the Retreat of an Animal

mackenzie suess

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Thesis Advisor & Honors Council Representative
Marcia Douglas | English Creative Writing

Committee Members
Marcia Douglas | English Creative Writing
Janice Ho | English Literature
Thomas Zeiler | History & International Affairs
you can’t make homes out of human beings
someone should have already told you that
(Warsan Shire)

Or can you?

The Retreat of an Animal is a collection of short stories revolving around, touching on, and recoiling from the body’s relationship to home. “Home” is the place of belonging, of safety and familiarity. It is “the retreat of an animal.” This collection is interested in exploring how the fear and hope laden term “home” intersects with the corporeality of the human body. In what ways our physical relationships and experiences with those around us transform our sense of belonging; how does our sense of home render us static or mobile? I chose the collection’s title from among the many definitions of “home” for its multiple readings; is home a place to escape to in this sense, or is belonging the root of fear, the cause for retreating, as in a battle? How does the so-called animal nature of the body—the sensual, sexual, reproductive capacity—relate to our feelings of belonging? How do bodies and places become or relate to home?

This collection has sprung out of personal and literary experiences over the years—with separated parents, moving, traveling overseas, reading the likes of Isabel Allende, Roxane Gay, and Tessa Mella. Small moments and long trials all necessarily feed into one’s writing, and these influences affect much of this collection’s content and style. I draw frequently from stories of fantastika, playing with elements of fantasy and horror wrapped in delicate prose. This collection I hope acts as a substantial starting point for playing with the aforementioned themes and merging literary styles (and genres), from which to reach further and further from everyday events to, perhaps more clearly, explore true moments of human experience.

These are stories of wanting to be together.
:the Retreat of an Animal
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Morrigan cannot breathe when she is born. It is early morning before the dawn and she is all blue lips and twisted lungs, pushed out from the sea and birthed between the rocks—gray obsidian, the color of her hair and of her eyes. No one is there to see her choking on the air. She is nine at birth, eighteen, thirty-six, seventy-two, without age, and unconscious for her first thirty-three minutes of life—hopeless minutes waiting for return. She can feel the small rabbit burrowing between the bones of her arm—a gift, all moonlight fur white, and it is the thumping of the rabbit's feet that begins the heartbeat.

Her first three days of life she sleeps curled weakly atop a rock, listening to the reckless lapping of the waves. It is a public place, but no one bothers or approaches her. Maybe no one sees her, sheltered. Past the rocks is gray-sand beach and that is where the families and the lovers and the old crones go—to the places the water is less brutal. The rabbit quivers in her shoulder joint and will not taste the salt. Morrigan can feel the currents inside of her, and the odd hours she is awake her eyes train on the waves and she does not want to leave. She catalogs as if for future recall, half unfocused and drifting: Three thirty in the morning is the water always almost only blackness but she can taste the horizon in the wind. At seven it is often still dark with clouds, glowing with smothered sunlight. At three in the afternoon the water sloshes and dazzles at the bluest it will be any given day, and nine at night leaves only silhouettes and white foam caps. Toward her left from the rocks are piles of bleached and black-streaked driftwood like bones or memories leftover, and she likes them. They are comfort of strength in the lonely, and near to the bottom of her rocky outcropping are small tide-pools of oysters and starfish and crabs. The salt smell is wet and heavy on the air, and tides bring fingers grasping at the rocks and
shore, as if begging to touch. Teasing.

She supposes the rabbit is that same color of the sea foam. Like her skin and her bones and her teeth. She supposes too, slipping in and out of hazy thoughts, that if she lies there long enough she will dissolve back into water. The ocean is a roar around her bones, cradling, and she thinks of how it will be when it takes her—all flotsam coming back together and body falling apart at once.

She supposes it must happen quite soon, and that this was only a mistake.

The following nights grow cold though and her days hungry. She is a woman four days old, five days, six days, and the rabbit shivers and hops. Seagulls squawk loudly and some she steals fish from now and then, trying to force down the meat as she gags and little spines prick her mouth. She throws up almost every meal; it tastes too much like salt and wanting. For days she is waiting for the sea to come again and swallow her. She ticks off hours—keeping watch on and feeling shy of beach visitors, collecting driftwood and seashells like gifts, singing fragments of made-up songs and waiting. Strength waxes with her restlessness though, and her little ventures along and near the rocks yield no return yet. A lost child, as if told that by staying in one place mama will find her again. She frets and watches and reaches out to the waves when they are high enough, stacks the driftwood neat and nearby like funeral gifts or protection. But days go by and the rabbit looks east away from sea, thumping its feet, and not one tide will sweep Morrigan away.

She is seven days old, eight days old and on the ninth day it is cold and it is gray and it is early before the dawn that she finally climbs off her rock altar home down to the sand level where the water rushes up to her toes. Morrigan has timed this off the habits of visitors so that she will be alone. She is afraid and excited and her limbs tremble still at the exertion, but hold.
She does not wonder why this day will be different she only knows that it is true. Her insides turn and turn again in knots. The rabbit nuzzles against the base of her neck. The sand is heavy holding her feet so she steps slowly. She wades a little into the water and the thick salt smell coats her airways. She shivers at the cold, the rushing and receding against her endless, and the rabbit thrills and scratches at her arm.

Tears balance on the edges of her eyes anticipating celebration. Her heart pumps loudly and her nerves thrum electric. Wind pushes strong and tender against her skin, tangles her hair.

*Take me back, now.*

She waits and rests her hands on the buoy of the waves; they tug and kiss, cold.

Morrigan’s is a feeling of wanting to fall as from some great height.

*Please.*

The water tickles and pulls against her body, but leads nowhere. It is quiet and holds her on edge. She teeters, but there is no fall.

She waits and the air is chill. She wades further. Searches for the currents that are strong; the undertow promises but does not follow through. The rabbit circles. Circles. Circles.

Nothing.

Seagulls call out above and circle like the rabbit. The waves roll in, roll out, steady thunder washing against her. She swallows mouthfuls, tries to hold herself under, swims out, out, out.

Nothing.

Morrigan cries out for a moment and uncertainty creeps, hugging onto the rabbit near her lungs. She waits thirty-three minutes before she retreats from the waves, fighting the chagrin and the fear kindling to life. It is not too late, though the sun is beginning to rise and she knows she
will not be long alone now.

She clammers back up to collect the driftwood and seashells stored over the days and takes them back into the water where she stands waist deep, expectant and spent. She offers a clean bundle of gray and white driftwood. She lets nine seashells go. She insists she is vulnerable, she is pure, she is anything the water wants and begs full body waiting. Waiting. Hours. But the rabbit circles and Morrigan’s skin feels briny like the air in her chest and there is only so long a heart can break. She treads water by the rocks, perches, holds with puckered hands. She does not want to cry but the rabbit nudges toward land. It licks gently at her wrists and ankles and nuzzles against her pulse. It curls in her belly, and when the waves begin to sound like shame in the sunrise, Morrigan knows the water will not take her.
Delicate and lovely: dark hair, dark eyes, slim wrists, shaded skin. The petite prize in a family of strong bodies, the only girl born for generations, Juliet has been coddled from the start. Too cold, Jules, take my coat; No, Jules, go home; Careful, Jules, let me; Don’t worry about it, Jules—The youngest of four: her brother, her brother, her brother. Her father, all born and bred here. Her mother not from this land. Juliet, little one sheltered from the wilderness, for theirs is a home snow-steeped and cold. Tree bones snatch at the earth deep; the snow runs in rivers beneath the sun, the only saving precipitation in this place. It’s our lifeblood her father would say, reprimanding the boys for any offhand comment lacking reverence. It sustains us, sustains the land. And in this winter world of ice, company is few and far between but tonight. Tonight is Mother coming home from town after weeks away working. She is always leaving to bring money home, to bring goods and books and trinkets because her boys feel the land too strongly for separation though both Juliet’s parents have prayed for each child not to. It holds them tight in the heart and the limbs. And Juliet, they say, is too precious. Juliet, they hope, is not like her brothers or her father or generations of men who cannot go. She, perhaps, will take after her mother’s foreign blood.

But this morning anxiety rustles against Juliet’s lungs and tears prick her eyes; her mother is coming home tonight but what has Juliet done that her mother can be proud of? These are ice folk, and her mother has been earning an outsider’s keep since she married, but what has Juliet done to measure up? She has tried to help her brothers hunt, to gut and clean, something substantial but they stop her every time, beg and cajole her into easy tasks—just cook, just read, just gather the light wood scattered by the house. Jules, we like taking care of you. But she has
seen some worry in their eyes. She has heard them whisper—maybe she has a better chance if she’s kept out of the wild, away from the ponds and deep snow melt. And so her father will not take or teach her with her brothers. Some days she manages to sneak out for brief periods, or explore the land close to the house with her brothers keeping an eye. Many days she sits still in the cold outside air and wonders at the beauty of the snow and endless streams. Theirs is a hard place; the land makes the person and everyone should contribute. Not Jules.

But the scene is just right this day and Juliet is not too late to make something of her mother’s homecoming: two brothers too sick to work or even prepare dinner, too sick to leave their beds and begging Juliet not to worry her sweet head over them. We’ll be fine, Jules, up in no time they say with eyes half lidded, words sloppy with fatigue—We have enough stored. You don’t need to do anything... Emil and her father gone early in the morning to meet Mother in town, to greet her with adoring eyes and sweep her finally back home. Finally. Juliet is not being kept tabs on. Juliet is not being cosseted and watched and restrained. Maybe if she can do this her mother will take her to the town next time. Maybe her brothers and her father will never let her do anything here, but maybe she could convince her mother she was strong enough to work with her, maybe…

Her boots crunch heavy in the snow as she marches away from the house, afternoon settling in the sky. She pulls her coat tighter around her slim waist. They never eat fish. The waterways here are the most pristine, world-renowned they say, but they do not fish nor swim nor play in them. Her brothers hunt elk and deer and rodent, they grow vegetables, pick summer fruits, but never fish. She has asked why before— the river-fed ponds around their home sit rife with them: herring and trout and salmon and others she does not know the names of. Her brothers have said only that they’re more trouble than they’re worth. They say it hastily, without
allowing for questions. But sometimes she can hear them by the snowy banks—something half-caught about the *life-giver*. But they never explained and Mother never said anything about it when she was home, only she’d look a little sideways at Juliet as if asking a question, *like them or like me*, a little nervous for the answer, a little angry maybe.

Today would be different though. She would go to one she knew they sometimes visited. She would see it for herself, and why they didn’t want her there, and she would catch the fish they thought were too difficult to bother with. She would be the only one who’d ever brought home a gift like this. Her mother would be impressed—she hopes, she hopes.

A mile from home she comes to it—a small lake she knows her father sometimes leaves gifts at. (She has tried to hide and watch him before, but she’s always caught, sent back home immediately. *I don’t want this for you...* but what did that mean?) But now she is here and the water is ringed with trees, and spring leaves float stilly. It is a beautiful place, and silent feeling. She is shy to have come, and a little awe-struck, but she will not let these feelings halt her. Cheeks chapped from the breeze, Juliet squats at the edge of the pool. She has carried a short spear with her from the house, one her brothers used to use. It won’t be difficult, she tells herself.

She has never killed before, is unsure how even to begin.

Half an hour passes in relative stillness while she squats, waiting for something to happen, some sign of game. The sunlight speckles down upon her coat and the placid water and the distinct feeling that she should not be here grows in Juliet. Flexing her fingers, she breathes in deep and her heart shakes at the thought of failure.

Never has Juliet asked her mother where her family is from, but she knows it is far away. Mother says she works in town so many miles from them because you can only work a homeland you belong to. But there is something in her eyes that says maybe belonging is not worth it. She
has mentioned Juliet coming with her, but it has not happened yet. Her whole family seems always to be waiting for something. Juliet has determined to change this.

Another twenty minutes and she is growing restless, angry with herself.

She cannot spear the fish if she cannot see any! She must do something. Too soon Emil and her father and her mother will be back, and Juliet must get back first. She imagines her mother’s smile, walking into her warm home with a full table simply, elegantly laid. She imagines her mother wrapping her in a big hug and telling her about how wonderful town is, full of business and people and noise. Full of women doing important things without fathers and brothers breathing down their backs with safekeeping.

Fifteen more minutes pass without sign of life in the water and anxiety races through her stomach. She is a girl easy to desperation and without experience.

Fine.

She will not come away with nothing.

She slides off her coat. Her boots come off next, then socks. She stacks them neatly beside her in the muddy snow. The best fishermen know how to communicate with their catches, she tells herself. Become like prey. She sets the short spear down to pull off her shirt and shivers, goose-bumps electrifying her skin in the cold. She imagines her brothers doing this when they visit the water, their boys-only kind of club, and pulls off her jeans, slips almost noiselessly into the pool. Her heart thumps hard now: a feeling she likes. She is bold enough for this, like her mother is bold enough always to leave and still keep the family together. Ha! Her brothers would kill her if they knew!

Silver silk bodies glide past her legs—a shuddery feeling—and recoiling instinctually, she bites her tongue. Great waves of chill thrill up her body from the water; Juliet is waist deep
and already straining not to quake. What if she should not be doing this? But she closes her eyes, screwing them in frustration. Wouldn’t Mother just laugh at her now? She never asks Juliet to do anything, and Juliet is convinced her mother must be ashamed: all beauty, no utility. Juliet has ever had the sinking feeling she is dead weight in the family.

Her lips pull up at the corners grimly and, opening her eyes, she catches ripples in the water. Wildly thrusting the spear at the slippery movement, the metal connects with flesh right away, but does not hold. She slams the knife deeper into the water in sudden violence—blood rushing and body cold, dizzy at her own shame—then yelps at the blood swirling up to cloud the pool. Is it always bloody like this to kill? She cringes away but does not leave the water. It’s not that cold, she repeats silently. Not that repulsive.

The snow sparkles around her, resting on the roots of the trees, becoming rivulets in the sun. Her brothers and her father are always reaching out to touch the trees as they walk anywhere, like moments of prayer everywhere they go. They never invite her to do the same, or tell her why. You would think they’d share with her more. But her legs are going numb beneath the lake’s surface and she is not so much concerned with what her family does or does not do right now. Another form flutters around her in the water and she plunges the spear back down, half from sheer surprise. It sticks this time and she barks out a nervous laugh. How spectacular she’ll be to come home with these for her mother! She’ll love it. She’ll love her. The little quicksilver body on the other end of the spear thrashes and wriggles against the steel edge and Juliet heaves the catch out of the water by the point of the knife. She cannot feel her legs at all. Terrified the floppy, violent creature will touch her, she flings it off the sharp point into the snow by her clothes. She watches wide eyed as it gasps and flails before she turns back to the water
where the blood is running thicker around her. Tears gather in her eyes so she cannot clearly see and laughs a few more anxious yelps. The poor thing is dying.

Icy fingers stab their way up her spine toward her heart. It is so cold in the pool. She works to shift the frozen pillars of her legs. Maybe this is the feeling of winter, to be winter like the land and the streams, to know perpetually such burning. Is this what her brothers feel when they come down here? Is this what being close to the land is like? *Never disrespect the land or the rivers.* She thinks of her father speaking to her brothers. *We belong to each other.* Another swift movement near the surface of the water wins Juliet a second kill. It is so easy. She starts to gasp and shudder—how long has she been in the water she cannot tell—and the failed laughter turns to sobs. She grits her teeth. She is fine. She is fine. Crying out as she flings the second fish to the shore, Juliet stumbles backward in the water. They seem to come in closer, the fish. They crowd around her. There are many of them in the pool, making her heart pump faster, her breath thrashing against her lungs. There can’t be this many fish in one pond. They shouldn’t be so close. She lashes out, striking another eager victim accidentally, and hurls it to the ground with the knife. Everything like ice. The leaves shine bright and painful green above. There are fish all around, vying closer, swimming tight along the lines of her frail body and they are crying, crying. Juliet is crying too as one hand grips the snow-packed bank and the other enfolds another sickly slick body.

It is a searing scramble to climb outside the pool with deadweight legs. She wants to let the little fish go but it will not leave her hand. It winds up in the snow with the others, and around her the fish are screaming and one and two and three more more leap from the liquid world to gasp upon the land, wriggling toward her, but almost all slip back to the water’s edge.
She begs them to stop. The water is dark and fully red, a world wet with fever pitch and anger. She finally heaves her weak body, blazing with chill, onto the bank.

The fish stop their screaming. There is no trace of them as she eyes the pool. The water rests calm, without record of blood. Juliet breathes harsh against her icy lungs. She cannot think for the heaviness of her breath.

One. Two. Three. Four. One. Two. Three. Four. One. Two. Three. Four. Again and again she counts to be sure. One. Two—the fish lie dead and bloody before her on the snow pack. They are not silver at all, but dull earthy browns, or tinted green, traced blue, gold speckled, red—Three. Four. One for Emil. Two for Robert. Three for Andrew. Four for her father. They will all have to share. She didn’t get enough. The tears on her cheeks have frozen.

Staggering to her feet, Juliet does not bother with clothes; the thought of them slicing against her skin horrifies her. She only wants home. Instead she forces her knees to a bend, skin blue and puckered and on fire, and collects the fish against the small slope of her breast. She winces as the blood smears across her, as fish lips kiss her tender.

_We take only for sustenance, not luxury._ Her father’s words won’t stop echoing in her head, but she can’t make sense of them through the scalding cold.

The light wanes as she stumbles back to the house: fevered, parched. The fish keep slipping out of her arms and every time one drops, thumping against the snow and sliding away, she kneels down to bite and drink the snow, to slap her tongue into the chill of a tiny canal. This is a fire never known, it is so cold, so unbearably hot. One. Two. Three. Four. Mother will be home by now, won’t she? Robert and Andrew might have woken up. They might know. All of them will be waiting. They will be so happy to see her. They will see how strong she is. One. Two. Three. Four. These fish are all she has to show. Their scales remain slick and bleeding, like
a man through his armor. Her skin is dry and cracked all over. Water, water, water. Water is the key out here. Respect the land, respect the life giver. That was their chant, wasn’t it? They will all be sitting by the fire maybe. They won’t give her water because she’s done stupid things. Because she is frozen fire. Where is Emil? Where is Andrew to scold her for going out in the cold? A guttural sound escapes her lips, but she cannot squeeze out any tears. Has no one ever realized the snow is a desert? The water has set her on fire. Anything, please. They will be so pleased.

Smoke hovers and twists above the roof of the house before her searing eyes when she approaches. Thank god the pool is not far, thank god she is here already and they are all here. Stupid, beautiful girl. Her mother was right, her brothers were right never to ask a thing of her. But if they will not let her be part of this land then she will be part of the rest of the world, with the people and the cars and the town, hours away. Her fish seem to breathe and bleed around her splayed fingertips, their fins seem to cut into her chalk frail frame.

—Andrew? the whisper feels like a shout, scratching along her throat. Everything is so hot but she is just outside the door. No one comes to greet her approach. No one cares. One. Two. Three. Four. Why should she follow her father’s stupid rules for her brothers? Why should they never eat the stupid, special fish? Why should they not swim in the stupid, special water? They are so close, her family, please.

—Emil? Emil, are you there?

Her fish heave open the door and Juliet can tell her skin is boiling and cracking. Such a stupid, selfish family for a stupid, selfish girl.

The living room is neat and clean. The hearth is lit, her brother’s and father’s boots stand by the door. Sweat courses down Juliet’s back, between her legs, around her neck and temple.
There is no water in this god forsaken place. She can feel her legs again, but this is not an improvement; they are burning logs, crisped stalks, dry and dead. The fish reek. Their smell fills the house, but they are not in her arms. They are giant and bleeding in pools: wrapped in a blanket on the couch, propped in a corner by the stove, eyes staring, lying across the floor, coming out of the bedroom. Fish, fish, her thoughts jitter and stumble, don’t be like that. Juliet swoons, staggering against a wall. Their stench fills her mouth and she fumbles to the bathroom doorway, slumping against it until it opens. There is crying somewhere, a high keening she has not the strength to question.

She scrambles to the toilet, retches smoke and charred tongue into it. It is impossible that no one is home. Those stupid fish. They should all be home. Why did they leave her? Mother will be proud. Beside the toilet, the tub is full. This is not bloody water like the lake and she wants to weep for gratitude. Always with gratitude—the gifts of the water. She is a gracious girl. Dark lines of red trace across the living room floor, reaching toward the bathroom. It will burn her, she is sure. There is a shuffling outside the door, some shadowy form she cannot make out, her vision blurry.

—Andrew? Emil? So weak. They won’t see how strong she is if they do not come home.

The blood creeps closer, into the bathroom. She crawls nearer to the tub; she will be safe there and it will stop this burning. She will show them later and they will know how stupid she is and she will show them how stupid they are. Why did they always try so hard to protect her? Why did they never teach her? —One. Two. Three. She counts aloud and climbs into the porcelain tub. The water is just barely warm and perfectly clear. Four. One. Two. She thinks of the fish bodies like dead bodies in her home. Three. Four. One. The burning has to stop first. She
must wait for the blood to recede. Two. Three. Four. They should have known better than to hope something different.

The wailing is Juliet’s mother, crouched by the beds of her sons, holding the bodies: thick and shiny scales, gaping mouths, gaping eyes. Her husband lies fallen, stabbed and squirming in the kitchen, her oldest son bleeding into the sofa cushions as he rested. The bathroom door remains cracked open. Blood stains the tiles as Juliet’s mother sobs her way from one body to the next. The tub, when their mother drags herself over, reeks, filled with a hundred swimming fishes frantic and her baby’s eyeballs, her fingernails, her hair strands.

No body.

No baby girl.

Just a hundred little fishes of the lakes and streams, and crying.
They took her to the woods blindfolded while the sun set. She never tried to run. She stroked the little gold ring on her right hand instead, and focused on the tickling progression of the light down her face, tracing over her lips, and how the air was still cool despite the rays. Cool like their hands were cool, both Willa and Ariel holding on to one of hers, taking her down a narrow path through the tall grasses, past the last of the college town homes and little fences. They felt almost the same—their hands. Long and slender fingers, smooth and icy and gripping hard. She thought of her mother's hands, and the way they’d cup softly around Giorgia's as a child, or crease the spine of a book as she held it to read. Giorgia pretended it was indeed her mother leading her and not these beautiful strangers.

"Are you ready, sweet?" Ariel's voice fell too thick with affection.

Giorgia bit her lip to force back a retort and remembered she was alone.

"We'll dress you all in white," Ariel murmured. "We'll pour lavender oil in your hair."

That day they had come to her in the garden with some delicate, forgotten familiarity Giorgia could not place, and slipped their waify hands around her wrists and whispered in her ear. Ariel with her sand-dune skin body and her belly round with child, Willa tired-looking and lithe and the faint hue of fog. Giorgia could not but rise to follow them though her heartbeat rushed at their presence, painful. It was the same fear of half-forgotten dreams in waking.

Giorgia's lips now formed a tight, even line at Ariel's words, and she closed her eyes beneath the blindfold and made sure to walk strictly heel-toe as they continued: something to occupy her thoughts. She did not flinch at the rocks or uneven path.

"Please don't make that face, sweet."

"Don't tell me what to do."
A hand struck her face, quick and sharp. Giorgia gasped and a breeze rushed against the sting. At the corner of her lips blood traced and tasted of iron.

They did not speak again until they stopped walking some twenty minutes later when the ground became soft and grassy and the path disappeared.

Giorgia could feel the sun slipping between branches and the breeze had picked up. The ring felt tight on her finger, but she did not pull on it. An old token from childhood; she could not even remember where it'd come from. It seemed only to have slipped into her life one day and so it had been ever since.

"We're here. Are you ready?" Willa's voice was heavier than Ariel's, pressing against Giorgia's ears as her hand pressed against Giorgia's shoulder. These women smelled of tree bark and the old chrysanthemums about her parents' home.

Giorgia grit her teeth and willed her heart to slow its thudding.

The silk of the blindfold slipped away and for a moment her vision clouded, but Ariel reached out and held Giorgia before she fell.

Around, the trees were not thick: little slips of smooth bark growing straight and true, branches clustering together above the women. Their slender forms left room for easy walking, their roots never peeking above loamy ground. Almost, Giorgia could recall afternoons spent racing between these trees, hiding, seeking, daring; who with? Tiny lights crowded the trees' limbs and down their trunks, tracing webs across each other, lighting up the wood as the sun sank deeper and shadows crept with teeth.

For a few moments Giorgia remembered her father's bedtime stories with their lonely woodland spirits, their schemes and magic. Always falling in love with humans. Stealing them.
They almost never made it home, did they? She felt tears sting her eyes at the memory and around them shapes began creeping in the wood.

She thought of her friends, moving new places, starting new schools, planning. She twisted her ring fretfully and lowered her lashes so her vision blurred into tiny starbursts of hazy light. That way, perhaps, it would become a dream and, upon waking, there would be a future.

Willa kissed one of Giorgia's chapped cheeks and Ariel the other, their lips rough like sand and stinging at the beads of earlier blood. They melded back into the group of approaching figures.

Giorgia’s bones felt weak beneath her now clammy skin, but she kept looking forward and pushed her back straight.

“Who are you?” she asked, meaning to be loud, meaning her voice to be level. It was harder with the churning of her stomach. The air felt moist and cool. Sunlight lingered somewhere out of sight, frozen for immeasurably long and giving the area, with its endless hanging lights, a soft, impossible glow.

"Step forward, love." A man's voice called slow and deep, squeezing inside her throat and Giorgia obeyed, uncertain from which shadow figure it came.

"You have such beautiful bones, such lovely veins. Your eyes are blue as ever."

The timbre called to her memory, but she could not place it quite. She tugged on her ring, fingers trembling, and then clenched them into fists.

“Who are you?” she repeated.

He stepped forward, out of the circle forming: a darkly clad figure, face obscured by a bird mask, feathers splayed out along the top, long beak arching away from his face, small eye
sockets. It felt as something from a dream of hers. He moved languidly and she breathed the chilly air in quicker bursts.

Soon there were no gaps in the circle of bodies around them, though the man remained slightly inside the circle with her, but at some distance. Each figure wore black—long tunics, belted—if they wore anything at all. Many were naked, exposing intricate, swirling tattoos up their arms and legs, and their skin was each a new shade of desert or cloud or marshland. She stood uncomfortably centered, trying to close herself off; she wanted at once to stare at their lavish skin, their women’s high, small breasts with dark, expansive areoles, the men’s cocks, hanging and hairless, narrow chested. Icy. She closed her eyes, face hot with embarrassment and fear. A memory of her mother brushing her hair crowded her mind, filling it up with the gentle murmuring—children’s tales of dryads and satyrs, how their blood was the soil and their bodies only extensions of the earth. They’re tricksters, her mother would say, teasing, don’t ever trust them. Giorgia's heart sank with each thought, breath growing shallow.

“Go away.” But no one listened.

Naked or clothed, all were dressed in mask and feathers too, otherworldly faces obscured by various darkly painted animal facades. They leered at her—teeth of stone and wood and root, some smooth faces, some covered in bark or fur. A circle of monsters or mad men of shattering beauty. Giorgia tried to keep her eyes steady, but her spine tingled and the bird-masked man stepped closer.

"I'm so glad you've come. This will not be painful."

"I don't want to be here." Her voice did not break til the end.

He may have smiled a little beneath the mask.

"Of course you do," he said, taking her hand, "You promised."
Her veins felt filled with ice and he traced a line down her jaw with one finger. She held back the urge to bite.

"Why?" The word escaped softly: a tiny bird of breath to hang between them. She had not meant to ask.

He leaned in close to her ear, breath thick and hot, like burning wood. "We missed you. We waited so long to have you back." He eyed the ring on her finger and reached out a slender hand to touch it lightly. “It looks better on you now than ever. You’ve grown into it.”

She thought of playing in the woods as a child. Of pretending, like the stories, she could be part of the very earth and of the sweet shadow voices. She did not look him in the eye.

Without command, two of the circle's dark figures approached her—one man with hair the color of moonlight, and a woman with no hair at all—and placed their cool hands gently upon her shoulders and back. “Don’t!” she yelped and squirmed away but they held her in place. He wore the face of an owl, and she a wolf, the teeth glinting in the tree lights.

The bird man stepped back and Giorgia almost had the urge to reach out for him.

The two new figures began to undress her, one button of her blouse at a time, while the others watched. Giorgia bit her tongue to bleeding and wanted to bolt, but something held her tight and still and close, and she squeezed her eyes shut once more while her body quaked beneath their nimble hands and she wondered if the tree lights could be like stars, because she missed those in the wood. She thought of the ring squeezing against her skin and all those times in the forest as a child. It had been a gift. It had been a gift and a little girl’s game with imaginary friends. The tears began slipping down her cheeks. She hadn't known. Bile rose in her throat and she told herself the strangers' hands were only little fish swimming about her when the man and the woman rubbed lavender oil up and down her torso and her legs, when they traced her in dark
inks like theirs, massaged her shoulders and her back, and Giorgia pressed her feet into the soil harder to keep from crying out.

"You're all light and terror inside," the woman murmured, taking Giorgia's hair in her slick hands and beginning to braid. "But Bone Mother will love you."

Giorgia squeezed her eyes shut tighter. "I have a mother," she crooned.

Standing and kissing the space between Giorgia's collarbones, the owl man stepped away. The spot burned as from starburst: bright and violent.

She opened her eyes again only when the wolf left her too, body tense and shivering, and Ariel stood only a few yards away with her belly large and exposed. She smiled softly and held a man's hand. Giorgia wondered briefly if the child would be born with downy wings, or fish tail or fox ears. Maybe a child of these folk would be something closer to stone. She heaved an unsteady breath, imagining her own body wrapped in roots, cold and heavy.

Another woman—crane—stepped forward next and kissed the crook of Giorgia's elbow, grazing the skin with her teeth. "Are you ready?" she asked.

Giorgia shook her head, jerking away. "No."

"You will be ready soon," replied the crane, and when a third woman handed her a white bundle, she slipped it over Giorgia's head, pulling her arms up, and proceeded to smooth the wrinkles out of the silk and lace dress.

The bird man came to her again as the crane slipped away. "Dance with me," he said breathing deeply, and rested her head against his shoulder. They began moving slowly in the open space to some internal rhythm, and though her steps were stiff he did not seem to mind. She could feel the faint ice of his skin through the dark cloth. "Did you ever imagine such a perfect scene?"
"What do you want?" Her voice quaked frail against the air and the lights turned into butterflies around her. Giorgia’s whole body felt fatigued from tension and she kept thinking of the shadows against the trees as a little girl, and their sweet laughter. Didn’t the tales always warn? Wasn’t it always changelings and abductions and tricks? But how they had taught her to listen to rocks and water drops and always asked if she loved them!

She had always said yes.

What child wouldn’t have always said yes?

"I want to bring you home," he murmured into her ear, and it sounded of nostalgia seeping into her joints. He kissed her cheek softly.

"I don't want to go home with you." Her words fumbled, mixed up.

The circle began to clap in sync, a slow beat with which to move, their bodies blurring in Giorgia's vision, her eyes stinging. She remembered him clad in moss and bark and silk, kneeling down before her wide, young eyes. She remembered him holding the gold ring out to her and how she'd laughed with delight and danced around between the figures. Nine years? Nine years ago a child. Ariel had been there. Ariel had hugged her little body, kissed her forehead. How was a child to know such wretched games?

"I am home, love. You can't change that now."

She wanted to clutch at her throat, to remove the vibration of his voice from her vocal chords. He held her hands fast.

She imagined the clapping as a heartbeat, steadier than her own, and she tried to match it but the breathing wouldn't come. Her body shuddered, convulsed. She could smell him, like pine needles and turned dirt and wet sandstone.

She’d only meant to play.
The clapping stopped suddenly and the others began pairing off, dancing around Giorgia and the bird man, slipping in and out between the trees. Her stomach turned. It was the same wood, of course. Of course it was the same. She saw Willa turning with another elegant woman, shadowless beneath the lights. They were beautiful, she thought, and bit her tongue again, tasting blood. She remembered dancing at her parents’ wedding, hoping she’d have one just like it. She’d never even told her mom and dad what happened—where the golden token came from all those years ago.

A butterfly landed on her hand, which lay on his shoulder, and she cried out in surprise as the little moon-glow of its body flew away. “Don’t cry, love.” His voice was velvet.

When she stopped dancing he stopped with her, but the others all kept on, their masks turning right into skin, puncturing the flesh and digging in, their limbs too long and too lithe, like moving would hide the stillness inside.

"Will you call me Eden?"

"No." Her lips were wet, thick with salt, and she knew his eyes were sad.

"You will." The softness of his voice could break her bones.

He kissed her cheek and pulled away with her hot tears on his lips.

He laid her down in the grass and it was cold inside her skin and Giorgia thought of Ariel’s baby and what it’d be like to be born to death. Would it be cold this way? Would the infant cry like her? Would there be blood?

Her toes were going numb when Eden kissed her right hand and removed the ring. She clenched her teeth tightly, head shaking slowly from side to side: “Let me go.” The trees shimmered in halo all around them. Eden slipped the ring on to her left hand ring finger and pulled out a long, slender knife from his belt. He kissed her forehead and traced a finger down
her side. She was still crying, but without sound and almost without shaking. The others kept
dancing. Her bones felt collapsible, her fingers like petals as Eden interlaced his in hers.

"We’re with you, love. Patient nine years to the day. You've always wanted to be here.”

His eyes were bright, reflecting the lights and the butterflies’ glow.

She wanted to imagine she was visiting her parents, practicing how she would tell them
she was moving so much farther away than they'd thought and ask them if they'd love her even if
she was gone.

"I'm afraid," she said instead, and licked the salt and the metallic taste from the corner of
her lips as he cut into her skin, right below the breast and down her abdomen. It felt like hands
reaching in and rearranging, tightening, holding her heartbeat steady. And then a pressure on her
face—something carved and wooden and fitted to her features. Sharp points digging into skin.
There was blood cool down her face like their hands had been and dimly she imagined the metal
taste at each puncture point while around them the others started singing high and slow—the way
stars fall—and Eden whispered to her again,

"I love you,"

and there was no more light.
Takis shuffled around some odd metal pieces in the trunk of his car, stalled for the third time this afternoon. If he made enough noise with Yanni (splayed out beneath the car, pretending to tinker as well, or maybe actually tinkering), the two American girls would keep giggling at their luck instead of thinking Takis and Yanni were just some creeps.

Takis was thirty-two and frequently picked up hitchhikers and, assuming Yanni was with him, he’d roll a spliff and they’d all get a little stoned until Takis decided it was convenient to drop them off. It was like a routine by now, but Yanni liked it (Takis suspected because it gives him the illusion of having many, varied friends), and with every stop Takis always hoped to unlock some hidden door for the future. That this traveling stranger he’d really get on with and they’d talk about his business dream (a thriving hostel) and suddenly they’d make it happen. Or at least encourage Takis and send everyone they knew to his business that did not yet exist.

His wife, Zoe—his ex-wife, Zoe (he cringed still at the term)—had always chided him for those silly dreams: not the business itself, but his romanticized solutions. Zoe with her smile half-quirked like she was shy to show it, her wide, soft hips filling into thick thighs. How he loved to wedge apart that tender skin when they made love—

His head smacked against the open trunk, a large metal basin clanging to the ground. These American girls, hitchhikers picked up late this morning, laughed from a small perch across the road, presumably gossiping about these two foreign men while looking out over the valley, views dotted with villages and olive groves. They were mountainside in the north country and the air was crisp with new spring and flowers, the landscape stretching and holding its breath for
the coming beauty. Takis put on a grin (intentionally half-pained) and asked Yanni if he’d figured anything out.

“Not worth the effort anymore. She’s pretty worn out,” Yanni replied with a slight smile, crooked. He always said this and they have always made it. Takis thought of Zoe momentarily. One year to the day that she left.

“You want some help over there?” One of the girls, Melanie, called over to them, still laughing.

Takis smiled widely for her. She had a slim, soft looking body, red locks pulled up in a hair tie and falling around her face. “No, no. Relax!” What did the Americans say? *Girl next door?* He’d continued practicing English since Zoe left. His accent wasn’t bad he thought, but he couldn’t be quite sure. “We will fix it, no problem!”

They had been going to show the girls how beautiful the area was, taking a little dirt road with nicer views around to the next town they needed. The girls oohed and aahed perfectly until the car started having problems.

“All this uphill fighting, Takis,” Yanni motioned at the vertical slant of the road. “It wore her out.” He patted the car affectionately, as if it were his own.

“Hey, guys. Maybe we should call someone!” The other girl, Kylie, spoke up in a strained voice, trying to sound pleasant. “We just really need to get to town for the night. We have a lot more road ahead of us.”

Tensing a little from the implied accusation, Takis waved his hand again. “It is okay, okay!” he said. “We have it!”

“Yeah, I know,” she seemed reluctant. “It’s just that this is, what, the third time?” Uncrossing her skinny legs from where she and Melanie sat, she stood up, approaching the two
men. “I just think Melanie and I really need to get going. I don’t mean to sound rude at all! I just
mean that we’re supposed to meet some friends by tomorrow night, and so tomorrow’s going to
be a full day of travel even getting to town tonight.”

Wondering how much was honesty, how much paranoia from Hollywood horrors, Takis
nodded. “Of course, of course. We get there no problem. Do not worry, okay.”

Melanie had come over to stand beside her friend, lip ring glittering in the afternoon
light. Succulent lips, just like Zoe.

“Hey, Kylie, it’s all mellow. We’ll get there when we get there.” She laughed and Takis
smiled. Some people fit into other cultures so naturally. Melanie motioned to the little car,
pushed up at the side of a hill. “I mean, how ridiculous is this! You can’t rush these things.”

Kylie bristled. “Yeah, I know, I was just saying the sooner the better.”

“It doesn’t really matter that much.” Melanie rolled her eyes and grinned knowingly in
Takis’ direction, like sharing a secret, like making them a team.

“Actually it kind of does.” Kylie’s voice strained tighter, Takis guessed more from
Melanie’s provocation than actual concern. “Graham and Linda have worked their entire
schedule around us so we could all travel together.”

“Yeah, but you can’t really plan this stuff—”

“God, Mel, will you shut up? You’re Miss Super Traveler who can just do whatever, but
some of us like to plan a little or, I don’t know, not screw over our friends.”

“Kylie. Chill.” Melanie’s voice sharpened finally. Takis casually eased himself back
towards the open hood of the car, away from the girls, but still listened. He was a sucker for soap
opera drama and these girls sometimes (only sometimes so far) were just like those awful
American T.V. shows. Zoe had started him watching them—guilty pleasures. “I just mean it’s out of our hands anyway, so we might as well enjoy it.”

Kylie groaned, crossed her arms tightly over her chest and rolled her eyes. “You think you’re so fuckin’ cool.” Her face flushed with anger. “Whatever. Fuck you.” She only murmured the last words but Melanie and Takis both heard. Before Melanie could retort Yanni broke in suddenly from beneath the rear of the car.

“Got it! We can go again!”

The girls sat side by side in the backseat, arms crossed, not looking at each other. It reminded Takis of their youth—twenty one? Twenty two at most. If this little argument could leave them so tightlipped, he thought, they’d never make it through relationships. Zoe was always the worst about fights. She’d storm around the house, throwing pillows, waving her arms around, always quick to tears and yells (but quicker, perhaps, to laughter and kisses). But the few times they really got into it she’d get dead quiet. Big, expressive, lips drawn into a tight line, face blanched white, limbs stilled and tight together. Takis wilted at the memory; he should have been better for her. He glanced back at the girls. No, he thought, they’d never really known anything yet. Momentarily his gaze followed the pink curve of Melanie’s cheek, her collarbone peeking under spaghetti straps. Who knows what Zoe had been like at her age though. Maybe the very same. It seemed impossible now; sometimes all he could remember of Zoe anymore was the pained creases around her eyes when she told him she was leaving.

“So what good music do you have?” Melanie finally broke the silence (startling Takis), still without acknowledging her friend.

Yanni busied his hands in the passenger seat, packing weed into slim rolling paper.
“What kind do you like?” asked Takis.

“Rock-n-roll.” She grinned and her whole visage lit up. Maybe more like Zoe, after all, the thought flitted through Takis’s mind, layering images of Zoe’s smile against this girl’s against the green and groves of the countryside. They had maybe an hour of driving before reaching his home city, where the girls had said they were happy to stay. A smudge of hurt blotted against his heart when Melanie caught his eye. It had been awhile since a woman looked at him with so little reservation. Most of his friends were his family, most of the women well aware of Zoe or already with some other man. Sometimes Takis wondered at the faithfulness of everyone, pride in his friends mixing with a touch of resentment. Maybe it meant something that this loud, adventurous girl showed up on this day. Maybe.

“So American,” Yanni quipped.

She laughed, and Kylie looked out the window with another eye-roll.

“I like other things too. Like drugs. And sex,” she added.

Takis blushed a little behind the wheel, but Yanni replied smoothly.

“Very original.” He lit the spliff and took a hit. The sickly sweet aroma filled the little car. He passed it to Takis.

“You can’t say you don’t like it!” She took the roll Takis offered. “Besides.” She took a long drag. “I asked what you guys listen to.” She handed it wordlessly to Kylie who, a little begrudging, took a hit as well and passed it back to Yanni.

“You know...we like a lot...” Takis paused and looked to his friend, hoping for inspiration, "rembetiko—it is music for revolutionaries." Melanie looked at him blankly, smiling a little but without meaning. “It is our traditional music. My father used to play it."
"Oh, cool," but Melanie had nothing else to add, her enthusiasm stunted. Then: "Can you teach me some words?"

Takis grinned; this wasn't going so badly after all.

"Yes, yes! What do you know?" he asked.

Melanie giggled, rolling her eyes, blushing. "Nothing. Yet! I'm the worst, I know. Go easy on me!"

Laughing agreeably he began with good morning. "Kali mehra. But you must say the 'r' soft, like in Spanish."

Melanie repeated obediently, butchering the pronunciation, as she took the spliff once more. For ten minutes she giggled her way through good morning, good evening, and goodnight with an almost understandable accent with Takis' consistent encouragement.

"Kylie you try!" Melanie turned smiling to her friend, but Kylie blushed.

"I don't want to," she said. "I'd ruin it." Silence fell and she felt guilty, searched for another topic. "But what about that music you mentioned?"

"Rembetiko?" Yanni switched on the radio to something old-school (lots of people listened to more Pop 100 hits than either man wanted to admit) while Takis smiled, pleased. A twanging tune began, and a strong nasally voice outpoured from the speakers. Behind them the girls winced and immediately Takis began trying to remember the American bands his older brother always liked. Something impressive the girls would like too.

"Or Led Zeppelin we like a lot," Takis cut in. It was the first thing he could think of. He’d heard a few of their songs over the years. “Yanni, do we have Led Zeppelin?” Yanni rolled his eyes, turning down the radio, but didn’t say anything. “And Bobby, er, Bob Dylan. We like them a lot.”
“Oh, I love Bob Dylan!” Melanie bounced a little in the backseat with renewed enthusiasm, leaning forward so that her breath almost tickled the back of his neck. “Tangled Up in Blue? My favorite. So good!”

Glowing a little with satisfaction, Takis took another hit. “Yes, definitely a good one. One of his best.” Takis was pleased, too, at how much he was understanding even Melanie’s rushed English. He missed the British lilt of Zoe’s voice but even American English held a little magic too, he thought.

Yanni didn’t call his friend’s bullshit; best to let him soak in any attention he could. God knew Zoe had fucked him right up.

“You know he was really a great businessman, Bobby,” continued Takis, determined to keep them interested, entertained.

Melanie snorted in the backseat. “Bobby?”

“Everyone here calls him that if they know him.” His words fell a little harshly, tripping over each other, but his fierce blush would have given him away if Melanie could have seen it.

“Mhmmm. Go on.”

“Well. He knew for what he wanted I mean. All great men do. You know what you want and you do it.” An image of Zoe crashed into his mind and he shook it away, focusing his gaze on Melanie instead through the rearview. She’s beautiful, he told himself. She likes me. Of course she likes me. He thought of Zoe listening to his family's old music recordings, sprawled out and dozing. Melanie seems like such a great girl, he repeated. Couldn’t saying it make it true? “And, you know, he is who I always think of for my business.”

The spliff continued circulating the car. Kylie stared lazily out the window, anger softening into hazy disinterest.
“Oh, so you’re a businessman, is that it?” Melanie grinned, teasing. He focused back on the road.


“Really?” She edged forward again, bending toward him, her shirt collar dipping just enough to peek down, but he looked guiltily away after a moment. “What do you do?”

“I own a hostel. I build it myself.” He wavered momentarily. “In construction right now, so it is not open still. But I have a full staff.” He imagined Zoe snickering at his lies; his heart sank a little and he plowed on. “We have reception and cleaning and a whole team just for design and the internet.” He imagined he’d have liked doing online and digital work if he’d gone to school. “We are growing.”

“Wow, Takis—that’s really impressive! How come you didn’t mention that before? We would have stayed with you!” She smiled, biting the tip of her tongue, a few strands of bright hair framing her face.

He thrummed a little with pleasure and laughed.

“No, no, not yet! We have too much happening right now with the—” he searched for the right word, “renovation? We cannot have guests right now. But, Yanni, we did not ask—” he looked at his friend, who had been playing on his phone most of the conversation. “Where do you girls stay tonight? Do you have a place to go?”

“Well, we’re supposed to meet this guy in town for coffee. Have you heard of Couchsurfing? It’s through that. And we’re hoping that after meeting us he won’t mind if we crash at his place for the night.”

“No—is that safe? It does not sound good to me.” He hoped his voice sounded assertive but friendly. “You should stay at my place, not with some stranger man.”
Melanie laughed, eyes softening sweetly. “I appreciate that, Takis, but it’s really safe, I promise.”

Kylie broke in sleepily. “What’s safe?”

Yanni, by now, had perked up a bit; his friend never invited hitchhikers over.

“Meeting that guy from CS. Takis was just offering us his place. Did you know he runs a hostel?”

Kylie sharpened a little. “I think we should still meet him. He seems really nice.”

“Well, yeah, but it would also be really nice to stay with Takis.”

“Yeah. Takis is great.” They were whispering in the back, but it made little difference; it wasn’t a big car. “But we already agreed to meet this guy. I don’t just want to up and change plans on him.”

“We don’t even know if we can stay at his place.”

“Melanie, he’s not going to turn us away. Besides, he seemed really trustworthy and fun.”

Takis shifted a little uncomfortably. Was he not trustworthy or fun? Kylie kept her eyes decidedly away from catching his.

“I have a lot of space at my house.” He cut in, trying to keep his tone light. He was fun. “Come to stay as long as you want.” He shrugged, hoping he wasn’t being too bold.

But Melanie smiled and he felt he’d played it perfectly. Kylie just looked at her friend, irritation rising again.

“Thank you so much, Takis! We’ll figure out a game plan when we get there! We’d definitely love to stay with you, we just need to get in touch with this guy to check some things.”
The drive wasn’t long after that. He and Melanie chatted about music a little more, she ooh-ed and aah-ed just enough at his (only kind of fake) business. Every giggle and pique in interest encouraged his confidence; he spoke smoothly, thought himself quite the gentleman, did not think of his wife talking about her day with him or the bending of her body when she helped him pull weeds, the soft and heavy fall of her breasts beneath tank top in the sun, the slight salt of her skin when he kissed it. He did not think of Zoe. He did not think of Zoe constantly still.

The little town, when they reached it, fed off the cracked, two lane road, its buildings small and rusted looking as they seemed to fall all towards the main avenue, too excitable and thoroughly exhausted. This whole country: too excitable and exhausted, trying too hard against foreign meddling. As soon as Takis parked in front of his favorite scroungy, whitewashed restaurant, Kylie was pulling out a blue scratched phone. The kind, he presumed, that is like carrying around a small computer, and priced like one too.

“Thanks so much, you guys,” said Kylie (somewhat brusquely), getting out of the backseat. “It means to us that you would give us a lift!”

How many times Takis had heard this he wasn't quite sure, but it always made him feel like he was doing something worthwhile with his time.

“Of course, of course, our pleasure!” He replied, scratching the back of his head. Yanni stood beside the car, stretching casually. He (how?) never seemed affected when it came time to part ways. Soft heart, Zoe always said. Sappy, and she’d kiss him gently, curl up beside him. “If you want we could get food together if you feel hungry.” Takis added, already assuming they’d say no and scuttle off to their mystery man. His confidence wore thin quickly.

Melanie looked right at him and smiled. “That would be wonderful.”

Stopping her subtle but steady backwards walk, Kylie gave her friend a sidelong glare.
“Actually I don’t think we can, guys, I’m sorry! Mel, I’m going to call that guy because we should be meeting him soon.” The words sounded friendly enough, but Takis could hear the tightness in Kylie’s voice.

“Kylie,” Melanie turned, “don’t be so rude. We can at least grab a bite, right?” She grinned and turned back to Takis. “We would love to join you.”

“Mel, I’m not going to bail on this guy. He’s been really great about inviting us into his home, okay?”

“Then you go,” snapped Melanie. “It’s not a big deal. I’ll meet you later and you can go hang out with that guy. Might do you some good.”

“Fine. Fuck it.” Glancing to her phone, she scrolled through Google maps and started walking down the block. “See you sometime, Mel.”

She disappeared around the corner.

“I need to go also,” said Yanni after a few moments. “I have some work before family comes tomorrow. Melanie, have a good trip, I hope.”

Takis felt monumentally more uncertain after Yanni left, so casually disappearing down the road talking on his phone—his brother or sister, probably. Momentary bitterness seized him that Yanni, that his supposed best friend, would leave him now; what was he supposed to do? Would he be interesting enough for this American girl? He’d always counted on having lots of people (or at least someone else) to help anytime he was with new people. Zoe had always called him crazy for that, telling him over and over how good he was with people, blahblahblahlah. For a few moments he stood next to Melanie in the parking lot without a word, frozen, panicking slightly.
“So…about dinner? I could definitely use some food.” She laughed, turning to face him directly. “Do you know a place? Or if you live nearby maybe that would be easiest? You could show me what it’s like to live here?”

Internally he heaved a sigh of relief.

“Yes, yes—I can cook you something homemade! I live very near here, only a few minutes’ drive.” He grinned back at her. “We can go?”

Takis’ home was a small one bedroom apartment in a large, blocky cement building. Nothing recommended it from the outside, but it had at least a big window looking out across the grey-roofed and littered town, olive groves pushing at the edges in the distance. A neat little kitchen table took up part of the small living room with a few old, scattered bills. Takis wondered as he led her in if she might find him a slob; he hadn’t done much upkeep since Zoe left. It wasn’t too bad, he thought, but maybe he wasn’t a fair judge.

Melanie smiled and chattered, settling into one of the chairs at the table.

He brought out two full glasses of dark honey wine.

“Always a drink before dinner.”

She grinned and accepted, taking a sip.

“So where’d you get the idea for a hostel?”

Takis shrugged. “I have wanted it for a long time. I meet a lot of travelers, you know—a lot of hitchhikers like you. My father always said to have a good business brain and I like people. It is a good fit I think.”

“Yeah, that sounds like a great idea, Takis. It makes sense to me. Have you traveled before? Who’s helping you with it?”
He blushed a little, taking a gulp of wine. “I have traveled a little. Not very far, and not very long. Two or three countries, two or three weeks, when I was younger. Family is important here. I spend a lot of time seeing family around my country, not seeing strangers far away.”

“That’s great! Not enough people care about family you know, I mean look at me—I couldn’t wait to fly across an ocean and get away. Is it a family business? The hostel I mean.”

“No, no—just me. Most of my family is not so happy with tourists.”

“Ah. I see.”

“Not you! I mean,” he stuttered and glanced between the wine and Melanie. “I did not mean that to you. Not all tourists are the same.”

She chuckled a little, looking away and took a long draught of wine. “I can’t really blame them. You get people like me coming in and out and expecting this and that all the time.

“Yes, but people should come together. See new places and also be close. I mean to learn.” He shifted a little closer to her, not sure if he should be talking about this stupid hostel anymore. His stomach was full of butterflies and his thoughts flicked to Zoe. It meant something that this girl had showed up today; he wanted it to mean something.

“Yes, I agree. It’s important.” Melanie leaned forward, setting down her glass, and Takis bent forward too so that their lips touched, very softly at first but then with more force.

Melanie tasted like stale sunflower chips, salty and dry. Maybe he tasted like an open wound, thinking of his wife. They sat that way—small chasm between their bodies (excepting the lips) while Takis debated putting his hand to caress the back of her neck—a few moments too long. Melanie pulled away first, smiled a little awkwardly and sat back. Takis leaned back too, unsure what came next anymore, but hoping his face didn’t give him away. This had been a bad idea even before it started and he didn’t want her to see his embarrassment.
“You are very beautiful,” he blurted after another moment and hid his face in another gulp of wine.

“Thanks, Takis.”

She leaned forward again for a second kiss, this time somewhat less stiff and clumsy on his part.

“I, for one, would love to stay in a place like you’re making.”

His pride swelled with his desire.

“You should stay,” he murmured.

She kissed him again, wrapping an arm around his shoulder as he rested a hand warmly on her thigh, just below her shorts. His fingers patterned little circles on the skin there, sliding upwards every few rotations. She sucked on his lower lip and kissed down his neck.

A little sigh escaped his lips. “Zoe, ephomenhí.”

Melanie halted her progress, sitting up again.

Takis froze, opening his eyes.

“Uhm. Was that— Did you—?”

“No,” he filled in an answer without a formed question, but couldn’t think fast enough to translate an excuse. He probably could have convinced her it meant anything, that Zoe was just another word to teach her.

“Yeah. Uhm. Hmm.” She lifted his hand off of her ass, setting it back in his lap and scooted away. “Are you, I mean, are you seeing someone?”

“Well,” searching for an acceptable reply, he drew the word out with an exaggerated sigh and leaned back further. All at once it felt as if she had been in his apartment for some endless amount of hours. He felt a little sick, and spread his arms wide over the sofa, feigning ease. “You
know, I have an early morning tomorrow.” He wondered momentarily, absurdly, if his accent was thick.

“Yeah.” She laughed a little, shifting, putting more room between them. “I should get back to Kylie.”

“Do you want,” he couldn’t think quite what to offer at this point. “Do you want a ride or something?”

“No, no, that’s okay.” She was flushed and trying to stay polite.

“Yes. Well. Have a nice trip.” His plastered grin stuck at the corners as she rose, legs smooth and tan under her shorts. Was she relieved? Part of him wished she would feel insulted somehow. Mostly he felt tired, old. If she could just be gone already.

“Thank you, again, for the lift today.” She hesitated in front of him at the door, leaned a little forward as if unsure what to do (to kiss goodbye or hug or simply leave) and balked from each. They stood a few feet apart momentarily.

Maybe he should have said something, but he couldn't be bothered with English right now. He just wanted to lie down. His mind was tired, scattered.

Melanie walked out the door and down the hall towards the stairwell, already checking her phone. Takis looked after her and shut the door quietly. Sitting back on the couch, he stared blankly at the opposite wall. He thought of his wife, and where she was maybe walking home to, or who she was maybe walking home from. Maybe she, too, would need a lift one day and he’d run into her on the road sometime like how many dozens of strangers over the years. He closed his eyes and imagined Zoe sitting in the car beside him, and telling her about his business plan, lingered on the imagined excitement and support. He imagined holding her again, without space between.
“We’re not going tomorrow.”

Almost in unison Sophia and Clement let out loud whines. “But Dad.”

Adela eyes me from her place at the table, fitting Ian’s bib around his neck. Sophia and Clement wiggle in their seats, big eyes following my every move as I lift a stack of bowls from the cupboard to the table, but no one makes to take them. Adela has already laden the table with food.

“Clement. Take your plate.”

“But I wanna go!”

“Clement.” He is eight years old and I grow less patient every day; Adela always tells me I’m too harsh.

He looks down at his hands at the growl in my voice. I hope he doesn’t cry. Sophia quiets too, but continues looking at me with big, brown eyes.

“Come on, kids,” Adela breaks into the silence with a syrupy voice. “We have such a yummy lunch today. Clem, we even have raisin bread—see how sweet and warm it is.”

Ian hiccups, wags his arms in the air for my wife’s attention. Immediately she turns to him, cooing and kissing his infant neck playfully so he giggles. I imagine the sticky-soft of our youngest’s skin and cringe a little inwardly, picking up my own plate as I settle across the table.

My wife is getting older, heavier. She does not line her eyes anymore, or flush her cheeks. I can grab the flesh of her hips and buttocks away from her small frame when we make love, if we made love.
I scoop up several ladles-full of soup and dish it off between myself, Sophia, and Clem since apparently they will not do so for themselves.

“Please, Daddy?” Sophia whispers, plopping a little spoonful of greens onto her plate.

Wanting to snap at her, I sigh instead, resolve weaker for a moment.

“It’s okay, kids, Daddy and I are going to take all of you in the morning.” Adela sits back in her chair and pushes a small basket of bread toward Clem.

“Excuse me.” I lift a brow, my upper lip trembling a little in annoyance. We’ve discussed this for months, since there was first mention that something “special” was happening at this Reading. Whatever it is won’t be good. This clock’s been speaking our futures for hundreds of years; you don’t meddle with that, Reader or no.

“I think it’s a good idea,” she replies. Adela always was a small woman. Her body feels a little too big for her bones now and she will never undress for me even if I want her to. “We go every other year, every Reading—we should see what’s happening. If it’s big news, and it is big news, we should be part of it.”

I don’t want too much anymore though.

“Yeah, Dad!” Clem jumps in, reinvigorated by his mother’s support. “Cause it’s our clock in our city and so we should know what’s happening!” He smiles toothily at my wife.

“That’s right, Clem. We’re all part of this.”

“You don’t get to decide that, Adela.”

It’s the same fleshy body Ian and Clement and Sophia grab at with their small, sticky hands and kiss with children’s bubble-gum mouths.

She flashes her gaze to me coolly. “Neither do you, sweetheart.”
I watch the skin of her arm hang down a little as she reaches across Clem to tidy Sophia’s napkin, and push my chair back from the table. “I feel like a walk,” I say.

It’s their body anyway. Not hers. Not mine.

**

When we met it rained. The first time, I mean. We were only a block from the square, the clock-tower’s skyward thrust still visible from street level. We were hovering under the awning of a grocer I can't remember the name of. The clock had stopped working and the whole city panicked when Elias said he couldn’t read the letters so clogged up. That dirty shit, Elias. Adela worried too, wrapped in a coat twice her size.

“I’ve never seen it like this,” she’d murmured. I had been a strange man in a tall brown overcoat. My mustache was thickening into something quite nice. She was twenty-four, and her blonde hair curled down around her neck with the moisture.

“The letters are just tired,” I’d told her with a grin. “They want a rest from all of that prick’s reading.”

She’d laughed a little, politeness maybe, but I was interesting to her, even then. “Really,” I’d joked, “if you had that good-for-nothing staring at you every day, you’d be begging for a break too.” I eyed her thin necklace, her round breasts just peeking out from behind the bunched wool of her coat; it was only a thin dress beneath. “Then again, I bet you get a lot of that too, huh?”

Oh, how she blushed! That’s something worth remembering— Adela’s blush, when you could get her really flustered, really shy or pleased. Her whole face would turn bright rosy pink and those brown eyes became saucers and sparkled…

“That’s incredibly rude, you know?”
I don’t know another woman who’d have said a thing like that.

“I meant it as a compliment—”

“It wasn’t.”

God, I must have been upset! I don’t remember though, I only remember her delicate knuckles curled around her coat collar.

“I’m Filip, by the way.” I had reached out my hand for hers, wanting to offer a kiss.

She’d eyed me up and down, unconvinced maybe. But I already had her. There are some people you just can’t help but know.

And now what’s this shit with the clock tower? What I should’ve known then is that she’s got a temper and a will too strong for her own good and a fat mother. It’s a good idea, Filip—we’re going, she says. Ha! And what gives her the right to decide what this family should do? Because God dammit, aren’t they my kids too? Isn’t this my city? Adela isn’t even from here! Whatever bullshit scandal this is with the tower, someone should at least have asked the people who actually know the city. That no one thought to consult anyone at all…Elias’ manipulating, I’m sure. He thinks he’s so smart with his politician daddy, that prick.

The streets turn in circles while I fume, cluttered with trash and graffiti—some leftist propaganda like they think they know anything about how we should take care of ourselves. Some assholes have even made adverts for that damned Reading tomorrow, mixed in with snide editorials from local papers—Reading Blowout Bash: Elias hosts party in wake of unemployment, or Reader calls for “special event” at this year’s midwinter Reading. What little shits. Some people don’t event want the tower around at all! But you hear people all the time complaining about this stuff, just not with all this paparazzi frenzy. It makes me uneasy. It’s
possible Elias could actually do some fucking damage this time instead of just his normal bullshit.

It must be an hour at least that I’m out without any direction in mind. Every building, every old stone I could once pick out from any other; I could orient myself perfectly from anywhere in the city. And now? An angry old man sidetracked by littered papers, surrounded by trash piles and noisy, snotty kids, stalls of rotting vegetables.

Turning my mind back to Adela, I think of her from that first meeting again and let the melancholy settle in. I pretend I’m holding onto her delicate hands as I slowly wend my way back to our house, smashed between grimy buildings, their dirty laundry hung up between the windows.

Welcome home, Filip.

**

The kids are wreaking havoc in the living room when I return, all their little plastic toys scattered, hair tangled and flyaway. Clem and Sophia are racing cars, but Clem is almost throwing his to the finish line—the end of the living room rug—prompting Sophia to harsh squeals of indignation. I cannot imagine going over to join my children. Adela is always saying I don’t spend enough time with them… I hover in the doorway uncertainly, watching their energetic huffs and puffs. Am I supposed to feel closer as they get older? Will I have to wait until they’re fifteen? Twenty-five?

Adela is nearby, folding laundry in the hallway just outside where the kids are playing, disappearing to various rooms after some moments folding, then returning to fold more. I can see the faint outline of her bra from beneath her white dress. It’s the red one I used to tell her to wear
for nights out because I liked to glimpse the straps now and then, thinking about sliding them off her shoulders when we got home, kissing her neck and unbuttoning the back clasp…

Ian is napping in his crib, positioned against the wall by his siblings. This must be the first time his crib has ever been out of the bedroom. I double check my children again: Clem and Sophia playing. Ian with them, sleeping.

How long has it been? For how long have we not been alone together? Adela appears again, apparently not seeing me; is she only pretending? Is she still mad? Or can I surprise her? Her face is calm, quiet. The kids’ squeaks and yells, their hair-pulling and grappling don’t even phase her. It must be a woman’s gift, I suppose, because they carry the child for so long, they have more patience. But I don't want to think of her pregnant now, or motherly, or serene. I want us to be coming home from a night out, I want us drunk and back from dinner or a friend’s party. God, what happened to all our friends? Adela has always had the sweetest lips. Her neat hands fold swiftly and she has almost finished the very last of the stack. When she turns away, arms full with fresh sheets, I watch the swish of her hips, too tight against her dress, but what of that, really? She has always been a beautiful woman.

As I step through the room to follow Adela to the bedroom Soph glances up and smiles brightly without a word and that alone is almost enough to halt me. What kind of man am I? Dimples pierce her rosy cheeks, her front teeth too big for her mouth. Clem turns, frozen partway through picking up one of their plastic cars, and waves sheepishly. Is it all children that have such bright eyes? Do all of them look at you with such openness, so eager? For a second I almost stop to play. They could play cars, I could play the good father and we would all laugh and call it a job well done. Instead I whisper “I love you” and turn my tiptoeing into exaggerated steps,
putting my index finger over my lips like we’re keeping a secret prank from their mother and they giggle. That’s something at least—getting a giggle out of your own kids.

A sly, wretched guilt begins forming in my bowels down the short hallway, but I pretend I don’t know why. Adela is just closing the dresser drawer, now full with linens, when I step in with what I want to be a casual smile.

“Hey,” I say, more timid than I mean, almost hinting at a question. She has a little red pin in her front blouse pocket; I bet it’s the same color as her bra. Do her panties match too, I wonder.

Her hand flutters to her chest. “Jesus, Filip? I thought you were out!”

Stepping quickly over to her I wrap my arms around her waist and press close against her. “I didn’t mean to scare you.” My arms don’t encircle her width as neatly as they used to, but to feel her skin so close intoxicates anyway. It is a thin dress. I think again of the day we met and lower my head to kiss her neck—the skin feels so perfectly soft.

“Filip. Filip, come on, the kids are just out there.” She is gentle but insistent in pushing me further from her. She smells of baby powder but I try to ignore it. It’s like a new perfume. It’s practically like the old flower one she used to wear. I kiss my way down past her collarbone, to the tender skin at the top of her breasts, hold more tightly against her wide, soft buttocks. God, please, I think, anything just to let me have this.

“Filip, stop it—what are you doing?”

“The kids are busy. We have time.”

“Filip, will you stop?” Her voice rises, becoming sharp in the dim room as she grabs my hands, shoving them back towards my body instead of hers. “Not now, okay? I have work to do.” She is blushing, tugging at her clothes and looking away.
She says “now” as if she would some other time, some other “later” we never get to.

“I miss you.” It’s supposed to sound sweet. She’s supposed to find me charming.

“No.” The word closes icy between us as she pulls away, folding her arms tightly to her chest as if for protection, as if to stop me seeing her body. “Jesus, Filip. Don’t be such an ass.”

She storms out of the room, swearing softly under her breath, face beet red as if I am playing some joke.

Well, fuck.

I don’t wait long to storm out behind her, back into the living room.

“Sophia, Clement, get your shoes on, let’s go.” I seem to have a knack these days for making myself unwanted. How long was I? Ten minutes, fifteen maybe, and back out again.

Adela is standing over Ian’s crib, gathering him into her arms.

Soph and Clem look at me fearfully; they have heard this tone before. They don’t even ask where we’re going, just scramble to their shoes by the door and wait quietly.

I look back at Adela just before I step out, Clem and Soph moving out the door. Ian has started to hiccup and cry, and she is unbuttoning the top of her dress, tugging the cloth down below one breast. The nipple is puckered, dark skin circling wide around it. Ian clamps his lips, quieting at the contact. She looks up and catches my eye, wraps her other arm protectively around her little flabby stomach, the dimpled and thickening thighs, and turns a little away. Her eyes alight with anger. Embarrassment. Even from the doorway I can tell she is fighting tears. Years ago maybe she’d have let them fall, or let me see them.

***
At first Sophia and Clement are afraid, quietly. I’ve never hurt my family, never even a spanking but you’d think I beat the kids the way they quiver sometimes. I rarely even yell, for God’s sake. I need them to know I’m not mad.

“What do you want to do today?” My hoped-for enthusiasm falls flat. I sound like a brooding old man.

Clem eyes me timidly as his sister speaks up, hesitant. “Could we go to the clock, Papa?”

Oh, the clock. It’s all this business about tomorrow that’s got them interested.

“Yeah.” I sigh a little, but try to stifle it halfway through. “Yeah, sweetheart, we can go there.”

At my acquiescence their mood begins to lighten palpably and they hop a little as they walk, excited.

“Last time,” Clem begins, “the Reader said the letters said that he should say that the rains were going to be late this year and that it was because Heaven was confused.”

I cringe, but resolve not to dampen their spirits again.

“Don’t be stupid, Clem! He didn’t say that!”

Sometimes I don’t understand Sophia at all; she gets so argumentative. I don’t remember arguing with my older brother half as much as Soph does.

“Yeah he did! I remember! Mama wanted to buy a rosary then because she kept looking at them when I helped her carry groceries home!” He beams with pride at this last part. Mommy’s little helper. He’s getting older, of course, but if he can do anything for Adela, my God, he’s the greatest kid on earth. Are all children like this with their mothers? One day, perhaps, he’ll hate me for not making her happier, think that this is all my fault. One day he might look at his parents and instead of pride feel only grief.
“You don’t know anything, Clem! He was talking about stars and stuff. I know.” My daughter’s voice gets shrill so quickly.

“Calm down, Soph.” I flounder for what to say. “You’re both right.” This doesn’t seem sufficient. “Stop arguing with your brother.”

Immediately she quiets. Maybe it’s good if your kids are a little afraid of you.

My stomach drops in shame at the thought and we wander a ways without saying anything.

The walk to the tower has been changing for years; this city used to be tall and lonely-looking and beautiful. Noble, even, with tight and clear cobbled lane-ways like veins to the clock-tower. Old women, the kind of old women my wife is becoming, used to screech outside of their windows energetically, arms flapping like their dirty laundry as they shared gossip. But quiet hangs dense and heavy in the air these days, and Soph and Clem skip down clogged lanes lined with beggars and squat ugly additions creep and grow onto every building. They look like boils, diseasing the city of my youth. Marcus and I used to race through these streets as kids. Every year, every Reading we’d go to hear Malik’s proclamations.

“Maybe today you’ll finally learn if you’ll ever get laid!” He’d yell, darting through neighborhoods and twisting streets.

God, the kid was an ass.

“Shut up, Marcus!”

“Aw, you’re blushing! Embarrassed, Filip?”

I was thirteen, Marcus fifteen. He’d been fucking Chloe, a whore down the street about two miles away for almost six months and never shut up about it.
A tall, lean kid, he’d dash through the streets, down alleys, across front stoops. Those were good mornings, early in the light, all the girls giggling in their doorways, eyeing us. Hot to trot. Marcus’ favorite saying. I kept up almost pace for pace too, and we never got lost in this city. Born and bred here as far back as our family goes. Adela’s family came from two hundred miles away, but I always liked to think her body fit the nooks and crannies of the stone like she belonged here. I don’t think my mother ever forgave her for being a foreigner, but I called her one of us, and Marcus said she was close enough, or at least pretty enough. He died when I was twenty three— caught up in a bar fight one night, a few too many shots of the green lady. Adela found him then, coming home from the hospital and smelling like children’s wails. She stopped her nursing training after that. Clement was born a year later. They’ll never even have a fucking uncle. They’ll never know this city, or their mother like she was in the rain with blushing cheeks. God damn it.

Sophia kisses my hand.

“Are you okay, Papa? Which way do we go?”

My heart aches a little and I smile softly, kiss her forehead. I should be better at this.

“This way, baby,” and I lead them through the ugly, cluttered alleys toward the last beautiful piece of the city.

**

Twice a year the clock tower rewrites itself—midsummer and midwinter. Elias, that cocksucker, sits with his back to the cobble-stoned square of our great-great-great grandfathers’ generation. For hours he stares at it, from pitch dark to sunrise everyday, Reading. I bet he’s a fake, but Adela loves it. They say God writes His Will in the letters there over the course of seasons. Maybe if she’d grown up with Malik Reading like I had she wouldn’t be fooled by this
hypocritical ass. But twice every year like some families go on vacation Adela perches Ian on her abundant, stretch-marked hips, tugging Clement by the hand who tugs on Sophia who stares until I have to give in, and we join the throngs at the tower. Sometimes I have to laugh at the absurdity—you couldn’t have kept me away from a Reading on my deathbed when Malik was around, and now my kids are begging me to go.

I sit, Clem and Soph on either side of me, on a little bench looking directly at the clock face. The light is only beginning to wane and a touch of heat remains in the air. It is a large construction, some hundred and forty feet tall and half that in the width, each massive grey stone clearly cut. The square takes all its life from the tower. The town takes all its life from it, really. Fifty years it took them to build is what my grandfather said—a short time for such a behemoth of stone, reaching up and up and up from one far end of the square as if surveying everything in its view. My grandfather always said it went so fast because God knew it was a gift for Him and smiled on us. Our reward was our futures.

The centered clock face hangs perfectly round and off-white. It chimes every hour—something they added recently to help the city actually keep time—but not in accordance with the clock hands, which only the Reader it’s said can decipher. Thickly painted letters—old, foreign, from the prophet some three hundred years ago—circle its face like numbers normally do. I suppose it still tells time, just in infinitely larger increments than minutes or hours, and each letter is painted internally with images of God’s resurrection. All things born again. All things saved eventually. Eventually.

“Papa, how come you like it here so much?” Sophia’s voice whines and I feel guilty. Aren’t fathers always supposed to think their daughters are angels? She swings her legs, still holding my hand on the bench. She stares up at me with the same brown eyes as Adela, the same
frustratingly endearing sparkle. She is a big girl. Bigger than all her little friends in their seven-year old braids, their dresses, their painted toes. I will kill the boy who calls her fat. I wait for the day— Sophia coming home in tears, her little mouth stretched with wails, the hiccuping. It hasn’t happened yet. Adela, oh, Adela would wrap her up in warm, sagging arms and rock her and tell her boys don’t know anything. Women are better at being parents. I have been learning this for almost a decade now; it only gets harder with time.

“Don’t be stupid, Soph,” Clement cuts in. “It’s the most important place and Papa is the most important so of course he likes it because it’s the best!” But quickly he is distracted by the balloon of another child, one let go and flirting through the air up to the sacred letters circling the pale face, their thick brush strokes standing out starkly.

“Clem, that’s inappropriate. Apologize.” My tone is sharp, but with some pride too. Papa is the most important.

Around us more flyaway papers blow across the square, some of them the same I saw earlier, some older, from weeks ago. Other parents pass with loud-months and pig-tails tugging and giggling and crying. Some look nervously to the clock, or hopefully. Some ignore it. I can’t help but imagine them all eyeing us though, sliding glances from me to Clem to Sophia in her too-small dress Adela keeps saying she’ll sew, and I imagine they are shaking their heads almost imperceptibly in my direction, like they’re sad I should have a daughter with any girth, or upset with me for letting her be. I squeeze her hand a little every time this happens, try not to hear the whine of her owww.

“But it’s true!”

“Clement Joseph.”
He looks at the ground, face red. “Sorry,” he mumbles, hands twisting nervously. Maybe I am too hard on him.

Some feet away a group of teenagers chatter over their cigarettes about tomorrow—the apocalypse coming; the flood of foreigners; a terrorist strike. I try to tune them out, hope Soph and Clem aren’t paying attention, or that they don’t grow up into pretentious punks like these.

“But, Papa—” ventures Soph again after a few minutes, “how come you do like it so much?”

I turn away from the group and their stupid, insolent predictions. How can I explain this?

“Because it’s a magic place, Soph.” I finally say, looking at Clem with an insistent smile, wanting him to feel better. “It’s where I met your mother. And I want you both to have that magic too.”

The group is saying something about revolts and scatter their ashes as they walk away.

I put my arms around Clem and Soph, drawing them close like in a hug and exhale audibly.

I never should have been a father.

**

By the time we are back home Adela is readying for bed and Ian is asleep in the crib. Soph and Clem lick the last of their ice-cream cones I bought them excitedly, wanting both to show their mother their prizes and hide them to be rebellious. She only cleans the chocolate stains from the corners of their mouths and tells them to wash up for bed. She says nothing to me.

That night our room is too hot, but Adela lies wrapped in all our blankets. I can’t quite tell if she is only feigning sleep—she’s always been a shockingly still sleeper—but I hope not. If
one of us, at least, can rest and forget this night then all the better. Her breathing is regular, soothing. One arm is exposed, holding the blanket to her chest while she lies curled on her side, away from me. I want to reach out or kiss her soft arms. I don’t. I lie very quietly and as close as I can without touching, and try to remember what it was like to fall in love.

**

>You know what it is, don’t you? It’s the border disputes—

>He’s going to tell us it’s time to pick up arms—

>The letters started lying and he’s been forced to make a public apology—

>They’ve spelled His Heavenly Name!—

>It’s about our homes—

My stomach turns with the murmuring voices as we, within the milieu of every other person or family in the whole damned city, make our way to the clock tower the next morning. The light is thin and chill, stabbing through the nice button-down Adela bought me years ago.

>“I don’t like him.” Every Reading, at least, I say this to my wife.

>Adela barely turns her head at this anymore, the sun highlighting the loose strands of her hair. Whatever other adjectives she accrues, she is still a beautiful woman, especially at her most impatient.

>“You don’t like anyone, Filip.” Every Reading she repeats this back to me.

>Ian hangs tight to Adela’s waist, eyes sleepy, head lilting against her breast. They are soft and heavy after three children, but they’re the only ones to make use of them anymore. They bounce a little, like her hips, as she strides down the cramped streets toward the square. Soph runs to her mother, tightening her small hands into the fabric of Adela’s long skirt. Never without the kids. Thoughts of yesterday bloom to mind and my cheeks flame to chagrin. Maybe
I’m just a bad husband, and that’s that. Bad husband, bad father. You can’t undo things like this. There is no deciding after-the-fact.

Clement smiles toothily up at me. He’ll be a handsome young man in another ten years.

“Are you excited, Papa?” He demands, rushing to wrap his arms around my legs. His eyes are radiant with expectation as he gazes up at me.

“Clem, watch out— you can’t do that while someone’s walking!” but I pick him up, hold him close like fathers should. He smells faintly of dirt, faintly unwashed, faintly syrupy. I put him down. My children are the apples of my eyes.

“Of course he’s excited, Clem, dumb.” Sophia cuts in impatiently. “Papa loves the clock!” Clearly she was happy with last night’s explanation.

Adela clucks a little beneath her breath— disbelief maybe, but it does not mask her own buzz as we slowly approach the square. She has been looking forward to this with such absurd expectation. A part of me wants to take her hand and yank her back; stupid flutterings of nervousness wring in my stomach. It’s this whole bullshit stunt of Elias’ and I’m sure it will be bad if it was his idea. I keep flashing back to Marcus and me standing awestruck while Malik read out Heaven’s proclamations; it didn’t matter what for—goodwill tidings, natural disaster threatening, great wealth for some family or other. The clock cared for its own; you never heard about this or that “grand event” unless it was bound up close to our lives. But, God, Elias? He’s always fawning over these elaborate interpretations, bringing in the whole world. As if we should orient around everything else happening in every other damn city!

I look again to Adela. Her step picks up as the square comes into view between the buildings up ahead and the crowds thicken as we get closer: families, young couples, visitors looking all around behind camera lenses.
“I can’t imagine what all the fuss is about.” Adela says, trying to play it off like she hasn’t been waiting for this for months. I almost reply honestly, but there’s a shine in her eyes, a little excitement I’ve thought for a long time had washed out for good and all of a sudden I think of how soft her body would be against mine if I kissed her right now in the middle of the street in front of all the kids and strangers milling by.

She would never have it.

God, what happened, anyway?

Slowly, slowly, we march our way forward—Sophia and Clement both try clinging onto their mother’s arms as she leads the way—until we are only thirty some yards from the clock itself. It seems to hum with the gathered energy, stalwart and alive. The tapestries that traditionally decorate the front of the tower at Readings—hanging side by side and colorfully depicting the saints—are gone. They were always one of my favorite parts growing up but Elias, true to form, has apparently asked for their removal, leaving the grey stones cold and exposed beneath the sky. All around us people thrum with delight and impatience. There is a restlessness today, some eagerness for spectacle which, I worry, Elias will not disappoint. I don’t like it.

It must be forty-five minutes, at least, we stand on the stretches of flagstone surrounding the tower while the sun rises higher and hotter. The clock’s shadow darkens, lengthens, disappears with the noon. Little beads of sweat form on our foreheads and the kids are complaining loudly of their discomfort—aching feet, jittery, too hot, too thirsty, hungry again already—their lists are endless and I pretend not to hear, letting my wife manage them. Near to us two women stand: young and laughing. Their hair falls long around their shoulders and I linger on the firm roundness of their breasts, their sweet and slim hips, legs long beneath their dresses.
“But my feet hurt,” Clem cries, face pressing into Adela’s belly. Sophia is twirling her skirt and hopping one foot to the other. How excited we were, bringing them home from the hospital. I glance back at the two women.

“Dearly Assembled!”

Suddenly Elias’ voice sounds magnified from upon the small, raised dais. He sounds like wilting flowers, the kind left too long in stagnant water, but Adela’s eyes are gleaming and even Ian quiets his hiccups.

“I am so glad,” he pauses, “that you have all come today. We have never had so momentous an occasion in all the long and noble history of this sacred Keeper of Times and Fortunes.” He motions upward, to the black curves and slashes of the holy letters. “Today is a special day. A time cut out from the endless Flow of existence for us, most humble in our home on earth. One city. One world. One home, blessed.”

What is this ass-hat getting to? Momentarily Adela clutches my hand, squeezing, and her arm presses against mine. Momentarily. Only momentarily, and what could we have been maybe, young again. There is a schism, splitting in my heart. Why bother wanting what can’t happen?

Elias drones on for some time and my stomach clenches uncomfortably. We should not have come this morning. I knew God damn well we should not have come. The crowd is dense and silent, hanging on his words. The two women stand excited, unburdened and almost close enough to reach, pull to, take home, fuck in my wife’s sheets without a name. Would I ever?

From the dais, Elias’ voice shifts and I focus again on the bastard, shifting uneasily.

“Our fortunes have turned, my lambs.” His voice carries thick as if with tears, “And it must be our pleasure to carry His Will.” What is it this fuck wants? He waits and all eyes train on
him. “I have read it in the Face of Time!” He quiets to a whisper, stupidly over-dramatic; I want to gag. “The letters,” he sweeps his arms wide, “must come down from their lofty home.”

A collective murmur looses from thousands of lungs at once. What’s he talking about?

You must be kidding me. Whispers between dumbstruck faces. Can I be the only one who knows how this city should be? “Will you all help me now? Do not be afraid! I know you are worried. I know our city seems fraught with strife but come! And join me now. For this future has been ordained by Our Lord in Heaven and it is Willed!” He gestures emphatically for people to come forward, up on to the dais, though it has always been a space for the Reader only. There are moments of pause and then a few stupid shits climb up, hesitant at first and yet so eager to deface the clock. I blanche in disgust—this cannot be real—but Adela already strains a little forward as if to join.

“This is important, babies,” murmurs Adela to the kids. “This is history making.” Her lips quiver with anticipation, her body tense with it. “We believe in making our own fate, don’t we?” I step further away, trying to pull Adela and the kids with me. Surely this is not happening.

Around us people begin shifting, shouting, pushing a little. Sophia and Clem jump and hiss with joy, excited by the crowd’s sudden energy. A few more people clamber onto the dais, some already trying to scale the tower walls. So quickly—how can this be? Centuries of the clock and now? I hold back the bile in my throat, these fuckers, and I shout out as if Elias could hear me directly, but Adela looks back at me—eager and fresh, pulling toward the clock. She is, even now, even after all, expecting me by her. “This is so exciting!” but my skin itches with the desire to get away while the crowd grows bolder. Some fight it but more and more climb up toward the tower. It seems like hours we’ve been here, but it has only been some thirty minutes, forty at the most. What is wrong with these people? Fear quakes against fury in my stomach. “Filip.” Adela
sounds my name, watching me, and it feels like a whisper, like she is lying naked next to me years and years ago and ravenous. For a moment I am caught and hopeful—how could I say no to her? But Elias cuts in from the podium:

“Let us finally,” he says, velvety and sick, “retire the Future to the Heavens.” There are scattered cheers and furious bellows but Elias is unperturbed. “Finally we will let the holy letters lie.”

And then Adela turns away, the children clinging and shouting with the upraised voices of the city. I reach out not thinking, shouting their names, but they disappear quickly with the shifting bodies. All together surging it is twenty people, thirty, fifty now helping flood the dais, their greedy hands reaching to dismantle the clock as if infected with some awful elation, as if they think this will solve their problems. Elias is saying something about dynamite later, for the stones, but I am shouting half-formed words—irate and jumbled—and trying to find my family in some disappearing place. Around me, faces blur. The buildings surrounding the square are not the ones I used to know—this must be some dream, surely. This must be some God damned phantom playing out and not real life, all at once like this. Or has it been happening all along. A body shoves into me and I stumble onto my knees. We have been slinking this way forever maybe. This city my children were born in. This city I met the woman I loved in. They must not be too far and for a moment Adela is somewhere up ahead smiling and holding our children close so I call their names but they melt back into the rush of people. Suddenly I am glad Marcus is dead not to see this. Feet thud around me and knees jostle into my back and the contents of my stomach are splashing onto the flagstone—my body is so weak and mind dizzy and there is shouting and clamoring and I think I have lost them. I think I might run on and on and on into or away from this place and never reach them.
6: one’s own land or country

The First Three Days We Ready

1. Fasting as the empty of the fallow fields.
2. Fasting like the fields.
3. Fasting as fallow and fasting and fasting; we do not touch the earth these days.
4. Dyeing soft for the colors to set: cloth we turn muddy. There is excitement.
5. Tying of hemp twine, and readying of skin dyes. There is chatter and laughter and the young ones make light, like only playing at adults.
6. Purging and purging; bathing and bathing
7. Watching at the sun’s rise of the Holy Week and praying and praying we do not to forget what it is to rise: again.
The Fourth Day is for the Summer

1. Dressing in the full plume of an abundant land, passed now and hoped for again.

2. Digging in the fallow fields, barefoot as greeting, heaving dirt behind sweat-stained backs:
   six feet to the earthy bed, six feet walking length.

3. Gathering the white stones from the fields, the little ones asking and we make sure they
   thank, rummaging light-hearted in the dirt.

4. Feeding potash to the hungry furrows: to moisten, to make ready for hard planting.

5. Chopping the vegetables by the men, and the women cleaning the bloodied meats: each to
   their kin. The young ones don't know what the meat means, and what the plants mean.

6. Joining the smoked flesh of the animals with the holied water and the plants into stew for the
   feast. We all partake—young and middling and old—because all Spirits grow weary.

7. Sleeping all together in the dark and on the ground, preparing our bodies for the feeling of
   home.
The Fifth Day is for the Autumn

1. Taking the herbs to the fields for the burning and the walking: counterclockwise, winding back the sun. Breath trembles in the chill.

2. Standing in the North and West corner for prayers, the point between the Dead and the Future. Most of the young ones have never been here before.

3. Returning South and East to the homes and continuing straight to the river.

4. Going naked into the water running North and East; there must be no more than three at once; too many bodies disperse the movement and our Spirits forget the Clean direction. The young ones giggle and race—are reprimanded, become shy.

5. Washing face, chest, genitals, returning to the homes.

6. Holding the white field stones heavy in our palms we incise tiny holes, thread the twine through, turn to necklaces, leave unworn. The old ones eye them with sadness and with hope.

7. Applying the skin dyes, dark and russet like the leaves; arching, curving, swallowing designs all along the limbs to remember roots so they will feel familiar.
The Sixth Day is for the Winter

1. Tilling and sweet-talking the fields so they care for us as we for them. The young ones watch wide-eyed and faint of heart. They call their mothers; they cry not knowing yet quite why.

2. Gathering in the homes of our mother and fathers and cousins and fore mothers and fathers.

3. Listening as they speak in stories; we wait long; we do not interrupt.

4. Telling of movements of Spirits: from the underbelly into fertile land and so we get spring and ripening into our summers and fading, fading crawling back into the underbelly.

5. Telling of chasing Spirits to capture and to hold inside—for ripening and summer and wellness in bodies like land; our people are people of Spirits.

6. Teaching of taming and of maintaining; Spirits are beasts not easily held but we hold them, and the young ones and the middling shake a little and shrink because this is not symbolic.

7. Memorizing, repeating so we will know the right ways to return home, even in the darkness and the damp, even in the underbelly. Don’t shudder, we tell them.
The Seventh Day is for the Spring

1. Ladening our limbs with the unworn clothes of earth color muddy, so we are recognized, and with white-stone necklaces to hold the body down.

2. Heeding the four directions in the night we walk all together, the old ones leading, the young ones trembling, their mothers and fathers tugging their hands to keep them from fleeing, palms slick with sweat.

3. Beginning in the South and the East we file to the North and the West; we are people of the earth and we promise to our Spirits—cycles do not break with us.

4. Watching full moon shadows touch our feet at the ink earth markings: tickling, grabbing, pulling down down down to the holes days old and waiting.

5. Coughing and gagging and the little ones cry out for their first time with tears and soil in their throats and grasping hands, but if the sowing is not right we cannot reap and we are

6. Cleansed, readied, planted—

7. Sixty bodies, sixty souls, for the fertile fields to grow.
You are twelve years old when the god is hanged. You are sitting with your mother in the kitchen; your brothers are out. Your father is reading a book by the fireplace though it’s getting out of season for fires. Just this morning you began your first period, and every few minutes you want to run to the bathroom and check if more has come or stained your dress; it is blue, and you think of your mother’s clucking tongue when you told her this morning. She’d been drinking coffee at the kitchen table—early, because she is always exhausted from the family and gets up every morning with the sun just to be alone—and you had crept in, face scarlet with embarrassment, your soaked-through panties still wet and deep red.

She was upset because she wanted you to wear the white dress today, for the hanging, but was afraid it might stain and show while everyone was out.

You are wearing a pad right now, and it wedges uncomfortably between your legs, shifting too far backward, feeling like some poorly-planned diaper, or else far enough forward you worry it might show. Of course, every time you check you can’t tell a thing, but that does not stop the worry. Your mother said it would be easier to start this way, and less painful, and she didn’t have anything else in the house to use because she almost never gets her period anymore anyway.

You had woken up a little panicked. You hadn’t showed your mother the stain on your sheets or that it had seeped into the mattress; you were afraid she’d get mad. But she had given you a little piece of sweet chocolate and let you sit with her at the table while she drank her coffee. You didn’t want to spoil everything.
Soon you will be leaving with your parents, meeting your brothers and the city downtown where the river runs to see the god. They say it is the first time in a hundred years and your parents are excited even though they don’t show it. You are sure they are, because your father keeps flipping impatiently through the book he’s trying to read and your mother isn’t doing any work even though she has the bills all laid out in front of her to pay this month.

You had to throw away your favorite panties—the ones that got too stained. Your mother said they weren’t worth washing and put them in the trash can outside. We can get you a new pair soon, she’d said, sitting back down at the table. But it seemed wrong to you, that you should need new panties before you even got a bra. Your breasts—you preferred that word, it sounded so much more adult—were only just slight roundings beneath your shirt. Barely. Why did you have to get the blood first?

When you leave the house your mother holds your hand which is unusual, but it makes you feel special and so you don’t mind even though you are twelve now and don’t like hugs or hand-holding. Your father has his arm wrapped around your mother’s shoulders and they walk a little briskly, looking forward. You take this, too, as excitement.

There are other people on the streets heading the same way. Some smile or wave. You recognize a few of them, but you don’t see anyone from school yet. You keep an eye out. You want to feel important, with someone to talk with other than your parents. Maybe your brothers will hang out with you today, but the thought makes you sad because you never fit in with their jokes. It’s easier if you don’t want to. Besides, now you’ve gotten your period maybe it would be weird. They probably think it’s gross and you don’t think you should tell them even though it’s kind of exciting. You aren’t sure if you should ask your mom. She seems very focused anyway and so you don’t say anything. You want your brothers to like you. You will try to impress them
some way today; you’ll have something clever to say about this god or this parade. You aren’t sure how this event is supposed to work but you think you are supposed to and you don’t want to ask your parents about this either in case they are angry with you; they are almost not paying attention to anyone. You think this must be a very big deal, this hanging.

You hope the pad is not shifting too much while you walk. You hope the wind will not blow the hem of your dress up too much. You hope you will not get another sunburn bright red—it is very hot out today—and have all those freckles show up on your face and arms again.

It is only a mile from your house to the park downtown. It is a small park right next to the river and there aren’t very many trees but they are spring blossoming right now and the pink and red flowers make you feel a little better about the blood falling out of your body. Maybe it’s not so gross. Today the park is filled with people. Your parents are scanning the throngs for your brothers while you eye the grass, wondering if it will die from all these people trampling it or if, somehow, the pad might not catch all the blood and some of it might drop down to the grass and would that be like water or would it be bad for it? You’re not sure if anyone would notice, but you hope it doesn’t happen and shift your legs back and forth trying to fix the pad, even though you’re not sure anything’s shifted at all. You wish there were a bathroom nearby to run into and you’re glad, now, you don’t have to see anyone you know. Just in case.

There is a small stage in the park. Usually it is only the homeless who use it, curled against the back wall, but today there is a small podium in the center and a man standing near it, and a small cluster of well-dressed people.

Your mother scoots you in front of her and you don’t like being around so many people, shifting their feet, milling around, all talking loudly, incessantly. Suddenly your brothers show
up beside you though you hadn’t seen them coming at all. You greet them, but don’t reach for a hug because you don’t think either of them would want one.

And then it begins.

There is movement on stage and the crowd grows attentive and you don’t know why or how but all at once the day is different and the park is not a park but is a sunlit procession. Everyone is quiet. You feel your mother’s hands on your shoulders, pressing down and holding tight. Your brothers feel far away, but you can feel their arms brush up on either side of you. Your father is only a tall shadow behind you.

The small cluster of people on stage has parted and in their absence a man is standing. You cannot see perfectly, but he is thin, taut, chest bare against the sunlight and his pants are of some thin weave and you cannot tell if he is wearing shoes. You aren’t sure if you are supposed to feel awe at his sight, or if you should save it in case this is not the god. You are not sure if the god is only a metaphor, but you think it’s not supposed to be. You hope no one thinks you’re silly for taking this seriously and try not to show any strong emotion in case it is wrong.

His hair is short, black. His skin is pale. He, hands bound, is prodded to the front of the stage by one of the men from the group. The crowd slinks back a little, but you seem to move forward. You feel very close all at once and he looks like a man drawn in charcoal but you don’t know if that makes him god or not and you can’t tell if you want to cry or if it’s the blood thrashing in what school told you to call your uterus. But you know if it’s the blood you don’t want it to be because this man doesn’t have that and if he’s god you should only feel what you two can share. You hope he doesn’t know you’ve just gotten your period. None of this seems fair, but you cannot tell why.
You think he must be an artist and in one second you are imagining spending your life becoming an artist like this god who is only maybe a god because no one has told you yet and you will grow up and make beautiful things and you will charcoal this face until you get it just right. But it is only a second and only a fantasy of a future like children have all the time and adults too, though you never think of your brothers or your parents having seconds like that and you are too intent on the charcoal god to wonder now.

He does not say anything.

Your brothers murmur something; they call him stupid, they call him an idiot for not trying to get away or to explain or to save himself. You’re not sure they understand and the possibility thrills and frightens you.

One of the women, thin and bony, blonde hair pulled tight to her head, steps forward to the man of charcoal and grabs him aggressively, as if twisting his wrists. He cringes a little and your face scrunches in sympathy. How old is he? you wonder. Is everyone supposed to feel excited? Expectancy sits heavy on the shoulders of every adult, pressing like your mother’s hands.

The woman pulls the god toward the stairs leading off the stage and onto the ground, person-swarmed. There are whispers and reaching hands, and hesitation tickling down throats wishing to call out. What would they say? You feel it yourself, like a stone placed at the base of your tongue, commanding you to silence. You don’t know what words you would use; you’d want each one to be a small sun to orbit him. Maybe you would say I’m sorry, but you’re not sure of this. You cannot place the feeling of the stone at your tongue that’s slipping to the pit of your stomach and churning. It is hot out and your panties feel sticky, and you want to touch to
check if it is blood or only sweat from the still heat of midday. You hope it is only sweat. You hope if it is blood it won’t begin to smell.

The small group of people on stage follow the woman and the god, helping direct him now and then, correcting his gait or occasional stumble. You don’t understand why no one made an announcement; don’t they always do that? The speech giving, the words no one cares about. You never skip straight to the event.

The crowd begins to move, to follow, and without trying you are so close to him, and your brothers with you and your parents almost touching somehow still and the whole crowd is moving you forward with them, buoying you beside the god.

You almost want to say hello but you are afraid.

Your brothers reach out as if to touch him and suddenly you want to scream—they cannot touch him! How dare they! But they don’t reach and they are muttering what a stupid cunt he is, what a pussy, and you have never heard your brothers like this before; you have never heard them angry, but you know it is not anger as much as it is something darker, hunched and curled in their heart-valves. You think of the blood catching on the hairs between your legs and feel ashamed. You will not tell your brothers. You want to hold the god’s hand, tell him you are the cunt, not him. Offer to take his place. You don’t, but you want to, somewhere you cannot quite recognize behind the paralysis and the not-understanding.

There is walking, walking for two miles in the sun. The moisture between your thighs, under your arms and beneath your barely budding breasts worsens and you wonder why bodies should be like this, or if the god is sweating like this everywhere too. You can see on his thin chest the sweat slipping down with each heaved breath while his retinue prods and pushes, stopping periodically to tighten the bonds of his wrists. The procession follows the river—more
like a creek—all the way, sometimes weaving out of its sight but always continuing parallel in the heat. You are sure there must be blood staining these panties now too; surely you’ve waited too long to check and now it’s soaked through. You inhale, trying to discern if the odor is strong enough for anyone else to tell. You didn’t know it would smell like this. A little like a wound, a little like metal and disease, something to cauterize.

Some people really are excited. Some pockets of viewers are singing quiet songs, little boys waving tiny flags. He’s from here, they say. He’s our god. Isn’t that exciting? Why isn’t anyone filming this? But your father glares at those people, calling them pig-headed nationalists under his breath. You’re not sure why he’s angry, or why he’s here if he doesn’t like what’s happening. But then you think you are here too, and is that any different?

The procession halts finally in front of a convenience store, in the parking lot that shares the river bank with slopes of mud and low-hanging trees. You wonder if the store might sell pads. Would everyone notice if you slipped in to get some? Would your mother go with you? You don’t have any money; you’re not sure what to buy anyway. Does it matter what kind? You want to massage the skin above your triangle of curling hair, ease the tiny creatures clawing at your insides so you don’t feel so fatigued. You didn’t think it’d hurt in this achey kind of way.

The crowd is growing louder and you are at the front. Someone shouts out, but you’re not sure what they say; you’re looking at the man in front of you and his charcoal eyes. You wonder if god is in the coal or on a canvas and how many people believe he is a god. You won’t ask because you don’t really want to know, though this answer too, lurks somewhere unidentifiably behind uncertainty.
Strip him! Someone calls. A squeal of excitement goes up from those assembled. Let’s see what kind of god we’ve grown, eh? What have our prayers gotten us? But your family has never prayed and you can’t tell if that is good or bad right now.

The woman with the tight blonde hair and the bony physique stands squarely in front of god and unbuttons his trousers. You feel ashamed to look and you want it to stop but you are so insatiably curious to see and everyone wants to know and you blame the crowd for your own watching.

His trousers fall to the ground and the woman directs him to step out of the pant legs so his haggard body is perfectly exposed. You have never seen a penis before; it hangs down awkwardly, looking lumpy and discolored. You’re not sure he’s still the charcoal god. You guess your brothers and your father must have the same thing, but you try to push that thought out. There is scraggly hair around his genitals though, like yours, and that is something at least. You think you feel a thread of blood begin to slide down the inside of your thigh, hot and sticky. Will it stain your skin? You imagine it will be like a scar somehow, that everyone will see. You are glad not to have that sack of skin like this man has, but you are not sure this cut between your thighs is better. At least it stays better tucked away.

The woman and the others from the small retinue produce a length of rope, already tied at one end and slip it over the god’s head. They lead him toward a tree, one with a branch reaching out across the river. One of the men, fat and sweating and in full dress pants and jacket, ties the god’s legs together, like his hands. You notice this god is already bleeding—from the chafing of wrist bonds—when they retie his hands in front of his crotch. You are blushing fiercely again, red like blood again, and the blonde woman steps to him, something sharp and bright in her hands. Some guttural sound lodges in your throat and the woman lifts the metal piece to his skin,
drags it across his forearms, and blood bursts through the wound lines, bright and slick. You cannot understand why or if they always do this or isn’t he supposed to be hanged and you cannot get the sound out of your throat and choking you this is not right and you want to reach out and you want and you want you do not know what and—

God looks at you.

His charcoal eyes bloom dark like his blood and you wonder if yours will be the same color and wouldn’t that be sacrilege. Of all the things happening, wouldn’t that be sacrilege. And your gaze falters but you want. Him. You want to go to him but he is without expression and waiting for you to come. Closer. You know this and inside you alight with terror and excitement and you are afraid to meet his eyes now, shy because somewhere you know, and maybe you shouldn’t because this is a nameless thing. You shift your gaze to the shuffling feet around you, to the tears and the angry mouths tumbling out their frustration and you think maybe they all know, somewhere neglected in their mess of feelings, jumbled and sharply felt behind uncertainty and tedium, and you are sure that you have all been waiting and now none of you knows what to do with the god of wanting. Of seeking and never finding, quite.

This is the god of lonely. This is the god of wanting to be together, everyone wanting not to be together and he has not turned his gaze from you and this, too, is like a wound and you are sure you will begin to bleed from the attention. The woman is dragging your god towards the tree limb and she is fastening the length of rope around his tender neck and the men, dressed up in slacks and lazy faces lurk and hover around him, stand him on a step stool so close to the river and this ugly parking lot and your god watches you still until you are sick with selfish and you retreat into the crowd and they pull the step away and your family is gone somewhere you don’t know, can’t find, so you turn and you flee but—
God will not die like you were waiting for.
And neither of you makes a sound.
Reading List:

*The House of the Spirits*, novel
   —Isabel Allende

*The Bloody Chamber*, collection of short stories
   —Angela Carter

*An Ethic*, collection of poems
   —Christina Davis

*Ayiti*, collection of short stories
   —Roxane Gay

*The Penal Colony*, short story
   —Franz Kafa

*A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings*, short story
   —Gabriel Garcia Marquez

*Blue Sky White*, short story
   —Tessa Mella

*Rabbits*, short story
   —Kanai Mieko