

To Rescue the Guides

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Rescue on a Restless Day

The snow outside my window is sincere as a summer's day. I am slouching on my checkered couch and have flung onto the floor my wet boots, cold socks, and long gloves meant to give me warm-to-the-elbows coverage. They lie scattered under my desk.

Sarah, Sarah, I sing to myself. "Remember when you wanted to be a writer?" I ask.

I am kneeling, resting my head on the arm of the couch. "Like it was yesterday," I reminisce.

"It *was* yesterday," I answer.

Tomorrow, I bet I'll still be saying yesterday. That's the problem. I am folded down on the carpet.

Once in a while, I lay eyes on a text with a good sky or sea description. Why shouldn't I be next? I've gone at it with a stargazer's most careful eye, a young writer's most deliberate meta-sense of sensibility.

A character is sneaking up on me. Thirty, thirty-five. She collects miniatures – porcelain women out to tea, cups to their painted lips; bronze carousel horses, mid-gallop; thimble-sized ceramic summer bouquets and woven baskets to hold them. In her bedroom, she has arranged shelves of worlds you could hold in two hands. She loves these worlds so well that even in the most lightless dark, when she must invent the shape and gesture of her own hand held in front of her face, she still knows each miniature figure's position. As an unforeseen result, every real life thing strikes her as frighteningly huge; she counts each morning's explosive sounds: the chime of a bowl set down on her granite counter, the shuffle of the cereal she pours. When she smiles, even slightly, she feels her whole head in a grin.

Sarah, Sarah, I sing.

I catapult off the floor and run to my desk, kicking my winter wear out from under foot – soaring boots, socks, and gloves fly into the walls. I bite the skin on my knuckles and jot down my character before she can evaporate. My struggling knuckles bear all the bite marks of rescues like this one.

Without Ground

Someone feigning the ability to fit greatness into five lines wrote this about me:

After whining for hours, the levees gave way, as if to say to the homes that were still OK, “Don’t count your chickens!” Lake Pontchartrain overflowed and turned her house into a treacherous, salty mess. She’ll tell you, she’ll tell anyone. She lost her child. For days, her heart pumped so fast, she was sure the blood would burst right through her veins. That fragile system couldn’t possibly contain so furious a flood.

This writer doesn’t know that I am the subject she has squeezed into that suffocating space. I wanted to phone her to tell her so, but the Five Line Fiction Contest only provides its writers’ names, the cities they’re from and the ‘why’ behind the work they do so well. I appreciate Ruth Fells from Meridian, Mississippi, who writes about her friends, her family, and herself in order to make things last. I feel a fondness for her. Because she’s not that far away. And because I, too, am a writer with little reason.

You may disagree. You may say that you, in fact, were the writer and that I have often tried to be. But there are some lingering things you do not know. For instance, if you were to read Ruth Fells’ five lines, you wouldn’t guess that she was talking about me – and Ben – either, which is why I now set out to look for you, to tell you all that’s happened. In the end, believe it or not, I may have to beg you – the poet, the ultimate dreamer – to believe me.

Though you’ve sent not a word to notify Ben and me that you have missed us dearly these years, I do know that you missed Ben’s growing up. So I’ll tell you, he was the type of boy about whom everyone he met – every old time friend, every savvy stranger – would say, “Now there’s a smart boy.” And I would have to tell them that, just because he’s quiet, doesn’t mean he’s smart, but that they happened to be right.

He didn't habitually play pretend, but when he did, he put his all into it. In this diligence, I think he took after you. He didn't bother with typical pirates and princesses. Instead, he would quiz me on his many chimerical creatures *not* known to man, drawing them out in all their bizarre glory. "How many heads?" I'd ask him, and he'd hold up his sheet hesitantly, so I could see for myself.

When the gushing Gulf forced us to climb up up up to the attic, where the roof came between us and the sky, Ben clung to his book of drawings. Did he expect to find one of his creations out there? I saw none from the attic window. What we watched were monstrous walls of water and wind that tore the street signs from their poles, setting them free to flutter away, so no one would know where he was going.

I carry the phonebook to our once-shared desk (this in itself is a task and a half). I will call all the hospitals and halfway houses in New Orleans if I have to. They can no longer say, "But it's been just days." And they can't yet say, "But it's been so long." So I'll take my chances.

The tiny print on the yellow pages is impractical and impersonal. I can't read it for the life of me, and none of the numbers or names looks like it will lead me to you. I pick up the phone. Are you in this city somewhere among the sick, lying in a sterile bed? Wanting to hear that we're OK? Waiting to hear that we're not?

Ben had a stammer that I never tried to get rid of. What mother wants to lose even the littlest bit of the child she adores? There were times when he got stuck on 'h,' and I thought he was laughing in his quiet way.

When he had his silent spells (eight short years old, and he already knew how to turn himself off), I liked to blame it on the stammer – better that than think he hadn't much to say to

me, or to anyone else. When the warnings came out, he was following through with his longest spell yet. And in the attic, enclosed in our tight two-person huddle, he still made no mention of the raindrops that plunged together in a shimmering sheet to the ground. I tried to get a sound out of him, cuddling and coddling – *Rain rain, go away. Come again another day...* But as far as I could tell from his tight lips, Ben neither feared nor admired how the forceful downpour kept those drops leaping back up when they hit the pavement, like myriad jumping beans.

You never skipped a beat when it came to words. When we met, you were not surprised to find that you already knew almost all of me. You had been making me up all along and had a reserve of genuine flattery stored up, waiting to surge forward when you met the woman who matched the words. Meanwhile, *my* words became worthwhile because your busy brain's interpretations made a job of filling out the spaces between them, extending and inflating my sentences until I didn't believe they were my own.

You and I made sure, also, to read the works of others to each other, so our home would not forget what lay outside it. We performed this ritual, even though your understanding may have been greater than mine and impossible for you to impart to me. Even though your words sometimes slurred together with sleepiness, and I sometimes fidgeted with my legs caught under your legs under the heavy quilt on the couch. I'm most thankful for our recitals of those magical realist texts (which you had always favored) because I would later be able to offer for Ben's consideration: Borges' alphabetical *Book of Imaginary Beings* and Márquez's giant, raggedy angel, knocked down by the rain. They pleasantly startled us with their coupling of the familiar and the strange, and Ben ate the stories right up.

The phonebook is staring, open-mouthed, at me. I instruct my hand to hold on tight to the phone, but it loosens its grip, and the phone falls through my fingers, like a toy dropped by a

distracted child. I imagine the rising water enveloping you, wherever you've been lying so long, longing – I presume – for Ben and me. It's one thing to think that my lack of flair for listening eventually rendered me an inadequate audience for you and blocked your lovely stockpile of words. It's another thing, entirely, to think of your words lost to the world, washed away and swallowed by the tide.

I slam shut the phonebook. And out the door I walk, barely confident in all my disarray. I shield my eyes from the brilliant sun, which has long since dried up all of New Orleans.

On nights with no moon, when Ben couldn't sleep, I refused to turn on the light for fear that he would never fall asleep. I told him to count sheep, which seemed childish, even to him (especially to him), but I was desperate and would tolerate no protest. Sometimes the silliest matters allow you to set up some semblance of family law.

In my own fuzzy pre-sleep state, I asked you if you had ever counted sheep. If you counted in number words – one, two? Or bleak, bare numerals – 1, 2? Were yours cartoon sheep with perfect shape or real ones with texture and dimension? Were they moving or standing dead still? Floating off into sleep, themselves, as if to mock you? I posed these questions to you because you weren't listening, and I didn't need answers. Now, I do. Now, in those slippery hours, I grab at any straight fact I can find.

Around the world, about fifty tropical storms grow to be hurricanes each year. In the northern hemisphere, they spin counterclockwise and can climb from the Caribbean up the coast all the way to New England, toppling trees and turning houses to pick-up sticks.

The Mayan weather god, Hurakan, did not start out as a destroyer. This one-legged god, the Heart of Heaven, first made the solid land appear with a one-word summons, "*Earth.*" As if it were that easy. But later, angry with the ungrateful men he had helped create, he swelled the

waters, unleashing a great flood. Hence: Audrey, Betsy, Camille, Andrew, Katrina. Here, too, we humanize our disasters, whether they lose steam and die in the Gulf of Mexico, or suck up the water's heat and ram into the Gulf Coast, re-blazing traces of their repeated trails. They always tire themselves out eventually and fall away from the muddle they've made.

You were not the leaving type. You tried to stick it out with your eyes downcast and mouth in an unconscious frown. But as you stayed with us, your mind melted into a static mess. For once, you had nothing to say, so there was no discussion, no disagreement or agreement. You left your small library in the living room. You left your favorite foods stagnating in the fridge. You left behind a freshly painted porch, with its cracks glazed over, as a gift.

I make a beeline for your parents' house, knowing that there I can find you or at least find out hard facts about you. They will help me stay on track, your parents. I start to storm through the neighborhoods I hadn't dared to venture into earlier. But the houses, lying around lifelessly, give me pause. Wooden boards are crisscrossed and stamped against the windows, so nothing can go in or out. And it seems that the coded graffiti staining the front doors are only meant to confuse me. The kids flying by on their bicycles smartly choose not to soak up the scenery that surrounds us.

I worry that maybe your parents haven't stayed put, that they have moved and moved on. I don't think I can handle arriving at an empty house. And then I worry that they may indeed be there, that I will have to offer them explanations. And worse, what stories of you might I figure out from your parents' forlorn faces when they answer my tired knock? I stop mid-step and sit on the curb to rest.

The nights when neither Ben nor I could fall asleep to save our lives, I let him teach me the basics. For example, one must navigate twists and turns to get to the Minotaur, who settled

down in the center of an elaborate labyrinth. The untouchable Griffin is the king of divination, who can take flight at a moment's notice or masterfully hold his ground. Mermaids may empower you one moment and kill you the next. They are vain, combing their hair and checking their reflections in pocket mirrors, caught up in their own stories and unaware of the contradictory interpretations they induce. Ben – too young, I had thought, to disbelieve – said they were just manatees, mistaken for mermaids.

I say they are survivors and overseers with seaweed streaming from their hair. It's said that a pair, a mermaid and merman, swam alongside Noah and his ark. I see them as Ben's company, circling him while he sleeps and checking on the bubbles that rise from his parted lips.

The water rose from the warped planks of the attic floor to the eaves of our house, leaving inch after inch of our bodies wet and blurry until we couldn't see each other's hips, shoulders, neck, lips. I had no foresight to forgive me, no axe, no hammer, and the force of my last kick to the window did not come fast enough.

Nowadays, I fear that sleeping will cost me. How many slightly varied versions of you and Ben will get lost in those empty five or six hours when I'm sleeping instead of contemplating my reinventions? But sometimes I can't help the sleep that creeps up on me without so much as a warning. Last night, a lost night, I finally slept.

By late afternoon, I am ready to drive to the Gulf. I am ready for the big picture. I reach the beach with little sunlight left to light my way. The Caribbean hermit crabs have lined up neatly and involuntarily along the sand, dried out, with their failed gills and lungs side by side. I watch the waves lap against the horizon, which, contrary to popular belief, will not always stay

still for us. The tide crawls up around my ankles, giving me no choice but to leave brief footprints in the sinking sand.

When we lose sight of the ground we walk on, we forge a faith in our ability to keep our balance on the unfair, undulating earth. I swim out far far far into the Gulf, hoping that I will not be able to make it back. I do not feel ungrateful. I am very much afraid.

When we are without grounds for our actions, we skid through days, like flat stones found by proud children. And when we are misshapen, we plummet with no sense of how far there is to go.

A Certain Chase Ends With A Splash

In Accra, everyone is carrying at least one thing, and most people are carrying many things. Wrapped on women's backs are sleeping babies, clutched under arms are pounds of batik kente cloth, and on heads, are balanced baskets holding anything from plantains to young palm trees. Vincent winds through them, swinging the weight of his body on strong calloused hands, heading south through the city. He is carrying, too. A cup, clenched between his teeth, rattles with coins. I alone am empty-handed.

And the people are shouting. One because a vendor won't lower the price of her three-mango purchase. One to announce, in Jesus' name, he will find a way to get to World Cup South Africa in 2010. One because there comes a dangerous point when the space is skin-thin between his cart of Mr. Africa calling cards and some big car's bumper. One voice may not be a person at all, but the frantic horn of a truck with its top layer of cassava flour sacks sliding and falling off the sides for lack of a tighter tying down.

I, too, am threading through, turning with Vincent's every turn on my outstandingly slow American legs. My silent, urgent train of thought shrieks, "Slow down, you, wait! I'm coming to give." This is, after all, my primary purpose on my last day there – give my all and all of me, or at the very least, the cedi banknotes in my pocket. Tonight, I fly out of Accra, post six-day Cape Coast tour, where you better believe I heard ten million voices calling, even though they knew I could take nothing back, 250 years late as I was.

Sorry me, I witnessed how the coast's historic price haggling met its modern counterpart. Where once it was "Why should I pay full price for this one? He is clearly starved and without strength," now it is "How is it that you charge extra just to see the Door of No Return? Pardon, I do think I'm being cheated."

I did not negotiate. I took the tour guide's word for it, noting the shine in his eyes, and gave a tip to boot. Later, the eerie creaking of Elmina Castle's dungeons was gratitude enough for my generosity. But here in urban, uncertain Accra, there's more gift giving to be done.

Why Vincent? Because I felt the bass of his voice in my gut when I watched him singing in the dusty taxi yard. And I could see the notes lightly floating out of his mouth like fireflies released from a jar. And isn't such action our undying duty, according to so many textbook maps, unbelievably bloated with the inequality their color gradients depict? I almost ran out of breath at the thought of my imminent effort on Vincent's behalf. But if you want the full awful truth, when I saw him so legless and unable to clap his beat and balance his weight at the same time – I had said, under my cowardly American breath, “What a nightmare! What nightmares I'll have tonight!” I was expecting that karma might turn my dreams sweet. But before I could reach down deep into my pockets, Vincent had already taken off, out of the taxi yard, and here I am in my huffing and puffing pursuit.

When a boy, chasing and pushing a tire with a twig, knocks me out of his way, I knock over a tiny girl underfoot. Her plastic bowl of rice somersaults onto the ground, today's small casualty in this bumper car city. She starts to put the bowl's now dirty contents back together, and her mother, standing not so far away, laughs at the both of us and scoops her daughter up. “*Obruni*,” white person, she says to the teary child.

We tear through the final markets, perched on a hill before the city drops off into coastline, and the craftsmen say, “Do you like art? Do you not think this is pretty? Look I made you –” They step in front of me, block my way with body-sized wooden masks of furious faces, and they grab my wrists to slip on too-big bracelets. The *Kayayooos*, girls new to the capital from their world-away homesteads, are weaving through the market, trays of charcoal on their heads.

They are giggling and reaching for my hair – but how do I stop the bees, they say, from believing my hair is theirs, such beautiful color of honey. “You too!” I shout over my shoulder, “I love your hair too!”

Vincent will soon hit the beach. He cruises under the triangles of crisscrossed clotheslines. They form a wiry net between the many shanty houses, which have sprung up haphazardly along the shore. Now the clotheslines waver and bounce with sheets like ghosts, as I, close in tow, brush against them.

Vincent’s hands must be soft with sand for he has reached the beach. No, they must be – I glance at the bottom of my stinking shoes – covered in cow dung. Sewage water runs in a slow flow from city to ocean, and a pack of cows have been led to drink it.

“Wait!” I call a final time, but now that I’m competing with the crashing waves, Vincent will never hear me.

Without having to wade at all, he is waist-deep in ocean water. He steadies himself. He lifts his wet hands. His head is tilted back. He balances incredibly on the bottoms of his thigh-stumps, and he extends his arms. He should be, in this gallant moment, a tall cross, bearing himself to the world with waves folding at his knees. But being so low to the ground, he forms a stout and sturdy plus sign, and he closes his eyes to the salty water as the sea splashes up along his neck.

Seasonal Thing

When I met Frank, we spent just a winter day together. I signed up to volunteer at the shelter he was staying in – from sun up to sun down one Sunday, and then I never went back. Despite my determination being the size of the ever-reaching universe, I have trouble sticking with things like string instruments, heavy novels, and people.

Before my day with Frank, all I could think was, I've wound up moving into Lyle's, after all, haven't I? Toothbrush, girlhood blanket, glue-stick paper paint supplies and all – I had made my boyfriend's apartment a real second home for the moment, and that terrified me.

Frank, he had just gotten into Pat's Place, the seniors-only shelter in Midtown, by fudging his age. He'd chalked his ID and committed to memory all the Manhattan history that happened a bit before his time. Pat's Place was squeezed thin and tall inside an alley just a couple blocks down from Penn Station, where people go and come, free as summer vacationers, without having to prove a single thing.

We both were unafraid to present ourselves in full. We shot out our hungry, shakable hands to each other.

Frank asked, "How d'ye do?"

I said, "I'm just fine. How 'bout you?"

"I'm fine too. *Well*, what do you do?" he asked me. What did I do? And now, years later, what do I do now?

"I like art," I said. "I like a lot of things." I didn't ask what it was he did.

I suppose we both had our secrets, which peeked out in soft gestures and sentences cracked in half by silent whimpers. That day, for instance, Frank kept his hand just below his heart as if he were holding it up. He said among all these hard-bitten souls, he often kept still.

“Can’t even muster up the movement to fidget in this stone-cold seat,” he said. Underneath, I couldn’t help but hear the undulating hurt of his missing something long lost.

“Maybe it’s a seasonal thing,” I said. The snow was swirling that year, careless and unreasonably cold, from ground to sky it seemed.

“Mm,” said Frank.

His least favorite of the company at Pat’s, Peter Pfluger, was busy making his signature spiral art. Peter Pfluger had just hit seventy with a failing lung, no safety net to speak of, and an immutable icy puss on his face as Frank liked to point out – “Look at that there, Sarah, same from day one. Same from the day he was born, I’m sure.” Peter Pfluger was no miser though, miserable as he was. He gave out his artwork the way proud families churn out Christmas cards.

That day, he gave one to Frank. An extraordinary accident, Peter Pfluger said. The spiral had splattered arbitrarily onto the paper in the shape of a bird. “A sparrow, I think,” he said.

“A sign,” I insisted. “Let’s up and go, Frank. Let’s get out of here.”

“Oh no. No star-gazey bull hockey for me. Uh-uh, my pretty peach.” I welcomed the endearment because Frank was old and innocuous enough. (And, truth be told, I’d been hankering for some warm humanity from Lyle, who truly thought his inches were miles and that one sweet stroke of my long hair could last me at least a week). But I would not accept Frank’s immobility, not on *my* one Sunday visit.

What I wanted was to get Frank’s blood flowing and filling out his achy body and for his lip-edges to turn up toward his despondent eyes just once. What I did was convince him to go with me to the Museum of the Moving Image, where, as a grand finale, you can see yourself in quick flicker fashion. You do your dance for a camera that will make a thumb-sized flipbook out

of you, so whatever friends you have or don't have will look at it and say, "Well, isn't that the cutest, silliest – or in Frank's case, the happiest – I ever saw you."

A Break

My web sitter's eyes? Brown. Brown, I figured, but it was my first day and there's only so much nuance a girl can keep track of.

"Brown?" I said. My voice swept up the single syllable.

The choreographer, Bill, with his bristly chin-beard, would not accept a guess. He put his hand up like a traffic cop. "No no no," he said (performances thrive on threes). "I want an answer, not a question."

So my next go on the Spanish Web, as Christopher spun the tail end of the rope I was clinging to with both my hands, his feet planted on the blue mat below and mine floating up and outward, I searched for Christopher's eyes. I ignored the blur of the spinning tent, found myself in the disorienting orbit of centrifugal motion, and strung my stare down along the long, cloth-covered rope to meet Christopher's gaze. Brown.

When I shuffled down, Bill cupped my love handles in his eager hands and said "Better, Buttercup," or something like that.

Booming circus blue, blistering circus red, circus sun-gold; the indoor landscape is enough to make you choke at a matinee, be you performer, audience member, or otherwise. But my palate was asking for it, this overload. The cloud swing performers perched, twisted, and fell in the high-up air – the kind of air you come to right before you shoot past the ceiling fans and bust through the skylight. The jugglers' colored scarves were sparrows, canaries, macaws; their fire torches were comets. The twenty-four-hour man marked our tortuous route with red arrows on a map. And as Yella, our company bus – "our FAM-ily bus," cries Miguel, the ringmaster –

hopped from one small city stop to another, the world outside the tent grayed like a sick face in comparison.

But now I am holed up in my high school friend Hunker's spare bedroom in Brooklyn. My left ankle is a dull purple mess unfamiliar to me and resentful of me, missing its rope loop from which I dangle nightly in front of a thousand faces. I throw Hunker's huge jean-jacket – he weighs in at a cumbersome 290 pounds – over my whole left leg because I don't want to see even an inch of it. The Holland Tunnel has long since spit out Yella (and the spool truck with our tent in tow) to move on westward – Harrisburg, Pittsburgh, Canton, Dayton, Indianapolis.

When we were fifteen and sixteen, Hunker was the shy guy I needed, who boldly claimed the sun was out on dark gray afternoons to get me up and out of my room. And now he owns Hunky Video Store on Grand Street, though nobody watches good movies these days. When he comes and goes and I hear the click of the bolt lock, my hands find my elbows to hug because I think it's a ghost. When Hunker catches me huddled up like that he wraps a blanket around my back like a cape, or he turns up the thermostat, which works out well because my goose bumps clear out.

Hunker has been renting me comforting classics where men swoon when Bette Davis so much as throws back her hair. But today, he must have realized the anguish that plagues the cooped-up because he brought me a series of lectures on freely expanding outer space. So it is planetary motion that's gripping me this morning. Though there's nothing reining this universe in, I still can't help but see the restrictive side of the enterprise – those stiff suits pressurized to simulate conditions we already have right here on earth, no life beyond those sterile spaceships.

My father wouldn't have it – this lifestyle of mine. My father, who would give anything for the quiet life, who kept his lips pursed and prepped to say “shh” for most of my teenage years, he spoke out. “You can't just float around like a lost balloon, Lolo. You've got roots here.” Here was Marlboro, New Jersey, and I knew of no roots digging deep under the Garden State Parkway. And if they had indeed burrowed down, then it was time I loosed my feet.

The order of my ascent was as follows:

1. My uncomplicated mother, shortly before she died, would often clutch my small hands in hers and spin. Putting no forethought into her elegant footwork, she would cross uncross cross, and my body would lift hover fly, until I was flat smack between the ground and sky.
2. My first time on a plane was a flight to the Twin Cities to see my mother buried where she started out, where the grave and ground around it would be well-watered with the tears of her parents, her many siblings and their many children. I, an only child, struggling under the seatbelt, which my father strapped too tight, pressed my nose against the oblong window and stared into a still sky for the duration of the flight. During our descent, the buildings did not whiz sharper by the second into enormity from their miniature stature. No blur, no distortion – instead, we settled slowly down into the city's straightforward reality. My father mourned the 1960's Gateway District urban renewal that razed Minneapolis's first skyscraper. I touched ground without one kiss from him, without even a sketch of an explanation of what it means to desperately miss, without feeling like we'd flown at all.

3. The Ringling Brothers had hit 110 years, I was eleven, and my father had lost track of his age because time was a rolling snowball that refused to catch, gather, and grow. Three women right in front of our front-row seats pulled their way up three slack ropes, hand over far-reaching hand, as quick and graceful as bandits. They held on with tight fists and strong wrists that were made for the web. The male web sitters below looked up with the careful eyes one uses to scout out constellations. As they spun the ropes slowly, the women's posed bodies waved knowingly at me. Then faster and faster, and the high-flying women whipped around like dazzling flags or wash in the wind or a ceaseless top freed from the string wrapped around it.

Of course, for months I closed my eyes hard like a birthday candle blower-outer and tried to think of other positions I could see myself in. I did this frequently in front of my dad and almost never on my own. "Maybe I could go for NASA," I once thought aloud to him. (His tower of sugar packets on the kitchen counter had reached an improbable height.) At the end of the day, I did have as much or more invested than the next person in the stars' hyperbolic and parabolic spins. But still, no supernova remnant or pinwheel galaxy could entice me half as much as the rotating faces of watchful fans.

My one rule was that my feet couldn't be on the ground for more than half my workday. My dad said I was being impossible, I'd have to be more flexible. That's when I bent over and touched my toes, held onto one foot and brought it up above my head. "Flexible, see?" I said. "Yes, it's a difficult rule, but impossible?" Impossible was trusting in Newton's second law (a "fictitious force"), which throws a skywriter off course, makes the parachutist miss his mark,

fights gravity so a girl can fly. Impossible was imagining more than two days straight without my mother.

I could see I hadn't won him over, so I paraded right on, "People think it's *impossible* to put one foot in front of the other after they lose a certain someone," slender, milky-skinned, with a heavy ringing laugh, "And look at us." I knew he couldn't stand it when I brought up the worst of the worst, and I saw the floodgates about to open, so I quit there. And so did he.

Our company was only scheduled in Brooklyn for four days. I am two Fridays past that fourth day. Fall is already rusting into winter, and it's all I can do to see anything to look forward to through all this snow.

A Halloween party at Hunker's the night after our first show here brought me up to the roof of his apartment building. Dressed up as myself, wearing my leotard and peacock feathers in my hair, I floated up the fire escape for what little peace and quiet this self-conscious city has to offer. I stood in the middle of the roof with the city's flag waving above me, its eagle flying between two stolid Indians. I looked down at other rooftops that lay lower than Hunker's. My fanciful eyes elongated my legs and multiplied them exponentially. These legs of mine – ambitious, city-sized, and infinite – would stretch and bound and plant themselves on each and every urban rooftop. So firmly rooted on these rooftops would I be that I'd never fall down.

With all the aspiration broiling in the arches of my feet, I clutched the cold flagpole with both hands and swung around and around it, leaning as far back as I could, almost to the roof's floor.

But the fun ended there - my ankle folded in on itself, I crumpled up like a pile of skirts, and New York's traffic graciously drowned out my howl.

I'm dying to leave this apartment, but I know from my first days wandering around that I am more of an obstruction than a participant in the city's pulse. People rush around me like tide around a stranded stone because I am in the way of wherever they're going, and they want to let me know as much.

Hunker brought me the Best of George Carlin today to get me laughing, but I stopped the tape when I saw a mouse scurry out of the shoe I haven't been using. It ran past my phantom foot and wriggled into a crack in the wall with its accommodating ribcage. There was no need to run; in all my sluggishness, it wasn't like I could chase it down. I am stubbornly waiting for that mouse to come back out, so I can prove I'm not a threat.

I bought my dad a kitten the week before I left home for good –“she really did – a kitten,” he said twice to his sister who couldn't believe how little I understood about giving and taking away. I named the kitten Elephant because in the third grade Nicky Weezner named our class hamster Piggy, and my dad had said, “What a riot.” I thought kids liked to pretend that things were bigger and stranger than they really were, but Nicky, when asked, would just say that it was the fattest hamster he'd ever seen.

To me, my dad said, “A kitten, Lolo? You've got to be kidding.” He swallowed whatever sentence was coming next, his veins running like blue boulevards up and down his throat.

The day before I left, I returned Elephant to Petman's Pets, where they gave him back his old number – #3312 – on his old tag. I bought a goldfish instead and told Petman's to keep the difference between Elephant and the fish, which was fifty dollars. The trick is that Elephant was non-refundable.

My dad pinched the goldfish bag, holding it up and away from him, to let me know that he could be a hundred sparkling goldfish deep and would still forget to forgive me.

It's taken me almost ten years to tell the rest of the company (which is to say, I haven't told them) that I have not set foot in Marlboro since I left. Thanksgivings always tempt me – the thought of my mom's cranberry applesauce and her grandparents' crocheted tablecloth with applesauce stains is enough to make me consider calling my father. And once in a blue moon, I do – only to have my quiet pleas met with curt retorts.

Bill senses my distress, though I've never said a word to him. And I know just as well what gets him grinding his teeth. For example, puffed and full as he keeps his chest, I know he's scared to death we'll fall during the routines he's designed. I can tell because he makes sure Christopher churns his rope-hand through the air as certain as a clock, even though Christopher's been around longer than Bill. When he's in a funk, Bill will ram into me to keep me on my toes, or he'll clutch my calf in a desperate way when he's showing me how he wants things done.

I've heard whispers that when Bill first joined the company, he shot the breeze about a child he never had, still doesn't have, and never will. He would ask casually if people knew of any babysitters – he and his wife (no wife, either, by the way) wanted to have a short getaway off-season – but he wouldn't take down any numbers. “Why would he try lying about something so big?” said Chatty Lilly, the Static Trapeze artist, behind her flat hand.

Chatty Lilly, she won't get a clue if it's announced with a prelude of dizzying sparklers. I try to have my headphones on while I'm stretching so she won't corner me in her signature one-sided conversations. The joke is that my CD player broke months ago. There's no music playing, just my silent, deterrent headphones. One reason for your gut to sink when Chatty Lilly

approaches is that she remembers (and will recite) everything about every little thing, whether the history is hers or not. This can make a person a) irritated, b) jealous, and c) forever stuck on the mat in a butterfly stretch, worrying about how much of my life I can't replay in my head by heart.

The way they distribute mail to the company is Bill registers our location at each new stop and stomps off to the P.O. box when no one else volunteers. When he comes back, he sorts the mail like a poker dealer, flinging each envelope to its rightful owner. Since Chatty Lilly keeps up with all of her contacts, she's usually the one with the healthiest pile of letters in her lap. Her sister, Harriet, writes everyday without fail. Lilly calls Harriet's letters her "anchoring force."

On birthdays, Bill holds the bundle of cards that accumulates for the special someone above his head and parades around the tent's center pole, while Miguel shouts the person's name and says, *come on down, and co-llect your cards!*

And because it's never me getting whacked by flying letters and so rarely getting her name shouted out near the center pole (and Bill knows it), he has been known to slip in a fake letter from my father – not a prank or even a joke, just a chance for me to have some paper between my fingers. Bill's fakes usually say no more than "Hellololo!" in big stupid letters, but they're enough for me to rest my eyes on while the others are wrapped up in their reading.

I imagine writing someone regularly. I'd hastily scrawl letters on the road from here to there, my writing sprawled across the page and barely legible. The receiver would snip around each postmark and save them to track my trails. He'd preserve them in a coffee table album, or glue them down, laminate and frame them to keep from losing the strays.

I came very close to throwing my coat over my shoulder, tossing my tights in a rolled up ball at Bill's feet, and heading home on a Greyhound bus when Chatty Lilly told me she'd gotten word that Harriet was sick, and I pretended I hadn't heard her.

"Sick. Well, really sick," she said, even though (or because?) she saw me with my headphones on. "Lou Gehrig's Disease. Her speech is garbled and blurred like a watercolor painting, and when my dad got tired of saying, 'What? What?' he took her to Dr. Zimmerman, who said to her but I guess more to Dad, 'Now don't be startled when your muscles stop getting the message.'" Lilly's lip quivered.

I took one headphone off my ear and looked up at her shadowy face. "Hm?" I said, "I missed that."

"Oh nothing," she sighed and walked away with the sun through the skylight on her back.

I thought the usual "couldn't happen to me and mine." I was sure I must have reached my quota of bad luck long ago. But there's no science to it really, and the what ifs were bubbling over in my brain. I slowly tugged the cord of my headphones, left hand, right hand, wrapping them up until I got to the tail end, which was hooked up to absolutely nothing. Bill saw me from the sidewall and was in on my secret. He's always catching on.

He strolled by my mat, yanked my hair-sprayed bun like a church bell, and whispered, "There's music in the air."

"La dee da," I sang.

The next evening, Bill ran the cool edge of an envelope against my neck, and I snatched it as fast as a frog tongue to a fly. This one did not claim to be from Marlboro, but the address-

less envelope (just “LOLO”) was the work of Bill’s slanted hand. My eyes darted to the end of the letter and back again because I’ve learned that’s the best way to guard against a bad surprise.

It was fresh from my mother. It was typed because, as much as Bill knows, there’s no way he’d try to imitate my mother’s sweet script. *Lolovely*, it began, and my spine rattled away. And so Bill didn’t have to make stuff up out of thin air, he had written: *This is what I see. I see...*

No. Let me do that over.

And because she’s been watching all along, she wrote:

This is what I see.

I see your low cheekbones, your dimpled chin, and your sure neck.

I see your little earlobes lost in a collision of wispy sideburn and misfit curl.

I see you chew nervously on your knuckles when no one’s in sight.

I see you waver, fold, and bend your body into a boomerang.

I see you turn the watch I gave you around and around on your wrist to turn back time.

My mother’s sister, Ruby, actually gave me that watch. One year in high school, I had to smother my wrist with ointment every night because I was turning the watch in my sleep.

The very night Bill gave me my letter was the night Hunker’s party landed me flat on my back, up on his roof, so close to the moon I thought it might fall on me.

I start up today’s movie, which Hunker has left gift-wrapped next to my pillow this morning like a hotel mint. The picture won’t work, so it’s just noise at first – a throaty “Madame! Monsieur!” a long roar. But I slap my hand down on the TV, and in flickers the unfastened, snarling face of Alexander Calder, bent over his wire circus, bringing the miniature show to life. His hands scamper about a floor covered with thumb-sized figures he’s crafted. The trapeze artists dangle wildly, latching onto one wire trapeze after another. His tiny cowboy writhes on an unruly horse. Calder trickily, tenderly, takes the lion tamer’s head and places it inside the lion’s mouth for ten tense seconds. When the music climbs to a finale, Calder tugs the final chariots

along. I watch the performance over and over, once on fast-forward to see what this world looks like in a frenzy and once in slow motion to see the care that goes into every step, once to trace the artist's hand in everything and once to forget him completely, keep my eyes on the company, and let them have a life of their own.

In the taxi from the bus stop to 22 Clay Street, I will mentally match the movement of the pedestrians and traffic to whatever radio station is playing, until everyone is moving to the right beat. I will say early to the taxi driver, "Here here here, stop," because I'll want to see and slowly remember a couple blocks' worth of my town before I reach my house.

A pair of joggers' smug sneakers will fall in and out of sync in front of me. The two inattentive women will step on or over the neatly spaced sidewalk cracks as if it's all the same. I will hobble past Bud Cutlery's menacing window display and Specialty Toys with its Martian puppets and roadmap carpets. I'll nod at a lawn-chair lounge (but no lawn to speak of) holding a square aluminum sheet across his chest to make the sun bend up onto his red-hot face. The sun won't pass me by either; it will kiss the fuzzy nape of my neck, do a warm split over my left shoulder, and land with a thud in every spot where my bandaged foot ventures a step.

The door will open like a yawn. My whole house will look like a Bed and Breakfast, maybe painted a timid yellow with baby blue moldings. I won't know if the stereo's on or if a song from the taxi is still stuck in my head and won't let go. I'll be too tall for the ceilings, too heavy for the flimsy chairs, too unsteady for the slick tile floors. The rooms will ring hollow with unfamiliarity, but from the doorway I'll glimpse a shivering pyramid of forks and toothpicks on the kitchen table.

My dad will say in a deliberate voice, “Lolo,” as if he’s talking over a subway rumble or profound applause.

“Yeah?”

“Just look at you,” he’ll say.

Count on Me

Your drawing is in its “about to be” phase, as you like to say. That is, pencil hasn’t landed. The bright white square on the table is the same thin paper you used to use when you sent me your animal drawings in the mail. The notes traveled from 24 Bruce Court to 40 Bruce Court, which my parents thought was ridiculous. I didn’t. Our notes were sacred, as are all rituals when you’re a teenager. When I took them out of their envelopes, I did so ever so slowly. I worried I would tear a corner and lose the tail or ear, or worse, your pretty signature underneath. Who takes the trouble now to be so careful with the little things? Who’s got the time to send drawings like that, regular as a page-a-day-calendar?

Under the drawings, you always wrote, *Where’s your here?* I would call you and say without skipping a beat, “Forty Bruce Court.”

“Just checking,” you’d reply. “What’s the word, bird?”

“Well, Colin,” I’d push imaginary glasses up the bridge of my nose for no one’s benefit but my own. “Just the other day, I heard...” And that was our jumping-off point – whatever fact I’d recently found. The Hyacinth Macaw, to take an example, the Goliath of birds – it can reach forty inches in length and a stunning sixty years of life.

You would write it down; you, with your awful memory, kept a handy list of this information to take out and think about at any dull moment. You still do. Of our dynamic duo, I am the one with the steel trap and, thus, ever the sharer of offhand tidbits. I spread information like a calling.

I am working on a birthday card for you, right here in front of you. No use keeping it secret when I’m going to give it to you in an hour or so. I haven’t your artistic talent, so I’m

working on a simple “Happy Birthday” in silly looking bubble letters, ready to pop with big, round birthday cheer.

You lift your pencil to use as a pointer. Shaking it at me, you tell me, “Jeremy says it’s possible to draw an elephant – a damn good one – with just six ovals, two circles, and four rectangles. You’ve got to shade it in, fill it out, of course, but I can’t seem to get it right. Jeremy swears, though, hand over heart.” That exaggerated sincerity, cute as it may be, is cause for us to call him your “Shady Lady.” Jokingly, of course, and Jeremy knows it. He’s as fond of the nickname as we are.

The “lady” label could go just as easily for you – as early as high school, you were envying me my curves and even my monthly cramps and chance at future labor pains, of all things.

“Female rites of passage,” you said with an early, touching sense of loss and longing.

“Ach!” I’d flippantly exclaim, “pain in the uterus!” Now, every so often, you say to me, raising your low voice to lullaby pitch, softening your sadly unmistakably masculine face, “I’d make a good mother, yeah? Don’t you think I’d make an excellent mother?”

“Top of the line,” I say.

You pull a cigarette out of nowhere and a lighter from that same place. You haven’t smoked since college, when we were too far away for me to have to watch you do it anyway. You don’t exhale coolly toward the sky. You quickly and awkwardly pull on the cigarette (held in your non-drawing hand), as you might when no one’s watching. I cast you a quizzical look. You shrug.

“Old habits die hard,” I say. I’m willing to forgive. It’s your birthday.

“Old habits don’t die,” you say.

You give up on the outline of an elephant you've got going. You sketch a bird above it – a simple union of scalene triangles and quick swoops of pencil scratches around the wings to give it motion. You sketch another and another. The birds become a dense background, filling the negative space like overpowering wallpaper. You sketch several birds right under the elephant's heavy, indiscriminate feet.

“Careful.” I pat your busy hand to slow it down. “They'll be crushed.”

“It's just a drawing.” And then you say, “Hey, It's March fourteenth.”

“I know.”

“It's my birthday, and I'm twenty-five. Exclamation point.”

“Exclamation point” refers to the other day when I told you on the phone of the adage that a person is allowed only three exclamation points in his lifetime. “We should cut back,” I said.

“Ten years and you can be president,” I say – you don't like responsibility. “I know, I know it's your birthday! You kidding? Look at this stupid card.” I shove it under your nose. Had you not seen it? “And look what I brought you.” Now, I give you what is left to give, that is, something I haven't already given you after all these years – a twelve-by-twelve photograph of an art installation. The artists' thousands of pounds of wires and switches generated bubbles whose skin was three millionths of an inch thick, almost as weightless as air itself. Bubbles of every shape, their membranes so thin, the light they refracted gave off an iridescence unknown in nature.

Your usually curious, investigative eyes barely give the photograph a once-over. You push it back towards me, as if I've mistaken you for someone else, as if the gift was meant for another.

“Well, what’s more,” you say, “on this very day in 1964, Texas convicted the killer of the killer of JFK. I looked it up – this day – when I woke up. I put it on the list.”

I laugh uncertainly. “Jack Ruby. Lee Harvey Oswald. That’s a good one.” I pretend to write it down on an invisible steno-pad and push up my imaginary glasses, which I’m glad to say exist to this day.

Lately, more than ever before, I am full of facts. I’ve started working as a tour guide in Western Massachusetts. I specialize in authors’ historic houses. I come back to you with intimate reports of their secret nooks and their inhabitants’ quirky touches. Edith Wharton, ghost story writer extraordinaire, admitted an inexplicable fear that had her burning books of ghost tales at The Mount, her estate in Lenox. Emily Dickinson’s ailing eyes led the doctor to recommend she quit her beloved poems – reading them and writing them – she did not travel far from her Amherst home again.

Jeremy accompanied me a month ago, right when you and he started dating, to try out my tour and give me tips. Maybe he wanted to get on my good side off the bat. You chose not to come. You said it felt invasive, exploring people’s houses like that, all of their personal effects on display. Jeremy pouted his lips at you. “Well, you don’t have-ta, I’ll see ya afta!” he said, at once grabbing my hand and kissing you goodbye.

“And what’s *more*,” you say, “and this is something you *don’t* know –”

“There’s *more*?” I’m still pretending, steno-pad in hand. I’m a gossip, a conspirator. I’m a child, and you’re a spinner of tales.

“I’ve just made a discovery.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.”

You know how I feel about discoveries. People think they're a step forward. But really, discoveries push you backward in the most productive way – the big ones anyway make you retrace your steps and undo your previous knowledge. “Will you convince me not to understand what I do understand, to find what I do not discover?” I am citing Galileo. He's my favorite.

You don't run with my line. Instead, you say plainly, “It's the twenty-first century, and I'm HIV positive.”

I study your body, and this is what I see: You're massaging your throat, you're inhaling abruptly, and your stomach is jutting out with each sharp sniff. Are you stocking up on air? As soon as your belly is full full full, all that air rushes out at me in a blast. The air stings my eyes.

“Are you sure?” I am, after all, a devout fact checker; I'm doing what I know best. Plus, what else is there to say?

“Positive.” Your face folds inward. And plainly, you add, “Exclamation point.”

I take it back. You are allowed all the exclamation points you please, actually anything at all that strikes your fancy in the whole tightening, oxygen-sucking world.

You are back to your cigarette pack, tapping it on your wrist, and – poof – there's one between your lips in a slick flash. Jeremy, an expert smoker, told you that whenever someone blows smoke in your face it's a sign of seduction. I can tell him now, that's not always the case. Your smoke is stinging my eyes.

My stomach has flipped so many times in the last two minutes; my organs are all over the place, all in the wrong spots.

“I think my lungs and heart just traded spaces,” I say. You and I were big fans of that television show, *Trading Spaces*. Neighbors would switch houses for a couple of days and redecorate each other's rooms. You'd be surprised how often they approved of each other's taste.

You put your non-smoking hand, your drawing hand, between my breasts with the curiosity and gentleness of someone touching a pregnant stomach to feel the baby kick. I breathe deeply. “Oh, that can’t be good,” you say.

I grasp your wrist like someone checking for a pulse. “I meant it figuratively,” I lie.

I imagine snatching the cigarette away from you – it’s killing my lungs too – and thrusting it so close to your face you’ll have to cross your eyes to see it, and then branding my own hand with the cigarette’s orange end. Hard and hot as you’d expect, a mark that would last.

You say, “I’ve started a list of all the things I can’t handle thinking about anymore. As they come up. And, I’ve realized, just about every topic comes up sooner or later. Jesus, see what I mean?”

“What? Can I take a look?”

I think, the number of items on the list will inform me how long it took you to tell me.

“Do you want me to take a look?”

I think, what can’t I mention? What won’t I make the slightest mention of, for all the livelong days from here on out?

“Sure.” You flip over the paper you were drawing on. And there it is. There it was all the while.

Your most careful script reads:

The phrase “in the same vein”

Latex

Paper cuts

The word “count”

Tom Hanks

The phrase “sooner or later”

The color white

The color red

Birthdays

Cracking Up

My boyfriend, Lyle Bank, has just announced to me that I am always running around to please and appease this nobody and that nobody. That my eye pockets are sagging down to my chin with exhaustion and for who? That Flo Shmo and Jimbo on the street will never cherish my tired, cherubic face like Lyle does. That what does it take, Sarah, some earth-shattering signal from Whoozis-Name up in heaven to get me to sit the hell down for once?

I am popping fruity Lifesavers (I've stocked up, six ready boxes in my pantry) to mitigate a migraine and to sweeten my wary words, which so often must be teased out of me.

What happened – and I would tell him this if he'd just give me a minute – was that I was once seventeen years old in the dead of winter, a new driver with a new tattoo (the raven Lyle loves so much flying above my left buttock and its twin dying over my right). With no four-year plan, I was early losing hope, and I saw in Bold Helvetica on the highway, “Take a break. Stay awake. For Life's Sake.” I took only what I wanted from that message, and I said to myself and to others, “What's the good of sleep when it's a wonder what you can do awake?” The world was waiting and wanting, at its every melancholy turn, to be impressed.

With Valentine's Day fast approaching, I bought up all the buttons, glue, and graceful lace I could get my hands on at the local Michaels, and I borrowed my dad's palm pilot and ransacked my mom's address book to track down everyone I'd ever known. I got to work. Eyeing the stack of cards two-hundred-high, I knew that no one whose name I could remember would go without that red-pink hint of affection in their mailbox on February 14th. After the cards went out, my bare, brown table (just hours before, buried under bright scraps) hummed blankly of a job well done.

Years later, I breathed fresh, flat life into PS160, painting sunny murals with the round-

faced, grounded children on a low concrete wall that wrapped itself, black and bleak, around their schoolyard. Days, I buzzed dizzily, my Keds an inch off the concrete, thinking in a red and orange language (thinking, also, that panhandler there, does he have my eyes? Is he asking for my hand?), thinking twenty colorless schools per city year, why not. And at night, sharper than the sharpest tack sunk through paper valentines on all those friends' walls, I daydreamed, "The onus is on us." One day, I would mend those museums in Baghdad, hold desert-crossing hands in the Sudan, and answer the calls that echoed out from Mugabe's frenzied Zimbabwe, through the land-lock block, across the ocean to my eager ears.

Lyle cracks up with fat hardy laughter. He is kicking up the complacent paper cranes I have laid out, plenty and colorful, all across his oak wood floor. I stare down into the disturbed pool and won't look up into Lyle's leaky eyes. He wedges his neat boot-toe up under the slender beaks, winds up, and whack! they take wing.

"But these," I say – I bend at the knees and scoop up cranes the way you would scoop up a baby; they fall off my forearms and flutter down – "These were for you. No Jimbo here." Then his fancy feet really get going ("For me? That so?"), and with each brazen flick of his foot, the origami colors – candy-apple green, cartoon-sun yellow, stop-sign red – crisscross each other mid-air. ("You haven't looked my sorry way, not once, tonight. So you turned two dimensions into three, so what?") I've been deflated. He didn't mean that. My eyes hold fast to the slivers of vacant white, the underside of the origami square, still visible along the flying birds' necks and breasts. There are two sides to everything.

That is what I sneakily professed in my pack of poems for James, the happy guitarist at the 72nd street park entrance. I watch James strum John Lennon every eighth of December when I lay white lilacs on the concrete circle that says *Imagine*. James once asked me please could I

keep a careful eye on his guitar, his livelihood, while he ran to buy a pack of ciggie-sticks for a minor in craving. It turns out we're all full of favors. I drafted rhymes in cold condensation on my apartment's fogged up windowpanes. My restless fingers' painstaking script read: ShriII, still, fulfill. Break, ache, stake. Bright, night. I rolled my poems up into a scroll tied tight with twenty red ribbons. At first, James couldn't see the plain paper underneath that would later late-night whisper him into a lyric sleep.

I know I must look up at Lyle and pull out one of the hundred knotty sentence-strings that I've daily bundled under my tongue, in my cheeks, and between my wisdom teeth. As I stand up, I blindly pick one paper wing to pinch and raise to eye level – the weakest green. "I would say we could save one – one little one – but we can't save just this one and sweep away – gone – the rest, like they're all the same. You know, if you'll just leave the little winged things be, they'll stand guard while you sleep... says the lore anyway." He sighs. I say, "You want me to turn in, stop ceaselessly reaching out?" I say, "My words are tripping over me."

"Always," he says.

He sees only the hectic, the manic in my every step, and he believes he owes me a piece of his mind about pause. About the humble here and now and no more pondering and planning uncountable quantities of quality gifts. About what good there is in a goddamn lull once in a while.

And then he turns it all around, and he's looking down at his tired, finished feet. He gets so sad, he says. "Plain and simple."

I take a slow step away from him; a crane is crushed under my careless heel. I need no lecture from Lyle Bank on the ins and outs of abysmal feelings. Because I have known those days too. Known the exclusion from a cosmos where people catch their buses and make their

trains. Known, intimately, breath-holding under bathwater and the stillness of pitiful hands too fickle to pick anything up. I flop onto the floor, squashing flat Lord-knows-how-many of the creatures I created.

Moon in Gemini

I have fallen deep into the musty back corner of a secondhand bookshop at 80th and Broadway. Several hours have passed, I suppose, since I found the store's forgotten section on stars and signs – even without an italicized label to tell me, at a slant, *ASTROLOGY*. I've no nametag to announce myself either.

I've been here, sprawled out and spaced out, nursing no spacey myths in my lap as I'd planned. My legs stretch as long as they'll go, quite separate from the rest of me. This store's so small, it wouldn't let the legs of a single star-crossed being take her anywhere anyway. Sarah, I say, lift up your glassy eyes. But they feel as big as eight balls behind their lazy lids. I look left. These brittle books haven't seen the sun in centuries.

I'm sure I must have come here – string and scissors in my jacket pocket tell me so – to get together a short book stack for Lucy Letman's birthday. Lucy Letman, famous for her emphatic nod, is ever the believer. She is proud to be a feeling Pisces. A late May baby myself, I just can't be sure.

I fumble for the card I've started, *Dearest Bobblehead*. I skip to the bottom and write with a hand that moves like a lost soul on Sunday, -Sarah. My bated breath waits for the card's middle to fill itself in. But my thoughts are refusing me. With a childlike fist, I clutch the pen in a death-grip and scribble over the words until they're three black blotches.

I turn the card over to its backside, still blank as night.

With limp limbs and a pen in need of strict command, I shuffle through possibilities. Lyle, I'm leaving you – along with the man-planted Manhattan trees and square buildings, and the sun and all the planets crowded around it – for good. Or: Ken, I won't be egging you on any longer with this and that thing – do give the parental unit, though, a hand or hug once in a while.

Frank, hon, hang in there. Luz, Mikey Jr, Joey J, KayLeen, keep it up, the Bronx will always be grateful for your rosy characters and colorful street art.

I leave a finger-length space – I’ll fill in the receiver’s name soon enough. First and foremost, there are honest woes to be sorted out, selected, and presented. But I lose all rhyme and reason right before I set out to write. Not everyone totes around a ready rationale. I write only this personal statement in paragraph form to explain it all:

*_____ , I’ve settled on you,
Every day, minute in and hour out, I bite my nails right off their beds. I keep all those fragile crescent slivers together in a tin Altoid box. The persistent mint still fills my room with a finished feeling when I lift the lid. I do this just so I can see, day to day, what somebody – my body – can produce. But my fingertips are sore with their under-skins gnashed up. They ache with inactivity.*

No. This won’t suffice. I crumple up the card in a weak fist and throw it over my shoulder like one throws salt for luck. I need fresh paper. Hoping the constellations won’t consider my sacrilege, I rip out the copyright page of *Planets in Transit*. (Who wants a date and source for this starry science anyway?) I toss the book aside. I write in lucid block letters:

DE-PRESSED. DEEP REST.

I close my eyes and pull any old book from the warped shelves. I part the pages with two hands as one may part curtains, crowds, or seas. I open up my gaze, wide and sure, I slap my note down, and close the book – a heavy home around it. Again I shut my eyes, and I grope to find a vacant slot to return the book to its crumbling companions.

After one quick minute, though, it’s dawned on me that I should add some words to ease the mind of whichever faithful stranger finds my note. I’ve got to write something like:

*Don’t worry, you.
I don’t go through
with anything these days.*

But the bindings are all blending together with the same curling titles. Each sings its own certain theory, and they won't come to a consensus. I don't reach out for a single solitary book.

I've no chance.

Imperfect Present

Even though Raulito Mejía's little bike sank a foot into the muddy, ruined road that afternoon, even though his brother Rodrigo had to use all his muscle to yank the bike out of the ground, the only thing the five-street by five-street flooding town could talk about that day was Ceci Silueta. Throughout my whole two months of lazy days in El Salvador, I'd never seen the village chatter buzzing with such vibrancy as the morning after the sighting of Ceci. "*Sabes qué?*" said my host mother, Rosa, awake and busy with chores by dawn. "Ceci Silueta is on the prowl."

Rodrigo rode the bike back to our house in the drizzle with Raulito on the handlebars, his bony legs dangling. They put on dry clothes. They boiled water for yucca soup and ate it in their room because the kitchen floor was wet from rain that had blown in through the kitchen's empty doorframe. I could hear Raulito from the next room, whispering between spoonfuls, "I saw her last night! I saw Ceci myself! She was right there, standing with a straight back and her arms hanging at her sides and her *pechos* hanging out. I could feel her breath on my face from far away, and it was hot like fire. And I could see through her – she must be a phantom like they say!"

"She's a myth, little brother," said Rodrigo. "Close your mouth and eat. Ya." But how could Raulito do that?

Every rumor under the absent sun was circulating. She was a gypsy, surely from out of town, probably from the highlands. She was a saint gone savage, machete always in hand and knotty hair stretching down to her kneecaps. She was a whore (that she was always naked when spotted in the night was the only consensus the town could come to). I'd certainly never seen her.

I continued trekking to school, mud caking over my ankles and gun-crack thunder

exploding and making the ground tremble underfoot. My host father, Gerson, and Uncle Aldo passed me each morning, herding the cattle to graze. The animals bent their bulky heads forward to press through the teeming rain. And they were thinner by the day, their ribs pushing against their skin, because the grazing fields had become vast pools of water.

When the flooding started, I was teaching my students irregulars. Present perfect – *my father has been to the United States*. Preterit: *my mother and brother stayed here*. I settled confusions about *bear* versus *bare* and *dam* versus *damn*, which made them giggle. I taught them the difference between *we stopped to eat* and *we stopped eating*.

Rodrigo was one of my best students at the secondary school. He had received a national scholarship just weeks before I arrived from the US; he would be the first in the town to go to college in the capital. Gerson said Rodrigo kept his clever brains in his feet so that they would smartly walk him straight to university. Rosa said that while pregnant with Rodrigo, she spent extra money to eat fish, which would give him intelligence, and she'd been praying and knowing all along he would succeed.

Rodrigo, though, kept fairly quiet about it, saying only that no one could milk the cows as well as he did and how they would miss him and might dry up if he were to leave, and who would maintain the water well, who would make sure Raulito didn't sit so close to the television? Rodrigo was always the one to pull his brother's plastic chair back away from the glowing screen. And Rodrigo would be lonely, he once said quietly to me. But without taking a breath – I didn't get a word in – he said, "Hey, Gringuita, do you want to learn a little tongue twister?" He stared at the cracked tile beneath his feet and said, "*Poco coco compro porque poco coco como*. Do you like that?"

The silent rumor surrounding Rodrigo that had once spread like a rash around town was about his girlfriend all the way from the city of Santa Ana; who knows how he met her? Who knows where she stayed in this town across the country from her city? In nearby Usulután, perhaps?

Long before my visit, she'd been Rodrigo's worst-kept secret. The fear that the girl would erode his devotion to his family and finally wipe his college plans away festered in the Mejía household until Rosa could take it no longer. "Enough!" she yelled on a moonless night. "I will not be tolerant, m'hijo!" Mothers – especially the ones with bodies built like the houses they govern and mouths as wide and fierce as the Lempa River – are not ones to be reckoned with. And Rosa didn't give an inch, just brushed by and kissed the scalp of her eldest son, who was puffy-eyed for days on end.

Much of the maize and beans began to wash away. The men straddled plants on their small family farms and grabbed at the rotting crops, so they would not attack and kill their weak neighbors. The men said to me that the Lempa riverbanks would soon be collapsing, and just you wait, the government would send out their late alerts on radio, that in the past even drivers on the Pan Americana have gotten a big bath in the flood. But as the men walked home from their farms with half-filled sacks of wet corn, their conclusive, collective remark was: "Curse Ceci Silueta for the bad luck she has brought us."

For amusement one morning, I had my students make up short essays about Ceci. I told them to use their imaginations, but all of them, straight-faced, gave me their versions of the truth. They wrote, *Ceci visits us because she is angry and has hungry for revenge. Ceci is an angel to guard we because we are poor.* One wrote, *Ceci is the ugliest.* Rodrigo wrote, *Ceci is the most beautiful.* Marcela, my quietest student, wrote, *Ceci drowns in the flood because she did not*

swim. She dies because she was alone. I shuddered head to toe, but not a single student blinked an eye. What they said was, “Marcela, don’t use two tenses in the same sentence. You have to choose present or past.”

“Enough about Ceci,” I said. I was nearing the end of my stay and running out of time to get through the lessons I’d brought. “Let’s go on. Who knows the difference between *pour* and *poor*?”

The next morning, on my drowsy walk back to the house from our backyard latrine, I found two of the Mejias’ brand new chicks drowned in a gray-brown puddle. The coupled humps of yellow fuzz peeked out from the puddle, and I considered scooping them out with gentle hands. Instead, I ran away from them and into the house to tell Rosa.

Normally, Rosa, like everyone else, chased her frantic chickens out of the open house, swinging a menacing broom. But that morning, Rosa took the chicks’ mother into the house with her and squatted down, clicking her tongue at the hen. Rosa’s big body pushed hard on the balls of her feet, until she seemed stuck there. Looking up at me from the floor, she said, “La gallina’s babies have just had a scare, they must have seen Ceci Silueta last night. They have died of fear.”

Days later, Rodrigo took advantage of Uncle Aldo’s afternoon nap in the backyard hammock and stole the old deck of cards out of his pocket. The cards were damp and crumbling around the edges. Teaching *Go Fish* and *Crazy Eights* was harder than I expected, and Rodrigo couldn’t seem to get across the rules of *Dos Comodines*. So instead, I taught him, “Jack, Queen, King, Ace.” And we practiced the numbers and suits.

Uncle Aldo stirred, then stood and stretched out his curled back with an exaggerated yawn and a long stretch toward the leaky ceiling. “What are you doing with my cards?” he said.

He snatched the deck away from us and put it in his pocket. Uncle Aldo smiled, biting his bottom lip with two metal-crowned teeth. “I thought women don’t like cards,” he said to me.

“*Ay, tú!*” Rodrigo pushed his uncle lightly. “Go ahead,” he said to me.

“Ok, repeat: ‘diamonds.’”

“Diamonds,” said Rodrigo.

“Hearts.”

“Hearts,” he repeated with a rasping “h.”

In the middle of my last night in El Salvador, I woke up to lightning flashes turning my room bright silver. I couldn’t fall back asleep with the thunder’s racket, so I stared out through the dripping space between my wall and our tin roof. I rested my elbows on the powdery cinderblock’s square holes – they weren’t quite windows – and I watched the lightning’s sharp teeth split the sky.

And then I saw her. Ceci Silueta, outside. No machete, half-naked, and gorgeous black hair that weighed wet and heavy, full of rain, and reached her waist. She walked slowly toward our house, her broad, graceful face drawing closer and closer. She reached her hand out to the wall, and there it stayed, while her body followed it. The whole of her seemed to be wavering, part by part, into place. Or was I seeing a mirage in the sparkling rain?

And then I heard him. The low rumble of their conversation was barely audible under the thunder, but right outside my window, I recognized Rodrigo’s voice. I heard only intermittent murmurs.

“There are no stars in your hair tonight, *mi cariña*.”

“Santa Ana never has stars.”

“Only pregnant clouds in this tiny town’s sky tonight, *cariña*.”

“In the city, it is the streetlights’ fault. They are stronger and shine instead.”

Even though my flight was just hours away, even though the Mejías had made me an honorary daughter and sister, no one was speaking to me the next morning. The house bustled in silence.

The family was packing up their things. And they were leaving things behind. Things that made their home a home. Rosa picked up one object after another, examining and scowling at each one – a vase, a pillow, a stack of plates, the unlit candles under her statuette of the Virgin Mary. She inspected each one, as if it were not part of her life, but rather a foreign object, perhaps fallen from the sky. She took pictures out of their frames and albums, and she slid them into an envelope. She pointed determinedly around the room like a sorceress, indicating to Gerson, Aldo, Rodrigo, and Raulito what to put in the family’s three suitcases. She hissed at the mother hen who followed stupidly at her heels. “*Déjame en paz!*” she yelled at it.

I was folding my mosquito net, which had hung like black fog above me for all that time, when Raulito approached me. “I have a gift for you,” he said. “Mamá says I cannot take my bicycle. It’s outside. You’ll take it to the United States. It’s good, *verdad?*”

Rodrigo came over to us with a paper in his hand. He pinched Raulito’s cheek. “Go right now to Mamá, little brother, or she’ll spank you. She’s spitting fire.” Raulito ran off.

Rodrigo gripped my arm harshly and pulled me against the wall. Did he know I knew?

“*Tén,*” he said, handing me the paper in his hand. “Keep it.” It was his last homework assignment on the third conditional, rows of sentences that read: *if I had _____, I would have _____*. Rodrigo continued in perfect English, “You are leaving today, and we are leaving too.” He

said, “There will be no more nightmares of Ceci Silueta. The town, all of us, we are moving to higher ground.”

Why Not Say Love?

We are arguing about love, as if there aren't a hundred other matters that make us push and pull like backwards magnets. He calls it the "L word." I wonder what it is that stops him up so thoroughly, stifling him and strangling me. I call it loudly, Love, with a capital L. L with its flick of the tongue, air around and out of the mouth in a soft push, L, the loveliest letter of all twenty-six.

The heart of it is that all throughout my youth, I saw myself as a free-winged thing – unbound, unraveling, and coming completely undone in all my poetic loneliness. But like every other beating being, I couldn't help that wave of feeling at twenty-eight, twenty-nine that I was capable of giving and getting a big boatload of love. A strap-you-in kind of love. So much love, you could boil water with the heat of it.

I say, "I don't care if you say it back."

He says, "Back? Back? This *love* of yours, I don't even know what you're starting with. You need cement to build a house, dough to make bread, seeds and light and water to grow a garden."

I'm done with your desperate analogies, and you know it, hence your last feeler: "You know? ...Photosynthesis."

I'm not answering.

"Rose?" You throw my name into the air as if you're shouting from cliff to valley, waiting for the echo. But we're in your stuffy den, a space too small for lovers on edge, and my name sticks to the walls with a splat.

“Bread? Flowers? For God’s sake.” I raise my fist like a plant toward the sun because conviction climbs from firm feet, up through the legs and trunk, and whips out into the arms. “I love you!” There’s thunder in my throat. Still no echo.

Visiting Out of Love

You visited me several months ago.

If you were anyone else, I would not write to remind you of your visit because that other you, I imagine, does keep track of his time and his cross-country travels as most people do. But you are the you I know so well from our one month in New York City five years ago. We took a poetry class together. Since then, I have given up poetry. Its disorienting lines look nothing like the life I live, so I have taken up story writing instead. I told you of this transition when you visited, but again, I am reminding you because I do not think you heard me so well. I know you so well.

You are the you who greets the two Hasidic Jews in Tompkins Square Park. Others are whizzing by, but you oblige them with a once-in-a-blue-moon prayer, days before Yom Kippur. Neither do you ignore the Jews for Jesus in front of Grand Central Station or the Free Palestine flyers in Columbus Circle. You are not one to pass up a chance dialogue.

And you are the you who waits and waits outside the Second Stage Theater on 43rd Street to commiserate with the man from the one-man show. He played his sleepwalking character so realistically.

One very full day later (you tend to fill your days to their midnight brims, hopping from stop to spontaneous stop), you are the you who says to me, "Guess what I dreamt last night? I dreamt that a Hasid grabbed both my hands in Alphabet City and prayed with me, prayed for me. And he prayed for you too, for you were walking just a bit behind me in my dream. And then I dreamt of a sleepwalker. He strategized with me about how to separate sleeping and waking. We compared our cycles."

"But that really happened," I answer, "I was right there with you."

Do you believe you dreamt up New York altogether?

In New York, we were in love, I'd like to say, and why not say it? This is how we proved it to ourselves: We swayed to the enchanted beat of the Village Vanguard's jazz entrancements. We tangled limbs on the Brooklyn Bridge to imitate the crisscrossed cables above us. We recited Walt Whitman to each other on Federico García Lorca's stoop on 113th Street. Lorca loved Whitman, and Whitman *would* have loved Lorca, you said, and the two of us together sure loved them both.

Perhaps it's the age-old story; who am I to think I know special when I see it? All I know is you made me wish every man in America had the same bent lanky figure, the same hair that occasionally brushed the shoulder-blades, so I could keep seeing you in every person and every place.

Your visit took place in Boston in the fall, the most undecided of the seasons. Orange July had slid into yellow August and August into late, slate gray September. (You taught me, when we first met, to make unexpected matches – to couple colors with months, numbers with musical notes, and so on. Boom – you'll have poetry.)

I bought you two fruits from the corner store to welcome you at the bus station. You chose the apple, though apples were out of season, and I ate the orange, which you said was so round and fit for a Cezanne painting.

Your visit meant synthetic flowers on the dresser. It meant perfume. It meant my sleeping in short spurts just like a newborn, what with you fast asleep right up against me (as close and encompassing as clothes against the skin) and so much thought flying around to think about.

So it was dreaming for you and thinking for me. Semi-systematic mind of mine, in the middle of the night, would take a stroll through Manhattan. I narrated aloud between your heavy

sleep-sighs, speaking to your eyelids, “Morningside Park’s riverside path,” I said, “Lincoln Center’s coin-filled fountain, Strand’s thick book stacks, following you as we get off the six en route to our beloved Brooklyn Bridge and walking up toward the city’s night sky with its conspicuous absence of stars, the subway’s breath trailing at our heels.”

During your visit, on some subway ride (to where, I can’t remember – it was all a whirl), I said not without bitterness, “Five years, you barely wrote me.” Then, out of forgotten love for poetry, out of desire to usher that poetry back under my wing, I said, “States away, still not a day passed me by without a cry out to you. I do declare, you left me letter-bare!”

You paused while I waited for my heartbeat to restart. And then you said, “Pay attention. Look over there at that boy with the deck of cards.” A boy was kneeling on the subway floor, flipping card after card onto the seat in front of him. You tossed out questions: “What number is he waiting for? Where have I seen that boy before?”

I lifted my shoulders halfway to my ears in a relinquished shrug.

I record your visit as a piece of fiction, so it will go down in history. In this way, I forbid you to forget it. The next time you visit, I will show you the story so you can remember. "Oh, fictitious visits!" I might say. "Oh fictitious-feeling real visits!" you might answer.

THREE LITTLE WORDS

Bookshelves like branches, I used to swing about my little library, plucking book after book to swallow down pages like tasty leaves in my big corner chair. My husband would chase me around, trying to get me to put them down, but his bright eyes were no match for those beautiful bindings, his small remarks no substitute for those tall tales in neat lines.

One winter night, Gertrude Stein's *Five words in a line*. set my brain whirring and scared my blood into a freeze till all I could do was sit with my books open all around me, searching for an alternative solution. All my husband said was, "So? So? Easy peasy japanesey, even I could have written that."

So I said I needed space, and I hopped off to Jerusalem to warm up, get back some peace of mind, and maybe meet an old friend with hair so long it could house a host of critters. But in the dry heat of that summer in the Holy Land, I began to lose my words. *Nidmah*, *Dimyon*, *Midumah* - three-rooted Hebrew unhinged my English, and I lost connection. Or did the blind guns and set-aside slums scare my own voice out of me? Either way, my husband could barely decipher the letters I sent home.

My critterful friend turned into lover but later kicked me out for failing to communicate, so I flew and boated to Zanzibar, where Africare had a spot for someone who didn't just care but cared with all the bones in her body, and I did. My first day there, children clustered outside my doorway, a tower of curious faces, stretching six vertical feet. *Sikuwa nikinifahamu* – Swahili squeezed infinite infixes into my words like nesting dolls till my mouth didn't know what tense it was in. Letters home were out of the question; instead, I sent picture collages of faces and beaches and mosques and monkeys to my husband, who was sick with cabin fever and a suspicion that something with me had gone amiss.

Japan's tight text columns disoriented me. Fifteen Finnish cases nearly finished me. But activism in the Amazon is what put me over the edge. Oil spills had kids waist-deep in black muck; even the butterflies got stuck, but it was all a secret, so no one talked to anyone. Not a word. I hollered nonsense into the thinning tree expanses. And my husband didn't hear a thing from me for days and days.

When I finally came home, I had to point the cab driver the whole way to my house because my mouth was zipped up tight for loss of words. Everything seemed three-fold fancy and higher than high tech and extraordinarily ordinary.

I smoothed out newspaper pages all across my kitchen table and shuddered at the fine print. I held an orange up to the lamplight and tried to recall all my associations – its color and light weight and spark-like taste, but this bright little globe just filled up my hand and nothing more.

My husband pulled me to him, eyes on my eyes. He had kept open his arms for me that whole time and for no one else. After he said "Welcome back" and "What now, Katie? What now?" he said, "I just have three little words for you." My face must have looked as if I wanted to know what those words were because next he said in a huge voice, "I love you!"

If I had been able to speak, I would have said, "Those are three BIG words." And if I had been able to write I would have written, "THREE LITTLE WORDS?" And if this world of woes hadn't taught me how to listen, I wouldn't have heard anything at all.

Sleepwalking

Your hand – you bowler-hatted, tall-standing stranger – grazes mine. We, with our unsure stances, in our anxious skins stare at each other. We are fast moving westward on an Amtrak train, chugging our way across time zones from Chicago to San Francisco. My older brother, Ellis, is not expecting me, but I know he'll be glad to see me. He agrees when I say that a good surprise, no matter if it's the tiniest trinket, can be as grand as a grandfather clock.

Your hand darts around like an unquiet thought, trying to find a place to land that is nowhere near my hand. You stuff that thought, finally, in your jacket pocket. I think of Sammy, my youngest, who pulls back when I touch her. I love her most, and that means a lot because picking a favorite of three children is a parental sin. Sammy once muttered something momentous to me, and I missed it. We were biking in autumn, and the turned leaves floated around, showing off their weightlessness. The crunch of the fallen leaves under our tires out-crackled Sammy's voice, which is often fainter than the farthest star. I say she's a timid one, but she's got a hint of spunk; you can see it in her gait, I say. And to that my husband Bob's gaze says, *You ghost of a mother, what do you know, nothing.*

I thought Sammy may have said something about love on vacation because we, as a family, had just taken an all too typical trip to St. Louis and then to the monstrous, manmade Carlyle Lake. Sammy saw her dad sitting in his boxers atop the sand mound he'd made for himself, pulling his eyebrow hairs out in distress, which has no business on the beach. And she saw her mom quite far from him, wading in the lake in water-heavy jeans and thinking about which rooms she would claim as her own if their house were divisible by two.

Actually, Sammy didn't quite see me because I was holding her under her armpits, with her face away from me as she requested. I fastened my hands tight to her slippery skin because

she was the one of my three who was liable to elude me. Every time she left the house for school or play, I was terrified she'd run away. Who am I anyway to think she's mine to keep? Children, with their sidewalk chalk and scented markers, are really just mapping their routes for an inevitable escape. Is that not the unblinking truth?

I dipped Sammy's feet in and out of the lake. I pretended to drop her and caught her before the splash. She didn't giggle or screech. I bent my neck forward to see if my silent, un-wriggling daughter had somehow fallen asleep. But her eyes were wide open and steady on the sky.

"Do you have the time?" you ask me. If you stretched your arms up in some sort of surrender or like some nightmarish bear, you could reach the ceiling.

I rub my wrist where a watch would be but isn't. I want to answer, *To talk to you? Of course. But first tell me, Bowler-Hat, who do you think you are? Don't you know what century we're in?*

"Hm?" I say.

"Do you have the time?" you say quietly with hot cheeks. I want to tell you, don't be bashful; we all have to ask the simple questions twice sometimes. Now I'm thinking how often simple questions web outward into intricate nets. How quickly *where were you last night?* turns into a regretful voice asking: *where are you when you're not where I need you to be? Where are you headed as the seconds spill out, turning future into past, and whom are you happening upon in the midst of your ignoble mobility? Who is receding into a fuzzy remembrance of yesterday and with whom are you hurtling into an equally fuzzy fantasy of tomorrow?*

"Sorry, what was that?" I say.

"You have corncocks in your ears or something?" you say, not so quietly.

“I don’t wear a watch.”

“We’re two peas in a pod then,” and you push your sleeves up above bare wrists to prove your point.

“You like vegetables, huh?” I wish to wind up in a world where no one needs clarification, but I clarify, “Corncobs. Peas.”

And then, because you’re scratching your nose with one hand and fumbling in your pocket with the other (Pen and spiral notebook to record our encounter? Handkerchief to complete the out-of-touch self-portrait you’re painting? Hidden – tricked you – watch?), I say, “It’s the middle of the night. But you’d never know it in this car.”

The dining car is lit up like a sign. I glance at the light fixture, which will stick me with a five-minute inescapable glow, front and center in my field of vision. I look right at you, and the glow shrouds your face. Who knows what nuanced expressions I’ll be missing for the next five minutes. Suddenly I regret my upward glance.

“Well, what’s with your up-and-aboutness?” you ask me. And before I get to ask *You want the short or long? ...Story, I mean*, you say, “Tell me everything, if you like. I’ll hear you out... all the way to the Pacific.” You give me a thumbs up, then loop that thumb around and against your chest to indicate *I am*, “insomniac,” you say. I look up and down and out the black window because I can’t tell where that voice – your voice – is coming from. You don’t know of my affection for fickle sentences that start racing before the word “go” and cut each other off; the winner finally pours forth, looking back self-consciously.

I could pile up all the necessary facts and leave them at your feet for you to fashion into a not so simple story. I would title the piece, *The Boarding of an Amtrak Train*. Ellis always said that storytelling requires a recipe. Lay it out, ingredient by ingredient: Sammy's sick with a sore

throat. I can't hear a thing she's asking for. Joseph and Nan keep saying if she really wanted something she'd make signs with her hands, but I see no signs, and plus they're always ganging up on her. Bob's eyebrows are thinner by the day, and his frustration practically seeps out of his skin and into mine across the eerie space between my pillow and his. I'm not paying attention. I'm not pulling my weight. The house, our home, is sinking, and I'm parading away from it, farther by the day. But not once have I known a house that didn't feel like a barricade around me, blocking my meandering way and locking me in with too-familiar company. Even as a child, I was halfway out the door half the time, seeking brand new places and faces. Sammy's the same way. And poor, panicky Bob can sense it in both of us, clear as the heaviest sleep's foremost dream. Ellis will untangle this mess.

Or, instead, I could frame my reason for you. Drive home a big blunt one-liner. (Bob, ever the eye-roller, says, "Will you get to the point before bedtime?" But what he means, I believe, is *Will you get to the point before I give up, bow out, and move on?*)

I'm taking a temporary leave.

But that's not my story.

"Well?" you ask. Why is it that I'm here, bumping into strangers in the middle of the night? And this is how my explanation unwinds:

My father slept with his fingers intertwined on top of the comforter, his knuckles pressed up against one another as if they couldn't bear to come apart. My mother, a yoga enthusiast, bent herself into different poses under the sheets. She liked how simple it was to keep her balance lying down. My older brother, Ellis, tried to fool his dreams before his dreams fooled him. He set his alarm for every four hours and jotted down his brain's nonsensical stories, hunting for

patterns. I was a sleepwalker.

Try not to picture closed eyes, a stiff neck, and zombie-like arms stretched out in hopes that someone will fill in their frozen hug. I was limber and seemingly lucid. I chatted away to myself, kneeling in the closet, folding each of my dresses, preparing a suitcase, and searching (along my walls, under the rugs, in every forgotten corner of the house) for I don't know what.

Adolescent Ellis, always excitable, would take my head in his hands. "Your memory-catching chemicals run out in your sleep," he would say, tapping my temples. "But whatever it is that you're chasing all over the house, that's your signal." And I had to put the pieces together. There was nothing more important than following my search to its destination. Then the sleepwalking would stop. Was that the goal then? I wondered.

After Ellis left for UC Berkley, states away, I sent him word that I was all right. I bought a postcard from the Art Institute of Henry Fuseli's painting of a paralyzed woman, suffering a visit from the one-and-only devil himself. "Could be worse..." I wrote inside.

Apparently, what was really worrisome was what lay outside our house. My parents locked the doors from the inside, but I too was on the inside. A slow slide of the bolt lock, and, so they thought, I'd be out. Out among nocturnal company, namely inattentive workaholics, sleepy night watchmen, and 24-hour store cashiers, who kept their cashbox keys well hidden, fearful of rumored hold-ups sweeping their part of the city. And by morning, I'd remember nothing from this world whose hum permeated the nightly hush, and who knows if I could find my way home through the morning's gritty cityscape? But I didn't leave. Sleep-search as I might, I found no map, nor compass – not a single clue to lead me out of our house and to point me in a certain direction – east, west, or otherwise.

I would have to bound through years and years of frustrated nights before I would

stumble upon my signal. Thirty years, in all, that screeched to a halt just one week ago.

Windy, windy, burn-your-cheeks-off-when-you-round-the-corner February had crept up on Chicago, and on the month's unusual 29th night, last Wednesday night, I found it. A ticket out. A blank post-it note on the kitchen table, an anticlimactic neon pink square, but my disrupted, fed up brain projected opportunity onto that plain little sheet. And what I saw was *up and at 'em, take the slow wave, ambulate, and generate some community-wide commotion.*

Post-it note in my pocket, I hurried to the door. Creak went its hinge, then crunch went the snow under my wet slippered-feet, block after block between my children and husband and me. I strolled through the city toward the lake, freer than ever with all the lights out in the stores and offices. I felt the lingering heat of 1871 as I craned my neck to take in the magnitude of the distant skyscrapers that followed the great fire. I felt an early murmur of something big stirring up there in Grant Park.

A twenty-something-year-old man was sorting cans outside of a homeless shelter. He was a night-shift volunteer wearing an offbeat beret and all his civic engagement on his sleeve.

“What are you doing out at night?” Jonathan asked of me.

“I thought I'd get some of the city to myself,” I said. “Plus,” I added dreamily, “you've got to dream somewhere. Why stay cooped up while your brain is practically somersaulting out of you?”

“Follow-up question,” he threw back. “Who needs dreams when the newspaper serves daily the very essence of unbelievable?” Why is it that strangers are the ones with the knack for spontaneous conversation starters, with the most probing questions? “Take the explosive leap year 1968. You've got women's second wave shouting ‘no more beauty standards!’ to all the Miss Americas on Atlantic City's boardwalk. You've got a Polish Commie government pushing

out a tidal wave of Jews who were forty thousand one fine day and five thousand the next. You've got poor Mexican soldiers reaching down for coins in Tlatelolco Square then hush-hush killing hundreds of the rich Mexican students who threw down those coins to prove some unclear point. Not to mention 'Nam!"

"But that was another time. You weren't there. Anyone can dip into another decade to pick up and collect evidence for any old stance."

"True," said Jonathan, "True. Fast-forward then. To the immediate tick or tock on which this very moment hangs. Now. Who needs dreams when the night's already got a line-up of blacklisted characters all around us? *After all, it is you and I who are perfect not the next world,* he recited.

I pointed at myself, at him, at his bag of cans to guess who his characters might be. Then three things happened at once: I began to hum Billy Joel's "In the Middle of the Night," Jonathan let out a trio of tremendous sneezes, and his bag fell to the sidewalk with a tinny clatter. We were a symphony. "Three sneezes. Make a wish," I said.

The recycling machines outside Benny's convenience store were steely monsters six feet high. Jonathan slid two fingers into the coin slot to check for anything left behind, and we began our task.

Another man was dropping a crate's worth of bottles one by one into the machine next to ours. Jonathan, carelessly loud, told me the man was there every night, rain or shine, pushing bottles into the recycling machine. Jonathan pulled up close to him to sing a snippet from a Nineties song, *bottles and cans and just clap your hands just clap your hands.*

Wendell turned around and clapped his hands together so close to Jonathan's face it nearly took his nose off.

“I’m just jokin with you,” Wendell said. “Don’t mean harm. We’re all here just same, desperate as all hell aint we? No more tryin my luck – straight up cash I can depend on from these machines.” He swept his hand like a game show host to indicate the recyclers.

Ours tore hungrily through can after can as I mechanically reached my left hand down to the bag, switched the can to my right, and inserted each one.

“I could tell you lots of things you don’t know, you know what I’m sayin?” said Wendell, “You wouldn’t guess it cause I young, but I could tell you lots like how to take a person down kick to the back of the knees till they buckle then as they topple elbow to the neck to slam ‘em down into a puddle at y’ feet. I never done it but seen it done. I could tell you a story I heard the other day from m’girl Onyx. Story might as well be mine, our lives so *simlar* to each other.” He grabbed onto his hair with both hands and said, “But I won’t. I’ll tell you a story bout chance cause you takin a chance on me just by the fact your ears are open.

“Chance and my mama and me – those three things is what the story’s about. My mama played the lotto. Lord, she loved the lotto,” he said. *Say it three times fast*, I said under my breath, and he said it again, “Lord, she loved the lotto. And my mama was no dummy. The grandmama of mathematics, calculatin her odds as busy as a bookie. But all that, no matter, went to shit cause she wouldn’t stop playin, and scratch cards too, wishin so hard for prosperity, her eyes almost popped out her skull, and her sight went bad – afternoons walkin like a zombie here to Benny’s store. Skimpin five dollars won back here or there was a glimmer of hope as far as she was concerned.

“One day, she heard word o’ this sham out o’ Australia, these loaded whiteys scammed their way so they could win no matter what. ‘And it be legal, all of it,’ said Mama, ‘just that they filthy rich so they can ford to scheme like they did.’ I said, ‘Why you worryin about that half a

world away? It's noon here and probly not even light there yet.' But my mama walked around the house a whole week – our little house that got no stairs, no parlor, just two kids per room, six kids in all, and a kitchen. She walked slouchy and pouty, bad as Frankenstein with only the walls guidin her, a week! All day every day! Sayin over and over, 'If only...' and wipin her outa-luck hands on her duster. That's when she quit – quit beggin me and my brothers to go to church, quit fussin over my only sister's unfortunate keepin-her-single bad skin, quit tryin to stop smokin, and once and for all quit believin in some holy coincidence that would get her a winnin ticket.

“Except for one last scramble. She bought each of us a scratch card. And when I say us I *un*fortunately mean all my brothers and my sister and not me. This cause just day before, day was Sunday, I didn't give a penny to the collection plate – why? Cause I didn't have more'n five dollars to my name when I was sixteen, and with our neighborhood gettin ghettified, whose God was God? Not mine, I'll tell you that! So Mama had to set an example somehow. My baby brother won. He won a thousand dollars with that card Mama had to scratch off *for* him – he so teeny he could barely say 'boo'. I got nothin. Still got *nothin* now, you know what I'm sayin?”

Inside Benny's, Jonathan wanted a bite to eat, but he got lost among the rainbow assortment of candy wrappers under the brilliant white lights.

Jonathan was all whispers, worried the ceiling might trap our every word, and our own shouts would startle us. He pointed to the cashier and whispered, “When he rings up items, he introduces himself as the luckiest of unlucky men – to listening and non-listening customers alike. He watched his buddies drop like sacks of flour into the Sahara sand on a journey from Mali to Libya.”

Prosper Senior piped up, “My Africa. It was not like your America.”

"My America?" I said.

Prosper kept right on, "A day was not three meals and nine hours of shop counter and two of TV and kiss your kiddies and go to bed. A day was minus two men - one on the left of me, one on the right of me, both behind. No women to make you laugh a chuckle and make your heart a little softer in your throat." He reached behind him, opened the microwave door, and wiggled his fingers inside. "And very very hot. You understand?"

"I do," I said to him. "There was a heat wave here in Chicago. In Nineteen Ninety-Five. The fans were spinning and spinning, but it was all hot air. Old men were left dead in bed because the urban crime scared them into leaving their windows shut tight. They fell asleep hot as a grill and slept forever. All the lonelies – they were the ones to go. They had no one to call."

Prosper didn't look up at me. Where was my voice? It seemed as empty as the whirr of those worthless fans. He stared wistfully at the microwave. "Saharan heat so hot," he said, "it would finish off your Dalí's melting clocks in one little minute."

"My Dalí?" I said.

Prosper hopped over the countertop and went for the door. "I am coming," he said. But he was leaving. I turned to Jonathan. "He means he'll come back," Jonathan whispered.

The door chimed, and a customer walked in, knowing what he wanted from the beginning. He marched on back for a six-pack of Magic Hat. We had a short scare that Prosper wouldn't be back when the customer needed him, but he came right in time. At the counter, the customer said, "And a pack of Lucky Strikes." No "please," no "would you mind." He pointed behind the counter at the cigarette shelves. He was running the show. As Prosper rang him up, he said to the customer, "You know I am the luckiest man?"

The customer chortled. "You sure about that?"

Jonathan, my admirable reporter, whispered to me, "Who the hell is sure of anything

these days?” Jonathan could run the show as far as I was concerned.

Prosper continued, “The luckiest of *unlucky* men.” He was kneading his hands as if the longest day of his life were coming to a close.

Jonathan leaned into me. “You know this guy won’t give Prosper the time of day.”

“But it’s nighttime,” I pointed out.

The customer chuckled once more, then turned on his heels and walked out of the store. But still visible through the foggy window, he swiveled around and came back in, the door chime now a redundant melody. “You know there’s a lost dog outside, a Westie. No collar on him, but some indentation around his neck where a collar would be.” The customer rubbed his own neck. “Must belong to somebody.”

“Everyone belongs to somebody,” Jonathan whispered. He swiftly kissed my cheek, and just as it was over and he was pulling away, he kissed my cheek again with all the surprise of a trick candle.

Outside we met eyes with Alice. We ruffled her ears. We picked her up and put her down. We lifted her as high as we could, as if to measure her against the moon. Our fluffy, button-nosed newfound friend looked just like a toy brought to life. She ran circles around us, muddying her little paws, and the whole night through she wouldn’t give us a single hint about where she’d come from.

You seem antsy, so I take the words right out of your mouth to prove I am in tune with the mood of my chance companion: “I am getting antsy in here,” I say, also because I am. I’m ready to see the train’s smoke-billow erupting like a sick cough and its red rear-lights like a pair of bloodshot eyes. I want to see the pioneering train track spidering out ahead. “I can’t even see

the track we're on," I say.

"Hate to break it to you, but dark night or no night, you couldn't see the track from this window. It's underneath us."

You seem to be staring so thoroughly through me; what is it you see on the other side?

You say, "You would think after such a long tale of encounters that the sun would have circled back around by now."

You mean the earth, I want to say to clear up your astronomical confusion. And I want to tell you, *there's no telling how long a night will linger on*. And lastly, I would like to say *what luck running into such a listener on such a long night*.

"You would think."

A Mentor Over Coffee

Jeb Buttress, over coffee, said I wasn't dreaming big. The moment we sat down, high up on our shaky barstools, I put my hand on the wall to steady myself, and Jeb slapped my manuscript on the table. "Here you've got a guy, he does nothing, says nothing, just bumbles around. Reminds me of my next door neighbor - wish-washiest fellow with the silliest flapjack face you've ever seen."

My shining protagonist, Francis Dougherty. Yes, it's true, Francis keeps no mirrors in his humble home for fear he'll break his own heart. He's down on his luck with a back-story as sorry as a lost dog. But Francis speaks five languages, two of them tribal, because he takes the time. And he bought a pottery wheel when he was just sixteen and puts it to good use. But what Jeb can't stand is that Francis has never left his home state of New Hampshire to give those languages a try. And Francis keeps his bowls and vases and pots in his basement. He doesn't show a piece of pottery to a single soul the whole book through.

Jeb Buttress is my late father's old poker buddy (though he doesn't believe in luck), and he's the type who casts a shadow no matter the time of day. He picked up writing when he turned fifty and decided that with a half-century of wisdom and tell-able tales he could really make it big. You'll see his picture in the lower-left corner of his many paperback covers, his arms folded, eyebrows raised, and glasses on top of his head. He calls his left hand Sweetie and his right hand Pie. He pretends to spit on each palm and then rubs them together saying, "Sweetie Pie, Sweetie Pie, help me cook up a sweet lil lie," because that's all stories are, is sweet little lies, he says.

But me, my hands are aching for truth; they're known to be small by all who have matched their palms up to mine in an effort to relate body to body. I know people. In the morning they wipe off their un-fresh faces and put on new ones for work; at noon they make a

resolution not to look back, only forward; and at night, they climb up creaking stairs to greet clean sheets. I gather these people together - Francis and friends - into a pile like a spilled deck of cards so their hearts and spades won't stay scattered all over the place. And then I write.

Before my meeting with Jeb, the sidewalk's edge had called to me with its line of mums and marigolds. I knelt to pick the rogue dandelions pushing their way into the yellow mix without a care. I am pressing flowers in a book for my sister-in-law's new baby. The baby hasn't come yet. That's how they say it, calling it "Baby," acting as if the baby is ready to go, planner in hand, and penciling in its own arrival.

"Maybe Baby will come early," says my sister-in-law. One of her hands is glued to her stomach. Her other hand is constantly clutching bed frames, armoires, arms of sofas, my brother's shoulder to help her stand up after she tires of sitting down. I'd say she stands more often than not.

"Maybe Baby, maybe Baby." My brother sings himself this lullaby. Is he thinking maybe Baby shouldn't be coming at all? Maybe Baby will be gracious and postpone? Grant them some extra time to prepare a vision of their child's near and distant future?

To press flowers properly, you want to pick them at an early age. You want to refrigerate them to keep them cold. You want them to retain their color. It is better to press flowers in heavy books - dictionaries, phone books, encyclopedias. You may learn a thing or two as you place them in the middle of these books, somewhere near the letter M. But who can lug those volumes around, so heavy with unimaginative information? I use a simple sketchbook with an elastic band to keep Baby's flowers safely strapped in.

Last summer I took a writing course at the YMCA, but I wound up with more tips from my classmates than I knew what to do with – which flowers have weak stems that must be

replaced by florist's wire, how many coats of varnish will hold together a decoupage frame, how to correct a knit ladder with a crochet hook. There happened to be a sizable clique of elderly women in the class, who kept themselves busy with all sorts of classes. Expert crafters of holiday gifts with grandchildren all over the place, they liked to have their voices heard and recipes noted down.

These women spread time all over our workshop's round table. They stuck 1950's female characters alone in their houses with embroidery hoops and homemade upside down cake, with husbands who were early out the door, briefcases in hand. They wrote about how small they were during the Depression and how much smaller they felt when their mothers called them inside to wash their tiny hands, their mothers who did not bother to whisper when they discussed financial troubles. They wrote history as if it belonged to them.

One of them, Patsy, preferred "old" to "elderly" or "senior." She tapped her cane with its tennis ball bottom on the classroom floor. "Out with it," she said. "It's not like I don't know."

Patsy grew up in an orphanage with no family tree to follow, so she liked putting the bare facts about herself out in the open air before people could draw their own conclusions. Her characters, though, suffered the brunt of her absent identity crisis. When Patsy had me over to tutor me in the craft of book binding, she said at one point, "Past is past, that's all. At least I know what's what." But her heroine, Rosaline, tells a different story. She has taken her own picture every month since she was thirteen to track her face's changing tones and contours, to make sure she doesn't lose sight of herself. Jeb, I'm afraid, would feel no affinity for Patsy's writing either.

Baby will be here in late November.

"Here, among all this? Incredible!" I said once to my ambivalent brother, lifting up my

hands in a gesture to the world. I made a mental note of Francis Dougherty's stake in all this.

"Then why don't *you* have one?" My brother lifted his hands to mimic me. He left the room just like that - a caught criminal, arms up.

My sister-in-law prays that Michael or Michelle - she does not want to know until the special date - will arrive on Thanksgiving Day. What better gift? I fantasize that Thanksgiving will find me gone on a book tour, that I'll receive pictures in the mail - smiling, teething, talking - that I might send my pressed flowers from afar. Distance makes the little things a little less impressive. I have pages and pages I must tenderly tend to, and they are responsibility enough.

I'd never heard someone say, "I'll have one of everything," until Jeb Buttress, just ten minutes before the coffee shop closed, hopped off his barstool (landing on both feet), strolled up to the rows of Italian pastries going stale behind glass, and said it. He came back to our table with a straight stack of bakery boxes, tied together with red and white string. "Dessert for a dinner party. Wife's orders. Book club plus husbands. You know the drill." Out of nowhere he pulled a chocolate Florentine and handed it to me with a flourish. "There," he said.

"Where?" I said. "Oh, thanks." And then as a final plea: "I can't scratch Francis, he's all I've got."

Jeb swished his coffee to clean his teeth and gave it a big swallow. The mug had left a wet ring on my first page, but Jeb kept his eyes on a spot above my head. He downed the rest of his coffee, which was only a gulp's worth, but the way he threw it back you'd think the mug was full. "Gotta dream big to write good, remember," he said. He whistled two notes to the waiter and signed an imaginary check in the air to signify the end of our visit.

I had to get back to those pages and pages, but instead I packed up my manuscript, put my Florentine away for later, and went to Patsy's. She was busy with an Exacto knife and ruler,

cutting the spine and hinge for her book's front cover.

"Fresh sheets for Rosaline?" I asked, pointing to a stack of blank paper on the table.

"Indeed, but I've an addition. I haven't slept a wink these past few days," said Patsy. Francis, too, had been tossing and turning, saying "good night" to himself over and over in every language he knows. "Illustrations," she said. "I'm thinking this will be the most momentous work of my life."

Without looking up, Patsy pushed a box across the table to me. Inside was a pile of self-portrait photographs, Patsy's own face sliding back in time with each one.

Patsy lifted her cane, which was resting on the table, and she pointed it my way. "When I look back, I believe I must have sprung out of the ground at random. Here, there, who knows? Rosaline, at least she's got a hand guiding her way into this world."