

THE HOSTLER

by

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Abstract

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The Hostler

Thesis directed by Professor Jeffrey DeShell

The Hostler is a collection of fictions featuring extravagant and histrionic female narrators cast in iconic roles such as “the woman,” “the nurse,” “the lover,” and “the daughter,” among others. By featuring narrators who are prone to melodrama and deploying a writing style that favors artificiality over mimesis, The Hostler strives to explore highly stylized, absurdly comic, and artificial narrative voices as catalysts for the reader’s empathy.

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The Windsock

The windsock knows where you sleep, Wayne. I fly the windsock at half-mast for you, and we stand before your window and speak your name into the glass: “Wayne.” The only word the windsock can speak is your name.

I told the windsock what you said to me before you left. Do remember what you said, Wayne? You said: “Make your desire known, you frigid bitch.” So I bought myself the windsock. I call it: The Windsock of My Desire. The windsock inflates when I speak your name, Wayne; it grows. That’s how you can tell that I want you. The windsock never lies.

The windsock bears your face, Wayne, but its body is shaped like a Japanese carp. Together we compose original haikus and recite them to your answering machine. Did you listen to our latest message, Wayne? It went:

Cold wind in my sock

whispers: You’re killing me, Wayne.

Wayne Wayne Wayne Wayne Wayne.

The windsock cannot take much more of your silence, Wayne. Don't you know how fragile the windsock is? Listen: I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. For God's sake, Wayne, at least answer the windsock this: Do you feel sorry? Do you feel sorry for me?

The Staple

The staple does my bidding, Wayne. The staple, disguised as a staple, infiltrates Grace Memorial Hospital and pilfers numbing agents so I don't feel any pain. You won't feel a thing, Wayne, when the staple binds us together again.

Would you believe me if I told you the staple is my spiritual guide? Don't laugh, Wayne. Don't laugh. I know what I used to say. I used to say: "I am a scientific materialist." And I meant what I said. I believed in matter; I believed in the sturdiness of things. But now, drunk on morphine, I believe in your presence, Wayne. Wayne, you're so close to my heart (I've stapled your photos to my naked breast).

The staple is schooling me in the art of love, Wayne. Love is painful: a stapled nipple. Love is tender: a warm washcloth to the nipple. Love is generous, Wayne, and we have so much to give. We have so much to share, the staple and I. We'll share the morphine, Wayne. We'll share the washcloth. We'll give our body, our blood, and our soul. It won't hurt, I promise. Here, take my leather belt between your teeth. Now close your eyes, Wayne, and breathe and breathe and breathe and breathe.

The Red Lipstick

And then, Wayne, just as I was warming to the idea of dying alone, the antidote presented itself: red lipstick. I don't know why I hadn't thought of it before. Two simple words: *red lipstick*.

Wayne , you know me better than anyone. You know I'm a modern woman. Yes, I shave the pits of my arms, but I'm not a fascist about it. So what if I miss a day? We live in a modern age, Wayne, and I'm no big-booted Nazi. I would never say: *A woman must paint her lips red*. On the other hand, I often find myself saying: *A woman can do as she pleases. Painted lips, unpainted lips—who am I to judge?* Maybe I am a bit of a feminist, Wayne, but I would never point at a woman and say: *That woman is not liberated because she did/did not choose to paint her lips red*.

In the end, Wayne, I decided: *Only a touch. For the purpose of attraction*. Of course, when I brought the tube to my mouth, I could not stop. I traced blazing circles round my lips, like our dying planet in motion, until I held in my hand an ember, a nub.

And how brightly I stained my short glass of whiskey! I displayed the stain (for the purpose of attraction) by rotating my glass 180 degrees. *Come hither*, the stain said, or: *OPEN FOR BUSINESS*.

That night the tavern bustled with men like you, Wayne: thin and white and clothed in form-fitting jeans, their skin was parchment paper—nearly translucent. Music limped from a child’s keyboard, and all the men danced like mechanized snakes.

I demanded my body relax and give in to the puerile rhythms. I held my glass of whiskey aloft. I said to myself: “Be bold! They don’t need to know why you’re laughing; the important thing is to draw attention to your mouth and the ruby stain on your glass.”

I struggled to shimmy. I said to myself: “It’s not that you’re replacing him...” And yet, in an age such as ours, a woman can deny the body and survive only for so long.

I laughed at nothing in particular.

I felt the eyes of many men, and Wayne, there was a moment when your name escaped my thoughts.

The Hat

It is his style to hide nothing (what I like about him), and I consider myself fortunate.

I speak with gusto. Not in public, of course, but during my lonelier hours. I find some joy in fervent repetition.

I know him, and he is mine! I know him, and he is mine!

Which is why the appearance of the hat disturbs me.

Being honest, I must say it disturbs me *to the core*. I don't know how I acquired the phrase, but that's how I feel.

Thoroughly disturbed.

And what can I do? Grant no legitimacy to change? Become an old world monk—refuse a heliocentric universe?

No! I am a modern woman.

I call him to the kitchen. The light through the window is skittish.

I have already bathed myself completely. I have *gone the distance*—what phrases I acquire!—with respect to my grooming. When he arrives, I affectionately set my glass on the counter.

He is wearing oat-colored pajamas. He owns a second pair, a flannel pair for when it gets cold. Both pairs are oat-colored. I know this, and he knows I know this.

Once, half in jest, I proposed another color. The Macy's had fallen into an unusual state of disorder. Children darted in and out of the racks as if they possessed no sense of the law. There were three of them—blonds, punch-red rings round their lips. They could have been triplets. They could have been orphans. Their parents were nowhere to be found.

I snapped my fingers about his ears and his eyes to rescue his focus.

"Jonquil?" I asked. I pointed at a yellowish pair of pajamas.

"No thank you," he said, and I felt my small heart leap.

Being honest, I felt a warmth come over my loins.

"Don't you know me by now?" he asked.

Which is the problem: I need to know.

I smooth the collar of his pajamas.

My hands move to his neck—I give his neck a squeeze—and upward toward the hat on his head.

He stops my wrist.

"I bought it myself," he says.

No, no. The hat is stylish.

It's made of soft, blue felt. It has a narrow brim, a sharply indented crown.

The hat is glamorous!

It's the kind of hat a woman buys for a man, and the man wears it to appease her; maybe he wears it to please her.

I'll skip ahead to the sex. I am a modern woman.

I unbutton his pajama shirt. He helps with his pants, his underpants.

When I reach for the hat, he blocks my hand.

"Alright," I say. "Alright, my love."

The sun disappears. The clouds cast the kitchen in shade. The clouds move, collide, explode, and—hasn't the weather always failed to interest me?

I tend to my own undressing.

And it is only a hat. A hat!

When I take him, I mean to take all of him. Every inch, until he's no more. Until there is only me.

I cry out my own name.

A Blond-Haired Baby

I told him that I am appealing in silk, fur, and leather.

I told him there is a history of disease on my mother's side. I am not one to forego preventative care, I told him, but I require a strong sedative when visiting the dentist and the gynecologist.

I told him I like his wood floors and I like that his dining table is made of the same wood.

I felt myself blush when I divulged something wicked (I give flimsy compliments to friends and acquaintances!) and he told me I am not so unusual in that regard.

I crossed my arms and said I wanted a drink. He asked what kind and I said he's probably never heard of it. What do you want, he asked. I want a Diki-Diki, I told him. He returned with two glasses of light beer.

He told me he wants to get a blond dog and name it Lager. I told him Diki-Diki is a better name. It's more original, I said.

Why is it okay to pet people's dogs, I asked, but it's not okay to pet their children? Stop trying so hard, he said.

I told him to walk me home.

Often I was wrong. Often I am wrong.

We cut through the park. It was the hour when mothers stroll their young to sleep. It was easy: I patted the head of her blond-haired baby! I received no scolding. I told him to give it a try.

The Free-Standing Bathtub

When flipped, this charming enamel-coated bathtub is a cozy/sturdy cast-iron structure for protective use against outside assailants who threaten to dissolve the nuptial bond by hurling small objects of destruction (i.e. tightly-packed snowballs and handheld explosives). The drain-hole, offset on the roof of the structure, can be opened to let in a small amount of natural light while also providing an avenue of escape for cooking smoke, cigarette smoke, and fragments of speech (pleas for peace/relief) directed toward the assailants and/or God. Though a rare occurrence, it sometimes happens that a child is conceived, carried to term, and successfully birthed during an extended period of hunkering down. In such an unfortunate case, it is not unusual for the child to take its first wobbly steps between 18 and 25 years of age. The child, once emancipated, will cautiously emerge from the compact family structure (into total and horrifying brightness) with pronounced curvature of the spine. Corrective surgery is recommended, though the standard back brace (customarily used to treat scoliosis) will effect a modest increase in verticality. Should the problem be ignored and the condition left entirely untreated, the child will manage a hunched walk, as if hinged at the belly, affecting the posture of a broken individual.

A Dehumidifier

Because atmospheric water facilitates undesirable tear-inducing emotions, a dehumidifier is an affordable DIY alternative to regular psychiatric counseling/costly mood-altering medication. The dehumidifier, when allowed to run continuously, will foster an arid home environment suitable for the narrowest range of emotional response. Confined to such an arid home, the human body will also be rid of unnecessary moisture. The mouth that houses a pumice-like tongue will lose the flexibility required to form vowel-shapes, and so outright crying (a purely vowelistic utterance) will become an impossible act. To ensure optimal aridity, it is recommended that all sources of water to the home be stopped. Bathing should be restricted to no more than once a month, and should ideally take place at the local YMCA by running a damp cloth over the arms and legs. For biological reasons (having to do with the ingestion and proper digestion of food) it is necessary that the kitchen be demarcated as a “moisture-rich-area” and stocked with several 12 oz. bottles of water *to be opened only at designated mealtimes*. Family members (silently seated at the dining table) may use glass pipettes to apply one drop of water to their open mouths per bite of food. The same family members shall volunteer on a rotational basis to police the kitchen doorway between meals. Now an inevitable occurrence: a guard dozes while on duty, and wakes soon after to find that her loved one is illicitly seated at the dining table. Surrounded by a forest of empty water bottles, the offender is crinkling his face in a

frightening manner and emitting an oddly musical noise. He must be put to bed immediately. (The guard might even tuck him in—tightly—so that he feels secure and comfortably restricted. A woolen blanket works best, the corner of which can be used to wipe dry the offender’s face and the inside of his mouth.) Sitting on the edge of the bed, the guard may then tender additional reassurance via short, hard consonant-clicks. As a last resort, she might open one bottle of water and wet her own mouth enough to form a few rounded words. “O-o-o-ok-a-a-ay, okaaay...”

The Lobster

At the Red Lobster, after he cracked himself open, so to speak, and revealed something soft inside, and unbearably pink, he produced a small velour box, in which, I suspected, hid a ring. I suspected, though I could have been wrong.

The table was set, and beyond: brownish lobsters with banded claws torpidly paced a tank of saltwater.

I placed the box, unopened, next to my glass of white wine. I did not consult the menu.

When the waitress asked me to choose, I said: Arugula salad. I said: I'm "vegetarian"—though that word is wrong.

The waitress turned pink, said: Arugula?

There is a misconception about vegetarians. The person who abstains from consuming the meat of another animal is considered by the public to be moral, attuned to the pain of any and every sentient thing.

The truth: it's not easy to ruin meat for other people. Don the equivalent of a grin. Threaten to prepare a pudding made of your own boiling blood.

Even vegetarians are equipped with a sense of humor, though the public may refuse to accept it.

The truth: no one wants to see inside a “beloved”—though that word is wrong. So much pink turns the stomach, and nothing but the digestive balm of arugula can calm that sickness.

For the occasion, I wore stiff denim pants and a white leather jacket—and this was my secret—the jacket had no lining. (Am I so different from the woman whose clothing conceals that she is pantyless?) No satin, no cotton: my jacket was leather, through and through. He wore a borrowed suit, hair parted and plastered, to impose significance.

People, like crustaceans, are dull of wit and short of sight. The people in the Red Lobster dining room certainly failed to notice that he was grossly dressed, that I was no vegetarian, that the unopened box would serve a purpose yet.

Actions speak just fine, and having no desire to watch him eat—or worse—I took the box in my fist and I set the box free. He screamed a little scream (“Good God!”) when he thought the tank of lobsters would burst.

At home I placed the wriggling lobster in the porcelain bathtub. I stopped the drain and ran the faucet. I added Kosher salt.

People, like crustaceans, are of brittle material and would benefit from spending time in a well constructed bathroom. Mine has white porcelain tiles on the floor, the walls, and the ceiling. The lid of the toilet can be turned down to make a chair for hours of rigid sitting.

I added a carrot to the bathtub. I added a stalk of celery. I kept the image of his face crumpled in displeasure from my thoughts.

One won’t last long by following public opinion.

The lobster paced, languidly maneuvering the vegetable obstacles.

I started to whistle a childhood tune—of all things!—and immediately stopped myself.

The Bread

I thought we shared an appreciation for the basket of white rolls they place on the table before the meal arrives. You told me you felt it, too—the void in the pit of your being—that you hungered to fill it. I felt so attracted to you then. I told you how I felt. I said, “You need only ask, and they will replenish the basket as many times as you like.” You smiled. Your smile gave me strength. I remembered to engage you in small talk. I was happy to do it! It was paltry, but genuine. I said, “Contrary to popular belief, the snake cannot unhinge its jaw; rather, the snake has a very flexible lower jaw, designed for gulping its food whole.” I even wore the rose you gave me. I broke off the barbed stem, tucked the red bloom behind my left ear. I turned my head so you could see: my left side, my good side! I wanted to show you my prettiest surfaces. You kissed the tips of your fingers and pressed them to my cheek. I could wait no longer. I gestured toward the basket, said, “Do you mind if I start without you?” You shook your head. And so I began with what I thought was your blessing, wasting no time on the pats of butter individually wrapped in gold foil. You watched with an expression I mistook for understanding. Each time the basket grew empty, I snapped my fingers to get the waiter’s attention. I don’t know how many times I snapped. But you kept count, didn’t you? You said, “Slow down, you’ll spoil your dinner.”

A Parakeet

Here lies what is left of my parakeet: plucked and roasted on the table. The kitchen smells like boiled chicken. You sit with greasy hands on your belly. Your belly bloats from roasted parakeet meat. You ask me to smile. "This isn't a burial." You pass me the knife, the fork. I cannot partake. My parakeet: a thing of beauty displayed in a white wicker cage. Here lies what is left of my parakeet. You goad. "Eat. Aren't you hungry?" You say you can feel my ribs. And I can feel yours. Now you have eaten, and I am betrayed. Here lies what is left of my parakeet, and I will not partake. I will not partake. You say, "See how circumstances are to blame?" And you lift your t-shirt, display your wiry ribcage. You ask if I understand, if I'm willing to try. You say, "Sometimes a parakeet is just a meal." You let your shirt fall. You say, "Please." And you say it again: "Please." Here lies what is left of my parakeet, and I will not partake. I will not partake. You say, "Please. Please. Please." You say, "Eat. Please. Eat."

The Deer

I want to explain.

No longer do I hunger for the familiar comforts: the meaty stews and steaks, the milk.

Like hiding a pill beneath the tongue, I retreat to the privacy of my bedroom and pour the warm milk into the narrow gap between the mattress and the wall.

I've made changes.

I've cut out milk. I've cut out meat.

I want to explain. I was raised on milk and beef. That's how I was robbed of my swift, slender legs. That's how I was given the shape of a woman.

I want to be clear. I was raised on a dairy farm. It's true what you've heard. Animals can sense the pending storm.

Now I'm old enough to marry, but Father knows I'm not ready for that, not yet. Come nightfall, he gives me a mug of warm milk, he says,

"A little rest can work wonders."

I retreat to the privacy of my bedroom.

The milk I've spilled has rotted the mattress, and come morning I cannot wash the sour odor from my skin and hair.

If Father knew, he'd call me ungrateful, he'd say,

“That was my sweat, my blood.”

I try to be honest.

I try, but the relentless clamor of cattle brings such confusion.

It is hard to chose words with care.

We live with the cattle, Father and I. We live with the grass, the mud, and the stones. A forest of Beech and Maple runs the property line. Deer feed on the leaves.

I try to see things Father’s way. I read the document that enables his perspective. The deed hangs above the stove, framed in wood and glass.

Father owns 600 acres of pasture. 200 head of cattle. The white farmhouse. The cluster of barns where the cows are milked and put to bed in winter.

Father does not own the forest.

At the stove, I prepare a stew of beef and root vegetables. With mortar and pestle, I pulverize tomatoes and thyme—a fragrant paste, rich in color and sweetness.

Come supper, I excuse myself.

The stew has cooked perfectly; I can tell by the broth. The broth has thickened and now it holds to bright chunks of carrot like aromatic glue.

I refuse to taste it.

Holding my belly, I take my leave.

Father lets me go. He sends me off with a steaming mug of milk, he says,

“A little rest, a little sleep.”

My belly feels taut in my hands, like a barrel.

I want to explain.

I’ve made changes, restricted my diet.

My transformation is almost complete.

I grow leaner and leaner, long limbed and sinewy. I no longer require a brassiere. I sprint freely through the pastures. My hue is not pinkish. My skin sprouts smooth blond fur.

The night is quiet, and I keep a window open.

I listen for deer.

It seems irrational to say so. The forest lies acres away. But I can hear the snapping of twigs beneath their hooves, the shuffle of dry leaves, their breathy snorts. They call out. They beckon.

I try to be honest.

I read.

The library is limited, but sufficient: a squat wooden shelf in the den. There's a dictionary, a Bible, an encyclopedia of world history.

I keep a notebook of lined paper, leftover from my schooling. I copy down what is relevant, I map out the divisions.

Cattle, n. Property, article of property, moveable personal property.

Deer, n. A wild animal, a woodland animal, an untamed creature.

Clear-cut, twofold. I am very thorough.

The God of Adam separated the deer from the cattle, the forest from the farm. He is a deer let loose, he gives goodly words. How do the beasts groan! The herds of cattle are perplexed! You will be driven away from men and fed grass like cattle. He makes my feet like the feet of the deer, and sets me on high places.

I practice good penmanship, but ink on paper can say only so much.

The Yiddish word for “deer” is “Hirsh”—a common male name among Eastern Europeans.

And yet the men of that name were fated as cattle—corralled, slaughtered.

It is impossible to be precise.

But one must choose a side. I must choose.

I used to tend for the young of the herd. I was robust. My legs were thick, and my hips. Come spring, I sequestered the calves. I had to feed them in the morning. I had to shovel dung from the pens. It was important that my arms stay strong. The males, I raised for fifteen months before Father would sell them to slaughter. Their brown pelts were soft and warm, ever swelling then shrinking with their breathing. Father would sell all but one, or two—those he would slaughter himself to keep meat in our kitchen.

I am trying to explain.

I am trying.

Father has relieved me of my chores. I lie on the milk-stained mattress and hold my barrel of a belly. Father sits on the edge of the bed, still dressed in his dusty work clothes.

He lays a hand on my head, he says,

“You must take proper care of yourself.”

As a child, I liked to watch when Father slaughtered the bulls. Their flanks were dusty and dull, but their insides held such brightness.

Once, Father removed a bull’s stomach and set it down before me on the barn floor. *The book*, he called it. When he slit the stomach open, its folds fell apart like so many pages.

I crossed my arms in disbelief.

A stomach is a stomach.

I doubted there was ever a book so red.

Now I know better.

Slice open a word, and it will bleed.

A word can turn to rot.

I am trying to explain. I am trying to be honest.

I have never been so hungry.

I leave the bed and make my way down the stairs.

I carry the sour-milk stench like an illness, and Father follows, keeping his distance.

Outside, I stop at the edge of the woods. Crouching, I gather an armful twigs. I fashion a crown and place it on my head. The sun casts my antlered shadow on the grass.

Before me, Father stands, squinting in the light. He squints and says,

“My daughter.”

I can tell from his puckered mouth that those words have already soured.

The Icemaker

Because the human psyche is liable to crack during an episode of mourning, a Preservation Module is necessary to ensure productivity in the face of loss. Repurposed as such, NewAir freestanding icemakers make effective and affordable Preservation Modules. To utilize your icemaker accordingly, first locate the Life-Wind-Inlet-Valve (conventionally termed “water inlet valve”) on the roof of the machine. Next, hold the valve to your beloved’s mouth to funnel her breath into the ice-making chamber. Now press the “ON/FREEZE” button to initiate the preservation process. The resulting cube of “ice” should be kept in the freezer until needed. Should your beloved expire, place a single cube on the bedside table. Clap twice to kill the lights. (Relax.) Go to sleep. Meanwhile, the cube will melt and a familiar noise will sound (like a woman exhaling) as your beloved’s breath is released into the bedroom’s atmosphere. And you will find her soon, your alveolar love, in a pink house corralled by a fence of curved bones. She will blow cool air in your ear, on your neck. Try to hold your laughter inside. The house in your dream will grow like a balloon, but the walls will not break.

A Blender

The Cuisinart PowerEdge Blender is now equipped with the newly improved TurboEdge Blade designed to blend multiple fragments of language and in so doing reconcile contradictory desires and/or ideologies with maximum efficiency. When placed on the dining table, the tempered glass blending jar functions as a speech-receptacle into which two opposing parties simultaneously articulate their individual viewpoints, i.e. “I love you!” and “You call this chicken?” By merely activating the TurboEdge Blade, the potentially conflicting sentiments are merged. The difference is split, so to speak, and upon deactivating the TurboEdge Blade, a fully unified and entirely benign utterance resonates from within the blending jar: “You! I call you this: Love Chicken!” Why? Because it is the inalienable luxury of every significant other to be addressed via his/her very own TurboEdgeGeneratedPetName™. And that’s not all! Now, at last, the anguished ideologue is offered the comforting prospect of clarity. Into the blending jar, he reads the beloved Book of Proverbs. And then into the blending jar, he reads the confounding Book of Ecclesiastes. And then out of the blending jar, bellowed like a cherub’s mighty giggle, sounds a singular voice of truth: “To increase knowledge, the wise increase heartache. To increase knowledge, the wise increase heartache. To increase knowledge: increase heartache. To increase knowledge: increase heartache. Increase knowledge—increase heartache increase heartache increase heartache.”

A Turkey Baster (is Just Like a Penis)

It's a matter of tone. After all, the details are typical. He and I. A kitchen table, a bottle of whiskey. *Ohio*. At the table, we choke on whiskey. We wait until thoroughly drunk. We talk about the baby. *The* baby. The one we've agreed to make—if all else fails—when he is thirty-three and I am thirty-five. *If all else fails*. We talk like the future is unpredictable. But we know. We know. Separately, we'll botch the same equation. The $1 + 1 = 3$. The Boy + Girl = Baby. For him, it's a matter of orientation. For me: a matter of tone. Thus the agreement. *It's all a matter of tone*. A catchy bit of wisdom. I add it to my collection of mantras. Weepy on the bus. *It's a matter of tone*. Sloshed in the supermarket. *It's a matter of tone*. At the bar. (Can I buy you a drink? Yes. Can I buy you a drink? *Yes*. Can I buy you a drink? *Yes?*) *A matter of tone*. If all else fails! Every failure: a problem of voice and delivery. So sayeth Novalis, anyway. So many musical problems, and I claim them all. *The* baby. Ours. A rare breed. He: a Mexican. I: a Jew. Both of us drunk on whiskey. Both of us *scholars of literature*. Our baby: *el superbebé, der super eyfele*. Our future scholar of Judeo-Chicano Lit. Call it *specialization*, or the perfect pedigree. Call it *Derridian*: a *new peripheral voice*. Of course the naming holds *some* importance. But I've already got it: a good Hebrew name. *Zvi*. Or maybe something in Yiddish. *Schlomo*. *Schlomo* if the baby is *a little off*, a little soft in the brain; if the baby is born with a tail. No sense wasting a good name on spoiled seed. Put something Spanish in the middle. *Filiberto*. I

say it aloud. “Zvi Filiberto de la Garza Levy.” He is pleased. “To the baby.” We clink glasses, choke. He and I. And now I can really feel it: *the warmth*. Like spooked birds: my inhibitions disperse. I coax them back. *Come, come. I won’t harm you. I need you. Hold me down and keep me quiet*. The generic girl-glitch: he’s gay. And we have no money. Poor gay elephant cramping our style. The solution: a turkey baster. Seven bucks a pop. We’ll do it *on the cheap*. Like the Chicana lesbians. Fill baster with semen, insert baster, and ---- it will work. I’ve confirmed with my grammy (*real Jewish grammy*), and she put it best. She said: *A turkey baster is just like a penis*. My new mantra! *A turkey baster is just like a penis*. I’ll lie on bed, insert baster, and -----
----- Southern Ohio, *atonal landscape*. You never get what you want. You badly communicate. Your farmland, your winter. Your blond fields like blond hairs on the bare white rump of an octogenarian. You, heart-shaped state, which no one loves to talk about. *I don’t want to be alone*. Across the table, he sways like a stalk and says he’s thinking about puking. I’m still under the whiskey’s warmth, so I ask. “Will you sleep with me?” He says: “Passionately. When you’re thirty-five. We’ll have passionate baby-making sex.” *A matter of tone*. I speak: “I hope you’ll still find me attractive.” He says: “Me too.” He’s wearing the collared shirt with the pearls down the front, the dark blue shirt. He always finds shirts with pearls. He laughs when I say it again. “Sleep with me.” God, I am the only serious girl in the state of Ohio. But I *like* the look of his face blackened by stubble. Sloppy when I’m around, but with the others he’s all sweater vests and shiny shoes. “Sleep with me.” He laughs. I laugh: “Ha. Ha.” He says: “Light my cigarette, girlfriend.” So I light it. I’m learning now, knowing that anything can make me cry. I focus on my whiskey so he can’t see. *A turkey baster is just like a penis. A turkey baster is just like a penis. I hold my eyes still, and no drops fall. A turkey baster is just like a penis, a turkey baster is just like a penis, a turkey baster is just like a penis*. “We’re laughing,” I say. “Ha. Ha. Ha.” I say:

“Heart-shaped state.” And I try not to blink. I try to put on a less serious face. I try to take myself less seriously. *Stark winter state*. I beg the birds come back, pin me down, keep me quiet.

The Giraffe

There are too many people on the bus, and that's fine by me. I've nowhere to sit, and that's fine. I can stand because I am young. "Youthful" is how you could describe me. "Very youthful," you might say if you were comparing me to a very old person. So what if my neck is too long? A long neck is no reason to reject a potential sexual partner. It would be unconscionable to say to another person, "No, I will not have sex with you due to the incredible length of your neck, the texture of which, by the way, is nauseating to look upon because it so closely resembles the domestic turkey's wattle." How could anyone say such a thing? Let me tell you something. You are ignorant of the wattle's function! Do you not know that the wattle is an ornament for courting potential mates? And let me tell you something else about wattles. The grosser the wattle, the better the wattle. As a matter-of-fact, an overt wattle is the mark of a pristine sexual partner. If you do not care for my neck then I encourage you to avert your eyes. Pretend that I am a better-looking person. If my neck turns your stomach then we shall court before breakfast whilst our stomachs are empty. How about twilight? I am most attractive before the sun has risen.

I know. I get it. I'll say it: I'm ugly! I may as well change my name to Neck-Shaped Stack Of Rickety DNA! I blame Mother and Father, but Mother and Father had normal-sized necks! And winter is approaching, and I hate winter! Do you know the number of scarves my

long neck requires? Guess! There are too many people on this bus! Too many people! And when winter arrives all the people will decorate themselves in the cutest, most delicate scarves! Why? For the sake of fashion! There are too many people on the bus and whenever they move they jostle me and my head wobbles on my neck like a lollipop on a rubber stick! These people are perverts! Is this how they get their kicks? By watching my head sway leftward and rightward atop my skyscraper-of-a-neck? I would trade anything for a seat on the bus so that I might no longer be jostled for their pleasure. I would go so far as to surrender my eyebrows. My neck is abominable, but I take pride in my eyebrows. My eyebrows are adorable. My eyebrows look like caterpillars napping upon my face! My eyebrows for a seat! Imagine how stupid I'll look without my eyebrows! One long neck! Zero eyebrows! But here's the big question: What's the point?

Truly, I have believed that a seat on the bus will fix my problem. A seat on the bus! Standing, sitting. Nonsense. What matters the bus when my stop is approaching? Soon I will take to the sidewalk and my face will float above the avenue like a frowning helium balloon on a flesh-made string. And now I have bargained away my eyebrows. There were days I would bend at the waist and lower my face to the level of the people and an attractive person would compliment my eyebrows and I would say to myself: This person wants to have sex with you. And it didn't matter too much that the person did not want to have sex with me. Those days are over. Winter is coming, and I have an abnormally long neck that is impossible to keep warm. My heart breaks for the hundreds of sheep that will be shorn to make my scarves. I empathize with the sheep because I too am shorn: I am shorn of my eyebrows.

But what's the point? One day I will die and leave no sexual partners behind who might mourn the loss of me and also commission the construction of a special coffin to accommodate the length of my neck. I am like a giraffe: a giraffe without a coffin. That sounds like a

joke. What do you call a giraffe without a coffin? I shall learn to tell jokes and to laugh at the jokes. Another joke: What do you get if you cross a giraffe and a hedgehog? (The answer is an extra-long toilet brush.) And here's a riddle: Long neck. No hands. One hundred legs but cannot stand. Born of forest nest. Against the wall I rest. What am I?

Well, I am certain of three things. One: winter is coming. Two: I cannot stall winter. Three: my long neck will grow cold, chap, and most likely be turned into a pillar of ice. But I shall prepare myself as best I can. My overcoat is drafty, and so I will add a button to my overcoat. The adjustment might spare the senseless shearing of a sheep or two. The trick to keeping warm is movement, constant movement. The answer to the riddle is a mop, a bloodless thing.

A Miniature Horse

The other one, the one called Rachel, is the one to blame. I walk past the diminutive stables—now unoccupied, but still stinking of dung—to the adjacent park and crouch for a moment so that I might cross beneath the yellow tape strung round the perimeter of the playground.

I saw Rachel's face on television during the 7 o'clock news and during the 9 o'clock news and also during the 11 o'clock news. I can tell you that Rachel did not look well, but keep in mind that Rachel is not photogenic.

I like Italian greyhounds, the music of Depeche Mode, and anti-Nazi propaganda films. Rachel shares these preferences, but in a debauched and squat sort of way that turns them into the attributes of a miniature horse. I have said such things to Rachel. I have shared my feelings.

And Rachel said, "What's a miniature horse?"

I admit Rachel's ignorance took me by surprise. I was so shocked that I spit the bourbon from my mouth and the bourbon almost landed on my exposed copy of *Violater*. (I was—at the moment of my spitting—bent over the record player.)

The ordeal was almost annoying, and yet Rachel was oblivious to my distress. She said something like, "No harm, no foul."

Rachel is chock-full of clichés, and often I fear for the integrity of my own language.

But I carried on with the activity: I set needle to vinyl and instructed Rachel to dance to Depeche Mode in a genuine way.

Rachel failed. She danced as if she *liked* or *barely tolerated* the music of Depeche Mode. Then she threw her hands in the air as if she *loved* the music of Depeche Mode, but her love wasn't real. I could tell.

"You look ridiculous," I said to Rachel. "You look like a Nazi."

Rachel said that she does not look like a Nazi because she hates Nazis.

"I'm the one who hates Nazis," I said.

Rachel claimed to hate Nazis, too.

"Stop posturing," I said. "You're like a miniature horse that's pretending to be a real, normal-sized horse." The insult was clumsy, but Rachel didn't seem to notice.

She asked again: "What's a miniature horse?"

Depeche Mode knows that though I may appear to be constantly out of reach I give in to sin because I like to practice what I preach. I think, above all, that's what Rachel wanted. She wanted to practice what I preach. She seemed honest in her ignorance of miniature horses, so I took her to the stables. At the stables, she became emotional. Even when confronted by a miniature horse—the small thing was happily munching on a very short piece of hay—Rachel was still unable to understand. She failed to grasp the concept of the miniature horse.

"What kind of person keeps a horse in a 3-foot box?" she said. "A horse cannot thrive in a 3-foot box! Look at it! All short and stubby!"

I was at a loss. "It's called a *stable*," I said, "and the miniature horse is meant to be short and stubby."

Rachel was inconsolable. “Only a Nazi would keep a horse in a box,” she said. “A Nazi!”

That must’ve been when Rachel got the idea to liberate the miniature horses. All thirty of them. She unlatched the stable doors, and with a fistful of baby carrots, she lured the short beasts out into the light of day. Then *all hell broke loose* (one of Rachel’s favorite clichés). The miniature horses formed themselves into a herd, galloped toward the adjacent park, and trampled the playground.

If you could see the playground now—the yellow CAUTION tape, the blood still splattered on the teeter-totter, on the sliding board, on the tire swing—you might assume the worst. In truth, no child was killed or eaten, or even terribly maimed.

Rachel fled the scene atop one of the studier miniature horses. Along with the rest of the petite herd, she is currently at large in the nearby foothills.

As for me, I am not quite frowning. My expression is genuine. It says: I love the music of Depeche Mode. And also: I’m the one who hates the Nazis. I’m the one who hates the Nazis.

A House and a Horse

The Sick Room & Nurse

“Symptoms of Disease.”

Illness is an unwelcome visitor. Though my complexion favors the bluer side of fair, I am not ill. Those who know me know that I am naturally slow of blood and cold to the touch, but these signs should not be taken for the symptoms of disease; rather, they indicate a rare constitution. Nobody knows me here. I came to this house only recently. I was greeted so kindly, with welcome upon welcome, and then: “Come in! Come in at once! You look as though you’ve already caught your death!” It’s true the chill in the air had tinted my lips a violet color, but I assured the family that I was not ill, not at all. I promised that I had never before felt livelier, more luxuriant. I accepted little help climbing down from my horse. “If only I’d worn my bridal gown,” I teased, “for I see no reason why the Young Lord and I should not be married tonight!” What a polite family: they laughed for my benefit, even while their faces looked swollen, tortured. They knew the wedding would have to wait. I have since made myself at home and terrifically useful. In fact, I have taken charge. On such occasions, the care of the patient naturally devolves on the female head of the household. The Young Lord is a charming patient. The Young Lord is a sweetmeat, my fiancé. The Young Lord is very, very ill!

Animals Kept for Pleasure & Profit.

“The Horse: Rearing & Riding.”

Rearing is a very bad vice, and perhaps nothing does a horse addicted to it so much good as to fall over backwards. There are some skilled riders who will choose the right moment, pull the horse over, and get clear themselves; however, it is pure madness for the untrained rider to attempt anything of the sort. The trouble is there is not a man alive who will candidly admit that he cannot ride a horse. (As a rule the less a man knows about horses the more wonderful are the exploits he professes to have performed with them.) Indeed, there are countless cautionary tales and lurid bedtime stories that speak of the horse that would fall upon the amateur rider—but to no avail. Perhaps in his innocence the Young Lord was never told such stories. If only I had arrived a day sooner, I would have insisted he think twice before mounting that clumsy animal. By the time I found him, the Young Lord was already pinned. The doctor thought it medically prudent to let the beast lie where she had fallen, much like there are certain stab wounds that must go untreated. (Some daggers are better left stuck in the flesh and to remove them would only serve to drain the patient of blood.) Unfortunately, where the beast had fallen was upon the Young Lord! I’m told the Young Lord was carried to the sick room, horse and all, by the brawn of no less than twenty men (neighbors and servants among them). The family begged me to stay away; they pleaded I wait until the Young Lord was feeling better. “First impressions are so very special,” they said, “and we should hate for the Young Lord to impress poorly upon you.” I told the family I would take my chances. They refused to accompany me to the sick room. I admit it was shocking to first lay eyes

upon my fiancé in such a state, though, being honest, I suppose the bulk of the horse made it difficult to cop a decent look. The Young Lord was in bed, having what appeared to be a fitful sleep. He lay on his back, and on top of him lay the horse with her hooves pointed heavenward. Every now and again the horse's legs would perform the motion of running, like some dreaming dogs are wont to do, and the Young Lord would slap her rump as if to say, *Faster!* On his slumbering face was a strained smile, and I imagined that in his dream the Young Lord was a world-class rider, a champion joustier. Pleasant dreams aside, the reality of the situation was simply too ugly to bear. What kind of quack would prescribe such a spectacle? No, I would not allow it. I ordered back the twenty odd men and instructed they gather round the Young Lord's bed. Gingerly, they placed their hands beneath the horse's muscular frame. They awaited my cue. "On the count of three," I said. "One, two, three. Lift!"

Domestic Surgery.

Hemorrhage—In order to stop the bleeding, one must understand that blood may be poured out in two ways. First: pumped in jets of bright red. Secondly, blood may flow from the body in a dark-colored continuous stream.

Leeching—The best leech is spotted yellow, its belly steel blue. Give it time to crawl about on a piece of coarse cloth. When applying the leech, hold it by the tail, leaving its mouth free over the affected part. If the leech shows an unwillingness to feed, the patient's skin should be slightly dampened with a little sugar and water, or milk. Once affixed, the leech should not be touched, but left to fall off when full. Then place the leech on a plate and sprinkle salt on its head to assist it in vomiting. As for the patient, after the leech is removed,

bleeding is sometimes copious. Try to stop the flow of blood with a warm bread-and-water poultice. Sometimes the patient will not stop bleeding.

The Sick Room & Nurse.

“Sanitary Principles.”

It should be needless to mention that strict cleanliness is most desirable in the sick room. The room is free of carpet and furniture, except for the patient’s bed and a modest bedside table. A basin of tepid water sits upon the table, and upon the water happily floats a soft, yellow sponge. It is estimated that the human body presents a surface of twenty-eight miles of excretion through the pores of the skin alone; thus the body of an invalid must be sponged regularly with devotion and vigor. The body of the Young Lord, owning a special fleshy magnitude, may present a much larger surface than is average. Yes, I’m afraid the Young Lord imparts a near damaged appearance: like a blond pastry oozing custard, the Young Lord seems to have been over-stuffed. I sit on the edge of the bed and use my fingers to comb the Young Lord’s hair. The Young Lord’s eyes are seeping and strands of his hair have stuck to the discharge. I pick the strands loose. I comb the Young Lord’s bangs to the right. I comb them to the left. As good nursing demands, I am always surveying the scene, so to speak, noting new improvements and afflictions, no matter how minor. How true, I find, is the old adage that sickness cannot well hide the marks of painstaking breeding. The Young Lord has a delicate chin. His nose is what they approvingly call “buttonesque” and sits like a white mushroom upon the loam of his face. His cheeks are milky, malleable. Only the bounty of his lips is momentarily marred for the Young Lord has begun to vomit. He vomits quietly, with haste. I can see that more

sponging is required. When the Young Lord is finished vomiting, I remove the offensive matter immediately, and then I remove the Young Lord's clothing. In response to the latter attention, the Young Lord balks. The Young Lord burps. I believe the Young Lord means to give mild protest. His hands move to cover his groin. He is a gentleman, but decorum holds no sway during times of need. His chest is hairless, grand. I start sponging the mound of fat at the Young Lord's right breast. "The cases of illness are very few where sponging the body of the patient is not attended with beneficial results," I tell him. As far as the nurse is concerned, at no time is free ablution so needful as when discharging her duties in the sick room. A tyrannical notion of selflessness sometimes leads a nurse to deny herself all personal care and comfort. I run the sponge along my own nude calf. A skillful nurse directs her attention as much to the prevention of disease from spreading as to the curing of the actual patient. It requires considerable intelligence to carry out the preventative method, and entails much labor on the nurse, but the reward exceeds the pains. I sponge the body of the Young Lord. I sponge myself. I scrub and scrub!

Odds & Ends.

Sausage Dumpling—Bend the neck and heels together. Enclose the meat in crust, taking care to prevent leakage. This is fun fare, and at the same time wholesome, but should be carefully prepared. How often can one buy sausage dumplings with crusts that keep the gravy in?

Feeding Adult Fowls—The object is to supply the quantity and quality of food that will produce the greatest flesh. One simple rule is to give as much as can be eaten

eagerly, and no more. If feeding commences with apparent indifference, the supply should be stopped.

Animals Kept for Pleasure & Profit.

“The Ass & The Horse: a Parable.”

The differences between the ass and the horse are trifling. Both beasts possess mane and muscle. Both will cry out to signal danger. Even the respective cries are arbitrarily named, without reference to the sounds themselves. The ass brays. The horse neighs. There is but one difference that counts: the ass is employed by the poor. Because the chambermaid was poor, she rode the ass. The princess rode the horse. They were traveling to a distant province where the princess was to be wed. The road was bland. A bird fell; a fox pounced. A dry wind raised the dust. The women grew thirsty.

There came a stream.

“Get down,” the princess said. “Fetch me water in my cup.”

“Get down yourself,” said the chambermaid. “Lie on your stomach and drink like a snake.”

Hints About Fruit.

Apples, of which there are two hundred and fifty varieties, contain a large quantity of malic acid. It is to the presence of this acid that their sourness is due. When apples are cut with a bright steel knife, the surface of the metal is turned black. Apples are most palatable cooked into a sauce. Add spice and sugar. No foul words escape the mouth that is stuffed with a sweet substance.

Bilberries are a silencing fruit. They are sometimes used to make port, but are most effective pushed one by one into the mouth that would otherwise be free to spit curses or spill secrets. A beloved's mouth stuffed with blue bilberries can be made to smile: first place a finger at each corner. Then push the lips upward in the direction of the eyes.

Apricots fit perfectly in the mouth and for that reason make excellent ball gags.

Servants of The House.

“The Lady's Maid: a Parable.”

The strictly technical knowhow required of a chambermaid can be learned on the job, but no amount of teaching will impart the delicate grace that proceeds from a submissive disposition and an honest passion for servitude. The princess's chambermaid did not have a submissive disposition. She did not have a passion to serve. She had never possessed those qualities. She'd concealed the truth of her character by shutting her mouth and doing as told. Now the chambermaid was refusing to do as told, so the princess, in need of a drink, climbed down from her horse and knelt by the stream. She did not lie on her stomach like a snake; instead she sat on her knees and used her hands as a cup. When she was satisfied, she returned to her horse.

“What on earth are you doing?” asked the chambermaid. “That's my horse. Yours is the ass.”

But before the princess could mount the donkey, the chambermaid shoved her to the ground. The chambermaid kicked the princess in the mouth, and the princess spit up blood and three of her teeth.

The chambermaid removed her own apron and frock; she left the worn garments in a heap in the dust. Now she was naked. She stood over the princess and said, “Give me your gown.”

The princess did as told. She removed her gown and her soft leather boots.

“They are my clothes now,” the chambermaid said. “Yours are the rags.”

Odds & Ends.

Vinegar as an Aid to Digestion—Vinegar, when taken with food in moderate quantities, will calm the stomach made queasy by loss. It will calm the stomach made queasy by guilt.

The Stove is a Friend—What stove is not an excellent listener? The human voice echoes warmly inside her big belly. Sit at her feet, open her hatch, and unburden the heart.

Servants of The House.

“The Stableboy: a Parable.”

Domestic servants have become more deficient in ability than any other class of laborers. The stableboy, for example, badly wanted to be known as *Stable-master* (or, at the very least, *Stable-man*,) but the prince would not allow it for the stableboy could hardly manage to properly muck-out the stalls, let alone keep the royal horses fed and fat enough to bear the weight of the royal family. A silent shaking of equine knees was the first sign that a royal horse would drop to the dirt, but even if one’s attention were directed elsewhere (say, if one were across the lawn, admiring the coherent splendor of

the royal rose bushes) one would still hear the royal shriek that followed the shaking. This “regal collapse,” as it has been termed, was sometimes more of a slow drop (a “gradual imperial topple,” though that term has yet to catch) by which the burdened beast leaned so far to one side that it simply fell over. The rider fell with the steed, emitting a shriek or a series of “no’s” spoken at an increasing pace. Horses became a tremendous source of embarrassment for the royal family, and for that reason the stableboy deserved the insult of his title. But the stableboy resented being blamed and bossed; he wanted someone of his own to dominate. He was often spotted kicking the chickens and hurling the smaller dogs because there was no one under the prince’s employ who ranked lower than the stableboy. (Also the stableboy smelled of dung and was an orphan.) Enter the princess. Yes, their journey was complete; the princess and the chambermaid had arrived. Because the chambermaid had come on horseback, she was taken to be the prince’s future wife. As for the princess, she was missing some teeth and had come on the back of an ass, so she was sent to help out in the stables. Girls being what they are, now at last there was a servant ranked beneath the stableboy: the stablegirl. The princess was sad, but she hoped that caring for her old horse would serve to remind her that she had once been a woman who mattered. Unfortunately, the chambermaid’s first action as lady of the house was to have that old horse killed. “Summon the knacker,” she said to the prince, “and have him chop off the head of the horse that carried me here. It knows too much.” The prince thought the request odd, but easy enough to grant. The old horse was beheaded, and the princess became the stablegirl. In her dreams, the stablegirl was a horse (a spotted grey Persian) hitched to a casket instead of a cart, and she ran through the streets of the village faster than sound. The chambermaid dreamt of inimical spines, a

solid lake. Once, in a dream, the chambermaid was stripped naked and stuffed inside a barrel studded with nails. As a warning against shaky equine knees, the prince nailed the severed horse-head to the arch of the stable door. Beneath the arch, the stableboy pushed the stablegirl onto the stinking straw and shit; then he ripped open the front of her stockings. When he covered her mouth with his own hot mouth, the severed horse-head screamed. The stablegirl pushed her thumbs into the stableboy's eyes.

Animals Kept for Pleasure & Profit.

“The Horse After Death.”

Management of Horses that are Intended to be Stuffed—The joy of horse keeping has to do with imagining the frisky, spirited animal as a rigid piece of decorative art. It is fun to let a horse eat from the palm, to feel the softness of its mouth—that jaw, those teeth, they could crush the hand of any man—and also to know that one day the fierce beast's head will be attractively mounted on a household wall. (Horse heads look especially handsome in the library or study.) The horse that is intended to be stuffed should be killed with as little external injury as possible. All wounds from which blood may flow over the fur are objectionable, but one cannot always prevent such blemishes.

Skinning Horses—Make a cut just deep enough to divide the skin, but no deeper, with a sharp knife. The skin must be peeled back and pulled upwards over the neck and head till the skull is exposed. Throughout the whole of these operations, care must be taken so that the skin is not stretched or the proper proportions of the horse will not be preserved. Next clean all possible flesh from the skull, extract the brains with a brain-scoop, clean the skull cavity, and stuff the cavity with straw. Redress the skull in its skin.

Make sure that the skin is put back in its natural position. Now stuff the mouth with straw and remove the eyes.

Hints About Plants.

Hazel Branches are the safest protection against vipers, snakes, and other reptilian creatures since times of old. Hazel branches have been known to ward off men who affect a serpent-like posture, who move with their bellies close to the ground as if they were concealing a weapon or buckling beneath the weight of menial labor.

Snake Leaves are useful in raising the dead. It is no secret that a battle is brewing on home soil and that many men will lose their lives. Snake leaves are effective when applied to men of all stripes, aristocrats and servants alike, but are so scarcely come across in nature that one would be wise to keep as ample a stock as possible even during times of peace. Place a snake leaf over each eye and stuff one in the mouth; then wait for breath to return.

Rosebuds are used to predict the hour of a beloved's death. Arrange the rosebud in a vase of water; set the vase on a beloved's bedside table. He will be dead when the rose reaches full bloom. No amount of harassment will raise him from the bed.

The Sick Room & Nurse.

"The Patient's Mental Health."

There is one point on which a nurse cannot be too scrupulously exact in discharging her duties: the confidence of her patient should be to her completely sacred. She cannot help having eyes and ears, but none of her patient's revelations spoken during

the delirium of illness should pass her lips. The most unimaginable depravity of speech sometimes escapes the lips of the purest-minded patient when under the influence of fever. A nurse can only assume that the utterance of foul thoughts may proceed from overheard conversations in public thoroughfares, where even the most spotless mind can be exposed to lasting blemishes from slight contact with the drunken, depraved, and destitute. Until bad language is purged from the streets, as it is in the educated classes, the striking contradiction between healthy and diseased speech in the same individual will continue to baffle the understanding. Detached sentences, incomprehensible to the healthy ear, can lie dormant until the onset of fever excites the patient's mouth to morbid action. The Young Lord, I feel quite certain, would not wish his fiancé to hear his feverish ramblings (mostly having to do with horses), so I try very hard to keep his mouth busy. Idle lips, after all, are the Devil's playthings. The Young Lord is in quite a state. Although the horse was removed (then stuffed and mounted), its impression remains. Where her weight was most felt, the Young Lord's body appears to have been squeezed free of its meat; but the meat had to go somewhere, and so adjacent to the Young Lord's pinched parts are elephantine limbs and bodily bulges. I sponge as much as I can, but some level of infection and resulting delirium is inevitable. Of all things, the Young Lord has not lost his appetite. If he opens his mouth to spew forth a list of saddle fashions or riding styles, (all nonsensical, complete fabrications, I believe,) I quiet him with a spoonful of pudding or a juicy maw-sized fruit. Now the Young Lord's mouth is plugged with an apricot. I am sitting at the foot of the bed, directing one of the servants to hang that damn horse's head on the opposite wall. Soon the Young Lord will see the mounted head and know that he is the victor in the battle between horse and man. But the Young

Lord is waving his hands, gesturing ferociously. Though the apricot still plugs his mouth, he manages to emit a noise that is similar to screaming. He will not take his eyes off the horse's dead face, despite my efforts at distraction (I am moving wildly in front of him). Delusions are another condition of mind that frequently attends a state of feverishness, and I conclude the Young Lord must be suffering a delusion. He covers his ears with his hands. It is not unusual for a patient to maintain, against all evidence to the contrary, that certain sights and sounds are present to his faculties. The only recourse for the nurse is to try and convince the patient that he is dreaming. "You must relax," I say, reaching out to comfort the Young Lord. "You're only dreaming." The Young Lord grabs a hold of my forearm; he will not let go. "Relax," I say. "Your eyes get any bigger and they'll pop out of your head!" I cannot pry the Young Lord's grip from my arm. His body looks like it's melting, but his strength is fierce. It seems he would like to embrace me completely. I can see only one option: the basin and sponge are within my reach. I grab the basin and hit the Young Lord hard about the head. He releases my arm and I scoot off of the bed. I exit the sick room. The Young Lord is screaming. I shut the door behind me.

Calisthenics for Ladies.

Stand with the heels together, the toes turned out, the knees joined, the body erect, the shoulders back, the arms down, the head up, the eyes and mouth shut.

To Foretell the Weather.

If there should be a halo round the moon the weather will be violent. If the sky is red at dawn the weather will be violent. When inky-colored clouds are floating in the sky

at night the weather will be violent. If one spots wisps or streaks or light scudding clouds the weather will be violent. If the barometer falls and the temperature rises the weather will be violent; fire will consume the houses of the rich and the bellies of the poor.

A Key

I am the boy cast out in the snow when the snow plugged the sky and the gaps between trees, when the snow hid the forest beneath a flat white field and the field let go of its name, and I am the boy who was lost to the snow because I wore clothes of snow, a jacket of snow and trousers of snow, and I could not tell myself apart from the world, and I am the boy who found a locked box in the snow, a locked box with a small golden key, and I opened the box and I crawled inside, and there I curled up as 'o' on a page, and there I am, a mark in the snow, there, small, small, like the dot on the page at the end of the story.

The Hostler

Back in town is how she describes herself. Back in town, and she is. She's also prepared a sentence, a lengthier description for what she is. The sentence goes: A fully-grown woman, I am returned to the town of my birth.

Written in a letter, the sentence might serve her well. Dear friend, for example. A fully-grown woman, I am returned to the town of my birth. Imagine the fields. Nine pastures. A clump of wooden houses. The stale row of shops. Yes, there's a castle, too, I think, planted to the right—that's the East. Or if you've forgotten how to laugh then conjure your own notion of "town" (everybody has one) and picture my face about it. Do you remember my looks? A mean nose. Long-necked. I still have the errant eyebrow. Might you single me out of a crowd? Say I am standing in a thicket of townspeople. Imagine I am clothed like the others. And I am garnished as the others are garnished with mud, soot. I am fully-grown, and there is hay in my hair. I don't want to waste anymore of your time. Please believe: I am desperate to leave you your time.

But she isn't one to write.

She doesn't write.

She does not keep distant friends. A friend is proximal. She's said this in public: "A friend is proximal." She expects the phrase will catch.

As for Mother and Father, they take little interest in her homecoming. They pull open the door. They do not step aside so as to allow her to enter the house. They close the door. “I will go to the tavern,” she says. Mother and Father aren’t listening. She speaks to herself: “I am back in town, but I will go to the tavern.”

Along the way she comes up with an aphorism. It goes like this: Every return has an expiration date. Every return has an expiration date, and so does her own. She won't be back in town for long. The days will heap themselves upon themselves, and then what? Then she will be in town. She will be in town—merely, utterly. A common description, and useless. Everyone is in town. Even the tourist becomes a resident. In town, everyone is a resident. And so the people in town are known by the titles of their professions or the honors of their ranks. The butcher. The surgeon. The old man clothed in leather. The duchess. The duchess's bastard.

She does not care for her sentence because her sentence is stupid.

She needs a real job. She needs a title.

She arrives at the tavern. She is seated at the counter.

A self-proclaimed Mitchel takes the seat next to hers.

“It’s me. Mitchel,” Mitchel says, and he slaps the counter with his palm. Pale wine splashes from his cup. Mitchel dabs at the spill with his fingers.

There are sconces affixed to the walls, and several do not hold any candles. She deems the lack of candles intentional and the quality of light tavern-like. She thinks about it and thinks about it. “Tavern-like” is the very best description. “Tavern-like.” She nearly loses her breath.

Mitchel talks like a friend. In turn, she is not familiar with Mitchel. If she has known Mitchel then she has also forgotten Mitchel. That is how it must be. She decides to consider Mitchel a long lost acquaintance, a leftover from her childhood. She wonders if Mitchel protected her from the fists of other children. She wonders too if she was beaten by Mitchel for the children’s entertainment. The beating probably occurred on a field or beneath a sliding board.

She drinks from her cup of beer so that Mitchel will find her more thirsty than dumb.

She remembers the face of an adolescent: a boy with a branded cheek. Once she shared her jar of cosmetic paint with the branded boy. They stood behind the schoolhouse, and she used her thumb to apply the gummy white paste to the boy's scarred skin. Shortly thereafter the boy was beaten. He developed bruises. When she offered to share her paint again, he punched her on the mouth. It didn't hurt.

Is Mitchel that branded boy? She isn't sure.

“Mitchel,” she says. “Yes. Mitchel.” She thinks it right to offer her hand. She offers her hand.

Mitchel does not take her hand. Mitchel does not have a scarred face. He will not drink his wine. “I assist your parents,” he says. “Have they told you? The summer was hot, and often I sweated.”

No, Mother and Father did not tell her. They opened the door and closed the door.

“I help your father with his pants,” Mitchel says. “I help him into his pants. This morning, even, I was there. I led him to the closet. By the wrist, I lead him. I helped him. You were nowhere to be seen.” Mitchel slaps the counter: “You were here, weren’t you.”

Mitchel is probably correct. She’s been at the tavern for several hours. Her complexion has probably adopted a tavern-like quality. A dimness, or a dullness.

As for Mother and Father: they closed the door. She is curious as to how they are passing the time. She imagines they are playing like empty-nesters again, roaming freely about the house and yard in their woolen underthings.

“My parents are dead,” says Mitchel. “I’ve inherited their house and horse.”

She attempts honesty with herself, and what she comes up with is a question. Who is Mitchel?

She does not know why Mitchel puts Father in pants. Nor does she know how, though she assumes the chore is conquered in the traditional manner of dressing a child. And does Mitchel think her the type of woman so easily impressed by a house and a horse?

She is feeling a little troubled, like an animal seated in the road. She has additional thoughts, such as: I am impressed.

“I’ll have another beer,” she says, “and I’ll have it dark, *extra dark*.” And then she is ashamed to have spoken so passionately. She says, “Please,” while inspecting her fingernails.

She does not spend time on her fingernails. Her fingernails are not groomed. They surely aren’t painted. Often she will grimace at them so that no one thinks her strange to depart prematurely. “Where did she go?” someone might say. “I reckon she went home to tend to her fingernails,” might say someone else. “I reckon you’re correct.”

Mitchel says, "I'm very busy." He frowns. "Will you mind my horse?"

She is not familiar with horses. That doesn't matter. She has bold thoughts about horses. For example: I will sit on Mitchel's horse. And also: A woman on horseback is different from a woman in the grass.

I will sit on Mitchel's horse, she thinks, and wait for Mitchel to complete whatever tasks a person such as Mitchel must complete. A horse requires regular riding (she is certain, nearly). She fears the days will pass slowly.

"Someone will bring me my meals?" she asks, "and a bucket for waste?"

"Please," says Mitchel, "be my hostler."

“Mitchel’s hostler.” She likes that.

She rejoices inside, deep inside. She does so by imagining her internal organs. Her organs are happier now in their toiling, and stuck with confetti.

She thinks about fruit. So what? Fruit is not a bad idea. She will purchase fruit. She will bring the fruit to Mother and Father. (Surely, by now, Mother and Father have had enough time to themselves.) The fruit will serve as a gift. She will give them the fruit.

“I am The Hostler,” she will say.

Mother and Father will smile with their mouths full of cake. She decides: a cake is not a bad idea. She has good intentions. She does not sense herself to be offensive.

She asks Mitchel to accompany her to the grocer's. Mitchel says, "No," but then, like a pet or a flea, he follows. Or Mitchel follows like a shadow when the sun slips and slips into its hole in the ground.

“The Hostler,” she says to herself, and she appreciates the sound.

Things at the grocer’s are warm in The Hostler’s hands. What fortune: today there’s a special on strawberries and sponge cake. The Hostler chooses herself a cake. She chooses a basket of strawberries, too.

“Call me Hostler,” she says to Mitchel, “okay?” Mitchel does not respond.

Once Hostler attended a strawberry-themed party. There was a birthday boy, and Hostler was his guest. They ate in the dining room. They ate brown bread topped with sliced strawberries. They drank pink strawberry milk. There were strawberry shapes stitched to the napkins. And the birthday boy's mother arranged an assortment of sweets on a buffet table. Hostler followed the birthday boy's lead and piled sweets onto her plate. Strawberry cake. Strawberry pie. Strawberry candies. Strawberry ice cream. A rare, ethereal confection called strawberry meringue. Hostler ate the meringue first. Was it concocted from an idea about a strawberry? "Eat more," said the birthday boy's mother. "Eat up." The birthday boy was cleaning his plate with his thick tongue. The birthday boy was fat. "Don't be shy," said the birthday boy's mother. She was fat, too. She was fatter than her son. Hostler felt her own body grow fatter like a goose on a farm, and the birthday boy's mother salivated.

Mitchel pays for the strawberries and the cake. Hostler thinks of the poor fat birthday boy; she hopes that his mother did not cannibalize him.

She will be The Hostler, of course, in the presence of the duke, but with Mitchel, Hostler will do, simply Hostler. Even the duchess goes by Duchess, simply Duchess, among friends. Sexual partners probably call her Duch or Chessie or Sweatmeat. Some have called her a tease before being executed.

The poor fat birthday boy! His fat salivating mother. Mitchel, too. Mitchel also is fat. Are they the same: Mitchel and the birthday boy?

Hostler is like a girl with a wooden duck on a string, and Mitchel is like the wooden duck. The duck has wheels instead of feet. It's sort of like that, but Hostler is older than a girl and Mitchel is not a wooden duck. Mitchel is bearded. Hostler does not believe there's a scar beneath Mitchel's beard. She walks the pebbled road to Mother and Father's house. Mitchel follows, fatly. Duck-like, but bearded.

The sky looks like a kipper—grey and dark, shiny—and it is everywhere the ground isn't. And the ground is thin, grassy, muddy. From a small distance, Mother and Father's house resembles a broad brown tooth. The house is a molar with its roots in the mud.

Up close, the house is not toothsome. It squats on a vast bed of muck. There are some green shoots in the yard where Mother and Father grow beets.

The door is locked. Mitchel knocks—feebly—and frowns. Mitchel frowns like a man who does not want his knocks to be heard. He shudders like a fat, bearded man who fears himself to be trespassing.

And Mother pulls open the door, and Father. The both of them pull open the door with their pink stained hands. They stand in the way of the entrance on their stem-and-bone legs: caked with mud, caked and cracking.

Mother and Father have pink-stained chins. They do not mean to smile—not probably—but their mouths are open. And their teeth are pink.

The townspeople do not like the taste of Mother and Father's beets, so Mother and Father eat the beets themselves. That's why Mother and Father look like they do—like beets. And that's how it was when Hostler was a girl. Beets, beets.

Neither Mother nor Father are wearing pants, and the both of them are thin in a hideous sort of way. Mother is wrapped in a bathing towel, but the dryness of her hair and the mud on her legs are proof that she has not recently bathed. Father is dressed in small woolen briefs and a blouse that hangs at his thighs, loose like a nun's habit. There are indigo roses crocheted onto the collar, and Hostler wonders if the blouse belongs to Mother.

Mother and Father are ravaged by beets.

Beets. And the branded boy who punched Hostler on the mouth. The poor fat birthday boy. The birthday boy's fat mother. The beets. The blond boy, also: the duchess's bastard. When Hostler was a girl, the blond boy was always around. He was white-haired. He had a small body. Sometimes he could not help but break, and Hostler had to be careful with him. She didn't mind. She liked his company, so he came around, always. Mother and Father had called him The Fixture and then The Broken Fixture. The townsfolk called him BB—short for Blond Bastard, or so they thought. His real name was Blond Boy.

Blond Boy, Blond Bastard—he didn't mind the mistake.

Hostler holds the basket of strawberries and the cake. She pushes them into Mother's arms and cannot think of anything to say, except: "I'm a hostler."

That's her new sentence: I'm a hostler. I am The Hostler. I'm Hostler. Her sentence is one of those.

Mother holds the groceries at a distance from her body in the style of cradling an unwanted infant. Then Mother and Father turn from the doorway. They disappear into the house. They share a similar, compromised gait; it's like a malnourished person's version of waddling. Hostler follows them into the kitchen. Mitchel follows Hostler.

The kitchen is red as it always has been. There's the wide oak table where Mother and Father peel the beets and chop the beets and eat the beets, and on the table is a pile of muddy beetroots. Discarded beet skins cover the floor: a rubbery, purplish rug.

Mother drops the strawberries and the cake into an empty tin wash basin. She takes a seat at the table next to Father. Father is holding a small knife in his reedy pink fingers. He's peeling a beet. Mother has her own knife. Now she's peeling a beet, too.

"The strawberries and cake are yours," Hostler says. "Can I fix you a plate?" But Mother and Father do not respond. They peel beet after beet with lizard-tongue speed. Their pink fingers guide the knives around the red spherical roots—once, twice, and again. It looks like flowers blooming. It looks like flowers bleeding. "Be careful," Hostler says, and then to Mitchel: "Where are their pants?"

Mitchel takes a step backwards. He takes another step. And another, as if Hostler were a hound that might lunge. When he is stopped from behind by the red kitchen wall, he wedges himself—some of himself—into the corner. He says, "I don't know." His face is worried. Mitchel is scared, probably, and committed to staying put with his rump safely lodged. He feels secure that way, Hostler reasons: so let him be.

“And where are the dishes?” Hostler asks. She looks in the cupboard for a plate, but there are rotten beets in the cupboard. They tumble onto the floor. They stink like cemetery dirt.

Hostler clears a space on the table for the strawberries. She uses her hands to rip the sponge cake into chunks. She arranges the chunks almost prettily around the basket of fruit. Mother and Father ignore the spread, but Mitchel tiptoes out of the corner like a man-sized rodent. Mitchel is the oaf whom the other rodents must pretend to tolerate. They must watch over the oaf, imagining all the while what it would feel like to slap him about the face with their silly rodent hands.

Hostler feels protective toward Mitchel, and she likes the feeling. When was the last time she felt that way?

Years ago.

Now Mitchel stands at the table and pushes strawberries into his mouth. His mouth gets sticky. When he takes a bite of sponge cake, yellow cake crumbs stick to his lips. Garishly red, spotted yellow. Moving muscularly. Mitchel's lips look like the pulsating body of a deep sea slug.

Beetroots bloom and bleed in Mother and Father's hands. They bloom and bloom.

When Hostler was a girl, she and the blond boy would sit beneath the wide oak table while Mother and Father peeled beets. The tabletop was an extra roof above their heads and the space they shared below it: private. Sometimes Mother's hand or sometimes Father's hand would dip below the tabletop to toss thick slices of beetroot to the floor. On all fours, like truffle hogs, Hostler and the blond boy rooted through the discarded beet skins for the juicy crescent-shaped slices. Then they rubbed the slices on their mouths like red cosmetic paint. And with red-stained fingertips, they drew circles on each other's cheeks to make themselves beautiful.

Hostler leaves Mother and Father's kitchen. She goes outside. She sits down in the muck of the yard, rests her head in her hands. Mitchel follows, sits down in the muck, too. He places a palm on Hostler's back.

Hostler cannot keep the boys straight. She cannot keep the boys straight. So she imagines an identity parade at the town jail.

The jailhouse is always too dark inside, but tonight there are extra candles. Tonight the jailhouse is as bright as bonfire. The candles are everywhere. Affixed by the dozen to the windowless walls. Upright and melting into the wooden jailhouse floor like short white men sinking in a bog.

There are three boys. The police line them up—the three boys—side-by-side.

The first boy has fists for hands and a scar on his cheek. He is the branded boy, and he is easy to name.

The second boy breathes with the whole of his body. His thick tongue falls out of his fat mouth. Hostler points and says, “He is the birthday boy. The poor fat birthday boy.” The police nod their heads. Yes.

The third boy is facing the wall. His backside is slim. His hair is blond and nearly white. “He is the duchess’s bastard,” she says. She asks that he turn around. The blond boy does not turn around. “Turn him around,” she says to the police. “Turn him around.” The police shake their heads. The police will not turn him around.

The horse sits in the grass like a dog on its haunches. “It’s called Mitch,” says Mitchel, and Hostler is stricken with nausea. She says, “Did you name it yourself?”

The sun is hard to place in the sky. There are clouds. Lush is the lawn, outrageous.

The horse’s muzzle is plush. Hostler extends her hand, and the horse sniffs at it. “Be careful,” says Mitchel, and he waddles away. He crosses the field as would a tugboat with feet. Then he enters the large stone house seated near the limit of the property.

The horse wags its black tail. The horse rolls onto its back, and Hostler kneels between the jointed limbs. She pets the fuzzy drum of the horse's belly. This way and that, wrenches the horse. The horse is squirming—it's a ticklish horse! "Laugh, my baby bonny," Hostler says. "What will time bring on ye?" There is laughter, and Hostler springs to her feet. The horse flops onto its side, snorting, panting, wheezing.

The horse heaves itself upward—shoulders, elbows, and fuzz—and rises to sit again like a dog. The horse is sort of smiling.

Does the horse want a bone? Hostler is not familiar with the diet of horses. Does the horse want a beet?

Over her shoulder is slung a knapsack. The knapsack is filled with Mother and Father's beets. The knapsack is something Hostler would wear as a girl. It made sense then: a knapsack of beets.

An unlucky child might swaddle a dry corncob in a rag, unsheathe the dumb doll like a sword or a butcher's knife, but Hostler was more than unlucky when she was a girl because Hostler didn't have a corncob. She had the beets, and beets were playthings, too. The beets were also a meal, and sometimes Hostler was popular among the hungrier children at school.

The poor fat birthday boy. He could swallow a beet whole.

House, war, and butchery: those were the usual schoolyard games. The birthday boy did not play at them. After a rainstorm brought mud, there was pretend candlestick making. The birthday boy did not fashion candlesticks out of mud. There was a season, Hostler remembers, when the children at school desired to stage an execution, and the birthday boy agreed to play the role of the condemned in exchange for the children's lunch pails. "What's the difference," he asked, "between execution and murder?" He answered the question himself: "A last meal." Some of the children gave applause. "And a scaffold, too," said the branded boy. (He had played at being cattle once.) So the children constructed a scaffold out of sticks, mud, and hay. The scaffold broke.

The poor fat birthday boy. What could be said of him?

“Bad playmate.”

“Shitty dancer, also.”

“Eating.”

The birthday boy did possess a tiny imagination. He invented his own schoolyard game. It was inspired by the nursery song Curly Locks.

The song goes: Curly locks! Curly locks! Wilt thou be mine? Thou shalt not wash dishes nor yet feed the swine, but sit on a cushion and sew a fine seam and feast upon strawberries, sugar, and cream.

It was the birthday boy's game, so he played the role of Curly Locks. He sat on a tree stump the way a blossom is stuck by its stem. But pumpkin-like, too, and salivating a little.

There weren't any strawberries in the schoolyard.

Hostler still remembers her lines. She would open her knapsack and say, "Curly Locks! Curly Locks! Wilt thou be mine?" Then she would feed the birthday boy the beets. It was sort of fun.

The birthday boy swallowed additional things. For example: the children's chestnuts. The birthday boy had to have the shiniest chestnuts—they'd been polished and oiled for games of conkers. And, once, the birthday boy swallowed his own pair of shoes. They were new shoes, and the birthday boy's mother had called them "ornate." Then she called them "too ornate." Finally she said, "These shoes cost a lot of money." But the birthday boy begged. He begged and opened his mouth. He would have the shoes. Then he would have them again.

It wasn't right that birthday boy swallowed the parakeet. It wasn't right, but that's what he did. He swallowed the parakeet. It wasn't right because the parakeet did not belong to him. The blond boy brought the parakeet to school. The parakeet did not belong to the blond boy either. The parakeet belonged to the duchess's newer child—the legitimate one—the one with brown eyes and brown hair. He had red lips. He was called Pretty Prince, and his daddy was the duke. Somebody wrote a rhyme about him.

The rhyme goes: A pretty little prince, so charming and so sly. The ladies shout with wonder, What a pretty, pretty boy! He'll have a pretty musket, a trumpet, a kite, a pretty penny rattle, a pretty silver knife. The duke will set the pretty prince upon his massive lap and fondle him so lovingly while he stirs about the pap. The duke will pin the prince in silk before he takes a nap then dress him up so stylish in a pretty leather cap.

A blossom or kerchief—the parakeet had been a more beautiful ornament. So the pretty prince had kept it near his breast. He'd kept it in the little pocket that was sewn onto his little scarlet coat. The parakeet moved in bursts, the way the hand jumps on a clock. Only birds, clocks, and lizards move like that. Sometimes the blond boy was content to watch the parakeet move. The parakeet was always talking and turning its head—left to right, left to right—as does the most popular guest at a party.

Hostler helped the blond boy steal the parakeet from its white whicker cage. They waited until the pretty prince had a fever. They waited for the nurse to wipe clean her hands and tuck all of her orange hair into a dark square bonnet. The nurse was strong and she carried the pretty prince all the way to the sick room in the castle's loneliest tower.

The parakeet was green. The blond boy carried the bird in a lunch pail and showed it to Hostler and the birthday boy at recess. Before long, the other children had laid down their mud and were gathering round as a swarm of large heads, a tangle of shoestring bodies: a loosed bunch of balloons. The blond boy held tightly to the parakeet. "The parakeet doesn't belong to me," he said. "The parakeet isn't mine." He held onto the parakeet with both of his hands. "You're a beautiful parakeet," he said. The other children were quiet, all of them in love. And then, as if a page were turned, the blond boy's hands were inside the birthday boy's mouth. Hostler grabbed a fistful of fabric at the blond boy's back; she tugged until he popped free like a cork. His hands came out empty and wet. Small. Feathered, a little.

The children cried for the parakeet. They pelted the birthday boy with handfuls of mud.

Hostler does not know how to care for the horse. She does not know if the horse requires affection. Should the horse be petted or patted, like a dog? Or is there another gesture, specific to horses, which Hostler should perform? And how often? Hostler knows that a dog will grow heartier the more it is loved, but a cat, being an opposite sort of animal, will suffer. The horse is sort of like a dog and sort of like a cat, but neither a dog nor a cat will tolerate being sat upon, so why is it that the horse likes to be ridden? In standing position, the horse is too tall to mount, so Hostler waits until it is lying down. Sometimes the horse continues to lie on the ground, and Hostler stays put—straddling its back with her feet in the grass—until she suspects the horse has had enough riding. Sometimes the horse will decide to stand after Hostler has climbed onto its back, but even then there is no walking, no running. Hostler has tried commands, such as: Walk! Run! Giddy! Go! Get! Start! Please. Proceed. Move! The horse prefers to stay in one place while being ridden.

Mitchel is busy. Often Mitchel is busy circling the yard. He circles the yard on foot. Huffing, he passes by. When he passes by, Hostler points to the horse between her legs and yells: “Is this right?” Sometimes Hostler waves, and Mitchel raises his hand to wipe sweat from his chin and nose.

Mitchel moves freely, albeit fatly, and Hostler wonders if this is what he desires: that she should take his place astride the horse.

Often Hostler imagines the clang of a whistle. Sometimes she imagines two clouds of steam shooting forth from Mitchel’s ears.

Sometimes Hostler imagines an identity parade. The jailhouse is lit-up and too warm inside. Candles litter the floor. A door has been left open to the outside, but there's nothing to see because it's night. A teaspoon of stars pinch the sky. The air is fixed, and so the grass can't move either. The police bring out the boys. The police line them up—the boys—side-by-side. There's the boy with the branded face: the branded boy. There's the birthday boy, and his mouth is a mess: beet-stained, pink, and loud. The horse clomps inside by way of the open door, trampling candles beneath its hooves. The blond boy is quiet. The horse bends at the neck and roots the jailhouse floor like a swine. Flame-by-flame, the horse snuffs out the light.

Uncommonly, the pretty prince survived his fever. So the duchess and the duke arranged a parade. All the townsfolk were in attendance. They lined up, three leagues long, along the wide muddy road that connects the castle and the town. They waited. They waited for the parade to pass them by. They sang songs, all of them. All of them had garnished themselves with what finery they possessed. Some wore bulbous wigs woven from hay, coiffed and crimped and piled skyward in the fashion of important people. Some wore heavy wigs of mud, and others had decorated their cheeks with circles of soot. Most resembled children playing at dress up.

The sun was so hot that it sparked the hay, and then some of the townsfolk were garnished with wigs of fire. The flaming folk sang from the tips of their throats.

Hostler and the blond boy had garnished themselves with the juice from Mother and Father's beets. They'd reddened their lips and rouged their cheeks. They'd each used a pink-stained finger to draw on the other's forehead: a heart-shape, a beet-shape. They stood on the side of the road. They waited.

And then The duchess passed them by. She wore a dress stuck with white and black pearls. She resembled a raw, expensive chicken plucked down to the pale of its skin, seasoned with salt and pepper. Perfectly seasoned. The duke passed by in lovely leather pants. The strong nurse followed, carrying the pretty prince in her arms like a leather trophy.

And the pretty prince was garnished with parakeets! Beneath the birds, the pretty prince was clothed in a boy-sized falconer's mitt. The clothing was probably custom-made. The parakeets clutched the prince's clothing with their small forked feet.

There were a dozen parakeets, or maybe a baker's dozen. They were colored like spring bouquets.

The wind blew, and the hay wigs flamed bigger. The wind blew, and the parakeets flapped their wings: the pretty prince disappeared in a soft swarm. Hostler counted the colors. Green, blue, yellow, pink. The blond boy's stained cheeks were red and then more red. Why did the blond boy redden? He was angry, or sunburned.

The horse did not eat the oats that Hostler piled in the grass of Mitchel's yard. Hostler scooped the oats from a wooden barrel. Now robins and jays, et cetera, are pecking at the pile of oats. The birds hop, and the horse looms. The horse strikes, and the oats puff before settling. Biting a blue-colored bird, the horse makes way for the shade of a flowering tree. The horse lies down beneath the tree and licks the bird like a new blue kitten. Hostler dunks a kerchief into the horse's trough only to leave it floating in the water. The horse does not require her mothering. A wad of pink bubblegum—a pink horse-tongue—has sprung to life on the horse's fuzzy face. The horse can lick its own lips clean. So the horse licks its lips clean, perfectly clean.

The blond boy and the pretty prince had the same brown eyes. They had the same nose: large, sort of, but not hooked. They resembled each other, but it was easy to tell them apart. The prince had brown hair, and the blond boy was blond.

The prince also had red lips, expensive clothing, and parakeets. The blond boy wanted the parakeets for himself. He collected black walnut shells to dye his hair brown. Hostler helped. She and the blond boy sat on the floor of Mother and Father's kitchen. They crushed the shells to paste between the palms of their hands. Then they went to the castle to find the pretty prince. The prince was putting his parakeets away. He was locking them up in their white wicker cages. The blond boy took hold of the prince's wrists. Some of the parakeets threw themselves against their cages, playing at being heroes. The prince squirmed, and then he was tired.

The prince was so tired that he didn't mind when Hostler let one of his ankles drop. He let his foot drag in the mud.

Hostler and the blond boy dragged the prince to Mother and Father's kitchen. They sat the prince beneath the wide oak table. They stripped him of his clothes. Above, Mother and Father kept time on the beets with the blades of their knives. The blond boy removed his own clothes, too, and then he pulled on the prince's leather pants. He put on the prince's scarlet coat. He used a sliced beet to make his lips more red, like the prince's red lips. Hostler used her hands to smear thick gobs of brown dye over the top of the blond boy's head: it was like buttering a round white roll. It was easy. Then the blond boy wasn't blond: he almost looked like the pretty prince. So he set off for the castle to play with the parakeets. Hostler stayed behind to mind the real pretty prince.

Hostler dressed the prince in the blond boy's discarded clothes. She combed the prince's hair and rouged his cheeks. It was sort of fun.

Hostler dressed the prince everyday, even though he had no where to go. She put him her green stockings. She put him in her green smock. She put him in her orange smock. Once, when Father and Mother were resting their heads on the top of the table, Hostler took Father's apron and one of Mother's tarnished earrings. The apron was too large for the pretty prince, but Hostler tied it on backwards and the prince could wear it like a beet-spattered cape. The prince screamed when Hostler pushed the earring through. He kept screaming, and Hostler was not having fun anymore.

Hostler dragged the pretty prince outside and set him free on the side of the road. He took off running in the direction of the castle. The apron flapped at his back like something possessed.

Mitchel must be a policeman. He wears a policeman's uniform. The pants are too small. The pants hug Mitchel's calves and squeeze Mitchel's ankles. The shirt is large and long. Hostler rides the horse with her feet in the grass. The horse snores. Mitchel crosses the yard as slowly as a bear.

The blond boy came back without any eyes. That way he could not take the prince's place again.

The prince had brown eyes.

The blond boy didn't have eyes.

Plus the duke and duchess had cut his hair, so the blond boy was mostly bald, too. Short yellow bristles were sprouting on his head. Somebody had already written a song about him.

The song goes: A beetle in a walnut shell, the duke and duchess placed, and then they placed two walnut shells upon the bastard's face.

The blond boy wore a bandage in place of his eyes. Walking, he held his arms out. He kicked his feet out. He looked like one of the resurrected, like he'd long forgotten how to use his body.

When he grew tired of tripping and falling he scooted around on his rump, using his hands to propel himself forward.

On the day he returned, Hostler was garnished with beet juice. She gave him a kiss on the mouth and some of her red color. He yelled and scooted off to sit in the corner of the kitchen. After that he was restless. He said he wanted revenge. He refused to sit beneath Mother and Father's table, and Hostler could find no reason to sit there without him.

They gussied themselves: pinked their lips with beet juice, and their cheeks. Then they set off to see the old man clothed in leather. It was the blond boy's idea, and Hostler helped to guide him down the wide muddy road. He seethed, and Hostler grew sick. She let go of his hand and hugged her stomach while she walked. He dropped to the ground and scooted the rest of the way. He told Hostler to sing the song about the old man clothed in leather, so Hostler sang him the song. When she was finished, he told her sing it again.

The song goes: One misty moisty morning, when cloudy was the weather, I chanced to meet an old man clothed all in leather. He began to compliment, and I began to grin: how do you do? How do you do? And how do you do again?

By the time they reached the old man's house, the blond boy had worn through the seat of his pants. He climbed to his feet, and Hostler could see his bare rump: slim and caked with mud.

The old man smiled, and the leather chinstrap on his cap was another grin below his face. He made leather clothing for the duke, duchess, and prince. The items were hung from the rafters, like extra skins for the rich, and the air smelled sharply of tannins. He helped the blond boy into some slick leather pants. He sat the blond boy down on a beautiful leather-bound stool. The blond boy said he wanted to look just like the pretty prince. “Macaroni!” the old man yelled, and Hostler realized she was hungry. The old man wasn’t calling for food; he was calling for a person. Macaroni emerged from the kitchen, sipping on a small cup. He wore a pale blue wig without any straw in it, without any muddy filler. The wig was large.

The old man and Macaroni began to work—tanning, sewing, plastering, primping. They dressed the blond boy in leather stockings and a shiny black waistcoat. They plastered the whole of his face white. They painted pink lips and cheeks right back where the features belonged. Macaroni gave the blond boy one of his bulbous brown wigs—so tall it scraped the rafters whenever the blond boy moved. The old man fashioned two eye-sized leather globes, stuffed the globes with rice, and sewed them shut. The new eyes fit perfectly on the blond boy's face. It was a shame, Hostler thought, that the blond boy could not see out of them. He resembled an important person, but he didn't look much like the pretty prince. The old man and Macaroni clapped and whistled. The blond boy smiled like a crocodile with all of its teeth.

Mitchel says he must go to work. He climbs onto the horse in his policeman's uniform. He asks if Hostler would like to accompany him on his rounds. Hostler uses the long dangling hem of Mitchel's shirt for a rope, and she hoists herself up and onto the horse. She settles herself in back of Mitchel and wraps her arms some of the way around his fat waist. Mitchel clicks his tongue against his teeth, as easy as anything, and the horse trots out of the yard, as easy as anything. The horse takes off running down the wide muddy road.

The blond boy thought he looked like the pretty prince, and Hostler could not convince him otherwise. “You don’t look like the prince,” she said. The blond boy didn’t mind. He would take the prince’s place anyhow, and if he failed it didn’t matter. He was done being the blond boy.

Hostler helped him learn the way to the castle by heart. They walked to and fro along the wide dirt road. It was sort of fun.

Soon the blond boy was caked in mud right up to his knees, but he could walk to the castle as naturally as a person with working eyes. So he walked to the castle like a person with working eyes. Hostler followed.

Mitchel guides the horse to the top of a hill. He gives the horse's ear a tug, and the horse grinds to a halt. Hostler can see the whole of the town: the castle, the nine muddy fields, the stale row of shops, the clump of wooden houses. There's Mother and Father's house, too, beyond the clump, as if the other houses have been politely distancing themselves over the years. Two naked figures are bent over in the yard, reaching into the muck for beets. Is the birthday boy somewhere below? Hostler looks for a gash of color or a red wound on the town: a patch of strawberries. Has the branded boy survived his love for cattle? The town looks unreal, like a map. The people look like plaster figurines. It's as if Hostler could pick them up and plunk them back down wherever she likes. And they'll stay in place. Hostler scans the landscape for a teetering figure blindly feeling out his way. She looks for a wig that's larger than life. Mitchel clicks tongue and teeth, and the horse descends the hill like a toboggan.

Someone tipped them off, or maybe they consulted the spirits; either way, the duke and duchess knew about the blond boy's plan to pose again as the pretty prince. Why else would they have moved the castle half a league to the right? All the townsmen in the army must've worked through the night. They took the castle apart. They lugged the bricks eastward. They put the castle back together.

The blond boy couldn't find the castle. He was confused and so he lost his perfect form. He circled the empty lot, searching the air with his hands. Hostler yelled at him to go right. Then the army came, and the castle guards and the police. They were like carp fighting over a chunk of bread: openmouthed, they swarmed the lot. Hostler ran all the way to the edge of town. She crossed the edge. She walked all the way to the next town, and the next. Even now she does not know what happened to the blond boy.

Hostler peers around Mitchel's broad back to catch glimpse of the castle ahead. The horse is trotting, and the castle looks like its bouncing.

There are other policemen on horses. They're coming from the fields. They're crossing the fields to get to the road. They're going to the castle. Some of the police have brought their hostlers, too. Maybe they are attending a party at the castle—a party for the police.

At the castle, Mitchel chains the horse to a post. Hostler is still seated on its back. She does not want to climb down for fear that she will not be able to climb back up. Mitchel tells her to watch over the horse and then he goes inside. The other hostlers have climbed down from their horses. They congregate below as a mass of tattered clothing. They chatter in hushed tones. Hostler is sorry she chose to be one of them. There's a window on the castle wall, as high as the horse's head, so Hostler watches the party unfolding inside. The horse watches, too. The ballroom is bright. All the police are dancing. The prince enters wearing a multicolored wig. The wig is ten feet high. It's made of too many colors to count, and it looks to be breathing atop the prince's round head. Someone blows a horn, marking the prince's entrance, and the wig shatters into a hundred spooked parakeets. The horse licks its lips and paws at the windowpane—growling, whining. Hostler clicks her tongue against her teeth, and the horse rears and screams and kicks out the glass.

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