipple and it excited me. He finished measuring without looking up once and I watched him in the mirror the whole time.

“Good,” he said while writing down the results on his chart. “Slightly above average.”

I smiled.

“Next we’ll do your hips. You have to have good hips to support a pregnant belly.”

We did the same routine as before. He started with the right hand holding and the left hand measuring and ended with the left hand holding and the right hand measuring. Only this time it was much lower. He held the tape measure at the same spot I had seen before in the mirror, at the crest of my fleshy buttocks, and when he reached around in front of me it excited me even more as the tip of his fingers tickled my pubic hairs. I closed my eyes and wondered whether if I reached behind me if I would find his penis erect. Then he was finished.

“Well your hips are a little small but they’ll support a pregnancy. But
when you give birth it will have to be done by a c-section. It will be safer for you and the child.” He wrote the results on his chart again. “Why don’t you get back up on the table and face me.”

Again I did as I was asked. He reached into the right pocket of his lab coat and pulled out a metal tool, a speculum.

“Spread your legs for me and we’ll have a look at your uterus.”

First position I thought.

“I’m going to start with a cotton swab.”

He began the process but my focus wasn’t there. The doctor had placed his hand on my thigh, the inside of my thigh, and this was the first time I felt the full warmth of his palm against my skin.

“Okay, now I’m going to insert the speculum.”

I thought the speculum would be cold inside of me at first but then get warmer quickly. I was wrong and it was cold and uncomfortable the whole way through. I squinted my eyes and scrunched my face hoping the doctor wouldn’t see me in pain. The doctor’s breath was warm; I tried to focus on that.

“I see your hymen has already been broken. That’s not uncommon. It can break from intense exercise or injury.”

It didn’t break from exercise or injury. It had happened a few months ago when the other girls from my living quarters told me it would be a good idea before my examination. They gave a hairbrush and told me to do it myself.

“It appears you have a tilted cervix which means you’ll be performing mostly in second position,” he said.

I wondered how deep the speculum would go and if it would be embarrassing if it started to feel good and I liked it. But it was over fast. The other girls told me this might happen and if it did it was the male’s fault and not mine.
“I don’t see any real problems,” he said as removed his hand. “I’m all finished with you. You can go ahead and put your gown back on now.”

I remembered I was naked. I had grown used to his eyes and touch upon me and in the short time we were together I had forgotten that being so exposed was not natural. I was reluctant to put my gown back on.

“Well I think you’re ready to perform today if you agree,” he said with a smile. “Do you think you would be able to perform today?”

I nodded excitedly in approval.

“Well I think you’re ready to perform today if you agree,” he said with a smile. “Do you think you would be able to perform today?”

I nodded excitedly in approval.

“When you?” I asked.

He laughed and smiled.

“No, I’m an infertile. It would be pointless for me to perform with you if I can’t breed.”

He opened the door, still smiling, and once again the knob and the wall clashed together.

“The nurse will come get you soon, Kat.”

He closed the door and was gone from me. The wax paper was now wrinkled and imprinted with markings and sweat from where I had placed my hands and where I had sat. The room was quiet and I was cold.

The nurse came and got me. She led me out of the room through hallways and up three flights of stairs and through more hallways. I kept looking for the doctor but did not see him. Behind each identical door I could hear muffled grunts and screams. I did not know if they were from pleasure or pain. At last she led me to a door with a number on it.

“Your partner is in there waiting for you.” She walked away.

I could have run in that moment and never gone into that room, I was alone and one no was there to stop me, but this was my job now, this was my destiny. I took a deep breath and opened the door. Inside was another white room almost identical to the other room, except that there was no mirror. Instead there was a poster that described first and second position
and in this room there was a bed instead of a table. On the bed sat a black male who looked up at me as I entered. He was older than I was but not as old as the doctor. Maybe he was in his thirties or his twenties.

“You’re young,” he said.

“Yes, almost fourteen,” I said in return.

“This is your first time then huh?”

I nodded.

“What position?”

“Second,” I said.

“Alright,” he nodded, “let’s do this.”

He stood up from his spot on the bed and began to remove his clothes, starting with his shirt and then his pants until he was completely nude. I removed the gown once again, only this time I tried to use my hands and arms to cover myself.

“There’s no need to cover yourself. I’m naked too,” he said as he saw me, “I have to get hard.”

Again I nodded.

“Are you going to do it or should I do it myself?”

“I don’t know how,” I told him.

He frowned and took his right hand and started stroking his own penis.

“Is it wet?” he asked me.

I didn’t answer. I was embarrassed I had forgotten this.

“Stick your finger in it and check.”

I did.
“Is it wet?” he asked again while still stoking his own penis.

“It is little wet.”

“Rub it some.”

I sat down on the bed and rubbed.

“Kiss me,” I said to him.

“Why?”

I shrugged.

He stepped forward. It was a quick kiss. He was right. It was pointless.

“Can we do it now?” he asked.

I positioned myself on the bed in the way I was taught. I got on my knees and elbows and placed a pillow under my head for comfort.

“Are you ready?”

“Yes,” I said.
Nascent

One hundred thousand beasts
Dance the mad pirouette at midnight
A dark brilliance balanced to the white furied flame.
A woman scorned, deadly and sinuous
Carnivorous mouth yawning in lazy anticipation
Of the reticent moon
Orange eye keeping his silent watch
Omniscience heavy with the poignant truth.
The tempest whispers back
A resounding clairvoyance
Of sea and sky
Insatiable desire the bell of sorrow.