

# Red Savina Review

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# **Red Savina Review**

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*Red Savina Review (RSR) is an independent, bi-annual e-zine publishing short films, creative nonfiction, fiction and poetry in March and November. RSR is a nonprofit literary review headquartered in southwestern New Mexico. For submission guidelines visit our website [redsavinareview.org/submit-2/](http://redsavinareview.org/submit-2/).*

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## A LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

*The decision to launch yet another online literary journal did not come easy. The cynic inside me whispered sweet nothings, "What's the point? More people write than read these days. The illusion of fame, fleeting indeed, there and gone, wisps of grandeur, infect the Internet like a grand pandemic, a festering virus of human vanity, a killing joke. Best to crave silence. Leave it alone."*

*And that was that.*

*Until I came across Cornpoem by Molly Stone. I know the poet. She asked me to read Cornpoem to see what might be wrong with it, as it had been rejected, more often than not in knee-jerk fashion, by dozens of journals. One editor, Molly informed me, rejected the poem in less than a day. Another in six hours. Intrigued, I read the verse. The arrangement of words got under my skin and into my brain. I read it again. And again. Days passed under the bright blue skies of the Chihuahuan Desert, and I continued to ponder Cornpoem. Why did Molly's poem get rejected time and again? Was I missing something? Was it too raw? Too original? Too strident? It then occurred to me that the poem, because I connected to it on an intuitive level, was doomed to obscurity. Familiar suspicions: "I'm an outsider and so is Cornpoem. Fitting we found one another but as meaningless as dust in the wind." I went about my day-to-day business in an attempt to exorcise the poem from my mind. Familiarity of routine breeds the ease of banality. Learn to forget.*

*Cornpoem, however, refused to go gentle into that good night, the images and beats creeping into my dreams transmogrifying them into nightmares...*

*Exhausted, I haunted the world like a somnambulant ghost...*

*The only hope, it seemed, in re-awakening my catatonic spirit, was making Cornpoem public. Since nobody else was stepping up, the task fell to me.*

*On a whim, I assembled a small team of editors and externs. Red Savina Review was born. A literary journal, of course, cannot stand upon a single poem, so the first order of business was to put out a call for submissions. We had little idea what might emerge from the process, if there might be a place where hardworking outsiders, writers, and introverts could converge, each willing to carry the weight of the other for a short amount of time. Our staff received a good number of submissions for a start-up, but many of them, though well-written, did not resonate, would not germinate, I knew, in soil fertilized by the likes of Cornpoem.*

*In reading the fiction submissions, for example, there were some strong gothic/ grotesque submissions, a few absurdist pieces that were a pleasure to read, and an abundance of postmodern tales that tried too hard to be clever. What ended up being selected, and I don't think I can fully explain this, were the stories that questioned*

*how humans self-identify. When it all boiled down: the selections—fiction, creative nonfiction and poetry—published in the inaugural issue of Red Savina Review shared one common trait: authenticity.*

*How does one judge authenticity in the literary arts? Intuition. And, if Heidegger was correct in his assumption that language is the house of Being, intuition, not logic, is the impetus of art and authenticity. Before we can come to either, it seems, we must purge those definitions attached to us like artificial appendages in public school, through mass media, in the university.*

*The purpose of Red Savina Review is to record the writer's struggle to wrest themselves from the bizarre marketplace of modernity in the quest to claim authenticity and thereby take a stand on Being. The work featured in the inaugural release, in my mind, is the beginning of what I hope to be a lengthy adventure.*

*It is my sincere hope that you will join in that voyage by reading the e-zine and submitting literary works that will lend the Fall 2013 edition the stamp of authenticity and depth of thought.*



*-JMG*

*P.S. Eskerrik asko (many thanks) to the [staff](#) for all of the hours of work. Without you and our [contributors](#), there would be no Red Savina Review.*

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## SHARMAN APT RUSSELL



### *Chasing Tigers: Adventures of a Citizen Scientist*

***JULY, 2011***

***July 23***

***I'm fifty-seven years old today, squatted on a sandy river bank, watching a pack of Western Red-bellied Tiger Beetles eat a dead frog. Although the insects are only two feet away and about a third of an inch long, through close-focusing binoculars they fill my vision, an entirely new and surprising world. Tiger beetles have disproportionately-large sickle-shaped mouthparts which they use now to stab into the white belly of the frog, slicing and scything and scissoring their mandibles like a chef sharpening his knives. Sometimes the beetles stand completely still, as if to pose, each brown wing cover patterned with seven creamy irregular dots, the abdomen orange, the head and thorax iridescent in the sun. The beetles flash red and green and blue and gold. Suddenly they are gone. Suddenly they return. Suddenly they stare straight at me, their large bulging eyes giving them a curious, inquisitorial air. Perhaps thirty of them feed on the slightly-bloated carcass of the frog, and I am reminded of lions at a kill, although lions don't look half so fierce.***



*I have always wanted to be a field biologist. I imagine Zen-like moments watching a leaf, hours and days that pass like a dream, sun-kissed, plant-besotted. I imagine, like so many others before me, a kind of rapture in nature and loss of ego. John Burroughs, an early American naturalist, wrote that he went to the woods “to be soothed and healed, and to have my senses put in order.” In my own walks through the rural West, this echoes my experience exactly. I enlarge in nature. I calm down. The beauty of the world is a tangible solace—that such harmony exists, such elegance, the changing colors of sky, the lift and roll of land, a river bank, and now a beetle flashing in the sun, an entrance into its perfect world. I am soothed, I am thrilled, and at the same time, eventually I get bored. Eventually I go home because my work (my writing, my students, my laundry) is elsewhere.*

*But what if that employment, my engagement with the world, was right there, in the largeness and calm of nature itself? “Blessed is the man,” Burroughs continued, “who has some congenial work, some occupation in which he can put his whole heart, and which affords a complete outlet to all the forces there are in him.” Blessed is the naturalist.*

*I have always wanted to be John Burroughs, and I have always wanted to be Jane Goodall who left her home in England—not even going to college first—working as a secretary for anthropologist Louis Leakey and then, at his urging, on to Tanzania to study chimpanzees. She lived in the forests of Gombe, her back against a tree, her toes rotting with fungus, beset by mosquitoes, watching and listening, entering the world of forest and animal—but always, always taking notes, desiring and finding and then opening “a window” into the mind of the Other, one not “misted over by the breath of our finite humanity.”*

*Sometimes in the middle of the street, in the middle of my life as a teacher and writer and wife and mother in southwestern New Mexico, I have stopped to wonder: why didn't I do that? Why didn't I go to Africa? It's a sorrow. My heart actually feels pierced. Where is my window into the Other? And where is my competence? My expertise? My forest? Why am I inside so much of the day?*

*Through close-focusing binoculars, I watch a female Western Red-bellied Tiger Beetle eat a frog, knowing she is female because of the slightly smaller male riding her back. Likely, the male is trying to be the last one to introduce his sperm into her sperm storage compartment. Instead of eating, instead of watching for things that might eat him, he holds on. A second male tiger beetle approaches the pair, perhaps to try and disengage the first, and then from somewhere the music rises and crescendos and a giant warty oval gravel-colored toad bug—known for grabbing its prey with sturdy forelegs and sucking out their vital juices—attacks the second beetle, jumping on him and as quickly jumping off, for the toad bug and the tiger beetle are about the same size, and they are both predators with the mouthparts to prove it. The toad bug lumbers away, as though its very shape were an impediment. The tiger beetle shakes itself as if relieved although, really, it is only stiling, lifting up on its long legs to cool off, getting a fraction more away from the hot ground.*



*I know about stiling, just as I know that the fastest insect in the world is an Australian tiger beetle who can gallop 5.5 miles an hour or 170 body lengths per second, because I have recently read cover to cover Tiger*

***Beetles: The Evolution, Ecology, and Diversity of the Cicindelids*, co-authored by David Pearson, a conservation biologist at Arizona State University, world expert on tiger beetles, and advocate for the citizen scientist—the unpaid, unprofessionally-trained non-scientist.**

***All around the world, citizen science projects are proliferating like the neural net in a prenatal brain. The sheer number of citizen scientists, combined with new technology, is beginning to shape how research gets done. Over a half million people have participated in GalaxyZoo, an online program in which volunteers catalogue the shape of galaxies. Another quarter million play the video game Foldit helping biochemists synthesize new proteins. National Geographic’s search for Genghis Khan’s tomb in Mongolia sends satellite images from the field to thousands of citizen scientists downloading them at home. For now, the human eye and brain are better than the computer at certain kinds of pattern recognition, and each of these programs has contributed in real ways to science. Projects that crowdsource or use large numbers of human brains are also developing algorithms which will improve how computers themselves work. (Like Yoda, we can teach them our mysterious ways.)***

***Perhaps as many citizen scientists join a smaller research team and go outside, usefully studying urban squirrels or phytoplankton or monarch butterflies. In environmental research projects, they are collecting water and air samples, monitoring invasive species and noise pollution, and watching the budding and leafing of plants to document climate change. Most obviously, they help scientists count things: wild turkeys, dragonfly swarms, juniper pollen, kestrels, salamanders, horseshoe crabs, black swans, road kill, solar storms, and comets. Some two hundred thousand people in a variety of projects work with the Cornell Lab of Ornithology tracking and monitoring birds. And these birders are working hard; a million observations are reported each month on the Lab’s online checklist eBird.***

***Particularly in the field of natural history, more people armed with better field guides and smartphone apps are able to gather information on a species’ distribution, behavior, and biology. Fewer scientists need to duplicate that work. As David Pearson has told me, and not with chagrin, many areas of traditional research in biology have been “largely turned over to amateurs.”***

*David and I are in regular contact because when I emailed him about the role of the citizen scientist, he emailed right back. David believes that conservation biology is in danger of losing its relevance—its ability to affect policy and protect diversity—if scientists do not reach out to the general public, abandoning their exclusive jargon and welcoming the barbarian hordes. A tall, genial man in his sixties, he has been effortlessly kind to me, sending papers and links to websites and directing my attention toward a personal study of tiger beetles, which he points out are “bio-indicators” of biological diversity, since where tiger beetles thrive, other species of birds and butterflies tend to thrive, too. In his own professional work, David has used a census of tiger beetles to help set the boundaries of a new national park in Madagascar and assess the status of a protected area in Peru. Prodding other people into studying his favorite insect is something he has done many times before: the lawyer in Cambridge now writing a book on the tiger beetles of Mexico, the dentist in Ohio with his fabulous collection of North American tigers, the new guy in Texas who has become somewhat obsessed.*

*I’m an easy mark. Ten years ago, I was first inspired by another entomologist, Dick Vane-Wright, the Keeper of Entomology at the London Museum of Natural History, whom I was interviewing about butterflies. “There’s so much we don’t know!” Dick told me, sounding excited and distressed at the same time. “You could spend a week studying some obscure insect and you would then know more than anyone else on the planet. Our ignorance is profound.”*

*Nodding, I wrote the comment down in my notebook. I liked its humility—an acceptance of how little we know—and I liked its challenge and implied sense of wonder—there is still so much to discover. Over the next decade, the words would surface again, like some message on a Magic Eight Ball: Signs point to yes. Concentrate and ask again. You could spend a week studying some obscure insect and you would then know more than anyone else on the planet.*

*I’ve spent a lot of time in my life, much more than a week, thinking about the apocalypse. In my circle of friends, climate change is a party conversation. Dead zones in the ocean. The melting ice caps. The rainforest on fire. Then there are the changing patterns in our own*

*weather—that terribly dry winter followed by a dry spring. Most of the Southwest is in what is called exceptional drought condition, the highest category of drought, a drought expected to persist and intensify. I've lived in the desert almost all my life and waiting for rain is nothing new. Every summer in the Gila Valley of New Mexico, we watch the skies, anticipating the monsoon season, the months of July, August, and September which provides us with half our annual precipitation of twelve inches. But here it is, mid-July and the rainfall we have gotten this year—counting all the way back to January—amounts to less than my little finger, a brittle twig, a shortened stalk of grass. This year has also been a bad fire season, with over a dozen homes destroyed in the town of Silver City where I teach and hundreds of thousands of acres burned in the surrounding Gila National Forest and nearby Arizona. My friends and I are fearful and excited at the same time.*

*As the world falls apart, as we lose hundreds of species a day in the most current mass extinction, as I lift my head to the bright blue New Mexican sky and lament and wail and ululate...the idea that there is still so much to discover strikes me as a kind of miracle. We think we've beaten the earth flat, hammered out the creases, starched the collar, hung her up to dry. We've turned the planet into our private estate, a garden here, a junkyard there, maybe an apocalypse at the end. But no longer wild, no longer mysterious. And yet. You could spend a week studying some obscure insect and you would then know more than anyone else on the planet. It's such a cheerful thought.*

*One day this month, while things on the planet kept getting steadily worse, David Pearson emailed me that the salt lakes in northeastern New Mexico had some interesting tiger beetle species and that “studying *Cicindela sperata* at the junction of Highway 60 and the Rio Grande River would be especially intriguing.”*

*Much like humans, tiger beetles can be found almost everywhere on the planet, except for a few spots such as Antarctica, the Arctic north of 65 degrees latitude, and isolated islands like Hawaii and the Maldives. Some 2600 species of tiger beetles have been described so far. The Rio Grande Tiger Beetle or *Cicindela sperata* is a species common in the Southwest, not endangered, and not threatened. Still we don't know much about the insect. All tiger beetles share some characteristics. Hatched from eggs laid*

*in soil or rotted wood, tiger beetle larvae are predaceous, digging burrows and waiting for their prey at the top, lunging out to drag in the small spider or ant passing by. Over months or a year or two years—going into dormancy in the winter (or perhaps doing that later as an adult)—these larvae go through three instars or three stages in which they grow larger and shed their skins. Finally the last instar forms the pupa which eventually breaks open so the beetle, fully metamorphosed, can emerge. But in what kind of soil or habitat does the Rio Grande Tiger Beetle lay its eggs? After the eggs hatch, what do the larvae of this species look like exactly? And how long is the cycle for this insect—from egg to larva to pupa to adult?*

*David was pushing me to fill in one of the blank spaces on the map he is constructing of tiger beetles in the world. The co-author of *Field Guide to Tiger Beetles in the United States and Canada*, he wanted to replace that brief phrase “larval biology unknown” that mars his entry for the Rio Grande Tiger Beetle. Caught up in the email moment, flattered to be considered a potential citizen scientist, I thought, yes, that would be intriguing. That would be fun.*

*Soon after, I decided I should go out and see an actual tiger beetle, live, not in a book, which is why I am here today. Most tiger beetles in my area are not active as adults until after the monsoon season, which has been slow to start this year. The Western Red-Bellied Tiger Beetle is an exception, one of the few species to appear before the rains, congregating in groups along river banks, ponds and irrigation ditches, stock tanks and mud flats. According to *Field Guide to the Tiger Beetles of United States and Canada*, “As water sources dry up and tadpoles, insect pupae, and other aquatic organisms become exposed, hundreds of Western Red-Bellied Tiger Beetles will attack these large but helpless organisms.”*

*Scavenging a helpless organism is something any tiger beetle would want to do. But more often these insects are hunters, running down their prey, grabbing and stabbing the victim, and drenching its body with digestive juices. The Western Red-bellied can also fly short distances, and I am reminded that this patch of sedge and grass along the Gila River, about two miles from my home, contains many more tiger beetles than the group I am watching. The sandy bank is literally swarming with carnivorous*

*beetles, just as the guidebook promised. Putting down my binoculars, I can see them on the mud and sand at the water's edge. I can see them everywhere in my peripheral vision, and I think of piranhas and certain horror movies I watched as a child. It's silly to be at all nervous. Still, I look quickly at my feet.*



*In 1954, a movie called **Them!** featured a nest of gigantic ants irradiated by nuclear tests in central New Mexico. The posters for this first “big bug” film used tiger beetles for the illustration, their mandibles holding up a blonde starlet in tight dress and red high heels, her head thrown back a la Ann Darrow in the 1933 **King Kong**. You can go to Wikipedia even now for a picture of those bulging eyes and snapping jaws. You can laugh at the bad visuals and ponder the movie’s final warning, “The atomic genie has been let out of the bottle. When man entered the atomic age, he entered a new world. What we may eventually find in that world, no one can predict.”*

*I was born in 1954, the debut of **Them**, living most of my life in the last half of the twentieth century, surrounded by stories from movies and TV and books, of course, so many books, making my decisions, (not going to Africa), reading and writing and living mostly in my head, the movie of **Sharman**. So the years flew by. And here I am today, in good physical shape, with a lively mind and two grown children and a few books I have written myself. Most decisions are no longer mine to make. I do not expect to become an ER doctor or the creator of cool television shows. I don’t plan on riches or fame. At every point in life, and not just the tail end of middle*

***age, there is a long list of what we will never be. We are defined by our limits as much as our loves.***

***This speaks to the power of transformation. Turn the idea around. At every point in life, there is a long list of what we can still be. I can still choose a window into the Other. In every moment of the day, in the middle of any day, I can become newly engaged with the world. Newly competent. There is so much to discover! So much we don't know. I can still become something I am not now.***

***Can't I?***

***Photo Credits in order of appearance: Ted MacRae; Elroy Limmer; Elroy Limmer; Peter Russell; Gail Stanford.***

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# LYNN DOIRON

## *Music From The Night Before*

*Morning is not without its music  
and the tamale vendor's cab-top speakers shout  
recorded old news of his wares.*

*A ginger-eared dog across the calle barks,  
and is joined in rounds from block to block.  
The propane truck plays its Mexican Hat Dance.*

*Dark is a stone bowl and light its pestle,  
every sound an herb dropped into dreams  
because dreams I knew in sleep are dust:*

*the road leading out from my navel  
across a cracked-milk plain  
is crushed, pummeled with the mint Buick,*

*the see-through stairs of a high-rise  
built with no sense of place.  
Tamales piña! Tamales res! Tamales rica!*

*There is dog hair in the mortar  
holding the stair steps and I wonder  
if it comes from a terrier mix or a pit bull,  
and why neighborhood dogs shed*

*such volumes of noise, all of it white,  
and every strain and strand follows unfinished  
losses, truncated roads, places I might*

*have given birth in, or been borne into,  
glistening, new, all teeth intact, dancing  
under an early sun.*

## ***Sometimes I Can Hear Oklahoma***

***Sometimes I can hear Oklahoma in the marine layer.  
Wrapped in a drift horizon too thick to approach.***

***Sometimes a vapor of saddle harness couples  
with tractor grease and corn shucks torn,***

***brown eggs in old straw and slanted blue cellar doors.  
And I turn toward what I can't see and see it. See it.***

***in the fleece of asphalt ocean, white-capped fields.  
And a clapping of floured hands calling chickens***

***calling chickens, clapclapclap. Handfull of calling.  
An old woman's aproned dreams. Sometimes.***

## DAY

*Sometimes day is day and spreads itself thin and large  
as if a reservoir set between low golden hills, ready  
for stock to muddy shores with heavy hooves or swallows  
to skid beaks and ripple-fill the pane of sky reflected.*

*Other times day is a flock of white ducks, orange-billed  
and orange-footed, webs between their toes the webs  
of fins from kin with ruby fans of gills; white ducks  
who rise and beat earth's atmosphere with such elan and*

*and fury, we mistake their flight for sun and shield  
our eyes from blindness should we look too close or long  
or try to fathom more than we've been taught to know of  
dawn and dusk, what falls between landings and departures.*

*And sometimes, walking near the reservoir, mud oozing  
through our toes, we find a feather.*

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# LARRY JORDAN

## *Side Show*

*Headlights fill one way  
of the two lanes winding  
between the gullies of Coke cups,  
snow cone wrappers  
and leaves swirl in the dusk  
of an October orange.  
Orion appears as the gate's shadows  
fade their twisting curlicues  
of elaborate hinge,  
and Sarah with two friends  
hold hands and shuffle in the dirt;  
they're first in line  
for the Cyclone tonight.*

---

*A chill strops to sharpen the air  
as apparitions thrum adrenalin.  
Sarah screams down the Himalaya  
with sticky, sweet lips.  
The moon necks its pose  
in the dangling bulbs  
glinting a kind of percussion  
that flickers to a blur.  
Pop and ting, the ducks dodge  
quick across a mechanical pond  
from the trigger of the good looking  
boy trying to win Mongo  
the Monkey Man and the eye  
of Sarah Ann Jessup.*

---

*An officer leans against the gate  
his foot propped on a bar. The stripe  
down his trousers is ironed crisp.  
He pulls out a cigarette and  
a book of matches folding back the cover.  
“Draw me” is printed under  
a face too close to the one  
he can not erase of the girl they found  
in the gully with snow cone wrappers  
and a little stuffed monkey.*

## ***Roller Coasters***

***His possible death  
stood beside the gate.***

***Bright chrome and a scream  
launch proofs of gravity.***

***He leaves what he leaves  
in three column inches.***

***The stone is smoothed for a chisel  
and carnies are taking tickets.***

***Either way, up or down,  
there is a waiting line.***

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# STAN SANVEL RUBIN

**WRONG**

*for DM*

*You're alone in a courtyard  
at night. No one's around,  
not even the guards. One window  
is lit above the dungeon  
where your brain is stored.  
Later, as the moon  
unfolds its scar, someone  
will come onto the balcony*

*and proclaim the freedom  
of everyone. The crowd will cheer  
because they want to.  
Where did they come from?*

*You want to ask, but if you do  
they'll carry off your head.  
It's rude to tell a crowd  
it's wrong.*

***DON'T YOU JUST LOVE IT?***

***You want to be happy, so you buy  
a stack of cream filled donuts from the shop  
that features cupcakes and a bride  
and groom effigy on top  
of a twelve layer cake.***

***He winks at her  
with pygmy eyes. She turns  
toward him, almost breathing,  
lips slightly ajar, plastic legs gleaming  
where her white dress splits.***

***They must have had help,  
they could not have climbed  
so high by themselves without sinking  
into an avalanche of sticky white,  
leaving desperate tiny footprints behind.***

***SEE HOW IT IS?***

***For hours in the convenience  
store's fluorescent night  
where no one talks to anyone  
you beg the future  
from a locked mouth.***

***Tired of being laughed at  
by the cashier because  
you have to count your change  
in pennies, spreading them  
like brass rain across the glass,***

***you push each one with your finger  
the way you lined up marbles  
in the alleys after school,  
playing for pride, the sheer  
joy of winning.***

***You're prepared, this time,  
to do what it takes  
to get your money's worth.  
You'll look them in the eye.***

***You'll make them pay.***

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# JENNIFER MACBAIN-STEPHENS

## *Art Project*

*I take myself apart piece by piece only to try and weld the parts back together. If I think about taking the body parts away- I can. I cannot remove the thoughts as easy. But first I must separate body parts from thought parts. Only, not having the correct glue, all of the parts will be slightly off. I take apart my thoughts in my brain like a black crow picking at something furry in the road. It can be done if you don't mind getting messy and in turn, making a mess. Sometimes, something might scream at you and interrupt. I cannot remove myself from myself. So I take little pieces away:*

*An eye here*

*A ring finger there*

*An ankle*

*(then a loftier goal)*

*A pelvis*

*Pick, tuck, hide, cut, paste, erase, denote, move, remove*

*Like so many gems of colors – some bright, some dull, so many red pieces, they gather to form a cup of treasures in my hand, a gift basket covered with cellophane trying to look prettier, not asking for much. Now we are all wrapped, secure yet still seeking a final resting place, a place to exchange gifts and to be unfolded on a table somewhere. We are spread out again, picked over, ahh'ed over and put back into a safe casing or a refrigerator. Now write your thank you note.*

## ***Theme Park***

***I went to a world that was surrounded by plastic but everyone was expected to create the natural element of joy. There were furry creatures with oversized heads that didn't mind if you touched them. There were masks everywhere- on the large objects and on the smaller of men- that gleamed smiles and narrowed eyes and all the while very wide people would sit on many buses, trying to make space and trying to keep time. There was no room for tears but there were many tears. The colors were in the billions and the food consumed-mammoth. Always the rides, and the light bulbs, and the noise and the snacks. Always the snacks. And when the week was over, perhaps the moments of forced joy were forgotten because everyone just wanted to sleep. If you see what everyone else sees and if you sit on what everyone else sits on, are you the same as them based on groupings? Like the creatures, I didn't know who was inside of me either.***

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# TOM MCCOY

## *roofing*

*when like a shopping cart in a parking lot  
death crashes into you  
and your worm drive mechanism and ring and pinion  
are shot  
and all the ships of air and trains of morning  
move into darkness  
and even the cough of money in the soft milk country  
becomes a kingdom of spiders and black bells  
i will remember the day we were roofing  
when the nails fell in the sand by the back door  
how you said if they were just a little more here  
than there it would look like jesus with a backpack  
and we could start a new religion  
and perhaps kiss the soft throat of heaven*

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# MOLLY STONE

*Cornpoem*

*“Tell me whar a man gits his corn pone, en I’ll tell you what his ‘pinions is.” -Mark Twain*

*What ferments into a publishable poem  
invisible editor-at-large?*

*A verse of corn fine grown—  
golden kernels of monoculture  
once maize white, red, and blackish-blue?  
The poetry of sin, now and then?  
The poets, they lie too much,*

*but that’s old news. Why not a sestina:*

*cows masticating grass, not corn-fed,  
wild grown and free?  
A kind of memorial for corn eugenics,  
a holocaust coined civilization, ardor of death,  
lunacy—blood-heat—powdered  
bone.*

*Or maybe you’re fond of spoon-fed free verse  
by vote, foam on coffee,  
given the nod by the workshop for suitable digestion?  
Corn oftentimes finds its way out of the body,  
you know, intact, ready to swallow  
once more: think food value:  
corn syrup.*

*Likely you'd fancy an ode cobbled  
from corn's phallic form  
and its horny likelihood  
which by now  
bores me to constipation.  
You too?  
As if that might brand rebel poets  
who  
exercise cobs for pleasures other than  
pipes to smoke.*

*The poem I'd write:  
green-eyed barn cat, black as forbidden rice,  
chucks-up mottled cornpone, whole kernels, how,  
the golden goo is gross on white linoleum floor.  
You'd favor not?  
I don't know.  
Do pussycats eat corn?*

*If not that, might a couple cornsilk couplets charm?*

*A glacial-eyed plumber, how the boomer goob  
struggled to flirt his cellphone number over white picket fence,*

*how he wore shitty latex gloves, pumped out corncobs (1, 2, 3),  
flushed down the toilet by a two-year-old tike next door;*

*the tot's father,  
how he consumed corn everything:  
tamale corn pie, steamed corn, corn salad,*

*hoppy glop, kettle corn, corn fritters and cream corn,  
craved corn the way bubba in forrest gump  
hailed shrimp as ambrosia. Remember?*

*The dad sips oksusu cha,  
ritualistically preceding meditation,  
touts the golden corn tea, glistening with honey*

*and basho's haiku, as lowering blood pressure.  
Would this be of worth, run deep into the secrets of the earth?  
Perchance there are no mysteries left unrevealed?  
Maybe, editor-at-large,  
indiscernible as the tiniest of gods  
spinning in hoop skirts flaming orange  
and gold  
on points of needles,  
the best thing to do is tend my own garden,  
drop native seeds into fertile corn holes  
and hope  
to germinate America  
anew un-addicted  
to kernel gold*

*Have you heard the old blues spiritual:*

*“Cornpone, cornpone,  
Cheese and potatoes...”?  
Cornpone.  
Shuck it. Mold it.  
Sop it in a bottomless  
melting pot of boiled brains.*

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# DAVID ELLIOTT

## *Identity Theft*



*It didn't take long for Henry to realize the woman he'd let into the company truck was crazy. She'd waved from the side of the road as if familiar with him and in distress but what made Henry stop his truck and back it along the shoulder was that she was attractive and there was something wild and unconventional about her that reminded him of girls he'd met years ago hitch-hiking through Europe and then out to California. Girls that he sketched and painted and made love to in sleeping bags under the stars who loved his long hair and his art.*

*She smiled tentatively while reaching in through the open window to unlock the door. Then hauling an overflowing backpack into the truck with her she said, "I'm going to the V.A. Hospital. Can you give me a ride?" She pulled the door shut in punctuation to her question, plunked the backpack on the floor between her legs, and looked over at him expectantly.*

*"I'm going near there," he said.*

***“There’s a model trying to steal my identity and I want to sue her, but first I want to see my Dad before I leave town,” she said looking forward now. “Do you think I should?”***

***There was a shiny pink scar bubbling from the middle of her cheek down into her throat. It sharply contrasted against the rest of her skin, which was dull, tawny, and cracked as if she’d been outdoors for days on end.***

***Henry didn’t know what to say. He smelled an odor of urine and sweat.***

***A horn blared at him because he was sticking part way into the road.***

***“The V.A. on Federal?” he said.***

***“I don’t know where it is, I’m just going there.”***

***He put the truck in gear and edged back onto the road.***

***“Can you believe someone would do that?” she said.***

***“What?”***

***“Try to steal who you are, who you’ve been. I haven’t seen my father in years. I was married to a rock star. He didn’t think too much of that.” She pointed to a new apartment building. “That’s a fashionable color. I’m going to build a building and paint it that color. Do you like it?”***

***“That’s the recession color. Everything is burnt sienna these days, like the country is rusting,” he said, thinking it was funny as he heard himself say it.***

***“I have to get myself a lawyer, do you know how to do that, one that’ll get this model to stop stealing from me? I used to be on billboards,” she said pointing to a large ad on the side of a building displaying a woman’s face and the promise of whiter teeth from a tape you applied while sleeping. “My father knows about lawyers, the bastard. ‘Course I don’t know if I should get out of town, do you?”***

*Henry said that he didn't know. She continued with this litany of strange non sequiturs – Henry trying to answer them in a way that would keep him out of any serious engagement, wondering if anyone he knew would see this woman riding with him in the truck that bore the ACCO logo, and a bumper sticker that asked How's my driving? and displayed the firm's telephone number.*

*He kept sneaking glances at her when he thought she wouldn't notice. She wore a full body leotard of bright blue, dulled with ground-in dirt. At first he thought she was wearing a skirt, but realized that it was a black denim jacket tied around her waist. Her nails were dirty, chipped and broken, red polish still evident but worn out like the finish of a decaying car.*

*“Could I bum a cigarette?” she asked.*

*“I don't smoke.”*

*“That's good. I didn't used to smoke. I liked to run on the beach in the morning. But now I only run if I have to get away.”*

*“Hmn,” Henry murmured like he understood.*

*He was on his way to replace a condenser that was on the fritz in an AC unit of an apartment building. If he had to take her to the V.A. he was going to be late. He feared she might make a scene if he couldn't take her all the way.*

*She lifted her leg up on the seat and turned with her back to the passenger door so she was facing him. He noticed grime in the lines of her cleavage. The unwashed smell grew stronger.*

*“What's your name?”*

*“Richard,” he said.*

*“Hi Richard, I'm Kim.”*

*“Hi,” he said feeling more nervous.*

***“Are you married?”***

***“Uhm, yeah.”***

***She nodded her head. “You look married.” Then she moved towards him and Henry thought for a brief second she would kiss him before she smacked his shoulder, and pointed, “Hah!” she said, “Look at that.”***

***There were two Mexican looking guys with bedrolls scrambling through the sparse brush at a freeway on ramp.***

***“They’re not going to find a place to camp there.”***

***She laughed again, but it sounded forced.***

***“I don’t suppose you could loan me five thousand dollars to get me back on my feet, could you Rick?”***

***“What?”***

***“Once I get my lawsuit finished I’m going to have plenty. I’ll pay you back.”***

***“I don’t have that kind of money.”***

***She started fiddling with the dial on the radio. He thought of telling her not to but kept his mouth shut.***

***She stopped on a country western station. “I hate most of this shit,” she said, but left it on.***

***Turning to him again with her leg up she scratched her knee and said, “Can I have fifty dollars if I give you a blow-job Rick?”***

***The way she said his name it sounded like she knew it wasn’t his. It sounded like she knew that the only reason he pulled over was that in the***

*back of his mind he was hoping that something like this would happen. It sounded like she wasn't crazy at all, just tired.*

*Henry didn't say anything. He just looked ahead at the traffic.*

*She sat forward again and said, "Turn down there," pointing to a residential street.*

*At the corner Henry turned the truck. Three quarters of the way down the block she said, "Park here."*

*He pulled the truck in behind a Volvo that had a bumper sticker that read My child was citizen of the month at Parker Middle School. Henry imagined a well-behaved little Volvo beaming with pride.*

*He looked over at her and she said, "I need something." Not like she needed the fifty, but like she needed a solution.*

*He peeled off two twenties and gave her all his ones.*

*She took it from him and rummaged through her backpack stuffed with ziplock plastic bags and seemed to struggle choosing the right one. Finally she opened one of the zip-locks and put the money in with a bunch of folded loose-leaf pages completely covered with neat cursive handwriting in blue ink. Henry glimpsed the words animal experimentation and Revlon.*

*When the money was stashed away she said, "Come on," looking at his lap.*

*Henry undid his pants, quickly looked around to see if anyone was looking, and then leaned back his head and gazed up at the torn headliner on the ceiling of the truck to minimize the impact of her body odor.*

*She worked enthusiastically and it was over quickly. Sitting up she said, "I haven't seen my father since 2008."*

***“That’s too bad,” Henry said.***

***“You want to visit him too?”***

***Henry shook his head, zipped up and pulled away from the curb. The scar that had been pink before was now pale white against the rest of her skin.***

***At the rotunda of the Veteran’s Administration Hospital she sat for a moment like she wasn’t going to get out of the truck. But then she heaved a sigh, smiled with the same trepidation as when she’d greeted him, and wrestled her backpack out of the door. There were several people standing nearby and Henry wondered what they were thinking.***

***“Good luck,” Henry said.***

***“Yeah, right,” she said slamming the door and stooping to pick up her pack.***

***As Henry steered the truck down the driveway her odor lingered with him and he fought the urge to throw up.***

***\*\*\****

***The next weekend, while his wife did the ironing and watched HGTV, Henry cleaned out the stacks of magazines his daughter left on his side of the garage when she went away to college. He’d been thinking of buying a surfboard and wanted there to be a place to store it where it might go unnoticed so he could avoid the inevitable inquisition about the expense.***

***As he piled the Vogues, Cosmopolitans, and women’s soccer equipment catalogues into the recycling bin one fell open and looking out at him from down in the can was the younger image of the woman who’d called herself Kim. Her face intact and healthy, she smiled brightly, wearing a blue bikini in an ad promoting tampons.***

***He pulled the magazine from the trash, sure that his eyes were playing tricks on him. But the more he looked the more he was certain it was the same woman. The issue dated February, 2010.***

***Quickly he looked around to see if anyone was watching him, then he threw the magazine back in the bin and shoved the others in on top of it.***

***He no longer had appetite for his chore, and hustled the recycling bin out to the curb, wondering what had happened to the woman who had called herself Kim.***

***It was easier than wondering what had happened to him.***

*Photo credit top left: © Aigarsr*

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**KHANH HA**

### ***A Silent Lullaby***

***1***

***Through binoculars the master watched her from the second-floor veranda.***

***She was putting the stallion at a trot coming down a gentle incline of the hill into the fruit orchard. The noon sun was glaring white on rows of fruit trees, the green of water apple and langsat and mangosteen. The horse was a bright white in the sun. Hatless, her long hair was deep black bouncing with the gait of the horse, her black shirt's sleeves rolled up below her elbows. On this windy day the smells of grass were born on the wind and the scents of lemon in the orchard drifted into the house.***

*The horse and she were getting smaller now at a gallop, her hair flowing back, her knees drawn, going fast until the white of the horse blended into the hazy tree line. In the grove's dark shade, the air reeked of the pine cones' scent and red squirrels and fox squirrels leaped from tree to tree. He remembered all that. Even the tiny chirps of crickets in the grass, the red wild strawberries like drops of blood in their patches, the late January wind damp to the bones coming from the sea. Those were all gone now. Now he could only live vicariously through her youthful body by watching her lose herself in the nature, to smell day heat on her perspiring skin when she came back in, the warmth of sun still held in the dense mass of her hair.*

*He lay the binoculars in his lap, rubbing his eyes. Then slowly he massaged his wrists. He had long disposed his wristwatch. All the house clocks, too. The sounds of their ticking frayed his nerves. Now in his own world he only had to deal with his illness.*

*He pushed on the hand rims of the wheels to propel his wheelchair along the railing. From above, he saw her again emerging from beneath the dense tree crowns into the sun glare. She led the horse past the gate of the corral. A young man was coming out of the horse shed toward her. A slim, muscular boy clad in a white undershirt and loose white cotton pants. Looking at his copper-toned body close-up, the master thought of an ironwood log long preserved in water. Nam, the boy, took the reins from her hand and led the stallion to the shed. For a moment he envied their youth, the girl, the boy, the stallion. The nineteen-year-old boy was new to him. Injured in a leg by a shark in a rescue mission. She had put him in charge of the stallion, freeing the man who worked both horses and the cattle to lighter duty. Self-assured, she was adept at reorganizing his staff.*

*He fed a cigarette into his mouth, thinking of the doctor's advice not to worsen his throat cancer. The sea smell came on the wind onto the veranda. Salt laden, acrid. He lit the cigarette. He held the smoke in his mouth as long as he could, closing his eyes, buoyed by an exhilarating sensation. He spat out the smoke by a sudden wracking cough, grabbing his chest then his throat.*

*He wheeled himself through the French doors into the spacious bedroom, airy with tall arched windows shaded with wood smoke-gray honeycomb blinds.*

*He brought his wheelchair to a stop in front of the wall facing the French doors. There was a large oil painting with a life-size figure in it. Every time he gazed at her lying on the moss-colored leather sofa, a sleeping beauty in nude, loosely covered over her loins by a Bordeaux terry towel, he felt alive. Leaning out of the chair, he traced his fingertips along the roundness of her shoulders, the faint clavicle shown as the face was turned away from him toward the back of the sofa, the mass of black hair rolled up, twisted into tight woven braids and clasped by an ivory dragonfly barrette. His hand trailed along the thigh, bent in toward the sofa's back, the knee pressed against the round calf of her other leg. The frayed edge of the terry towel took his fingers upward to the valley between her thighs.*

*There was a soft click of the doorknob. Barefoot, she came in. Another soft click to shut the door. He turned the wheelchair to face her. She crossed the floor, stopped, her thighs touching the armrest. Black trousers flecked with yellow dust, toenails painted lavender rose. Black shirt sweat stained on the front, unbuttoned along the V opening that framed her skin like white satin. Gently she cradled his head in her bosom. He shut his eyes, inhaling the warm heat from her skin. The smells of grass and pollen, of fern and pine cones, of hay and dust, of a sunny meadow brought home. When he kissed the skin of her chest, she said, Have you just smoked, and he nodded, knowing nothing escaped her unseen. He nuzzled her, pushing back the front of her shirt like a child at feeding time. Moments later he saw the front buttons undone and the meadow warmth from under the fabric rushed into his nostrils. Milky white was her skin that glowed with a devilish fervor and with his face uptilted he let himself be caressed on the head, drown in her intoxicating scent, and at the same time drained by a bone-deep fatigue.*

\* \* \*

*He came out of his doze and saw her lift the birdcage from the veranda's railing. Then she pushed his wheelchair back into the coolness of their bedroom. She parked his chair so he could sit looking out over the white*

*railing to the blue-gray horizon now blushing a rose color. The birdcage in hand, she went out to the hallway and when she came back, empty handed, she locked the bedroom door, picked up a bottle of baby oil and knelt down in front of the wheelchair's footrest.*

*I saw that you already fed him, she said, placing the bottle on the floor, and she pulled down his trousers by the waistband.*

*Yes. He was calling for you to feed him. He pushed himself up slightly, so she could slip his trousers past his buttocks. She touched the felt heat pad that covered his pubes and his genitals. The heat had mostly gone from it. Hold it, she said and placed the pad in his lap. The skin of his pubes felt warm against her palm. His penis felt warm too, resting limp and curved like a crooked finger. She squeezed a few drops of oil into her palm, lemon fragrant and cool, and smoothed the length of his penis with her palm. Then, encircling her thumb and forefinger around the base of the penis, she began to push her fingers upward the shaft to the glans. She stopped, holding the grip momentarily, and returned her fingers to the base of the penis and started over. The heat from the pad had made the flesh firm, the skin soft and oiled, so she did not have to labor with her gripping stroke.*

*His hand now came to rest on her shoulder, squeezing it through the soft cotton bathrobe still damp with her body wetness. His cheeks hollowed as he sucked in his breath while stroking the side of her neck, his fingers bone-dry. Yet the fever in him never made a difference, even with her patient strokes, long, gripping strokes to force blood into the shaft, which had been a daily routine, one in the early morning and again before bedtime, lasting each time fifteen minutes until her fingers grew so tired she had to switch hands. Not even a maid was allowed to know, much less to perform the exercise in her absence to cure his dysfunction.*

*The maid pushed the master's wheelchair to the rim of the pond. Reeds grew tall, reeking of a strong, dry-pasture smell. He sat straight up and gave out his hand for the milk can. Tucking it in the crook of his arm, the son studied him for a moment and then decided to turn it over. He took off the rubber band and pried open a slit of the plastic cap. He pinched the tail of a tan-colored house lizard. Still alive, the lizard dangled with its spatula*

*toepads paddling air. He clucked his tongue several times. And waited. Then clucked again. By the lip of the pond where reptile-worn soil was a smooth clay red, his son sat hugging his knees anxiously eyeing the water. Then, as they all watched, the water purred and its surface broke when a huge catfish emerged. At least five feet long, flat-headed, long-whiskered, and its thick body dripped water as it rose and snapped at the lizard. His son started bouncing on his heels like a coil operated toy. He gave another live lizard to the boy-man who closed his fist so hard around the mite it just disappeared. He grabbed his son's wrist, shook it until the fist opened. Then he placed the thin, long tail between his son's fingers and motioned toward the catfish. The boy-man, grinning mindlessly, dangled the reptile in the air. Suddenly the tail snapped, the lizard plopped into the water. The catfish snapped it up in one vicious swipe of its jaw that aroused a delirious croak from the little master.*

*He sat back, watching the catfish working the water during the feeding, his son playing with the live lizards before tossing them to the fish. His son wore a little brass bell on a neck string. They dressed him always in bright colored outfit, firecracker-red for his shirt and white shorts. If he strayed from the house even after dark, the bright colors would help them find him. A cuckoo called deep in the tangles of ground fern. Peaceful, he closed his eyes. If my son could be normal, he thought.*

*He'd had the lighthouse built for the fishing hamlet. The hamlet? He owned most of it there. The men, the boats, the trucks. He'd put county folks in the county seats just like he placed a hen in her roost. He ruled the roost. After his first wife—mother of his idiot son—died, he remarried a girl only twenty-two years old.*

*A rough cough doubled him up. His throat seared, his face went numb. He felt a back pressure in his head that seemed to swell it, then the eyes. He blinked. His liquid-filled eyes saw but a white bright glare. Then everything returned. He waved at the maid to take him back.*

*Coming back up the gravel walk he saw her and Nam leaving the servant quarter. A myna fluttered above her. Nearby birds chattered and twittered, the air full of their trilling. She watched the myna hopping on the grass, chasing its shadow.*

*The bird took notice of the master, flew up and perched on her shoulder.*

*Guest! Guest! it croaked.*

*She turned, smiling, to look at him, the guest the myna announced. The master always felt alive in her presence. The maid rested the wheelchair and greeted her a good morning. His son dashed, in his hopping gait, toward the bird and touched it on its well-groomed head. The bird blinked its eyes. Hello!*

*The master looked at the bird's round eyes patched in yellow. It bore a strong resemblance to the one they once had. Suddenly the myna opened its yellow-orange beak and said, What is your name, Mister?*

*He tried to smile and said to her, Tonight you can tell me how you taught this bird. This thing doesn't rely on scent like a dog. How did it know my gender?*

*I didn't teach it, she said and leaned her head back toward Nam. He did.*

*It must be instinct, sir, Nam said. I'm sure he can tell you are a man.*

*He didn't smile. He heard the myna croak out a hello to the maid and the maid just smiled, and he looked at Nam and asked if he knew of their myna the old cat had eaten. Yes, the boy said, adding that he knew from what she'd told him and how much she'd loved it.*

*Keep it away from the house, he said. We have another cat and you've seen it. A voracious one.*

*Yessir, the boy said. He's a good cat, though, I think.*

*And that bird is one smart bird, he said and motioned to the maid to take him back into the house. The sun was in his face on the way in, and, closing his eyes, he thought perhaps the boy could have taught the bird to tell her what he himself was forbidden to say.*

\* \* \*

*When the maid brought him a glass of lemonade in the living room, he was resting in his wheelchair, looking out the side French doors. He held the cold glass against his eyelids. As he opened his eyes there was a white glare. Not the white of the ruffled curtains, not sun-white brightness. He pressed the glass on his eyelids. A sickly pang went up the sides of his neck. The twinge crawled unobstructed like a fire-red centipede to the back of his head. Go away, you filthy! But it crept around, causing a lead-heavy sensation that pulled his head back, so that leaning it over the padded backrest he felt as if it was a block of cement in which every nerve had died. The pressure made his eyes bulge.*

*He brought the glass to his throat, holding it to calm his fevered skin. His neckchain rasped the bottom of the glass. He tapped the glass with the tear-shaped sapphire on the neckchain. It was thumb-sized and hollow. The back had a metal plug. Inside was powder poison.*

*His first wife died from a pinch of it after he found out her adultery.*

3

*The young man feigned dead, his face pressed against the sand. The full moon rose early and bright. Across the palely lit sand, he could see the little master perching on his heels on a hewed, water-blackened mangrove trunk, his shirt, his shorts soaked from the seawater. She stood behind him, waiting.*

*Around the holes lay strewn thousands of sand pellets the sand-bubbler crabs had discarded. Now they started peeking out of their burrows, waving their eyestalks. Nam's hand came down on one and snatched it. Then he stood up, brushing sand off the front of his shirt and pants, and walked across the sand to show the little master his catch.*

*Don't let him hold it, she said. He'll crush it.*

*I know, Nam said.*

*They fetched their horses. He helped the little master climb up on the quarter horse and then swung up behind him. They put the horses forward*

*going in the direction of the hamlet. The little master couldn't keep his head still. Nam could hear him purr softly in his throat.*

*Aren't you cold, eh? he spoke into the boy-man's ear, who had played in the water when they came down to the beach just before sunset. He didn't expect an answer.*

*He's fine, she said, checking the boy-man with a quick glance. He's never been sick in his life.*

*Nam could see a bonfire ahead of them. The fishermen must be heading out to sea early, he thought. Coming toward the fire he could smell the burning coals and in it the smells of oysters, the seawater-washed mud. They pulled up before the fire. The little master already fidgeted on the saddle when he saw the blazing fire pumping up mushrooms of black smoke. The boy dismounted and then the little master jumped down, crabbing as he landed on the sand. He ran to the fire.*

*Let's him get warm there, she said to him as she looped the reins around the pommel.*

*The smell of oysters drifted down like steaming sea in the sun. Have you tried their oysters, he said to her.*

*No. I've passed by here many times though. I can join you, if you want to eat.*

*Sure.*

*They sat down at one end of the table among fishermen who were coming and leaving. Each oyster still felt hot in their hands and as Nam pried the shell open with an oyster knife, the juice smoked with a seawater smell and tasted clean and tangy on his tongue and he washed it down with a sip of rice liquor. The spirits went down his throat like a small fire. She sipped from the shells before picking up the meat in creamy tan and dipping it in a little mound of salt and pepper wet with lemon juice. They ate until the pail was near empty. She began to clean her fingertips with a big wedge of lemon, crimping her lips, and took one last sip of rice liquor*

*and then ran her finger along her lower lip. Her lips had the color of red wine.*

*He paid and borrowed two empty pails and asked for fresh water. Then he carried the pails to their horses and let them drink. While the horses lapped water he saw her walking toward the bonfire where the little master was standing near its rim, silhouetted against the bright orange-red fire. Then a few feet from him she stopped. The boy-man turned sideways when he heard his name called. The firelight shone on his genitals which he held in both hands and his trousers were down around his thighs. The fire popped and flames spurted. His body convulsed with the turbulence of the fire. Standing in one place, she watched him work his genitals until he bent forward to spend himself into the flames.*

*From where he stood with the horses, the boy watched them. The fire, the little man, and her. Together they burned like embers in his mind.*

*\* \* \**

*The master was asleep now. She stood in her satin bathrobe in the dark, drying her hair with a towel, noticing that the moon had shifted, taking its yellow puddle from their bed out onto the veranda. It was quiet. Gone was even the ticking of the wall clock that used to fray his nerves on his sleepless nights. The sea murmured.*

*Lying in the quiet dark she could hear his shallow breathing. The little man must be sleeping soundly now, she thought. She didn't know what to do when she saw him exciting himself in front of the fire. Then, after composing herself, she took him to the water and had him wash his hands. Afterward he turned and gazed toward the bonfire, trance-like. She wondered what he was thinking of, or if he could think in visuals, then what did he see. When she went back to the horses she said nothing to Nam. She knew he had also seen it. Yet he put his arm on the little man's thick shoulders as he walked him to their horse. She knew of a secret place in her heart where she had put away things dear to her. She had put both of them in it, too.*

*She lay gazing out to the veranda until the last sliver of moonlight left the railing. Then she turned, pressing her cheek against the smooth, firm pillow, and closed her eyes.*

*She heard him call her name.*

*I thought you were asleep now, she said, barely audible.*

*He said nothing. She could see the liquid dark of his eyes. She closed her eyes again when he said, I talked to Mr. Long this afternoon.*

*What was it about? Sleep was coming on her heavy eyelids.*

*He's always been illuminating in his advice.*

*Hmm. Her husband never failed to consult Mr. Long, his spiritual advisor, on his key decisions, on Feng Shui regarding their living environment. What were they talking about, she held the thought just as it thinned out. Yet she heard him, My impending misfortune can be avoided if we have a child to raise as my descendant. Then this illness won't harm me.*

*She turned his words over in her mind. They said the severity of one's own evil karma might be assuaged by receiving an auspicious birth of a child into one's life.*

*Do you hear me, he said slowly.*

*I'm listening. Her mind woke, yet her eyes were closed. You were against adoption. You can't give me a child of your own. So now what is the soothsayer's advice?*

*He's not a soothsayer.*

*An oracle? His divine pronouncement had you convinced. Am I right?*

*He seemed to hold something back inside. Then his hand touched the side of her face. Will you consider having a child of your own? For me.*

*She opened her eyes. He was looking into her eyes, half of his face, pale white. You must've thought this over and through, she said, the way you sound.*

*Having a child to save me from this dreadful disease. If you consent to it, it'll make it much easier for me to confer with you about our plan.*

*Our plan?*

*Will you?*

*She felt a cold shiver. Then, holding in her breath, she said, You realize what you're putting me through?*

*He nodded. The only motion in the stillness.*

*You want me to whore myself?*

*He shook his head. His fingers lightly touched her lips after the words had come out. This, he said after a silence, hurts me deeply. You are my wife.*

*And you consider his opinion infallible?*

*He's rarely fallible. Besides, I've run out of options. And time.*

*If you have my consent, what then?*

*I can make arrangements. The final decision rests with you.*

*Decision on whom I go to bed with.*

*He was silent. Then he sighed deeply. It was too raw, she believed, to word it. Yet the way he loved her, as she knew, he must be hurting as much as he was hurting her and, that too, didn't fuse together and, thus, it hurt even more.*

*I want to think about it, she said, looking into his eyes now closed.*

***I'm fighting it each day to stay alive. You understand it, don't you?***

***Perfectly. If I do it for you, it will be on my terms.***

***Pardon?***

***Yes.***

***You can't.***

***Yes, I can. To fend death off you.***



4

***Over there, see, the proprietor said. He was hiding there after he dragged away one of my hunters fortnight ago. That's where he sat down and crunched the bones.***

***Looking toward the water-brimmed salt marsh, both she and Nam could see a tall clump of the cordgrass that fringed the marsh.***

***It's near impossible, said Mr. Sung the proprietor and also the master's business partner, to track him or spot him in the tall grass.***

*They could see, too, the brown of black-needle rush, at least four feet tall, vastly covering the landward expanses.*

*He darn near got another fellow, Mr. Sung said, just last month. He's gone cuckoo ever since. Folks say a man touched by a tiger is a dead man. I've got European and American tourists who came here to this swampland to hunt tigers and boars and so far none of them was hurt. But our tiger only likes the flesh of the natives. He makes our nerves creepy.*

*The proprietor ground his cigarette butt against the heel of his sandals. It's a beautiful morning to talk about such a rotten thing. Aren't they lovely, those flowers?*

*From the back porch, a trail led to the salt marsh and along the trail she could see canna lilies unfurl their broad leaves, sun-bright maroon, their large flowers splashing the drab landscape with gaudy red like after a carnage.*

*But you love to talk about this animal, don't you? she said, smiling at the proprietor. He's your main attraction.*

*Precisely. The man stood up, tall, broad-shouldered, running his callused hand on his cropped-hair head. Many came here to have a shot at him. But, hell, he drives many others away from my swampland. Your husband said he could send up a professional hunter to get rid of this beast for me. Well, he's my business partner. But what I'll do is kill this beast myself.*

*He sat down on the wooden railing of the porch, looking down at them while he lit another cigarette. He was a middle-aged man, twelve years her husband's junior. A chiseled face and calculating eyes, his hedonist's thick lips were bloodless from age-old nicotine. A man whom her husband had asked her to take this business trip to see. Seeing if she liked this man well enough as her husband had talked about his arrangements. It was she who asked Nam to come along on this trip, despite her husband's disapproval. Her husband was livid when they left in the chauffeured black Mercedes that took two hours on rough roads to a river port, then three more hours to the swampland in the Cà Mau peninsula on the*

*western rim of the Mekong Delta. Now, she wondered if this middle-aged proprietor knew anything of the purpose of her visit.*

*How d'you plan to kill this animal? she asked him as he drew a deep drag, his quick eyes having fixed on her despite the thin veil of cigarette smoke between them.*

*He's a great cunning cat, the proprietor said. He'd never pounce on you but from behind. To kill him you must see him first. When he's not seeing you, he won't turn against you.*

*And why is that, Nam asked, lifting his legs to rest them on the top rail.*

*If he sees you, he'll seek revenge. He's psychic.*

*So you better kill him if you shoot him, the boy said.*

*That's the plan.*

*How d'you kill him? she said, crossing her legs at the ankles, which drew his gaze to her bare feet in camel-colored open-toed sandals. He seemed to be thinking. But she could tell he was assessing her legs below her knee-length lilac skirt.*

*Well, if you have no plan for today, you can go with us after lunch.*

*Go where?*

*Where we set the trap for the kill tonight.*

*I'd love to be there.*

*Sure, after lunch then.*

*No. For the kill tonight.*

*Are you sure about that? He eyed her with a trailing grin.*

*Well, we didn't come up here for sightseeing.*

*All right, then.*

\* \* \*

*High up in a black mangrove tree and sitting astride a forked branch Nam rested, leaning his head back against the trunk, the rifle laid across his thighs. Within an arm's length to his left, she sat quietly in her light denim jacket, a belt looped around her abdomen and tied to the trunk, and to his right the proprietor was smoking a cigarette, cupping its red-glowing tip with his hand, his big Savage bolt-action rifle placed snugly in his lap.*

*The moon had not come up and the marsh lay dark. Roughly fifty yards ahead of them, on an expanse of black-needle rush protruding into the swamp, lay the carcass of a big stag. Shot to death in a mangrove swamp early in the afternoon and dragged by a pickup truck to this location as bait for the killing of the man-eating tiger.*

*Now, sitting in complete darkness behind a leafy camouflaged straw blind, the boy could smell the acrid cigarette odor drifting by. His hands caressed the walnut stock of the semi-automatic carbine, his eyes strained to make out the stag's carcass. If the tiger came now, it would be hard to shoot. Perhaps Mr. Sung could. That might have explained why he preferred the bulky bolt-action rifle. The boy closed his eyes. They had carried nothing with them when they went up the tree. No water. Just the guns. Mr. Sung had warned them that the wait could be hours, even until dawn. But she was a tough girl. Then the marsh began to glow. The water, too, mirroring the full moon just rising, cast a dreamlike reflection over the marsh. He could see her face now, though blurred, under the visor. Come now, bastard, he said to himself. His back ached, so he shifted carefully to take the numbness away.*

*He must have slept for some time, because when he woke the moon sat low on the mangrove forest and the marsh looked paler now, like silver. Then came a pep, sounding across the water. Then two more. His mind woke with an alarming alacrity. He glanced quickly at Mr. Sung, who jabbed his forefinger toward the marsh. Three more snappy peps. He tensed up.*

*There came the tiger now, out of the tall rush, striped and tawny-bodied, smaller at first then bigger as it moved along the cordgrass-rimmed bank toward the promontory, its massive body rippling with corded muscles. The boy caught a hand signal from the proprietor telling him to wait. He raised his hand to acknowledge it. He thought of nothing now but the tiger that, just now, rounded the smooth curve of the bank to enter the promontory. In the blue-silver light that veiled the ground, the tiger stood eyeing the carcass. It cut a huge, lonesome figure against the dark tree line. The boy now placed the rifle's butt in his shoulder, moving the muzzle across the blind's opening so that it was aimed directly at the tiger's broad side.*

*As soon as the tiger put its front paws on the carcass, a shot rang. Then the boy, seeing the tiger sway, pulled the trigger. The loud bang hurt his ears, the gunsmoke sulfuric and bitter.*

*C'mon, the proprietor said, get out there quick. He slung his rifle over his shoulder and grabbed the ladder and went down.*

*The boy held the ladder until she untied herself from the tree trunk and made her way down to the ground.*

*Did you hit him? she said as she strode out.*

*I don't know. At least one of us did.*

*When they were upon the tiger, its black-tipped tail was still thrashing and its mouth frothing. The proprietor pointed the muzzle of his gun at one of the wounds near the ear, two pulpy-looking holes still seeping blood. This one here, he said, was my shot. It went into the back of his skull. And this one here is yours. Hit him right on the neck. Either shot would've killed him. Then he lifted the muzzle up and slanted the stock across his shoulder. Now comes the heavy-duty work. Get him back to skin and clean him.*

*That'd be a heck of a treasure, the boy said, just to have his hide.*

*I'll have to send it later to the city to have it tanned. You'll see all his teeth and eyes, like a live tiger. I'll keep his eyes this time. Usually they put in fake eyes and brew his eyes to a blend and drink it. They believe that it'll give them a heck of eyesight. Say they can see a tiger before he sees them. See? Then he grinned and engaged her eyes. Did you enjoy yourself tonight?*

*Very much, she said, tilting back her visor as she looked up at him. First-hand experience is always a thrill.*

*Which would make a perfect gift for you? The hide or the head?*

*You really mean that?*

*I mean that.*

*She smiled as she looked down at the dead tiger. Then still smiling she looked back at him and said, A perfect gift can't be either or. It ought to be the whole tiger.*

*You're right. The proprietor smiled, cycling his jaw. Why didn't I think of that?*

*\* \* \**

*It rained suddenly with the sky full of sun. They had parked their Jeep off a path in a mangrove forest and roved a skiff following the waterways in the swampland. Now, they bore down in the skiff, letting the stream take them as it flowed swiftly under a canopy of crabapple mangroves.*

*They could hear rain drum loudly on the canopy of foliage. Let's go up, Nam said, looping a rope around a riverhemp branch and knotting it. They ran to the tree line. The ground gradually became level, cushioning the feet with dog's tooth grass. They stood leaning against a cajeput trunk and he saw a splash of pink flowers just a stone's throw away. The shape of a hut showed behind the profuse indigo shrubbery. They dashed toward it. It was near dark and they could see into the hut because it had no door.*

*Must be a woodcutter's hut, she said, wiping rainwater from her eyes.*

*I wouldn't know, he said as he entered it. She followed him.*

*From the dirt floor quack grass and green foxtail had sprung up. In a corner lay a cane cot, bare and narrow. He looked around. The air held an eternal dankness. Rain ripped. He could feel the wind in the hut as if he were outside.*

*You might as well sit down, he said to her as he worked the backpack off his shoulders.*

*Can we make a fire? she said. You have a lighter with you?*

*We could, cept everything is wet out there.*

*She sat down on the cot. He shook rainwater off his hair, his shirt clinging to his skin. He set down the backpack in the center of the hut and unzipped it and picked up a clean shirt.*

*Please put this on, he said, handing it to her, or you'll catch cold.*

*Thanks.*

*I'll be back. Then he walked outside, going from tree to tree, bending to look for firewood. After having gathered an armful of wood he went back into the hut. She was wearing his blue denim shirt with the sleeves rolled up to her elbows. Her own shirt lay spread on the cot.*

*I found this, she said, handing him a stubby white candle. It was under the cot.*

*He dumped the firewood. We can use this, he said, holding the candle close to his eyes. Then he got the lighter from the backpack and lit the candle. The bluish flame staggered then righted itself and then burned steadily in orange. Squatting on the floor, he spread out the dry sticks and lit one with a sprayed end in the candle. Then he used that to light another and*

*blew at them. Once they started burning collectively they popped and the sap smelled pungent. Her face was dry now and her skin glowed above the fire.*

*Don't you want to change out your shirt? she asked him.*

*It'll dry. Are you hungry?*

*I just want water. I drank all of mine in the skiff.*

*He went through the backpack and found his bottle of water and gave it to her. She sipped while he got out a baguette wrapped in brown paper. Then he unwrapped the paper so he could place on it a round box of La Vache Qui Rit cheese and two bananas. Our lunch, he said, grinning. Past lunchtime now.*

*I guess we did it on purpose. She handed the water bottle back to him.*

*With his pocketknife he cut the baguette in half. She took one half from him over the small fire, then a wedge of cheese. The bread still tasted fresh, the dough soft and yeasty. He threw crumbs into the fire, watching them singe quickly to black ashes. When he looked up she was gazing into the fire, chewing slowly, the cheese wedge nipped only at the tip. In the soft glow of the fire, she held a beauty that made his heart ache. Knowing her world, he was a dreamer and a fool.*

*The storm's getting worse, she said, breaking her gaze from the fire.*

*He looked at the wedge of cheese in her hand. Don't you like it?*

*Yes, I like it. I forgot it's there. She nibbled the wedge.*

*He pressed the candlewick with his fingers and put it out. Need to save this in case we have to stay longer.*

*She looked at the blackened wick still smoldering. I've seen people snuffing out candles like that. Does it hurt?*

*Not if you don't think about it.*

*Maybe you're right. Can I have some water, please?*

*Sure. He handed the bottle to her and, chewing, dropped his gaze to the fire. A long rip of wind.*

*You ever got hurt in your life? she asked him, holding the bottle in her lap.*

*Emotionally?*

*Of course.*

*He flicked a crumb into the fire and crumpled the cheese wedge's foil in his hand. He didn't want to talk about it. She said, Did you let it hurt you?*

*It just hurt like hell for a while.*

*What hurt?*

*Gazing into the fire, which was now burning low, he told her why he came to her town. I'm from up north, he said. Raised by an uncle and grew up with his only daughter who was my cousin. We made a living off his riverboat. Well, my cousin just disappeared one day. When I found her at a creek, she'd been dead for two days. No clothes on. Raped, sodomized. My uncle went to visit her grave one day and got bit by a poisonous snake.*

*He felt sick telling her now. He mentioned his cousin as his lover and yet he didn't care what she might have thought. He saw her hand coming over the fire to hand him the bottle of water. He took a sip.*

*I'm sorry for your losses, she said.*

*That's okay. Other people have it worse.*

*You seem to have it buried so deep in you it hurts when you have to talk about it.*

*He picked up a banana and offered it to her.*

*Thanks, she said.*

*They ate in silence. Then as he rolled up the banana peel she said, Do you still want to work for my husband and me?*

*He looked into her eyes. Well, if you still need me around.*

*Sure, I do.*

*A sudden violent gust of wind made the forest sigh deeply and the fire nearly went out. He bent, blowing on it to coax it back. I need to get some more firewood, he said and slowly rose to his feet.*

*Be careful out there.*

*You might as well rest. I don't know when we can get out of here.*

*If we don't lose our skiff. She rolled up her banana peel and lay it at the edge of the fire.*

*It'll be there, he said and dug into the backpack and pulled out his spare trousers. He took his trousers, still rolled up, to the cot and placed them at the head of it. Then he dusted the cot with his hands.*

*She watched him until he turned around. I really appreciate it, she said.*

*Sure, he said and went out.*

*It took him much longer to find semi-dry wood, for it was dark and miserably wet. When he came back in, the old fire was about to die, but the hut warm and smoky. Are you okay with all this smoke? he asked. He could barely make out her shape.*

*Don't worry about me. Her voice sounded soft in the dark.*

*He built back the fire. When it burned bright, he saw her now lying on her side on the cot, her head resting on the rolled-up pants, her jeans-clad legs drawn up. He stretched out on the floor, resting his head, away from her, on the backpack.*

*We might just rest, he said, closing his eyes.*

*He didn't hear her and opened his eyes a crack. The fire burned steadily now. He could see the feathery tufts of foxtail grass that grew out of the dirt floor. He reached for one stalk and broke the tuft off it and brought it to his nose. It had no smell. The winds kept coming in blasts. He could feel tremors in the earth against his back.*

*When he woke, the fire was dim. He sat up, cupped his mouth with his hands and blew on the fire. When it didn't rise, he rearranged the burned-down sticks and poked the ashes. The flames flickered and died. He looked outside. From the eaves rain streaked down like a curtain. He rose and went to the door.*

*Don't go out, her voice came behind him. Let the fire die.*

*Might not be safe. He turned to look toward her cot. I'm thinking of wild animals.*

*Let it die. She paused. Why don't you come over here.*

*He stood where he was, rooted to the floor. Raindrops splattered his face. Then he walked to where she was lying on the cot, its bone-white shimmer holding his vision. He sat down on the edge and she shifted her body to give him room. She held her face upturned, and her eyes trailed away when his hand touched the curve of her throat, sloping down in a soft alabaster valley in the open-necked shirt. His hand locked in hers, the other glided along her lips until they parted. Out in the forest a night bird cried. Broken branches clattered like castanets. The air smelled of rain and sodden leaves and the wind was warm and wet coming through the door. The scent of wet leaves was in her hair, damp still, tangled and thick. In the fragrance of her skin clung a wood smoke scent.*

\* \* \*

*He could hear her soft breathing as he rested his cheek on the top of her head. Once he heard the hooves of an animal sprinting past the hut. Then he felt her stir on his aching shoulder.*

*I'm going to tell you something, she said softly, raising her head.*

*Yeah, tell me.*

*It will change our relationship. But I'd better be honest with you.*

*He smiled, ignoring a stab in his gut, and said nothing.*

*You might wonder why I came up here. She took a deep breath and held it. And why you're up here with me.*

*He turned his thoughts over and again decided to say nothing.*

*You know that my husband has been ill, don't you?*

*Yeah.*

*He has cancer of the throat. Early stage. And he's been in wheelchair since his last stroke a few years ago.*

*He thought of the man, triple her age, whose gaunt face bore a chilly look. He never liked the man.*

*My husband is impotent. Even before he married me. Some sickness befell him and has left him powerless.*

*He began to follow the thread and a hollow opened in him that kept him mum.*

*Recently, she said in a toneless voice, he's asked me to do something for him. If I do it, it might help save him from dying. She went into a silence and he didn't want to break it nor volunteer his voice. Then she said, he wants me to have a child.*

*He felt cold. The hollow inside made him suck in his breath.*

*My husband arranged for me to meet that man, Sung, just to climax such act.*

*So Mr. Sung knows why you're here, he said in a flat tone.*

*I don't know.*

*Her voice was trembling and he felt sick now.*

*But it doesn't matter now, she said, if he knew or not. I have made my own decision.*

*He realized now she had. He closed his eyes and felt himself exiting his body before the unbearable heaviness of being crushed him.*

*If I ever have a child of my own, she said like a soliloquist, it's with whom I choose.*

*I understand, he said after some deliberation.*

*Do you now?*

*Yeah.*

*She inhaled deeply and put her face in his shoulder. He held her, drowning in the wet-leaf scent of her hair. After a while he could hear her regular breathing and, gently, he eased his shoulder from her reposing head, got up and went to the door, standing with rain needling his face. Then he walked out into the rain and went from tree to tree looking for small branches, picking them up, feeling them for dryness, and he could smell a*

*raw odor of wild mushrooms that hung wet in the rain. He sat down on a tree root, the firewood bundle in his lap, and rested his forehead on his drawn-up knees. He felt raindrops falling on his back each time the wind-whipped trees shuddered. A nameless scent of a night flower came drifting out of the dark. In him the hollow widened.*

*He felt a hand on his head and then she sat down beside him. I'm very sorry, she said.*

*He said nothing.*

*I didn't want you to have a wrong idea, she said.*

*That you loved me, he said into his knees.*

*Yes.*

*I understand. It's all right.*

*But you're a special person and I'll always remember you.*

*Thank you.*

*You've been hurt before. I feel very bad to have hurt you again.*

*Not as bad as it's hurting you. You must've loved him enough to do this for him.*

*I feel for him.*

*It chilled him to think of what she had decided to do. What would he do if he were her?*

*If you hate me, she said, dropping her voice to a murmur, you have every reason to. I've whored myself.*

*He raised his head and saw her face very close to his. She was crying. He brought his arms around her and pulled her into him.*

*No, he said, no.*

5

*It had rained the night before and now, at sunrise, as he walked with the foreman down the gravel path, he could see wormwood brimming thickly like birds' feathers in silver-green over the walkway's edges.*

*He placed his birdcage on the truck bed. He'd built the birdcage to keep the myna, for he knew how much it'd make her happy and forget the myna she lost. Then he looked up toward the second-story veranda. The man in wheelchair was there behind the white railing. Don't look. Don't think. He closed the door of the pickup truck and the foreman drove off the gravel path onto the main road. Past the housing community along the roadside, the early morning breeze brought a redolent scent of honeysuckles from their hedges. For a moment he had to close his eyes, feigning sleep. When he opened his eyes he saw the stone gate of the cemetery ahead and the pickup truck began slowing down.*

*Why're we going here? he said to the foreman, who turned the truck into the cemetery.*

*I'll tell you in a moment. The foreman took a last drag on his cigarette and tossed the butt out the window.*

*The truck went slowly down the narrow path under the summer-green shade of rain trees. The morning heat came early. Now the pickup truck stopped in a corner.*

*The foreman, both hands resting on the steering wheel, contemplated the scene like a pilgrim. The boy had saved him from a shark only to get his leg almost mauled. Then, still staring straight ahead, the foreman said, Well, son, you know what?*

*Yeah?*

*You'd made a mistake. You laid eyes on the missus who's the untouched cherry of our czar. She's young. Just like my wife. But the man the*

*missus's married to aint no ordinary man. I've worked for him since I was just your age and that's been thirty some years ago. He molded my career and helped me become who I am today. He even presided over my wedding. But he gave me a word of advice. Marry a woman half your age might make you feel younger, then you're finished. Later I'd found that out myself.*

*The boy listened, his eyes fixed on the foreman's half-turned face until the foreman shifted his body, looked directly at him and said, The only difference between me and the man I work for is I'm more human than him. I forgive my wife for having cheated on me. It killed me, son, make no mistake bout it. The foreman paused, crimping his lips. I know you're a good kid, and you've had your share of misfortune in life. Unfortunately, the one mistake you made happened against someone who's very unforgiving.*

*The boy nodded and said nothing.*

*From under his light jacket the foreman pulled out a pistol and laid it on his thigh. Why I took you in here, he said, is to put a bullet in your head. That's the order from the man you committed the sin against.*

*The boy looked down at the gun. You're his executioner?*

*Right.*

*Have you had second thought before?*

*No. I always carried out his order like a robot.*

*Why now?*

*Don't ask.*

*What if he finds out that I'm still alive after today?*

*The foreman jerked his chin at him. Take off your shirt and give it to me.*

***My shirt?***

***Right. You have a spare shirt in your backpack don't you?***

***Yeah.***

***Then take off this shirt and get dressed.***

***The boy opened the door, got out and took off his shirt while standing. Then he tossed it onto the car seat, opened his backpack on the truck bed and took out a fresh shirt and put it on. The foreman had already put the car in motion the moment he closed the door.***

***Why you want my shirt? he asked the foreman without looking at him.***

***To give it to the man. He saw you leave the house. What I'll do is put some bloodstains on it. What he'll do with your shirt afterward is none of my business.***

***He listened to every word the foreman said and his heart felt ice cold. Then he felt ill thinking about it.***

***Tell me, where're you headed to? the foreman said.***

***I don't know.***

***What d'you mean you don't know?***

***I don't know. I have no family, no place to go to.***

***So?***

***I'll just get out of this place then I'll think about it later.***

***There're buses and riverboats leaving the town every day. Tell me which.***

***Riverboats.***

*Longer but cheaper. You've got money?*

*I've got money.*

*You need anything else you say it now.*

*I don't need nothing else. These're all I've got.*

*Don't forget your birdcage. And one more thing, son.*

*Yeah?*

*Don't ever come back, you hear?*

*I hear you.*

*Good. I'm glad you take it like a man.*

*\* \* \**

*At dusk, lights came on in the town the river ran through. The river, now dark, carried with it the lights like starlights that bobbed and vanished.*

*He bought from a ferry peddler sweet rice cooked with mung bean, packed in a banana leaf, and black coffee in a styrofoam cup. He ate while the riverboat waited for passengers to board. Then he took off the cloth cover of the birdcage, set the cage on his thighs and began feeding the myna with leftover sweet rice.*

*You like sweet rice or you like papaya, he said, watching the bird peck a yellow bean from his palm.*

*Like papaya, the bird said, bobbing its head twice. Yummy yummy.*

*What'd Ly give you?*

*Papaya. The bird purred deeply.*

***Where's Ly?***

***The bird looked around, then bobbed its head repeatedly.***

***Call Ly, he said. Call her. He watched the bird as it fluffed its feathers then called out, long, clear, Ly Ly Ly Ly. Then it cocked its head and watched him intensely.***

***The new passengers were coming on board, a woman and a young girl, who sat down on the bench seat across from him. He smiled at them and the bird bobbed its head and croaked, Hello guest!***

***The girl's face beamed. Oh wow, she said.***

***She bent forward and looked at the bird that tilted its black-crowned head, studying her. Then it asked, What's your name?***

***The girl broke out laughing, her hand covering her mouth. He can really talk, she said to him.***

***Yeah. He can mimic all kinds of sounds.***

***Just then another riverboat was passing by out in the broad water, its motor chugging steadily. The myna looked around, shifting on its thin legs and making some deep-throated sounds.***

***He heard the boat I think, the girl said.***

***Yeah. He can neigh like a horse, meow like a cat. Then, stroking the bird on its breast, he said, What the cat say?***

***Meow, the myna let out a crystal-clear cat's sound.***

***Oh my, the girl said.***

***What's your name? he asked her.***

**Kim.**

**He glanced up at the woman who had been watching them. She wore an indigo blue headscarf. Where're you folks going, he asked her.**

**The Plain of Reeds.**

**Oh. It must be in the flood season now.**

**It already was when we left last week. And where're you going?**

**The Plain. He lied.**

**Oh really? Visiting?**

**No. I live there.**

**Well, neighbor, you must've been away then. We had early flood this year. What d'you do there?**

**I have a fishing boat. Then he looked down at the myna and then at the little girl. Kim, you want to feed him? Here. He put some sweet rice in the girl's palm. Let him pick from your hand, bean or rice. There.**

**The girl gently touched the bird's head with her finger. The bird pecked a yellow bean from her palm, tossed its head back to down the food and sang, Thank you, Ly, thank you.**

**The girl laughed. Oh, you're so sweet. Then she looked at him. Who's Ly?**

**My lover. I mean my girlfriend. He caught the woman smiling as she adjusted her headscarf.**

**The same, isn't it? she said to him.**

**What is?**

***Lover and girlfriend.***

***You have a lover? the little girl said, all perked up.***

***Yeah. She's his favorite person.***

***Where's she?***

***He thought for a moment and the woman said, Your lover. He glanced at the woman and then at the girl. She's home.***

***When are you going to marry her? the girl said.***

***The woman said, Shhhh.***

***I'll ask her to marry me when I get home, he said, smiling.***

***The girl's face beamed. You should, I think. Will she say yes?***

***Yeah. I know she will. She's carrying our child.***

***You mean she's pregnant?***

***Yeah.***

***The woman dipped her head toward him. Are you serious?***

***She told me yesterday. Yeah.***

***Then I think you ought to marry her. Soon.***

***Yeah. That's what I'm planning for.***

***The little girl stroked the myna's back. Is she a nice girl?***

***Yeah. She's very beautiful.***

***What does she look like?***

***The woman giggled. Don't mind her.***

***He shrugged. First time I saw her she was just coming down the road one night on this beautiful white horse. I could hardly breathe while I stood in front of her. I knew I would never be the same again without knowing her.***

***The little girl's mouth fell open then she said, I always love horses. I wish one day I have a horse of my own.***

***I have a quarter horse myself. She has a stallion. We'd ride around together sometimes late in the night.***

***Can she still ride?***

***Of course. Why?***

***She's pregnant.***

***The woman laughed and patted her daughter on the head.***

***Sure she still can ride.***

***Can he stay on her horse's head while she rides? The girl touched the myna's beak with her finger. I saw mynas standing on buffalos' backs.***

***Yeah. I'll tell her. We'll try that next time we ride out.***

***The riverboat sounded its whistle. The girl sat back on the bench seat, looking at him as he put the cloth cover on the cage.***

***What're you doing that for? she asked. How can he breathe?***

***Just so he keeps quiet and won't bother other people with his talking.***

***Can I hold the cage, please?***

*Sure, Kim. He leaned forward and placed the birdcage in her lap. She wrapped her arms around it, her eyes gone soft and dreamy.*

*It was evening now and the river was quiet. In the cabin, lights had gone out and the passengers were sleeping. He woke twice when the boat docked to let off passengers and pick up new ones. The woman woke, looking around in the faint reflection of lights from the food stalls.*

*Where're we? she asked him.*

*I don't know. Aren't you hungry?*

*No. I brought food with me. Would you like some?*

*No, thanks. If I eat now, I'd stay awake for a while.*

*You mean you want to save your stomach for what she has for you at home. Does she know you'd be home soon?*

*Yeah.*

*Aren't you excited?*

*I am. I mean, knowing she's home waiting.*

*You forgot the little one inside her, too.*

*Oh yeah.*

*You can't go anywhere long enough without thinking of them.*

*You tell me. You been there before.*

*Yes. I've been there before. She lay her cheek on her daughter's head and smiled. After a while she said, Maybe someday I'll take my daughter there to visit you. She loves horses.*

*Sure. He looked back out to the landing and the woman, at his silence, didn't inquire further of his whereabouts. Then he said to her, When will we arrive there?*

*By early morning. I thought you knew that.*

*Well, not exactly. This is my first time away from home.*

*You can't wait to get home to see her again, can you?*

*Yeah.*

*I'm happy for you.*

*Thanks.*

*Soon the riverboat was moving again. He slept. In his sleep he smelled the strong smells of horses and heard the sound of waves and, waking again, saw that it was getting gray in the sky and that the banks were yellow with riverhemp in bloom. It was drizzling and the wind came up from the land and he could smell the fragrance of cajeput flowers and soon he saw them, tiny and white, crowding the riverbanks. The Plain now came into view, flat, immense and steely gray. He heard moorhens calling, and rain now falling and popping on the surface of the water, the wind damp, and in that grayness a heron rising to air.*

*The riverboat found the ferry landing in the rain. The woman woke her daughter up.*

*We're here, she said to the girl.*

*The girl rubbed her eyes. Is daddy there waiting for us?*

*He'll be there. She picked up the birdcage from her daughter's lap and gave it to him. Well, we're getting off here. Yours the next stop, I guess.*

*Yeah.*

*The girl pulled the cloth just to peek at the myna. Hello baby, she said.*

*Hello, the myna said.*

*He never sleeps, does he? she asked him.*

*He does.*

*I'll miss him.*

*As they stood up, he said to them, Wait.*

*They looked down at him. He took the girl's hands and put the birdcage in them. Kim, he said, you take him home with you now, okay?*

*Oh my, she said.*

*The woman smiled, shaking her head. You're spoiling her now.*

*Teach him something new every day, he said to the girl.*

*Will he forget what you've taught him?*

*He won't.*

*Would he say Thank you, Ly, when I feed him?*

*You tell him your name. That's all you do, hear?*

*Will he love me like he loves her?*

*I'm sure he will. He needs affection.*

*Thank you so much.*

*He sat back, hands on his thighs. You all have a good day now.*

***You'll be home soon yourself, the woman said, tapping him on the shoulder.***

***Yeah, he said, smiling at her, home, yeah.***

***After they departed from the boat, he leaned his head against the sash and gazed across the water. Farther up he could see now a huge mangrove tree, gnarled and shaggy, rising out of the water like an ancient landmark. Beyond it, a house, still a small dark shape on the low, gray horizon. Beyond that, the final destination of an unnamed landing where the riverboat would stop.***

***He heard the little girl calling out to her father on the landing and then the myna's croaking voice, Hello guest.***

***The rain was coming down hard. It was the rainy season again.***

***Photo credit top left: Jungle Gateway © Karin Van Ijzend***

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## DINI KARASIK

### *Aftermath*

*Minnie brushed her teeth, smoothed a smudge of rouge across each of her cheeks, and then returned to bed to wake Carlo just the way he liked it, hoping he remembered it was exactly one year since they'd had their first date. After they made love, she cooked breakfast, feeding him bits of this and that as she chopped and sautéed and he read the morning paper.*

*She wore a silk kimono patterned in blue hummingbirds and pink cherry blossoms, a gift from a gallery owner who wanted more from her than the portrait of him she'd painted. Carlo took the last bite of egg and, when she stood to take his plate to the sink, he pulled on the sash, drawing her toward him, cupping one of her breasts and teasing the nipple with his tongue.*

*They made love a second time, after which they lounged on the sun-dappled stoop that Minnie had dressed up with a small chair and a pot of spriggy wildflowers. Carlo sat shirtless in the chair strumming his guitar and smoking a cigarette. Minnie sat on the steps in shorts and a tank top, her head against his knee, eyes closed and face opened to the sun. She remarked about the scent of magnolia blossoms now in full bloom, he about how Houston summers reminded him of home, his beloved New Orleans before Katrina.*

*Neither said a word about the anniversary.*

*Because it was Saturday, they walked to a nearby second-hand bookstore to browse the stacks. Carlo settled into a chair in a dusty corner and sat reading a paperback about pinhole cameras. Minnie watched him from a*

*short distance, flipping through art books and marveling at his good looks—the high cheekbones, skin the color of cinnamon, hair that moved across his head in thick, black waves. She caught herself smiling, an emotion percolating somewhere inside her, perhaps deep behind her navel. The feeling moved southward until she felt a flush of heat and then a silkiness between her legs. She watched Carlo in this way, buzzed by the possibility of changing things forever.*

*“I love you, Carlo,” she whispered into a book she held close to her face. Then she closed it, her index finger saving the place, and moved nearer to him. Carlo kept reading as she leaned into his broad shoulder.*

*“I love you.” She said it louder this time, the words almost sounding like an accusation. Carlo squinted a smile, reached for her hand, and gave it a squeeze.*

*Minnie was late in meeting her friends, Maria and Heather, for drinks at the pub where Maria tended bar. Maria was the closet thing she had to a sister. They’d first met in their teens, both of them foster kids in detention. Heather they’d met a few years ago in the bar when she drank herself into a stupor after signing divorce papers for the first time.*

*“Where’s Carlo?” asked Heather, her hair newly platinum and a fresh plump in her lips.*

*“Not coming. He has a gig tonight,” said Minnie, taking a seat at the bar.*

*Maria stood behind the bar, snapping a piece of gum and pouring shots for the three of them. Her eyes were large and intense. Silver pierced her brows, lips, and nose, and her body was a tapestry of tattoos, Aztec serpents and suns along the arms, an ancient pyramid across her chest.*

*Minnie looked around, gnawing on the stem of a maraschino cherry. The place was empty except for a couple playing pool in one corner and an old man sipping a stout at the other end of the bar.*

*“Ok, spit it out,” said Maria, “What’s the matter?”*

***“It’s nothing,” said Minnie, losing the stem and downing the tequila.***

***“It’s their one-year anniversary and he didn’t get her anything,” said Heather.***

***“It’s not even that,” said Minnie.***

***“Well, what then?” asked Maria, wiping down a section of the bar with a towel.***

***“Just tell us. You’ll feel better afterwards,” said Heather.***

***“Fine. I told him that I loved him. But he didn’t say it back,” said Minnie.***

***“Seriously? What the fuck’s wrong with him?” Maria had no filter. “I’ll tell you what. He’s just not that into you.”***

***“Maria, you’re not helping,” said Heather, “Minnie, has he ever told you that he loves you?”***

***“He gave me a Valentine’s Day card that said ‘Te Amo’ in big loopy letters.”***

***“Girl, that Hallmark crap? In Spanish? That pinche pendejo don’t speak Spanish and that don’t count,” Maria said.***

***“Yeah, but he likes to practice his Spanish with me. It’s kinda cute,” said Minnie flatly, striking a match and lighting a cigarette.***

***“Still don’t count,” Maria said, placing a round of draft beers in front of Minnie and Heather. “And put that out. You know you can’t smoke in here.”***

***Minnie rolled her eyes, took a long drag, and drowned the cigarette in a glass full of water. She heard the clatter of pool balls and looked up to see the couple in the corner groping and kissing between turns. Maria began to wash a stack of glasses while Heather continued talking.***

***“But he must love her, right? I mean why would he stay with her all this time?” said Heather, always the optimist in spite of two failed marriages.***

***“Heather, he didn’t even show for her birthday. Remember? Forty is a big one, too. She needs to kick his ass to the curb. Shit.” Maria raised her left eyebrow and pursed her lips. “Minerva, that man is wasting your time. He probably got mamitis.”***

***“What the hell is mam-ee-dis?” asked Heather, her Texas twang unmissable.***

***“It means she thinks he’s a mama’s boy,” said Minnie, “And there’s something else.”***

***“What is it?” asked Heather, always the first to express her concern.***

***“I think I’m pregnant.”***

***“That’s one way to trap a man,” said Maria, drying a pint glass and dousing another with soap and water.***

***“I’m late, that’s all.”***

***“Then let’s go get you a test,” said Heather.***

***“I have that opening next week. Things are crazy until then. Which reminds me, can one of you sit for me? I need to add one more canvas to my lot of nudes,” Minnie said.***

***The next afternoon, Heather lay naked across Minnie’s bed. She was petite, the mother of four-year-old twins, and newly divorced from her second husband, an oil company executive who didn’t get much mileage out of the boob job he’d paid for.***

***“Wow. They’re spectacular,” Minnie told her.***

***“I know. Aren’t they great?”***

***“Lie on your side for me. Move your hair out of your face and turn your head upward.”***

***“You should see her, Minnie. She can help you figure this whole thing out.”***

***“Who?” Minnie wanted Heather to be quiet so she could focus on the juxtaposition of her flawless breasts with her dimpled ass.***

***“My therapist! I emailed you her name and number yesterday.”***

***“I don’t know.”***

***“Have you ever been in therapy?”***

***“Hmm, once.”***

***“Well?”***

***“Well, what? Turn more toward me.” Minnie was focused on Heather’s abdomen, the way the extra skin wrinkled and pooched unevenly and how her C-section scar formed a sinister smile above her pubic bone.***

***“Did you get anything out of it? It’s done wonders for me.”***

***“You really want to know?” Minnie asked, continuing to paint. “When I was sophomore, I fell in love with my sculpture professor. Turned out he was married and wanted to stay married. I had some trouble getting over him.” She dipped her brush into a dab of yellow paint. “Lift your chin a little. Anyway, he claimed I wouldn’t leave him alone, that I was stalking him. Which wasn’t true, of course. But he threatened to have me arrested unless I saw the campus shrink. So I did.”***

***“I had no idea,” said Heather, “You should definitely go see her. That’s all I’ve got to say.”***

*A week later, Minnie stood second-guessing her decision to make the appointment when the doctor opened the door to her office and welcomed her in. She was a thirty-something beauty with blonde, upswept hair and a broad smile. She was also noticeably pregnant, her belly pert and prominent beneath a sheath dress that fell just past her knees.*

*Minnie instantly regretted coming.*

*The women sat across from one another on white leather sofas, between them a bare coffee table. There were no windows in the office, only a large skylight in the ceiling that filtered the afternoon sun. Built-in bookshelves lined the walls and Minnie wondered whether the doctor had actually read every book or if they were merely props that made her look smarter than she actually was. Professional types were always making themselves out to be more than they were. She'd learned that at a young age from her stepfather.*

*Minnie sat with her arms folded, her eyes landing on a framed photograph of the pretty doctor holding hands with a handsome man.*

*“Is that your husband?” Minnie asked, nodding her head in the direction of the photograph.*

*“It is.”*

*“Hmm. Looks nice.”*

*The doctor smiled and looked at a notebook on her lap. “So, Minerva—”*

*“Minnie. I go by Minnie.”*

*“Minnie, tell me about yourself.”*

*“What do you want to know?”*

*“Well, what brings you here today?”*

*“I can only pay you for one session, just so you know.”*

*“That’s okay. Let’s start and work on what’s troubling you.”*

*“I’m not sure where to start.” Minnie felt the doctor sizing her up and didn’t like it.*

*“Do you want to tell me about your childhood?”*

*“Not really.” Maria was the only person who knew the whole story about her past. Minnie never talked about her childhood. Not even Carlo knew about her running away from home at fourteen or about living on the streets until she’d been picked up and placed in foster care.*

*“Well, let’s start with your parents.”*

*Minnie crossed her legs and began jiggling a foot. She took a pack of cigarettes out of her purse, smacked it against the heel of her hand a few times, and slid a smoke from the pack.*

*“Can I smoke in here?” she asked, the cigarette already dangling from her lips.*

*“I think you know the answer to that.”*

*“Right,” said Minnie, returning the cigarette to the pack.*

*“So, your parents?”*

*Minnie hadn’t known her father and wished she’d never known her stepfather, a hack lawyer who had gotten a two-for-one deal when he married Minnie’s mother. How could she tell this beautiful, pregnant doctor about the way her stepfather would stalk her at night after her mother left to work at a hospital changing bed sheets and pee pans? How he’d been a patient at the hospital who hadn’t cared that her mother spoke only Spanish. When he proposed to her, he promised her a house. A car.*

***Immigration papers. All of that would be hers if he could also bed her ten-year-old daughter.***

***“I’d rather not talk about it,” Minnie said.***

***“Alright, tell me about you. Are you in a relationship?”***

***“Yes, but ...”***

***“But?”***

***“He hasn’t told me that he loves me.”***

***“How does that make you feel?”***

***“Like shit.”***

***“How long have you been seeing him?”***

***“For a year.” Minnie watched the doctor balance the notebook on her belly as she wrote. “I’m pregnant, too.” Minnie said, wondering if the doctor would write that down.***

***“Have you discussed the pregnancy with him?” A stack of gold bangles on her wrist jingled as the doctor tucked a wisp of hair behind one ear.***

***“No.”***

***“Why not?”***

***One night, after making love, they laid in the dark awhile. Minnie lit a Marlboro for them to share and the flame threw a soft light on Carlo. I’ve been thinking, she’d told him on the inhale, about what it would be like to have a baby, you know, before it’s too late. She’d exhaled slowly, nudging him to take the smoke. He’d turned over, his back to her, and sleepily said, Isn’t it already too late?***

***“Because he thinks I’m too old. Or, I don’t know. He’s already got a kid. Maybe he just doesn’t want another one.” Carlo’s son was six, but Minnie still hadn’t met him.***

***“And?”***

***“And I’m not sure I want to keep it. Maybe if I knew for sure how he felt about me, I would tell him.”***

***“Don’t you think he has a right to know either way?”***

***“Don’t you think I have a right to know whether or not he loves me?”***

***Minnie knew that the pretty doctor was right; she needed to tell Carlo about the baby. That night, she sat with Carlo on the stoop, drinking beers in the mid-summer swelter, listening to the scissoring sounds of mating locusts. Carlo lit a joint and pulled on it a few times until the flame caught.***

***“Carlo, I need to tell you something.”***

***“Sure, what’s up?” he asked, still holding his breath and reaching for his guitar.***

***“We’ve been together a year now.”***

***“Mmm hmm.” He exhaled a cloud of smoke and offered her the joint.***

***“No, thanks. I’m good,” she said. “So, I was hoping we could talk about what comes next.”***

***“Right now?”***

***“Is that a problem?”***

*“I kind of wanted to relax. I played two weddings today. I just want to play my guitar and chill. Can’t we talk about this later?”*

*“Sure, of course.” Minnie hid her disappointment. Sitting at his knees, she turned to face him and moved her hands along his inner thighs to meet his zipper. Carlo took another hit off the joint, put it out against the pot of wildflowers, and rested the guitar against the wall behind him as she took him into her mouth. He leaned back, eyes closed, his head against a window sill. After a minute or so, she sat up.*

*“No, don’t stop,” said Carlo.*

*“Carlo?”*

*“Hmm?” he said, eyes still closed, his hands cupping the back of her head.*

*“I think I’m pregnant.”*

*“What the hell? I thought you were taking pills?” He pushed her away and stood up.*

*“I was but I may have missed a couple.”*

*“Are you fucking kidding me?” he said. He looked at her incredulously as he zipped his jeans and fastened his leather belt, the buckle clinking like a cymbal in the night air. “I need to take a walk.”*

*“Wait. We should talk about this.”*

*He grabbed the guitar and slung the strap around him. “We’ll talk when I get back.”*

*Minnie watched as he stamped down the stairs and into the night.*

*A month later, Minnie was loading her pickup truck with canvases to sell at a summer art festival. When the phone rang, she tripped on the stairs sprinting to the apartment to answer it. Carlo wanted to talk.*

*“Where have you been?” she asked. “You just walk away? You don’t return my calls?”*

*“I know, I’m sorry.”*

*“I can’t talk to you right now. I have a booth at the festival. I’ve got to sell some paintings to pay the rent.”*

*“Can we meet later then?” Carlo asked. “I’m playing an early set. I’ll come by after. Be there around nine?”*

*“Fine. Whatever.”*

*Minnie poured herself a shot of tequila and swirled it around in an old jelly jar. It had been a long day. She’d sold too few paintings, enough to pay the rent but that was all. She shook off the disappointment and walked around the studio apartment, opening all the windows. It started to storm so she lit some candles, turned off the lights, and stood watching the lightning flash against patches of black sky, thinking about how Carlo left that night. How telling him about the pregnancy had backfired. She poured another drink and eyed the clock.*

*Cooler air began to fill the room and raindrops mottled the dust on the sill of an unscreened window. She didn’t bother to close it but caught her candlelit reflection in the glass and thought her eyes looked sallow and puffy underneath. Her face, lined and sagging a bit, betrayed her toned body as though at thirty she had plunged headlong into the future and gotten stuck neck-high. Inside every old person is a young person wondering what the hell happened, her hairdresser would often say as she slathered black dye at the roots of Minnie’s hair.*

*She downed more tequila and collapsed into the couch. There’d been many other men after her stepfather. With one or two exceptions, most of them had bored her because they loved her too easily. They weren’t pretentious and double-dealing like her stepfather. They weren’t complicated like Carlo.*

*Minnie flicked a column of ash out of the window. The rain had slowed to a stop and she imagined the crickets and cockroaches coming alive the way people emerge from shelter after a natural disaster. City smells wafted in—grilled meat from the kabob joint next door, the scent of industrial soap from the laundromat below, trash in the alley, the earthy smell of burning marijuana. She drank the last of the tequila and reached across the coffee table for a hand-carved puzzle box where Carlo hid his stash. She fumbled with the teak pieces and solved the jigsaw, anxious to roll herself a joint. She removed the rolling papers and a large ziplock bag that was bulky with weed. There underneath, snug in the velvety base of the box, was Carlo's gun.*

*She removed the nickel-plated revolver and, as the cool metal warmed in her hand, she thought about the two of them at the shooting range and how Carlo would wrap his strong arms around her to help her aim the .38 Special at a target. She found herself pointing the gun at the front door when she heard a key turn in the lock. Minnie stood as Carlo stumbled in.*

*“Hey, baby! C'mere and kiss me.” He tripped and grabbed on to a painting she had almost sold hours earlier, ripping the canvas and sending the frame crashing onto the hardwood floor.*

*“My painting, Carlo! Why are you laughing!?! Are you drunk again?” Minnie reached for the empty jelly jar and threw it in the direction of the door just above his head. She'd forgotten about the gun, weighty but loose in her other hand.*

*“Jesus, whaddya do that for?” Carlo said, picking shards of glass from his thick hair. “What the hell? How'd you find the gun? Put it down now, Minnie.” He slowly stood.*

*Minnie looked at the gun in her right hand and lifted it up, pointing it at him as though he'd given her the idea.*

*“Do you love me, Carlo?”*

*“Oh, for Chrissakes. That's what this is about?”*

***“Five weeks ago was the anniversary of our first date. I told you that I loved you. In the bookstore. Remember?”***

***“Ah, shit.”***

***“Well, why didn’t you say it back?”***

***“Jesus, Minnie. I don’t know.”***

***“You don’t know?”***

***“You know what? I don’t need this drama.” Carlo turned toward the door and then swung back around. “You know, I came to talk to you about the baby—”***

***“What? Now I suppose you want it?”***

***“I just thought ... You know what? Never mind.”***

***“If you leave again, I swear—”***

***“You swear what? That you’ll shoot me?”***

***“Why can’t you just say it, Carlo?”***

***“Say what?”***

***“That you love me?”***

***“Jesus Christ! Because! Because I—”***

***A shot rang out. Carlo clutched at his shoulder. He looked at the blood on his hand and shirt and then glared at Minnie for what felt to her like time unfurling through viscous space.***

***“You crazy bitch!” Carlo shouted. He backed up against the wall and slid to the floor.***

***“It was an accident!” Minnie cried, tossing the gun aside. Broken glass cut her knees and her heart beat fast as she kneeled beside Carlo, pressing on the wound with an old paint rag she found lying on the floor next to the torn canvas. Within what seemed like minutes, she heard sirens in the distance and wondered who might have called the police. The chef turning kabobs over a sooty grill next door? The teenager getting high in the alley? A mother laundering clothes one floor below?***

***She wiped blood from her hands on the torn canvas and scrambled to replace the paints and brushes strewn across the floor. A trickle of blood caught her eye and she watched it travel down the wall and along a groove in the hardwood floor, moving like mercury ticking the numbers on a thermometer. The apartment smelled dank, of sweat and gunpowder and blood, aromas that mingled with the faded essence of burning candles and cheap incense. She crawled to the windows that hung half open like lazy eyelids. Peering above the sills, she saw a police cruiser light up the trees.***

***“I came to tell you that I’d help,” said Carlo. “With the baby.” He held the bloody rag pressed against his oozing shoulder. “I want us to be together. I really do.”***

***“There is no baby. There never was,” she whispered to the outdoors, a part of her hoping he didn’t hear the confession. Either way, she knew it wouldn’t work out between them. Not because he’d left in the first place or because she’d lied to him.***

***But because he’d come back.***

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**R.K. MARFURT**

*The Storyteller*

*“This is the story of a mime and the family that arrived in his village out of the blue and settled in full view of his house,” Edgar Lorenzo announced in the suspenseful voice he used to capture the attention of his audience. He had to imagine the faces in front of him because no one was there. His audience had abandoned him since he had given up the one-hero approach and the purposeful drive towards the climax. “Befuddled in the head,” people muttered as they remembered indigestible bits and pieces he had started to fling at them one year ago, after the disappearance of Seamus Murphy.*

*The people in the small village of Wolden where Edgar lived had tried to save him. “Give us the story of the dancing clown. Tell us the story of the friend who forgot how to walk. Tell us about Georgia, the beggar, and the travelling salesman Anthony Birch.” Those were stories he had told dozens of times. During each session, the people of Wolden shouted for at least one if not all of those stories, which he told with satisfying predictability, never changing the intonation or even a single word. Nothing and no one could unlock now the place where Edgar had hidden away those stories.*

*When people said befuddled in the head, they did not mean senile. Edgar was only thirty-nine at the time, a strong and muscular man, who ran seven miles a day. The people meant crazy, and everyone new it had something to do with Leigh Murphy, her seventeen-year-old son Seamus, and eleven-year-old daughter Caroline. It was common knowledge that some sort of a relationship had started between them five years ago when the Murphys landed in Wolden without offering any explanation as to their circumstances and began making their home six houses up the lane*

*from the storyteller Edgar. Like in all such cases that happen in villages where everyone knows one another, rumours abounded. The Murphys were Edgar's long lost relatives, distant relatives, secret wife and children or on the contrary gold diggers under the illusion that storytelling had made him rich. The neighbour in back of their house was convinced that they were aliens.*

*"The mime wore a golf cap when he played himself," Edgar Lorenzo continued. "He played four characters in all: the man with the golf cap, the woman with the long blond hair and the red skirt, the teenager with very short blond hair and a baseball cap, and the girl with a blond ponytail and a pink skirt. Then there was the music which was an entity in itself." Edgar looked at the four characters and could not take his eyes off the woman and her son and daughter until his own sharp intake of air alerted him to the danger at hand. "You're playing with fire again," he heard an ominous voice whispering from somewhere within him. But the woman, her son and her daughter stared at him with blank innocence. Despite their blond hair and refined but dramatic features that made them look like modern ballet dancers, their resemblance with the reddish-haired and athletic Murphys hit him like a rock. He forgot that he was in the middle of a session. He sat down to consider the implications.*

*To make matters worse, he knew that the mime had this thing going with some of the spectators up in the stands. No show would go by without some spectators taking matters into their own hands. It's not as if he had conceived an interactive play, but constant interruptions and questioning of his motives made it into one. "Clarification," spectator 1 shouted before the mime even started. "Why is it you chose those four people? What is so special about them? Is there a theme to this madness?" she asked pointedly. "Give the mime a chance," spectator 2 intervened.*

*The music started in uncertain cadences, stumbling precariously along until it landed in the green space beside the mime. Do I know you? the mime seemed to say. He tried to catch the speeding notes. He ran after the peculiar trills that teased him and then disappeared. When the melody transformed into a haunting story of life's upheavals, he longed to cup it in his hand, melt the ice out of it and create a wonderful medley of joy and*

*love. But the mime was too awkward to realise his intent, and the music's galloping, out-of-control taunts left him stuck behind in a cold sweat.*

*The teenager with the short blond hair and the baseball cap dribbled his basketball through the town. The town was so small that when the boy ran back and forth and sideways through the streets, he seemed to be everywhere at once. No one stole the ball away from him. Of the few teenagers in the village, most would be helping on the farm or in the family business. One of the remaining two was developing new dimensions of cooperative software, the other spent his time sniffing glue. The boy listened in vain for the thuds of skateboards slamming down from concrete walls and steps onto asphalt or even gravel. All he could hear besides the tapped rhythms of solid adult shoes were the canes of the elderly and the gliding sound of a rare baby stroller. He waved to say hello to the old people of Wolden who happily smiled at the boy with the basketball. He ignored the babies.*

*Spectator 1 called the town a ghost town with nothing to do. "Do you really want to sacrifice this young blood on the altar of boredom?" "Not so fast," spectator 2 responded calmly, "Wolden is admittedly a place where life stops. Its inhabitants pass on, and ideas are dying out. The good news is that dead ideas make room for new ones. Waiting to be fully conceived, those new ideas linger until someone takes pity on them and picks them up. That's when they get busy contaminating or inspiring their saviours, teenagers mostly, whose congenial hosting and birthing capacity is legend among them."*

*By now the man in the golf cap was drunk. He looked up at the house where the new people had moved in. He liked what he saw, even though he doubted it could be anything more than a whiskey-induced vision. But even a mere vision was welcome to a virile young man of thirty-four. He couldn't take his eyes off the most charming one-third of the equation. Mesmerized, he remained standing in front of the house. In his mind he replayed the lonely hours he had spent in his queen-sized bed without companionship. The promise of alluring sexual experiences quickened his groin as he envisaged his immediate future with almost greedy anticipation.*

***“Tone it down,” said spectator 1. “You can’t be that horny.”***

***“Everyone deserves a little bit of happiness,” spectator 2 responded.***

***Edgar Lorenzo did not like the story he had started. None of his stories ever began with physical need or lust. They grew out of more uplifting sentiments: courage, generosity, and overcoming adversity were his field, feel-good stories with happy endings. Take the traveling salesman Anthony Birch for example. He sold brushes and detergents to support his family. In his heart, he was an artist who wanted to paint day and night. But his priority was to put food on the table for his family of five, and that’s what he did, although with great difficulty and through enormous sacrifice. Yet, in his spirit, he remained an artist. The salesman collected an image of every house and place he visited in its every detail down to a stray nail sticking out above a door frame. But, every time he wanted to paint, something happened. He had to keep watch over his youngest child whose whooping cough seemed to take her last breath away. He had to fix a burst water pipe, repair the toaster, the electrical outlets, the leaking window well, and the brakes of his car. He was forced to negotiate with increasingly aggressive collection agencies. He had to go to the funeral of his father, and a short while after, bury his mother. When one day he arrived in the small town of Halton, a fire had just destroyed a house in the outskirts. It was a very ordinary house, but one that had stood comfortably and secure in the knowledge that it was loved by its owners, who had surrounded it with an extraordinary garden. Desolation hovered over the left-over debris. Clouds of loss darkened the sky. Anthony Birch sat down, took his sketch book out of his travelling bag and started to resurrect the house and its garden, then rushed home to paint them. They reappeared, exactly as they had been, in the same colours and textures, and woven into the picture was the loving care of its owners, a sense of sorrow, but also of hope and indomitable human spirit. The salesman brought the painting to the owners of the house in a gesture of empathy for their loss, never imagining that the story would end up on television and mark the beginning of his career as a painter.***

***The girl with the ponytail curtsied in droll politeness in front of the mime. Another old guy, she moaned inside. It didn’t matter that he was thirty-four. All the people of Wolden seemed old. But this one intrigued her. He***

*plucked imaginary flowers from the gardens. When he offered them to her, they looked more beautiful than anything she had ever seen. Together, the mime and the girl followed the flights of colourful birds. Sometimes, the mime made the cardinals, goldfinches and blue jays stop, turn around, and dance some fancy hip-hop steps in front of her. He made them sit on her shoulders and her head. As soon as they took off, he replaced them with myriads of butterflies, which settled on her and linked their wings to create dresses of magical patterns and unheard-of softness.*

*“The Murphys must have at least a minimal amount of money come in from somewhere to scrape by,” said neighbour A to neighbour B. “I don’t see the mailman bringing them checks or anything,” B responded, “but I never heard that Leigh has problems with her credit card like some other people I know. From what I understand, she does freelancing of some sort, mostly translation work. I bet you anything she does those web surveys they advertise on the Internet all the time. She looks the type.” “Money must be tight, though. The paint of their house has been flaking off for the last four years and they barely even have enough chairs to accommodate two visitors when all three of them are around. Look at Seamus’ and Caroline’s jeans, did you ever see them without holes or frayed seams? And Leigh’s pants and sweaters date back at least three fashion cycles.” “The Murphys seem to be financially and emotionally on their own. It doesn’t look as if any husband or father were in the picture. I wouldn’t ever have dared to ask Seamus about his father. Given how private a person Leigh is, that wasn’t an option either. But I did ask the little girl Caroline, who said that her father left when she was two and that Seamus never knew his father who died in a car accident before Seamus was born.”*

*When the man in the golf cap and the woman in the red skirt met for the first time, the music accompanied them in syncopated discords. There was no plausible explanation to explain its behaviour. Why would it make something dramatic and even negative out of an ordinary encounter? Meeting each other on the street, what else could the man and the woman do but say hello, introduce themselves, smile broadly, and wish each other a good day. Just to engage in those simple niceties required that they push the music back. Go away, their gestures said. Leave us in peace. “So pleased to meet you,” the woman said to the man, and the music came*

*back to chase them apart and make them attend to the business that had brought them out of their houses in the first place. As soon as the man and the woman parted, the discords dissolved and the separated strands sauntered harmoniously into opposite directions.*

*“Now what?” spectator 1 exclaimed. “Can’t you make something happen? You have four people thrown together in a small village, each one of them waiting for some life- or at least mood-altering event to occur. Isn’t that everyone’s story? We’re always waiting for a special moment or a special event.” “You’re right,” spectator 2 agreed, “there is a certain expectation that seems to hover around those four characters as if linking them together. Expectation equals hope. As long as there is hope, life is liveable.” “You truly believe that?” spectator 1 asked and, when no answer came forward, fell silent as if she had just been rebuked.*

*The boy with the baseball cap dribbled his ball right into this quiet. With a concentration that bordered on obsession, he shot his ball into the netless hoop which had remained on its wooden pole like a memorial to the village’s livelier times. Over and over the boy tried. Then he dribbled up and down the street and back to the hoop for renewed attempts, sweat dripping down his forehead and his neck.*

*“That’s his dream?” spectator 1 asked. “Look at him. His meagre talent isn’t even enough to make him a star in a regional team. He is getting a tad old to cling to childhood illusions. But I can understand that he would want to remain in the period of life when everything seems possible and you don’t doubt your talents. I’ve been there, done that myself. Too bad he won’t make it either.” “I don’t think that’s what his game is all about. Look again. The way he goes at it. Does it look to you as if he were working towards something? Seems to me he’s letting off steam.” “You’re right,” spectator 1 conceded, “It’s not about the game at all. Oh no, I should have known.” She paused for a while, quite shaken actually. “It’s all about loneliness.” Another pause. “But I also see or at least feel a vague expectation to jump beyond the hoop into the realm of friendship,” she added, keeping a close watch on the scene.*

*The mime had trouble with his characters. The only one he was still able to portray with a certain authenticity was the man with the golf cap. But*

*here again, there was no action. The man was in a constant battle with the music which had taken on a mind of its own and rejected any authority he might have had over it in the course of his professional life. Like an unruly teenager, it was in his face, challenging his values, even his feelings, pushing the limits. Tada-dam, tada-dam, mocking him. Ch-ch-ch-chhhh. Sh-sh-sh-shhhhszz. What's this all about? The man tried to swat the music away, cursing it, wondering who had turned the sounds into flies and instructed them to harass him. While he wondered, the flies multiplied until he had to sit down, exhausted, covering his ears, staring into the ground. When he finally uncovered his ears and looked up again, the music said gently, "What are you so afraid of?"*

*One day, the mime decided to resurrect old skills. He dribbled his imaginary ball down the street and started shooting hoops. He was more rusty than expected. None of the balls made it into the basket. His frustration grew. The sweat dribbling down his face bothered him since he constantly had to wipe it off. He tried to shoot from close up, from the left and the right side, and three-pointers from the centre without success. That day the boy with the baseball cap also came dribbling towards the basket. When he saw the mime, he stopped and stared at him openmouthed. Never in his life had he seen a spectacle like this. He couldn't take his eyes off the man. He put his ball down and moved closer. He was relieved when the mime finally managed to shoot a ball into the basket. The boy continued watching. All of a sudden, one of the balls that the mime had aimed from the left side at the hoop, hit the rim, changed direction and flew straight towards the boy who automatically caught it. When he realized that he had caught an imaginary ball, he turned red with embarrassment. "Are you crazy?" he said gruffly to the man. "No," the man answered casually. "I'm a mime. It's my job to imitate movements and gestures so precisely that they look real." "Well," said the boy, struggling to regain his composure, "congratulations!" and with sudden cheekiness, "how do you think you're going to get your ball back now that I've caught it?" The mime and the boy smiled, decided to sit down on a nearby bench for a moment and ended up staying for a long time talking about everything under the sun.*

*Neighbour A said, "I'm almost sure Leigh spent the night at Edgar's. "You don't say!" neighbour C answered. "I didn't know they were that close."*

*“As I said, I’m almost sure.” “Maybe you could get something out of Caroline. She is a talkative little girl.” “That’s what I thought,” A responded. “You know what she answered.” “What?” “She said, and you know how innocent she looks and how she’s always smiling – I wonder if she really is as innocent as she seems – she said, and these are her exact words: My mother told me that there are questions no one has a right to ask and no one should feel forced to answer. And I think this is one of those questions.” C burst out laughing, “That’s a good one. I should learn from that little girl,” and he continued chuckling as he took leave from A.*

*The boy told the mime that he wanted to become a travel guide. “I’ll be a rambler’s guide,” he said. “I’ll bring them on cliff walks, forest excursions, and mountain climbs that they’ve never imagined existed. I’ll find the most unexpected sights. “Yes,” mused the mime, “that’s what tiny villages do. If they can’t hold you, they drive you into the big world where the freedom you’ve craved since you can remember either destroys you in the shortest of time or on the contrary lets you come into your own in places and cultures that have been calling you all through childhood and adolescence and now offer a chance at a new beginning. “Tibet, that’s where I’ll go,” said the boy.*

*Leigh Murphy took good care of her children. She had moved to the little village of Wolden because she could not afford the temptations of the big city. Her mother, who had attended one of the storyteller’s sessions in a nearby town the previous summer, told Leigh the story of the travelling salesman in order to lift her spirits. “It’s sappy,” Leigh snapped, but it did lift her spirits. When she was forced to move and heard that the storyteller lived in Wolden, she decided to go there for lack of a more attractive alternative. Leigh loved everything to do with words. Since she was a little girl she found nothing more thrilling than to discover new words, new concepts, and new sounds. She might try to write his stories down. It didn’t hurt either that one of her friends had like her mother met the storyteller and described him as “good-looking in a rugged sort of way that gives you the shivers,” and to annoy Leigh had added crudely, “and believe me fucking him is the only thing you can think of when you look at him.”*

*The little girl grew jealous of the special moments the man and the boy shared playing basketball and talking. But she wasn't the type to mope around and feel sorry for herself. She took a ball of her own and started practicing. Dribble, dribble, she lost the ball. Dribble, dribble, away it went again. Dribble. Stupid Ball! Dribble, dribble. Not again! Dribble, dribble. "What are you doing?" laughed the boy who finally noticed her. "I'm learning how to play basketball," answered the girl. She aimed for the basket, shot the ball, but was way off. "You sure have a lot to learn, sis," said the boy without making an attempt to teach her. When the mime arrived, the girl watched the man and the boy play their game. She was very attentive and watched their every move. As soon as they left, she resumed her practice. She aimed for the hoop over and over, until, finally, one ball went in. After days and weeks of practice, her hard work paid off.*

*"Watch out for this one," spectator 1 said. "Yeah, she is the one who will put this little village on the map," spectator 2 concurred. "Mother, take the little girl to practices in the town of Halton 80 miles from here. They have an excellent girls' basketball team there." "I've already made the arrangements," the woman in the red skirt answered. The man in the golf cap and the boy were amazed at the sudden talent the girl displayed. "Way to go, sis," the boy cheered and finally started to take her seriously. The mime had mixed feelings. The girl was much more interested in his imaginary hoops than in the flowers, birds, and butterflies with which he had delighted her in the past. It became clear to him that he had to exchange the skirt for a pair of shorts, which for sentimental reasons he kept the same bright pink as the little skirt. The mime also added a pair of red and white running shoes and a pink and white basketball cap.*

*The woman in the red skirt never could get enough of the smell and beauty of flowers. According to season, the man in the golf cap brought her snowdrops, daffodils, roses, sunflowers or gardenias. Soon he realized that the woman grew sad when her flowers wilted in their vases. What she liked was a garden that nurtured its little plants and let them grow in the sun or shadow according to their needs. So the mime created a garden. Every day when the man and the woman walked through the garden, he would paint it in all shades of colours. He called the wind and let the sun shine through the rain to create the tenderest of rainbows to connect the flowers to the sky. He let dew drops fall on the morning leaves and made*

*the spider webs glitter in the early dawn. After a while, the mime realized that the woman had a domestic side to her and had always dreamt of a small vegetable garden. As neither she nor the mime knew exactly when to plant each vegetable or how to care for it, they created a garden where vegetables were free to grow as and when they pleased. Both the man and the woman stood in admiration in front of the collage of carrots, radishes, cucumbers, Brussels sprouts, leeks, tomatoes, and yellow, green and red peppers. They filled their lungs with the aroma of thyme, parsley, oregano, chives, garlic, peppermint and camomile. It was left to Edgar Lorenzo and Leigh Murphy to sort things out, muck around in the unruly yard, pull out the most obnoxious weeds, and tend to their rather weak seedlings, some of which started to prosper and others to shrivel and die a sad and miserable death.*



*Proportionally to his developing friendship with the family, the mime's rendition of life became more poignant and lifelike. "It's as if I had four new pairs of eyes, my own lasered with new emotions, and the three pairs of yours showing me things I've never seen before," he said to the woman with the red skirt. "It's just as it should be," the woman said. "You give me a beautiful secret garden, and I and the kids open your eyes to the world."*

*Spectator 1 was speechless when she watched the woman in the red skirt portray her own spat with her sister over the jewellery of their dead mother, a quarrel so bitter that neither of the two sisters had managed to*

*talk to the other for the last three years, the estrangement a cruel prison that each of them had built for herself. With the keys thrown away, it seemed harsher than a life sentence. The solitude of the two sisters flowed out of the scene into the stands of spectators, enveloping each one of them, doing so with harsh efficiency, especially as the music had decided to cooperate in the mounting drama. "What is going to happen?" whispered spectator 2, watching spectator 1 with undisguised pity. In the sea of other spectators, spectator 1 and 2 sat motionless. The tension mounted until spectator 1 stood up and cried, "You'll keep the jewellery, Annabelle! I don't mind, I just want to be friends again." From the opposite side of the stands, a woman stood up and hurried over to spectator 1, while the audience cheered with relief.*

*"Who will be next?" spectator 2 asked spectator 3. Spectator 3 was too wrapped up in the happenings in front of him to respond. With everyone else, the two spectators watched the individual dramas and joys of their neighbours and friends replaying themselves on stage. While the stories were known to everyone, their meaning oftentimes became evident only when they happened again right in front of their eyes. However complex the situations and motives of an event, the mime focussed on the shades and nuances until the last person in the audience understood their significance. Many a person would say to their neighbour after an episode, "Now I understand. I never saw it that way before," and the neighbour would nod and ask, "Would you have thought it possible that something good could come out of even the most wretched situation?" Sometimes the spectators went home with a whole new set of questions.*

*During the sunny and warm month of May, the mime woke up one morning with a new alertness and urge to bring alive a story that had percolated through his body and mind for a long time. When the spectators were seated, the mime brought the boy with the baseball cap on stage. For once, the boy was without his habitual basketball. He seemed bewildered and awkward. The mime, whose alienation from his characters had caused him great anguish over the last months, was drawn into the boy. The feelings he encountered mixed with his own and affected everyone of his senses. He not only understood what the boy was going through, but lived it. Where was the girl? How would she respond?*

***“Remember the last time you were in love?” spectator 3 whispered beside spectator 2.” “Shshssss,” hissed the two women behind him.***

***The audience was enthralled when the mime brought a new character on stage, a girl of about nineteen with curly brown hair and a lilac skirt, busying herself behind the counter of Marsha’s Chocolateria, famous as far as Halton, her own little business that she had built up with the help of her father and which was attached to the family’s general grocery store. The girl watched over boiling pots, poured chocolate into moulds, stuck almonds or pine nuts on top of pralines and rolled others in coconut or cocoa. Her smooth movements – sequences of a charming and intricate ballet – kept her customers spellbound. They watched with rapt interest as she put white icing lines and pink and yellow dots on small pieces of chocolate. “I’ll take those last three you just made,” said the boy with the baseball cap blushing to the girl in the lilac skirt.” Outside the store, he stared at the pieces the girls’ fingers had touched just moments earlier, then let them slowly melt in his mouth.***

***“The girl reminds me of Celia, Joseph’s and Melissa’s daughter, who started her own clothes design business. The boys certainly can’t get enough of her either, and everyone else loves her too,” said Neighbour A. “I thought the same thing,” neighbour B replied. “Do you think Seamus has fallen for her? She seems so much more mature than him. I didn’t think she would give him a second look.” “I agree with you on that, but there is no accounting for people’s taste,” A concluded and sighed.***

***The boy with the baseball cap made the chocolates last and last. He remembered how the girl had smiled at him. She had looked at him as if he were the only person that mattered. Anxiously he remembered that the girl smiled at all the boys, whose frequent urges for their fixes of chocolate seemed more numerous than you’d expect. Yes, she is nice with everyone, but ...Was there really a special spark between Marsha and him? Did she love him? When the girl finally finished her work and left the store to visit her grandmother on the other side of town, which she did almost every night, the boy slowly, almost reluctantly caught up with her. “I have to see Evan across town, do you mind if I walk with you since we are going the same way?” “Not at all,” said the girl, “it’s so much nicer to have company.” Since the boy became completely tongue-tied, the girl did all***

*the talking. She told him about a new recipe from her grandmother that included honey, cashews, and whiskey. In addition, her girlfriend since grade two was going to join her in her business, and they had just selected a small company from Halton to design special boxes for their chocolates. The closer the boy and the girl got to Marsha's grandmother's place, the heavier the atmosphere felt to the boy who was barely able to breathe. When they were only a few blocks away, he stopped. "Marsha ..." he mumbled and fell silent. "Yes?" the girl asked after a while. "Marsha ..." Before he could ask the question, a commotion in the stands destroyed the moment. Seamus Murphy jumped up from his seat and stormed towards the exit of the theatre. The mime lost his concentration. After a last look at Marsha, he was unable to continue. "S-s-sorry," he stammered. "To be continued at another time." The spectators booed. Edgar Lorenzo left the theatre through the back exit and tried to find Seamus, but was unable to catch up to him. As he knocked on the Murphys' door later that day, Leigh opened. The only thing she said was, "How could you!?" And she closed the door right in his face.*

*The next day, Seamus was gone, and the mime could not be brought back on stage again.*

*That's when Edgar Lorenzo started spitting out indigestible bits and pieces of stories and his audience left him. One day, a long time later, alone in the auditorium, he was sure that he heard Leigh Murphy's voice. "It's a love story," she said. When he looked up into the stands, there she was, her face illuminated with a quiet smile. Her distant figure became so clear that Edgar waited for the clickety-clack of her shoes. He mustered his courage and made his way up into the stands. Despite a newfound confidence, he didn't dare to feel for the postcard from Tibet in his pocket to find out whether it was real. The higher he climbed, the more Leigh started to blur together with the woman in the red skirt he knew so well, their features erasing each other to such a degree that when he arrived where he thought Leigh to be, there was nothing left. Thrown off guard, he stopped. He waited for her to reappear. He waited until night fall. Then, with sudden resolve, he left the building and made his way over to the Murphys' house, insecure about what to expect, but realizing that this was his only choice.*

***Photo Credit: Mine Holding a Walking Stick in His Hand © Igor Korionov***

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***Untitled by Turid Pederson .  
Medium: Oil on Linen .***

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***Spittin' Image of Tom McCoy by Elvira Godfrey.  
Medium: Ink-Sketch Continuous Line Art.***

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## LITERARY BIOS

- ***Lynn Doiron*** A California native, Lynn Doiron lives in Baja California, Mexico. Her work has appeared in various literary journals, most recently *Nimrod*, and non-fiction anthologies. Author of *Handwording: New & Selected Poems*, Lynn is currently compiling selected poems and prose written during her four years of life south of the border.



***David Elliott*** After dropping out of high school, David Elliott made a living acting, boxing professionally and was voted President of the California Association of Judgment Professionals (CAJP) while running his Hollywood Private Investigation firm. He has piloted planes, built spaceships, served on the executive board of a major labor union, and traveled every continent except Australia, Africa and Antarctica.

- ***Elvira Godfrey's*** ink-on-paper sketches are drawn in a continuous line. Her work is featured in JW Art Gallery Hurley, New Mexico [www.jwartgallery.com/ARTISTStext/ELVIRA.html](http://www.jwartgallery.com/ARTISTStext/ELVIRA.html)



***Khanh Ha*** debut novel is *FLESH* (June 2012, Black Heron Press). He graduated from Ohio University with a bachelor's degree in Journalism. His work has appeared in the *Outside in Literary & Travel Magazine*, which came from one of Ha's novels by the same title. His newest short story, *A Woman on the Plain*, has been accepted by *Cigale Literary Magazine*. He is at work on a new novel.



***Larry Jordan's work has appeared in Comstock Review, Straight Forward, Miller's Pond, Pirene's Foundation, Antiphon and others. He resides in South Carolina.***



***Dini Karasik is a Mexican-American writer and lawyer. Her poetry has appeared in Crack the Spine and she has work forthcoming in The Más Tequila Review and Kweli Journal. You can follow her on Twitter @DosGildas or on her writing blog: [dkwritings.wordpress.com](http://dkwritings.wordpress.com).***



***Jennifer Mac Bain-Stephens is an emerging poet who was recently published in Issue #10 of Superstition Review and will also be published in Emerge Literary Journal in 2013. She has written three YA nonfiction books and currently lives in Iowa City, IA and works at a journal.***

- ***R.K. Marfurt published stories in Canadian literary journals such as the Windsor ReView, the Nashwaak Review, existere, Room of One's Own, The Antigonish Review, and paperplates. She recently finished writing a novel and is now looking for a publisher.***



***Tom McCoy is old and cranky. He believes humans should be limited to 500 words per day. Damn, wasted 21 already. He resides in Silver City, New Mexico.***

- ***Turid Pederson was born and educated in Oslo, Norway. She graduated from the University of Oslo before settling in the United States. Pederson resumed art training at the University of Houston, Texas. She taught at the Scottsdale Artists' School and has been a demonstration artist at the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa, Oklahoma. One of her paintings is included in the **New Mexico Capitol Art Foundation's** permanent collection in Santa Fe. She lives in Silver City, New Mexico.***
- ***Stan Sanvel Rubin is the author of three full-length collections, including Hidden Sequel, a Barrow Street Book Prize winner. A fourth will be published by Lost Horse Press in 2013. Recent and forthcoming poems in Carolina Quarterly, The Laurel Review, Hubbub, Cimarron Review, The Florida Review. He lives on the Olympic peninsula of Washington State and writes essay reviews for Water~Stone Review.***



***Sharman Apt Russell's most recent books are Standing in the Light: My Life as a Pantheist (Basic Books, 2008); Hunger: An Unnatural History (Basic Books, 2005); and An Obsession with Butterflies (Perseus Books, 2003). The essays Songs of the Fluteplayer won the 1992 Mountains and Plains Booksellers Award and New Mexico Zia Award. Other awards are a Pushcart Prize, the Henry Joseph Jackson Award, and the Writers at Work Award. Her work has been translated into Chinese, Korean, Russian, Swedish, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, and German. For more information, go to [www.sharmanaptrussell.com](http://www.sharmanaptrussell.com).***

- ***Molly Stone is quite fond of desert sunsets. She notes: "As of late, it seems as if the world is slipping into a nihilistic nightmare in a marketing scheme gone awry. Sometimes I see a cob of light piercing through the muck."***

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