

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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In this collection of linked stories, four characters navigate space between selves they've been and those to come. Alice must invent an autonomous identity after her husband dies in a bike crash. As she casts about to populate a new life, a geographer, a violinist, and a clarinetist emerge at similar crossroads. Each character locates a measure of solace in music: strings and woodwinds, the rail of bathwater and rain, a storm's quiet end.

Music for Strings

By
Vicki deTal

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Vicki deTal, Author

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Music for Strings: Stories

by
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Music for Strings

Tracks

Paul's new, pearl-white Merckx racing bike skidded off the mountainside, and a week later the spells began: Alice warped and grew. Her feet and mouth became thick and unwieldy, the muscles around her eyes pulled, went slack, tightened.

Alice in Wonderland Syndrome, it was called in the medical literature. Micropsia: Lilliputian delusions to distract from the real grief, the way head banging does, or cutting. *Curiouser and curiouser*, thought Alice.

The worst of it was when her voice split and droned in parallel pitches, like the mantram chant of a Tibetan monk. It shrilled and moaned on twin, discordant tracks. It swelled and grated and silenced her. She looked and sounded just as she used to, but this is how she felt: bent and cumbersome, like a face dulled with Novocain. Like the other Alice, she supposed, when she ate the cake and telescoped, extended in segments. Queer and unseemly.

She fared best alone, so she quit her house, her job, her phone. When the ringing stopped, when the voicemail box was finally empty and still, the spells quieted. Eventually, a whole week would go by with every bit of Alice remaining

right-sized and familiar, her voice emerging in a single, solid tone. And finally, the spells stopped.

Until tonight. Tonight, Alice was huge. She was huge and waiting in the entryway for Elizabeth and John. The other half of the old foursome: ex-partners in crime.

It was a year since her last spell, yet here she was, massive as Jaws. She saw him once, in a tiny chapel in Edinburgh—the steel-toothed Bond henchman. It was a fog-socked day, and the actor was in a wheelchair and enormous; his teeth were white and bare and small. She felt like that now: sad and hulking.

Alice spotted the couple through tinted glass, sharing an umbrella and half-running toward the restaurant. She hadn't seen them since the funeral, hadn't seen anyone but family, really, from when Paul was alive. These two were the first, a test: a toe in the old waters.

Elizabeth came through the door first, drenched and spectacular from blowing rain, her hair redder than Alice remembered. John lingered behind her, shaking out and collapsing the umbrella. Alice's eyes felt big in her head; she hunched her shoulders to become small.

Elizabeth dripped rain and rushed over. "Alice," she said, opening her arms; she smelled like damp hay. Then John was beside her, muscled and awkward, half-grinning with his familiar Elvis lips and crooked front tooth. He leaned down to kiss Alice.

It was too vivid, like Paul would arrive next, slipping up from behind, as animate as these two. He would reach a dizzying arm around Alice, reel her in against his ribs, and inhale her hair.

Alice's heart banged. A mist of sweat spread between her breasts.

A host led them to a four-top in back. Elizabeth and Alice sat, careful not to look at the fourth place setting, waiting for the dark-haired young man to deal out menus and carry away the extras: wine glass, water glass, napkin. John stared at the extra chair.

"So!" said Elizabeth. She pulled up straight in her seat. Alice's lips felt swollen and cock-eyed. She forced her mouth to smile and said back: "So."

Cocos Is Keeling. The phrase jumped into Alice's head and stuck. It was a place her friend Piz had told her about: two atolls, twenty-seven coral islands, midway between Australia and Sri Lanka. Piz dropped exotic names like these on Alice. They settled in her thoughts and clung, like barnacles.

"Really the '*Is*.' is for Islands," Piz had said. "But that's how it looks on the globe – like *Cocos Is Keeling*." Piz worked nights with Alice at the copy shop. He had a five-year-old daughter and a globe at home.

Alice wanted to shut her eyes and rub her face like a tired child. Instead, she asked through wooden lips: "How is the store?" Elizabeth owned a dress shop, where she sold waifish slip-dresses cut from eccentric crepes and silks. Alice used to go there to finger the fabrics and listen to Parisian lounge music. To sit with Elizabeth, ladylike, in pink-satin chairs.

“Really great,” Elizabeth said, her words soft and sad. She looked at John, who had left off staring at the chair to study the menu. “I go to New York soon to order for summer. Bright apricots, I guess, and a bluer purple.” She rotated her water glass by the stem.

Alice smiled and nodded and thought coming here was a mistake. The scent of beef pho broth and anise unsettled her stomach. She thought of pushing back her chair, of standing up and leaving the restaurant. *Cocos is keeling*. They had become her own chants, the place names Piz fed her. Worry stones to turn over. *Cocos*. *Keeling*. *Tartu*.

A waiter came over, and John and Elizabeth ordered beers. Alice, for no reason she could imagine, ordered a lychee martini and excused herself to find the restroom. She felt John and Elizabeth watch as she wound between tables. She had difficulty walking; she bounced a little with each step.

The restroom was vast, a single, and candlelit. Alice locked herself in, leaned against a large stone washbowl and blew out a breath. She looked normal in the mirror, even sort of lovely in the light. This surprised her. Her eyes looked deep, her long-last lipstick was lasting, her hair was slick and in control. It gave her a moment of hope, as if maybe she looked like this to John and Elizabeth: calm and just fine. Like she had come through the worst of it.

She ran frigid water over her wrists, washed her hands with too much soap. She saw them in the mirror: fingers weaving, sliding in unnecessary froth.

When she returned to the table, John and Elizabeth were picking at an appetizer of bean threads, hot peppers, and cucumber with mint. John was well into

his second beer, while Alice's martini sweated onto a cocktail napkin; two pale lychees rested heavy at the bottom of the glass.

Alice sat. Elizabeth smiled and frowned simultaneously. She leaned forward. "So how are you, Alice, really?"

Alice's tongue felt too thick to speak around, and a slip of anger stirred in her stomach. At Paul. If he were here, she'd prod him under the table, nudge him to fill the silence. He had been the smooth one, the one who would launch into a loud story and make everyone easy in an awkward moment. Alice took a couple of huge swallows of the martini. It was sweet, but it burned nicely going down, circled the anger. She took another swallow.

Elizabeth waited, John looked up from his beer. Alice knew what they wanted to know. Why she'd rented out the house and quit her real job. When she'd go back to both. Why she never called. Just what it was she thought she was doing. She considered possible answers:

The new apartment is a studio. Four walls, four corners, all visible, all the time.

No.

Nights at the copy shop, hours collapse, fluorescent bulbs hum and light the shadows. I have a friend there; his name is Marq, with a q, but I call him Piz, after the letters on his license plate: PIZ.

No.

A violinist lives across the hall in 204. His coat is black and long, his hair is black and cut straight at his shoulders, his violin case is black and sharp-lined.

No.

No.

“Things are good. I’m good,” said Alice, pronouncing the words carefully around her tongue. She heard a trace of the old split in her voice: deep tone low as earth, the halo of a higher pitch. She grabbed for her glass and vodka slunk through her, melted tension from her jaw, her shoulders, the insides and outsides of her thighs. The more she drank, the smaller she became. She pictured the label on the other Alice’s bottle: ‘DRINK ME’ in fine, looping script.

The waiter arrived with soup bowls, steaming and brimmed with cilantro. They ordered more food than they would be able to eat: Chili-basil squid and mung bean crepes. Stir-fried spinach, papaya salad, a new round of drinks. Skewers of char-grilled garlic and shrimp.

When the waiter was gone, John asked, “Remember that night at Trout Creek?” The relaxed half grin of years past had at last slipped across his face; he was feeling his beer. “Paul dropped the shrimp in the dirt, and we ate it anyway?”

Trout Creek, the sweet bite of pink flesh, sand grinding between their teeth. Paul, and stars thick as cream.

Alice leaned back to look at them: John, with the broadest fingers ever, a scar slashed through his left eyebrow. Elizabeth’s tiny, bright-white teeth and delicate collarbone. John speared the last cucumber slice from Elizabeth’s plate, and Alice felt the narrowest twinge of happiness.

Maybe she could have them back. Edge them into her new life.

She pictured it: buying a frame for the futon so they could visit, her two pine chairs pulled over. Guacamole and beer. And who else would be there? Piz from the copy shop – wearing his Paris-pink hoodie and stroking his narrow chin, a chopstick poked through his man-bun? Nate, with his shiny head, doubtlessly half-stoned? The elusive violinist? Alice considered telling them:

The violinist practices in the afternoons. I listen through the heater vent: high notes wind thin like smoke, low notes tremble deep between my hips. The music wanders the scales, goes electric, then slow like water.

Maybe not, thought Alice.

Maybe what's gone is gone.

Sometimes I lay my head on the floor, listening against the cool wood. Sometimes I fall asleep, and when I wake up, it's silent and dark.

“You know what?” Alice said, in parallel pitches, after they hugged and kissed outside the restaurant, after Elizabeth buttoned her coat and tucked her hair inside its collar, after John mashed Alice’s hand between his two giant ones. “I’m going to run back in and check the streetcar schedule before I walk to the stop. But thanks, you two. It was wonderful to see you.” The split in her voice had deepened throughout the meal; the vibrations grated on her.

“It was so wonderful,” said Elizabeth. She fluttered her fingers in Alice’s direction and stepped off the curb.

Alice waved and grinned and went back inside. She did not want to watch them walk away, lean together under the umbrella.

She wove between the tables to the restroom at the back of the restaurant. She was no longer tall. Her throat ached and scratched as if her vocal chords had actually produced the dual tones. A monk had to earn the right to perform an overtone chant; certain initiations and empowerments preceded the harmonic.

In the candlelight, Alice's reflection had gone wrong. Her forehead was lined and her lips were thin, as if necessary fluids had been drained from her face. She bent over the washbowl and pressed her forehead to the glass, watched as her two eyes merged, became one.

The streetcar was too bright on the way home, and almost empty. A fuschia-haired woman slept heaped in a corner two rows back. Her makeup had dried into dark paint pots beneath her eyes. Her coat and blouse gaped open, baring a tight line of cleavage and much of one breast.

An old man with milky eyes sat across from Alice. The thin cushion of his seat appeared wet, and an odor Alice chose not to recognize hovered in the aisle.

Cocos Is Keeling.

Her cheeks itched and seemed to revolve in place, like twin kaleidoscope wheels. They swelled, shrank, and swelled, and Alice was fit company for her streetcar fellows. A fun-house spectacle, a circus fool.

She closed her eyes and let her body jolt from side to side with the train; it chucked along the girder rails. *Lewanick. Tartu. Trout Creek.* In a semi-doze, she saw Elizabeth's smile, John's eyes. Paul plucking fat, pink curls of shrimp from the desert dirt, wiping at them with a dry paper towel. John's voice: "Ten-second rule!"

Alice's stomach turned a little, from the garlic at dinner and the drinks, from the extra chair, the lingering scent of Elizabeth's damp hair.

The streetcar arced right at a corner, then left. Lights flashed against Alice's closed eyelids, and the violinist appeared in her mind, flew past her in the apartment hallway. His coat and hair unfurled like sails behind him. Her eyes opened, and the streetcar whirred to a stop.

Inside the apartment building, Alice stood still and listened. Her ears thrummed, thick with the grey silence that comes with too many martinis. She walked on the balls of her feet, through the entryway and up the stairs, checking the click of her heels.

At her apartment, she stopped and listened again, pressed her ear to the door to hear the cool, hollow quiet. She imagined the armful of books stacked on the built-in, the futon mattress splayed flat on the floor. A small table and two chairs, wood floorboards red-orange and bare, except for a few thick candles stumping out of hardened pools of their own wax. She pictured herself inside. This was what she was now, a year-and-a-half without Paul. A blank slate. Pacing the space between what was and what would be.

She shifted from foot to foot and peeled her ear away from the door. Her watch said eleven.

She straightened, took a few steps down the hall, and stopped. She walked and stopped and walked until she stood in front of apartment 204. She lifted a fist and held it an inch from the door, hesitated, then knocked.

Her face stretched wide, then contracted. Her eyes bulged and shrank. *Cocos Is Keeling*. The fabric of her jacket whispered against itself, and she knocked again. This time louder, a few more beats.

Lewannick, Bhutan.

The door opened, and the violinist looked out through four inches of dark doorway. His eyes and hair were blurry.

“Do you want to have a glass of wine?” Alice asked. Her voice whistled and droned; she blinked three times to silence it.

“I was asleep,” said the violinist.

Alice had spoken to him a couple of times since she first discovered him across the hall, a month ago. She had asked him once if he would have a drink sometime, and he’d said yes. Nothing had come of it.

Cocos is Keeling. Tartu. Bhutan. Alice stood there, weaving slightly.

The violinist sighed. “Wait here,” he said. He went back inside where it was dark and pushed the door almost closed. Alice didn’t move. She listened to the silence grow louder and softer in time with her breath.

Trout Creek. She shut her eyes and saw Paul’s face in the night sky, looming, a large, milky moon. Stars glinted around him. She opened her eyes wide.

The violinist opened the door once more, this time just wide enough to slip through sideways. He closed it again, quickly, as if sealing it off. His hair was still blurry, but there was toothpaste on his breath. “Let’s go,” he said.

It dawned on Alice, just then, that they were going to her apartment. Somehow she had pictured him inviting her in, pouring the wine as if this were his idea.

She backed across the hall and unlocked her door. She hoped she had wine.

The only real light in the apartment was in the kitchen, so she hurried in that direction. But before she could cross the room, the violinist closed the door, cut off the light from the hall. Alice stood stock-still trying to see, straining to make out the edges of something, of anything.

Is Keeling. Is Keeling, thought Alice. *Bhutan. Tartu.*

A lighter fired up, and when she turned, the violinist was glowing behind her, holding a flame overhead as if he were at a concert. He peered around, stepping carefully. He spotted the candles on the floor by the mattress, crouched to light them.

Alice continued to the kitchen in the flicker of candlelight. She was relieved to find an unopened wine bottle on the counter. She felt for two coffee mugs and the corkscrew.

When she stepped back into the room, the violinist was lying on the mattress, pillows wedged behind his head, fingers laced across his stomach. He unlaced them to push himself up as Alice came over.

She handed him the bottle and the opener and put the cups on the floor beside him. She decided that he would pour the wine.

On the other side of the mattress, she wedged up more pillows, and half-sat, half-lay beside him, laced her fingers over her stomach. Her lips expanded and contracted. *Bhutan.*

The violinist filled the mugs and handed one to Alice. He tipped his ceramic rim to meet hers. "Cheers."

Tartu. John and Elizabeth seemed far away, like tonight hadn't happened, and Alice was oddly calm. Sipping wine from a coffee cup, lying on her bed in candlelight with the violinist.

They didn't say anything, either of them, for a long time. Then they talked at intervals, in short sentences, about the bad wine, the candle flames, nothing much. They left long pockets of silence in between.

Ten minutes after he poured the last of the wine into the bottom of her cup, Alice said one last thing, but the violinist was asleep. She looked up at the ceiling and thought of nothing: not of a white road bike spinning out on iced pavement, pitching over the low guardrail, not of her own distorted eyelids and hands, or of the violinist's slow breath.

When Alice woke, the candle flames were giant in their pools of melted wax, and the violinist was snaking a warm, thin hand up her shirt. He slipped it up and around and briefly cupped a breast. He peeled back the fabric of her bra, wedged it beneath the breast and cupped it again.

He pushed up against her from behind. She lay still a moment, then reached back slowly to touch his thigh. She was afraid he would be naked, and he was.

She rolled away, pulled up her side of the quilt where it hung off the mattress. She shimmied her legs and pawed with her hands until she was mostly under the quilt, prying the last of herself, finally, out of the violinist's hands until she was covered.

He paused.

Probably he had violin groupies, she told herself. Twenty-two-year-olds, with baby-doll skin and fresh eyes, whose thighs didn't touch when they stood.

After a moment, the violinist rolled over and pulled up his own side of the quilt, wriggled under, and found Alice in the middle of the bed. He got her pants off, bunched her shirt up under her armpits.

His body was thin, like his hands, but hard and tufted with straight black hair. Alice could feel his heart clapping through his chest. Rigorous. He touched her that way too, moved her around, put her where he wanted her. He pushed into her, and she clenched her teeth to stop a moan, thinking: Paul.

Paul, who'd been a grabber, finding flesh on Alice she hadn't know she had, until she felt round and unending. He'd take hold of the swell at the top of her hip, part waist, part ass. "Oh, you," is what he'd say, using his grip to gain purchase and push inside her.

Her insides flinched and opened now, remembering.

Or his hands would become moth wings, flickering at her neck, between her legs. Whispering along one part of her after the next.

The violinist moved distantly, resolutely, against Alice and inside her. But the motion was also fine and continuous, and she thought of his music.

When they finished, Alice wound herself in and around him, between legs and arms and over his chest. Their mouths tasted like old wine, and she sweated against him.

The next time Alice woke, they were uncovered. Flat on their backs, side by side.

Her body was still and right-sized. She felt around inside her mouth with her tongue. Right-sized. She rubbed her feet together. Right-sized. “*Bern*,” she said aloud: a single, solid tone.

The violinist breathed deeply in his sleep. Alice missed Paul.

The candles had gone out, but tiny stars danced in the darkness overhead and remained when she closed her eyes. In her head, she chanted: *Cocos Is Keeling*.
Gravesend.

Lewannick.

Trout Creek.

She pictured the stars there, so thick and curdled, you could scoop your hand through them. The air searing, even at midnight.

She remembered: they are coated in grime. It’s under their nails and caked in their nostrils. It’s in the rims of their beer cans. Only the four of them are still awake, sprawled in folding chairs. Everyone around them has passed out in tents or shut themselves into trailers and pop-top vans. But they wait.

Elizabeth has draped a bare, dirty leg over the metal arm of John’s chair so that their calves are pressed together. Her flip-flop dangles from her foot, and the

bottoms of her feet are black. Paul tips backward in his chair, trying to balance an empty on his chin. Alice runs her fingers along the back of his neck, fiddles with his hair. They're on high alert. They know it's coming, but it's like that sharp jet of air to the cornea in an eye exam: You're never prepared.

And sure enough, when it comes, they jump. The explosion of light, the thunder of metal.

They scramble out of their chairs, knock them over, chase each other across the gritty dirt. The sheer canyon wall is lit red, bright as a movie screen. Brush slices at their shins.

The train rounds the butte and aims, dead on the four of them, a charging moon. They run headlong, right back at it, their flip-flops spitting sand. Paul grabs Alice's hand to hustle her faster, closer. Wheels scream and roar on rails.

At last, when the train is huge, the light mammoth and blinding above them, John whoops and jumps and punches at the air. The other three stop in the dirt behind him, and Elizabeth screams against the noise: "NOW! NOW!"

Paul and John turn on their heels, yank down shorts and moon the moon. Elizabeth and Alice strip off their tank tops and wave them overhead. They arch their backs and howl, breasts bared, nipples taut, from running, from the caress of desert air, suffused with starlight and train-light, until at last, the whistle cries. Deafening and dissonant. A guttural, riotous chord. One short: Stand By. One long: Blind Curve.

Wings

Ileana had sea-green eyes and tangled red curls. “Under my clothes,” she whispered to Piz, “are wings the color of a hummingbird’s breast.” Red curls and wings are rare, and so when Ileana offered, Piz made love to her. Her lips tasted like blackberries, her nipples like tulips, her hair like bitterroot picked early, before the roots grow woody. Piz fell in head first, and as he tumbled, Ileana bit him with tiny incisors in the balmy velvet flesh between his thighs.

Piz was sixteen. Ileana was surely centuries older but with the spanking new face of a child. She spoke in musical notes, and her tiny feet sparkled when she danced in the corners of the room.

“It’s mommy’s day,” says Tess. Her eyes ricochet to the bright windows, to the black cat with copper eyes, to the pumpkin muffin on her china-blue plate. To Piz.

Their eyes fix, as always when they meet; magnets locked, currents exchanged.

“Yes,” says Piz. “Yes, it is.” Uneasiness steals from the arches of his feet to the top of his head. He breathes it out. *Mindful*. Inhales. “Drink your juice, so we can

brush your hair.” Tess’s hair is yellow, with wild curls like Ileana’s and a lingering whiff of red.

Ileana is early, as she always is, now that there is an official pick-up and drop-off schedule for Tess. She wafts in on the spring air. Behind her, a Buick idles at the curb, dreary brown, engine bucking.

Piz scowls, then relaxes his forehead and smooths his brow.

“We’re going to the zoo,” says Ileana. Her eyes glitter like sun on green sea. She smells like burnt sugar and cayenne, and Piz remembers her pregnant: breasts like full moons, iridescent belly brimming, and inside it, the slightest nymph, lashes flickering. Pointed toes and the hint of wings.

Tess spins on the balls of her feet: a flurry of yellow skirt and curls. Piz catches her around the waist and pulls her in to tie a shoe. He looks up at Ileana. “Who’s that?” he asks, nodding toward the brown Buick.

“*That* is Richard,” says Ileana. She turns and smiles and waves at the car.

Piz exhales. Richard, brown Buick. Two years back, it was Mick, with the reverse Mohawk and a banged-up van Ileana had slept in all winter. Todd, last year, had a retired U-Haul, a ten-footer. That chapter had ended in Mexico with a collect call. Ileana had gone out, she told Piz on the phone. She came back, rolled open the truck door, and found them: Todd passed out, his face buried in a woman’s crotch. A woman “with crazy eyes and tough, crooked breasts,” Ileana had said. “Come get me.”

Mindful.

Tess kisses the tip of Piz’s nose. “Bye, Daddy,” she says.

Piz kisses Tess back and takes hold of her shoulders, weightless and narrow as a swift's. He looks at her closely, at the small, round chin, the pale brush-stroke eyebrows.

Ileana drifts toward the open door.

Piz stands up and faces her. "Be back by five," he says.

Her eyes glitter and flash. They simmer with excitement, and with Depakote, which she takes now on court order. It's a requirement, since Mexico, for continuing to see Tess.

Ileana and Tess flit outside, across green lawn. A furor of twinkling curls.

Piz looks past them to the car. He makes out long, dark hair and hunched shoulders in the driver's seat. A beard, possibly. He notes a quick surge in his arteries, the rapid swap in his lungs: oxygen for acid oxide. Every artery, every synapse tells him to call Tess back inside. He locks his knees.

Judge's orders, Ileana's last chance.

So Piz slows his breath and thinks, "The will is the source of all suffering." The words of his sensei: "Notice: This moment, every moment, is perfect. Just as it is."

"Five o'clock!" Piz yells, before the pale flutter of legs disappears into the brown car, before the heavy doors slam shut.

Ileana half-waves, doesn't look back.

“Go get her, will you?” Merry had asked Piz over the phone last August. Ileana had called her collect too, from Mexico, after she had called Piz. “I’ll pay for gas, if you want. I’ll keep Tessa Jane.”

Ileana’s mother didn’t drive, never left the house. Piz pictured her, sunken into the balding sofa, grainy hair pulled into a spidery ponytail. The living room, cramped with dusty end tables where filmy ashtrays brimmed with ash. The grey miasma, a fresh cigarette smoldering between Merry’s knobby fingers.

They’d visited her once when Tess was a baby. Merry had looked closely at the infant’s bare back, felt for the slightest nubs on the top edges of her scapula. “Ileana was a changeling, you know,” Merry had whispered to Piz. “I never knew what to do with her.”

“I’ll take Tess with me,” said Piz, and hung up.

He dialed the number Ileana had given him. “Where are you?”

“At a phone, a phone booth, a blue phone booth under a metal bridge.” Her words and the breaths between them hurtled along, break-neck. “I don’t know. Near the water? I don’t know.”

Piz considered putting the phone down, imagined the Tijuana cops picking her up.

“Paseo de los Heroes,” she said then, in a perfect accent, as if she were someone else. Someone still and effective. She continued then, herself again: “There’s a painted wall and one of those zebra donkeys. And a store and a motel. Fiesta Inn.”

“Good, good. Stop there,” said Piz. “Go to that motel. I’ll find the number and charge a room, and we’ll be there sometime tomorrow.”

Ileana said nothing.

Piz disliked raising his voice, but he did: “Do you hear? Stay there!”

“Yes,” said Ileana, but she was drifting.

When Piz first began to sit in silence, the sensei said: “Feel the discomfort in your spine and legs. Notice how difficult it is to keep the mind from leaping in to break the meditation.”

Piz felt the discomfort in his spine and legs. He noticed the persistent itch of errant thoughts. He was glad the sensei had brought this up. “You will practice.” The sensei paused, and Piz waited. He noted a dull pain in his right shoulder, the urge to shift his sit bones on the zafu, thoughts of a bake shop in Amsterdam. The sensei continued: “It never stops. It never goes away.”

When Ileana’s periods first stopped, she had moved in with Piz and his father: Valentino, whose long-time lover had left him, and who hankered for family.

Merry had watched while Ileana packed a small army duffel. “It’s bad luck to get knocked up in October,” Merry said to Piz. She leaned close to him. She stank of bourbon; smoke from a Winston coiled between them. “She’s a shape shifter, you know. A lot of them are.” She gestured toward Ileana’s middle. Her lips grazed Piz’s ear. “Might not be yours, even. Might be a snake baby. Or a cougar.”

And to be sure, Ileana's shape shifted. Her belly thickened, her hips and nose broadened, her hair grew longer and more tangled. Her bones ached at the place where wings would sprout. She whimpered and ate rice pudding and liver. Her voice grew flat and her ocean-eyes darkened. She sobbed.

"You know, she's got depression," Merry told Piz on the phone. "She's got pills, but she won't take them."

Piz held steady. He pressed his palms hard against Ileana's temples when her head ached in the third month. He scrambled eggs for her at two in the morning and held her hair back while she threw them up. He took extra classes and graduated high school a year ahead of his class. He signed up for general education courses at the community college. And when Ileana asked, he made love to her, curling around her from behind, holding her breasts and round belly. Until once, just as he came, she bucked and cried, and it all rushed out: the mingled liquor of the three of them. Ileana, Piz, Tess.

Tessa Jane arrived early and palm-sized, like a kitten. Mewling, eyes sealed shut. For three weeks, Piz watched through plastic while Tess's tiny chest rose and fell, her translucent fingers twitching, her thin, ruddy skin warming under lamps.

While Tess lay in the incubator, Ileana lay in bed. Four days in the hospital, softly bleeding. Then at home, buried in quilts. She pulled pillows tight around her damp face and head; a down wreath. She ate only custard. She collected small quantities of milk with a breast pump and slept deeply.

“What about those pills,” Piz asked Ileana at night, after classes, after the hospital. He twisted red curls around his fingers, brought water and a cool cloth for her forehead and neck.

She blinked large eyes, but didn’t speak. Piz watched the pulse beat at her throat. He laid his palm flat between her breasts and thought he felt the vibration of her skin.

This is the day. Piz knows it; he knew it when they left. And as the hours pass, he feels it as certainly as if it has already happened. Tess is with Ileana, Ileana is with a stranger, and the brown Buick is not coming back.

He breathes in and out. He folds laundry. Three T-shirts of the same cut. Three button-downs. Three pairs of wide-leg jeans. And for Tess, a daisy-print dress, plush pajamas the color of mint, a blue tulle skirt. Striped socks with ten striped toes.

Piz had charged everything: the plane tickets, the motel room, the rental car. He parked in San Ysidro and walked across the border with Tess. And Tess was delighted: at sailing over clouds, at lacquer-stripped donkeys and Spanish chatter, at paper flowers and painted *globos* tied to the tips of narrow sticks. Piz stopped in the street to buy her a blue-glittered accordion and a clay rabbit bank.

Piz found Ileana in the motel parking lot, in the open back of the U-haul; she hadn’t checked in. She lounged cross-legged on a flannel sleeping bag. Todd sat sneering beside her.

Tess tucked herself behind Piz's legs. She clung to his hand and peered at her mother through the slim gap between his ribcage and arm.

Mindful. Piz wiped his neck with a hand. The heat was thick, and he felt as if he were under water: too heavy and warm. "Are you coming?" he asked.

Ileana glanced around the cargo bed and pushed back snarled curls. She raked together her duffel, a stained sweater, and sandals. She stood up, unsteady, and walked toward Piz.

"Later," said Todd. He flicked a salute their way.

Piz took Ileana's clammy hand and helped her down.

"I never checked in," said Ileana. Her eyes were black-ringed and lost, the sea gone.

Piz clasped a shoulder, turned her sharply to face him. "This does not happen again."

She blinked colorless eyes.

He walked them to the border and across, one hand holding Tess's, the other tight around Ileana's upper arm. Ileana dragged her duffel; Tess clamped her new toys tight to her chest.

On the plane, Ileana ate grey turkey and potatoes and returned to herself. She and Tess sang faerie songs, traded green M&Ms for orange ones, slept in each other's arms. Piz sat, scarcely moving. He breathed out and in, and from time to time, turned to look: matched peach cheeks and sea-colored eyes. Fine fingers the color of cream.

At five-thirty, Piz wanders the rooms in declining light. His pulse is dogged in his throat. Objects jump forward: rainbow slippers haphazard with colored tufts, an awake-asleep doll on a flowered quilt, lashes stitched closed. And the gold-palleted globe: fawn-hued oceans and welted amber mountains. Thin brown gridlines measuring degrees latitude, degrees longitude. Piz gives the earth a spin on its metal axis, and Africa tumbles after South America, fast past the Coral Sea.

He should have walked to the Buick and talked to the guy. Taken down his plates. He calls Ileana's cell phone once more. Gets voicemail.

When her breathing was strong, Piz and his father took Tessa Jane home from the hospital. Valentino drove. Piz rode in back, bracing his baby's tender head between a thumb and middle finger so it couldn't flop with the turns in the road.

"How's that little monkey doing?" Valentino asked at the intersections. He craned his neck to see the back edge of the infant car seat in the rearview mirror.

When Piz brought Tess into the room, Ileana could barely raise herself in the bed. But she shoved away the coverlet and reached to pull the blanketed bundle against her chest. Her breasts were pale and blue-veined, swollen with milk. She closed her eyes and was still, then opened them again. She peeled back layers of flannel to expose the small pink head fuzzed with gold, the narrow shoulders, the straight, smooth spine.

At the touch of bare skin, Tess's lips opened and rooted. With her fingers, Ileana compressed a nipple, formed a dark bud Tess could pull into her rose-round

mouth. Ileana shrank with the knife-new pain of latching on. Then finally the milk let down, rushed forward in warm jets. The sucking grew regular as breathing. Two pairs of sea-green eyes turned glossy and distant, their eyelids weighty and slow.

At six-thirty the black cat worries itself against Piz's legs. Piz calls Merry and tells her they are missing.

"You should have tied bells to the girl's shoelaces to protect her," says Merry. She's been sleeping, or drinking; Piz hears it in her voice. "Turned her T-shirt inside out."

Ileana had grown stronger with every feeding, as if she were the one gathering immunities. Her eyes and curls brightened, the tenor of her voice rose, and the pace of her speech.

Tess also grew, from the size of two palms to three, to the size of a doll. Her skin paled from dark pink to ivory.

Piz took a night job at a copy shop, slept a few hours in the early morning. He brought home milk and lettuce and roasted chicken. He mowed his father's lawn and took out the trash. He held Tess and studied predicate calculus and the visible traits of glacial erosion. He loved his small family with such steadiness that a single, fierce vein rose in a vertical line above his left eyebrow.

At seven-thirty, Piz calls the police. A bright burning rash has risen along the length of his neck and he stutters when he speaks. "She's with the mother?" asks the

voice on the phone. “On approved visitation? You’re out of luck, buddy. Check back tomorrow if they don’t turn up.”

The first time it happened, Tess was six months old.

Piz had come home from work at dawn, had looked at Tess in her crib. She slept bottom up, knees tucked under. Her hair was long enough now to lie in short swirls against her head; brief sweeps of yellow in every direction. Her lips moved slightly, nursing in a dream.

Ileana slept too: face pressed into the pillow, arms overhead, bare shoulders exposed. Scapula smooth where wings would be.

Her arms will be dead asleep, thought Piz. Numb until she dragged them down. Until the blood rushed in, chill and sharp.

He undressed and climbed in beside her. He draped an arm across her back and pressed: lips to chilled arm, chest to spine, penis warm against a cool, curved hip. He hitched a thigh over hers, curled the bottoms of his toes around the tops of hers. And when he woke, she was gone.

“Oh, that foolery,” said Merry on the phone. “She’ll turn up, and most likely with a man. It happens. God love her, she won’t take those pills.”

And two days later, a man’s voice on the line: “Come and get her.”

Piz left Tess with Valentino and drove to Lagoon and Going, where Ileana leaned eyes-closed against the front wall of a 7/11. She sat straight-legged and hunch-shouldered on a gritty, gum-stuck walkway; one hand rested limp beside a

thick grey puddle. She was bruised and unwashed and couldn't speak. Piz took her under the armpits and hauled her to her feet.

At home he stood square in front of Ileana and spoke: "Take the pills. Or leave."

She made her eyes round, let red curls fall over them. "They make me shaky," she said. "And fat and sad." But she took one, and a shower, and in the morning she was gone.

Valentino shows up pale at eight-fifteen, his dark hair pushed up at curious angles. "What can I do?" he asks Piz. "There must be something." His eyes bulge, are tamped pink with held-back tears.

Piz sits down and stands up again and shakes his head. He shouts at himself: "I should have followed them!" Then murmurs: "Please."

Piz turned eighteen, and Tess began to pull herself up on furniture edges, sidle crabwise along the dresser and bed. Piz got the two of them an apartment close to Valentino's house, and the nights Piz worked, Tess spent with her grandfather.

Ileana was invited to visit Tess, so long as Piz was home, so long as she left by dark. Sometimes she arrived lit up and wove in circles through the apartment, red curls eddying. She sang faerie songs, swung Tess in her arms, painted her toenails a tiny, fiery pink. Other times she slunk in and sank silent to the floor. Those days Tess would look at Ileana and carefully turn away. She would rattle a

plastic chain, chew the corner of a wooden block. She'd haul herself to her feet and bounce, singing Ba-Ba-Ba-Ba and holding tight to a cushion or tabletop.

Tessa Jane turned one, two, then three and four years old. She sprouted long yellow curls, a singsong voice, and the habit of climbing: furniture, trees, fences, any leg up to the sky.

Piz got his associates degree and declared a major in geography at the state university. He studied tai chi and right meditation. Mindfulness. He grew his hair long and knotted it at the back of his head. He threw the i-ching and had the symbols tattooed across his back: | | | Gentle entrance. | | | Thunder. | | | Bound.

Ileana wafted in and out. She disappeared for two weeks, or three weeks at a time, then came around more in the last year. Since Mexico. Until finally, she requested legal visitation and got it, pending state's approval of her apartment and roommate, so long as she took her Depakote.

And for six Sundays now she has shown up in friends' cars, dull-eyed but lucid. She takes Tess at ten and returns her at five.

Until today.

Piz sits again, puts his head down and hears voices.

The sensei: "Exhale fear. "

Merry: "She's an enchantress. A disturbance of nature."

And at last, near midnight, a man's voice on the line: "Come and get her. Ocean Shores, south of the lot."

Piz drives the Saab into the dirt and stops at the sandy drop-off. Clouds black out the sky, but the beach is lit with burning scrapwood. Piz runs south, laboring in soft sand.

Every dozen yards or so, silhouettes hump together at the edges of a bonfire, jabbing at flames. They move and shift in dark pairs and threesomes, in sixes and sevens. One long figure shakes out a blanket, then lets it float downward, black behind him. Waves push in and out along the shore, weaving a dim foam line. An engine hums high, then low in the distance.

As Piz comes up on each fire, shadows gather color, flame-lit faces turn toward him. They laugh, raise beers, then darken again in his wake.

The engine buzzes nearer and louder, and Piz looks left, away from the ocean. High, dark dunes roll and swell into the distance. The buzzing is a far-off motorcycle, a black outline and a dim, shimmering headlight, scaling steep slopes and skidding down sideways. Twisting and spitting sand plumes.

Further down the beach, a figure holds up his arms, crosses and uncrosses them overhead. There are two large fires ahead of Piz, then the small one where the ghost silhouette flickers and waves and changes shape against the flames.

Piz's heart slams double-time as he passes the first bonfire and the next. The waving man is alone.

Piz's calves and arches cramp. He hears his frantic breaths rail above the drone of the motorcycle.

He advances and the man grows larger and steps to one side. A mound appears against the sand and gathers color: Tess.

Piz drops beside her and pulls back the sandy towel that covers her face. She's lying on her side, curled into herself and sleeping. Her hair and skirt are half-buried, as if she has emerged from the earth. Piz kneels in place; he looks at the sand-frosted curls, the pink mouth, the pale fist at her chin, and waits for his heart and lungs to steady.

The man with the long hair frowns down at him and Piz stands up. He had been right: there is a thick beard, red-brown. "Where is Ileana?" he asks.

The man shifts his weight and stomps a boot into the sand. He nods at the dunes. "She's out there on that motorcycle," he says, "with some dude." He gestures past Tess, at Ileana's woven bag. "The kid's name was in the cell phone. Your number, I guess."

Piz looks at the man's heavy eyebrows and the bulky shoulders under the black T-shirt. "I'm grateful," says Piz. And he is. He bends to gather Tess in his arms. He leaves Ileana's bag in the sand and walks north.

The man shouts behind them: "Hey! What about this bag and stuff?"

Piz doesn't look back, and the sea lifts and falls and smells of salt. The wind goes cool then warm, is unsteady. Tess moves in his arms, and Piz breathes in and breathes out. Mindful. His heartbeat now is solid and even.

Tess opens blank eyes, far off in sleep. She blinks at the moonless sky, at the dark water moving up and back, rearranging itself. She looks at Piz and their eyes fix. "Where is Mommy?" she asks.

Piz schleps through sand, sinks and pulls, like going nowhere in a dream. He shifts Tess's weight and hears the drone farther off, high now, higher, then low.

"She's flying on green wings," he says.

Tess listens carefully, blinks at Piz.

He stubs a shoe against a dark stick and hitches forward to regain his balance. "They're bright and fast as a hummingbird's. They take her up and up, as high as the sky."

Animalia

Two ants plotted a course around the violinist's leg hairs, advanced steadily on a small, U-shaped gap at the hem of his boxers. He twitched in his sleep—a foot, the fingers of his right hand. Then a shudder ran through him, and he woke and grabbed for his crotch. His hand came back up quickly. One small black body lay rolled and half-mashed between his thumb and forefinger; the other trekked steadily along the thickest part of his palm.

The violinist shot a look at Alice. “Were you just going to watch them march on in?”

“I'd have stopped them,” said Alice. She wondered if it were true.

The violinist growled. He did this from time to time, deep and low in his throat. Alice found it funny the first time she heard it. Later, it was frightening, like when children made faces in the dark—snarling mouths, nostrils flared.

The violinist rolled off the futon and onto his feet. He wiped his hands to shed the ants, eyed the curled bodies where they fell, and scanned the rest of the floor. Alice looked too, and saw what he saw: eight or nine ants scattered at random intervals, crisscrossing the floorboards.

He sniffed his fingers and frowned. “I’m going home,” he said, and pulled on his jeans.

Alice thought about this and shivered. He had yanked off most of the covers when he climbed out of bed, and the sheets had cooled around her. She looked down at the parts of her body he’d left exposed. Her stomach was flatter than it had been in a long time, possibly ever. She smoothed her hand across the goose-bumped flesh. “Should I get my navel pierced?” she asked.

He said nothing and worked tangles out of his hair with his fingers. That was what she would miss when he was gone: deep black hair falling forward when he moved on top of her. Purples and crimsons in the gloss. She had discovered it in the hallway a couple of months back. He had flown past her on the stairs—long coat, long hair cut straight at his shoulders, flashing dark and bright behind him. A word had come to her: *Getaway*. Not get away, as in flee, but *getaway*: a seaside retreat, or the car that whisks a villain from the scene, scot-free.

“I hoped the new traps would help,” Alice said.

“It’s not working,” said the violinist. He crushed a passing ant with his big toe and pulled on his shirt.

“James,” she said now, to hear his name. She rarely used it; she may have said it three times in all.

He left and closed the door behind him.

The second time she saw him, the violinist was coming up the front steps. Black ankle boots, ragged jeans, a black sweater: *Getaway*. Alice had held the door

for him. He stopped in the foyer, one foot planted, the other turned and ready to take him away. He blinked and looked at her as if she had been dim and had suddenly come into focus.

“Do you live here?” he asked.

“Um, upstairs. Yes. I do.” The back of Alice’s neck itched.

He glanced at her breasts, put out his hand. “James,” he said.

His hand was thin, like a high school boy’s, and notably warm considering he had just come in. Alice matched her grip to his, second to second, tensile pressure to tensile pressure.

“Alice,” she said.

He had tipped his head a little, as one would tip a hat, and was gone, up the stairs.

Weeks later, they drank wine, found their way into Alice’s bed, and stayed there. They never left the building, never had a date. She heard him practice every day from across the hall, but she never saw the violin, or the inside of his apartment.

Alice got up from the futon and walked the perimeter. It was her morning routine before coffee: she searched for invading formicidae and updated her battle plan. The longer the ants were there, the more they annoyed the violinist.

The first of them had arrived on New Year’s morning. Alice and James lingered in bed. “What’s your Resolution?” she had asked, to irritate him. It was only her second new year since Paul had died, and she was in a bad mood.

He didn’t answer; he sighed and folded his arms.

Alice lay still, thinking back to the year before. She had slogged through the first holidays without Paul, heavy and slow, as if she wore armor. She got a few awkward voicemail invitations and refused them. People knew what to say to divorced friends; they were less sure of widows.

She kept her head down and avoided the confusion: bells and carols, reds and green, couples arm in arm. She slept. She sat cross-legged on the shower floor; the water beat down on the crown of her head, parted her hair, streamed into her eyes and mouth.

She went to a movie on Christmas, but couldn't recall which. She ate scrambled eggs and listened in the dark on New Year's Eve: the shrill of roman rockets, drunken howls, firecrackers. *Pap. Pap-pap-pap.*

Then the second bout arrived after what seemed like no time: another new year, and this time with the violinist. She was lighter now, and meaner.

She had looked at James' crossed arms and considered running a hand over the ivory skin and straight dark hairs of his bicep. Instead, she turned her head away and repeated the question: "Did you? Did you make a Resolution?"

He yelled: "Fuck!"

Alice perked up. In the two months they'd been sleeping together, the violinist had displayed emotion maybe three times. She sat up quickly and looked at him. As it happened, it wasn't her he was shouting at. It was the water glass. He held it inches from his mouth; it roiled with ants, some inside, some out. Some swam frantically, flushed into the drink by the violinist's abrupt motion. Some circled the rim

“Wow!” Alice had said, suddenly feeling better. “Look at that!” She may even have laughed.

Alice tried to kill the ants, but also, she admired them. In her quest for extermination, she learned remarkable facts. For example, there were more ants than people on the earth. And what the larvae were fed determined their adult roles: queen, worker, soldier, drone.

What she had set out to discover was why her particular ants didn't form lines. Instead, each scurried alone in one direction until it hit what appeared to be an invisible wall, then it turned abruptly and proceeded at a new angle. Or sometimes they formed mobs: crowding and seething en masse around a stray bit of cheese or a speck of sugar.

So far, she had read nothing about line formation, but she did learn that ants didn't have lungs. Instead, oxygen and carbon dioxide came and went through tiny holes all over their bodies. And rather than a regular heart and blood vessels, a single long tube pumped clear blood from the clypeus to the gaster and back again.

Today, it turned out, was a light day for the ants, which was good; Alice would leave soon to pick up Piz's daughter, Tess. Piz was Alice's friend from the copy shop where she worked the night shift, or had worked it, until last week.

Tess liked ants well enough one or two at a time, but she was not so fond of them in droves. Fortunately, this morning in the main room of the apartment, there were only a half dozen on the floor, one on the windowsill, and one on the café table. In the kitchen, just three lone scouts soldiered along on the counter, and two

marched headlong toward grey plastic traps. The bathroom was slightly more troublesome. There, twenty or so ants were on the loose, crisscrossing black and white tiles, scaling the metal waste basket, circling the sink's drain. She made short work of them with a wet tissue: swipe, toss, flush.

She dressed in clothes she thought Tess would like: a floral skirt and pink t-shirt. Piz was a geography major at the university and would leave for a long field trip to Boulder Creek, Colorado, just after his shift. Alice would keep Tess while he was away. Alice looked forward to a six-day sleepover with French braids and glitter nail polish. She put on pink tights and suede ballet flats and walked to the shop.

It was like spring outside, a false spring; Alice could feel the sunlight on her skin. The premature tips of crocuses poked out from dark soil, and trees revealed hints of new leaves at the ends and joints of bare branches. It was February in Portland, so the temperature could drop fifteen degrees in an instant. It could snow tomorrow or in an hour. But for now, residents had emerged from their warm homes with high hopes. Cyclists, their calves winter-white between the wool hems of their knickers and the tops of their neoprene booties, doubled up side-by-side in the bike lanes. Alice, too, pretended the weather would last.

When she reached the door of the copy shop, Alice paused and considered: as of last week, she no longer worked there. It was ended—the nightly bustle among islands of grey copiers, un-jamming originals, refilling paper drawers, freeing staple barbs from the nubs of the carpet. No more would she bind or fax or trim. She had asked the night manager for time off to stay with Tess. He had said no, that as it

was, he would have to reshuffle the schedule to cover for Piz. So Alice had quit. She didn't tell Piz; she left that to the balding stoner who worked with them most nights.

Piz had called her. "You did what?" he said.

"I quit, it's fine, I have some savings," said Alice, and she left it at that. It would be too awkward now, she thought, to tell him about the life insurance payout she'd waited all this time to claim. Piz worked nights at a copy shop to support a daughter and pay his way through college. It would be awkward to mention the house and the "real" job waiting, also, to be reclaimed. Awkward to admit that she had taken the copy shop job because the fluorescent bulbs, the printers' thumps and sighs were better than the silent nights without Paul. That it wasn't the paycheck she would miss; it was Piz's midnight geographical explications. The fact, for example, that more than half the coastline of the United States is in Alaska. Or that Antarctica contains ninety percent of the world's ice. "It's made up of seventy percent of world's fresh water," Piz had told her one night. He paused then to remove the chopstick from his man-bun. He rewound his long hair, re-anchored it, and continued: "Yet it gets less than two inches of rain in a year. It's the driest place on earth. Drier than the Gobi desert."

Alice pushed through the shop door. Tess spotted her and ran over to jump up onto Alice and cling like a monkey. She was as happy to see Alice as Alice was to see her, and Alice hoped it was not just because she was in the habit of buying Tess toys. She couldn't help it; Tess was Alice's excuse for reclaiming remembered treasures: Slinkies. Hula hoops. Pop-O-Matic Trouble. The last time Tess was over, Alice had bought jacks and a Teeny-Bouncer SuperBall, because the spongy balls that came

with the sets had scrappy rubber seams that made them bounce funny. She had stuffed a rolled towel against the bottom of the refrigerator, and she and Tess played cross-legged on the kitchen tiles. Magically, Alice could still sweep jacks from the floor like a master and capture the ball, fingers snapping tight around cool rubber, the jingle of metal.

“There’s my monkey,” said Alice. She spun in a circle so that Tess’s green eyes would spark and shine and her red-gold curls would flair out behind her. For this visit Alice had already decided what they would buy: a live Venus flytrap and a picture book. And a surprise, perhaps, for the violinist.

Piz went into the back room of the shop and came out with a pink Barbie backpack. He handed it to Alice. His gait was stiff at the prospect of leaving Tess for so many days.

Tess slid down from Alice’s arms and went to hug Piz around the knees, her face turned upward. He looked down at her, but spoke to Alice: “You should be able to reach me on my cell,” he said. “And you have her dad’s number if you need it.”

“Don’t worry,” said Alice.

Tess rose onto her toes, her mouth pursed for a kiss. Piz lifted her up from under her arms, raised her overhead, then lowered her until their noses touched. He kissed her puckered lips, then the tip of her nose. “Have fun, baby,” he said.

She put her hands on his cheeks and answered: “Have fun, baby.”

Alice and Tess stopped at two stores before catching the streetcar back to the apartment. Rocked by the gentle bump of the rails, they read through Graeme

Base's *Animalia* once, then twice, matching the bold letters of the alphabet to drawings: Alligator, Bat, Caterpillar. As they started the third time through, Tess stopped Alice at A; she put her palm against the page to keep Alice from turning it. "That's what you've got at your house, Alice," said Tess, pointing to a leggy black ant half-hidden by the tail of a grinning alligator. "Look at his ugly face."

"That's right," said Alice. She extracted the small tube-shaped terrarium from the bag she had tucked between her knees. "Dinner for our new friend."

Tess leaned forward to look at the bright green pods of the Venus flytrap. The pods hovered openmouthed and alien, like spike-toothed clams, and moisture clouded the bottom half of the enclosure. Tess's wide eyes crossed a little from peering so closely.

At the apartment, Alice carried the plant into the kitchen and pulled off the plastic cap, while Tess climbed onto a stepstool. Alice bent over the top of the tube. She moved tentatively, as if the spiny discs might suddenly leap out at her. She saw a few wilted black pods between the green ones. The girl at the shop had said to remove the dark bits with tweezers.

"Don't touch the pods with your fingers," the girl had said, "or they'll close up and die."

The advice was unnecessary, as Alice had no inclination to poke her finger into the thorny mouth of a flesh-eating pod. In fact, she chose narrow-tipped tongs rather than tweezers to pluck the dead leaves from the bottom of the terrarium: the better to safeguard her fingertips.

Tess and Alice held their breath as Alice lowered the metal tines into the cylinder. She angled them carefully into a space between two green pods. Her hands trembled, and she thought of *Operation*, the game in which a player must extract a plastic butterfly from the stomach of a lithographed patient—or some other ailment from some other cavity. One brush of the tweezers against the cavity’s metal rim and a buzzer sounded, the patient’s nose lit up, and the “doctor” lost a turn.

Alice steadied her hand, then pinched the tongs together near the bottom of a soft, black stem. But the edge of one tine grazed the spines of the largest live pod and the whole thing snapped shut, quick as a fist. Alice started and jumped backward, yanking the tongs out of the terrarium and leaving the black stem behind. Tess jumped beside her, and they both broke out laughing, louder than was called for, like they might at any moment cry instead.

Alice clapped the lid back onto the cylinder as if the plant might strike again. She looked at Tess. “I think I’ll leave those black leaves alone for now,” said Alice. “What do you think?”

Tess nodded, her face grave. “But let’s give it some ants,” she said.

There were a number to choose from: a small clot of wriggling legs and antennae had converged on a droplet of orange juice on the counter. Alice and Tess discussed how they might proceed. Would the flytrap prefer its dinner dead or alive? And if ants were best served alive, how would Alice get them into the narrow-necked container?

“Shall I give it a try?” she asked Tess.

Tess nodded. She stepped down from the stool, slid it back a few inches and stepped up again.

Alice removed the top again and gently clasped a pair of ants between her thumb and two fingers. She tried to release them into the tube, but they clung to her skin and ran in opposing directions. She brushed them back onto the counter and tried again with others. This time she guided them onto her fingertip and gently flicked them with her thumb. Some, unfortunately, were maimed in the process. Others arced wildly, landing far from the target. And the few that dropped smoothly into the cylinder bounced benignly off of the faces of the open pods and got lost in the dark soil below.

“Maybe they’re too small,” said Tess.

“Maybe they are,” said Alice, and she capped the terrarium.

Tess looked at Alice expectantly.

“Now what?” Alice asked.

Tess bounced on her toes. “The present!”

“Right now?” asked Alice. She cocked her head, as if she had doubts that this was the best moment to begin.

Tess nodded, causing her curls to coil and recoil.

“This very minute?” asked Alice.

“Yes, Alice! Right now!” said Tess. She fidgeted on the stool. She stepped down to push it close to the counter once more and climbed back up.

“If you insist,” said Alice. She removed the final toy from its bag and slid it out of its box.

It was an ant farm. There was not much assembly; it had clear plastic walls an inch apart, a red base, and a faux-brick, castle-top lid. Alice snapped it together, Tess poured in the sand and added the food. Then Alice slid the corner of a paper towel under the throng of ants working away at the juice drop on the counter. She lowered the captives into the top of their new home and shook them loose into the sand. In the end there were about thirty of them, climbing over one another and looking for order.

Alice looked at Tess. “Now what?” she asked.

“Bring it to him,” said Tess.

Alice thought about this. The violinist would be out now; he was always out on Tuesdays between noon and six. She didn’t know where he went, but she knew he left.

“Yes,” said Alice, nodding at Tess. “We’ll surprise him.” She grabbed a credit card and picked up the ant castle. She wondered vaguely just what it was she thought she was doing, and briefly, whether she really hoped to please James with this so-called surprise. She didn’t, she decided. She admitted it: it was simply part of her new meanness. And she liked it—this novel, unkind edge.

Tess hopped on one foot and followed Alice out into the hall. The credit card slipped easily behind the violinist’s outdated latch. Alice knew it would; he had locked himself out once and used his AmEx to get in.

She slipped the card into her pocket and edged the door open. Tess pushed past her; Alice quickly followed and closed the door behind them.

It was silent inside, the way a room was silent when you were not supposed to be in it. The back of Alice's neck itched. She stood still and tried to take in what she saw.

The apartment felt lighter and bigger than her own, although she could see it was the same size, only reversed. But the trim around the windows and doorways was painted white, while Alice's was the dark of the original wood. The sofa in here was white, as well, and the area rug was a soft beige. It was beautiful, really, this apartment. There were open shelves along the far wall with carefully displayed books and six antique clarinets on wooden stands. Three grey-cloth dressmaker's forms stood in one corner, wearing half-finished bodices in neutral-toned linens. And above the sofa hung a print of a Maurizio Pellegrin installation: an unnaturally elongated dress pattern and two tattered measuring tapes.

Adrenaline sparked through Alice's neck and under her arms, and Tess said the words for her: "This is a girl's house."

Tess was right. Alice's mind scattered in all directions. *I made him up*, was one brief thought. *I'm in the wrong apartment*, was another, which, while more horrifying, seemed to make more sense.

But the answers were taped to the refrigerator door:

—A photo of the violinist leaning against a sea wall with a tall woman in dark sunglasses. Her hair was long and dark, her skirt was dark and short, her boots were sky high. The violinist had his arm around her waist and was pulling her against him. He was smiling; Alice leaned closer to double-check.

—A printed itinerary for Sylvia Arias: October and November in Portugal, Amsterdam, Brussels, Prague through June.

—And a Post-it note attached to the photo's bottom edge: "J – I'll miss you, I love you, don't forget to feed the fish. S."

Alice looked around for fish and found a small aquarium near the kitchen window. A single betta hovered near center of the glass, brilliant blue, iridescent fins draped like scarves below and behind its narrow body. On the aquarium floor, an orange shell lay on dark sand, open side up.

Alice stood still and waited to feel hurt, but she didn't. Instead she was giddy. She thought back on the sounds: the croon and thrust and weep of the violin from across the hall. The violinist's deep, low growl and the silence between them. His apartment door opening and closing, the click of the key turning in hers.

She placed the ant castle beside the aquarium and swung Tess up into her arms. She tickled Tess's neck with kisses until she arched away, laughing. Tess asked Alice: "Do you think he'll like it?"

Alice set Tess on her feet and chased her out of the apartment and into the hall. She stopped in the doorway and asked Tess: "Did you know ants talk by touching feelers and giving off bad scents?"

Tess told Alice she did not.

Alice took a last look at the room behind her: the pale bodices and polished woodwinds, the photo on the refrigerator door. She saw this woman's things and wondered if she would be free now to go and hear him play, to watch his hair fall

forward as his bow rose and pulled, his fingers quiver and flicker along the curved neck and strings.

Music for Strings

Before dawn each day, James leaves Sylvia's apartment and walks through the city to the river. He crosses to the center of the bridge that crosses it, sets his violin case at his feet, and leans out beyond the rail. He thinks of the new Bartók piece, which he must perform in six weeks, he thinks of Sylvia, and he thinks of jumping in. He studies the water below: countless flimsy swells. City lights shiver along their tops and sides.

The river's surface shifts and bobs and James rehearses Bartók in his head. First movement: *andante tranquillo*. *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta*. No key signature, and a time signature that shifts and shifts again. He pictures the beginning on the page: the slow, clean notes and sweeping ties. He can hear the low start on muted strings, hazard looming from the earliest beat. At the first rising notes of the violins, James' fingers twitch on imagined strings and the remembered cool of the brazilwood bow. He feels the measured pressure of horsehair on gut. He thinks about Sylvia and wonders if she will leave him.

Amsterdam, Paris, Prague, Turin.

"Just think of dealing with the luggage and tiny hotel rooms," she had said to James before they fell asleep last night. "Stiff sheets, powdered cleanser dried onto

the shower floor.” She had closed her eyes then and pressed two fingers hard against the inner corners of her eyebrows.

James thinks: *five countries, eight months.*

He focuses again on the Bartók, on the high G at the top of page three, the note he’d missed in yesterday’s practice, over and over. The tinny trill, the inadequate turn of his wrist. He redirects the memory and corrects in his mind the difficult angle at the elbow to deepen the tone. He plays on in silence to the end of the phrase, the memory of the missed G hovering still behind the truer notes.

A quick wind chills James so that the hairs rise on the back of his neck. He stares into the glitter of the lights on dark, twitchy swells and remembers the transients he had read about who recently made the leap in earnest. The two men left ragged boots at the foot of the rail and jumped from the bridge for a summer bath and a thrill. Just one resurfaced. He had said to the press: "People say the river is dirty, but a lot of the missions are dirtier. I'd rather go into the river." James wonders if the luckier transient had left his buddy’s boots behind on the bridge, or had tucked them under his arm and carried them home.

Last night as he and Sylvia talked in bed, James watched her lips open and close, shaping consonants, teasing out vowels: “Stuck suitcase zippers, dragging baggage across the sidewalk on those little plastic wheels, banging them into elevators and up and down stairs...” She opened her eyes again and looked at the ceiling. “But do you know what I really cannot stand?”

“Hmm?” he’d said, and let his eyes roam. Street light leaked in between narrow blinds. It cast stripes across three dressmaker’s forms, poised and headless

in the far corner. It slashed hatch marks along neat shelves of books and antique clarinets on wooden stands, across the black and white tiles in the next room.

“The smell of a performance,” said Sylvia. “I can’t stand it: hair cream, shoe polish, perfume, sweat, starch, rosin. Oh, and that bad penny smell of saliva on brass ligatures and cane reeds.” She rolled toward him, onto her side. She looked at him with dark eyes under dark lids.

He lifted the sheet to study the length of her. The sweet cup of her chin and the fine throat. Small breasts inclined toward the mattress, nipples dark as her mouth. Her belly dipped to the side, as well, rounded slightly near her hip. And below that: the shadowed juncture at the tops of her thighs, curved knees far beneath.

“And cough drops,” said Sylvia. And James realized: she has no doubts. She is a musician: the thing itself.

“Ow,” Sylvia had said. “You’re making me cold.” Her stomach muscles pulled tight and she curved away from him.

James eased closer just the same. He dropped the sheet back over their bodies, let the air between them find a median warmth so they would sleep.

Now on the bridge, James hears the final bars of Bartók’s first movement. They bring to a close the slow fugue that will agitate and echo throughout the piece. The celesta rings: a phantom chime. James rehearses until daybreak, his violin silent and ready in its case. His boots make no noise on the pavement walking home. The new light is too thin to cast shadows.

“Come back to bed,” says Sylvia when he comes in. She is still curled in blankets.

James drops his clothes to the floor, slides between the sheets, and wonders what she will do. Her warm body opens to cloak his cold one. He touches her mouth and thinks of the tender tone of the woodwinds she plays. Uncommon brass and wood single reeds requiring a supple, focused embouchure: saxonette, tubax, soprillo.

It happens again and again. James wakes in the darkness and walks to the river. He places his violin case at the foot of the railing and rehearses the Bartók. He looks down at the water and thinks of jumping in, of plunging below. Second movement: allegro.

James imagines the antiphonal string choirs, syncopic piano, adamant percussion. He reviews the measures in his mind, note by note. The composition is brisk and knotty, and James hears each misstep from practice, errors made on real strings the afternoon before. Off tones jangle along his temporal bone, fire between nerve cells and down through his neck and chest to collect in the lowest curve of his stomach.

The conductor had reminded the players at an early meeting: As a child, Béla Bartók could distinguish dance rhythms before he could speak. He was composing at nine.

James lurches onward through the notes on the remembered page, pushing himself to be accurate, quicker. Black water lifts and falls in minor, breathy peaks

fifty feet below. He imagines breaking through its polished surface and succumbing to the current. Surface water is slowed by wind; deep water is tempered by the resistance of the riverbed. Between the two, James knows, is where currents run fastest: a few feet below the waterline.

James pictures Sylvia, asleep in the dark, early this morning, before he left. Her body was motionless, but the fugitive energy of Bartók's second movement hovered along her bare legs, her arms, the contour of her cheek. James had lain still, waited to sense the sharp energy of her body beside him. It seeped from her like smoke, and he'd steeped in it, let it drift around him. If he could, he would wring it from her, filch small quantities and conceal them within his own cheek and legs and bones and arms. Her eyes had moved rapidly behind her eyelids: the brisk pursuit of notion after notion.

Maybe she dreamed of a performance in Budapest, with folding chairs, her black-stockings legs crossed neatly at the ankles, lips poised on the mouthpiece of her clarinet. Maybe she dreamed of dill soup in Prague with pork roast and dumplings.

Thinking gets James nowhere. Tomorrow he will only wake again and stand on the bridge and confront Bartók, and think of jumping in. Industrial buildings will squat low and dark to the east. High-rises to the west will surge upward, their windows sporadically lit.

Third movement: adagio. Sylvia materializes beside him one morning, an apparition under the bridge's hazy lights and against the dark stage set of sky and

water. James is alert to the kindness of her appearance; alert, too, to the suspended quiet, the disturbed third movement.

“I thought I would come meet your muse,” she says, looking out over the river.

He looks too, downward to the water below. The surface is still and taut and he imagines shattering it like glass, submitting to the bullish northward current below. The river is one of just three in the country that don’t flow south. “To many Americans,” James had once read, “north is the wrong way for a river to flow, which leads to geographic confusion.”

“What do you think about when you come here?” Sylvia asks.

“The Bartók piece,” says James. He looks up at her, and at her dark hair, still as the river.

“You shouldn’t worry,” she says.

“I don’t worry,” says James. “I practice.”

Sylvia says nothing. She looks down at the violin case, then outward to the next bridge upriver, and the one after that. She doesn’t mention the upcoming performance, likely his last opportunity for a Boston Symphony audition. Nothing of his failure this same time last year, of the unsound G that had ruined his chance, if not for a lifetime, then for the span of four seasons.

A thin wind sparks up, lifts the ends of Sylvia’s hair. James asks her: “What if you take the job and do the tour?”

She looks ahead at the broad curve of the farthest bridge, arced like a new sun. “Remember when we used to walk to the nature reserve at dusk?” she asks him.

He remembers the broad pond at Oaks Bottom, egrets and wood ducks gliding between water grasses and tangled ferns. The cityscape brusque above the dark tops of willows, colors brushed across the sky and reflected on the pond: the image broke and scatted with the rise of the waterbirds, re-formed in their absence.

He remembers Sylvia's fine fingers interlaced with his, her silent footsteps on bent grass.

"My lungs would expand," says Sylvia, "like there was more air to breathe."

James recalls the dark gum of vegetation that clung in the pond's shadier, more sluggish nooks. He tries not to, but remembers an article he'd recently read: five feet found in inlets along the Canadian coast, detached and floating in shoes. Only two matched up. A coroner had said it was not as peculiar as it might sound; a decomposing ankle comes apart easily, and a foot wearing a buoyant shoe can float a thousand miles.

"And the osprey nest," says Sylvia.

He remembers: roughly built from large, knobbed twigs and driftwood slats, perched high on a platform braced and secured to a six-by-six post. Bicycles had whisked past it on the paved trail far below. The female osprey had tipped its head and tended to a long, grey strand of moss. Cyclists whirred and ticked as they passed, aero-sleek in dart-vented helmets and Lycra gear.

"What happens to us if you go?" James asks.

Sylvia laughs. The wind increases, lifts and drops her hair. "Remember that one really cold day when we took off our shoes and waded into the pond? The water

was freezing.” She turns to look at James. “Why did we do that?” she asks him.

“What in the world were we doing?”

James recalls sinking into the cold mud and ooze as the sun set. He had considered the dark, close cosmos at their ankles: black crappie, insects, zooplankton. He told Sylvia as their feet slid deeper into the sediment and grew numb: “Did you know people can’t drown in quicksand like they do in the movies? A French doctor actually made quicksand in his lab to try it out.”

Sylvia slipped a little and grabbed James’ arm. He took hold of her wrist.

“Apparently if you flounder around enough, you can sink so far that you can’t be pulled out,” he said. “But you won’t go in much past your waist, and you can wiggle out by yourself. If you move your just feet a little, water seeps in at the edges, and you can extract your body a fraction of an inch at a time.”

“You *could* drown, though,” Sylvia had said as she lifted one foot and staggered backward toward the bank. “If you went in head first.”

“It’s getting cold,” she says now, and lets her hands drop from the bridge railing. The river has turned choppy and small swells jerk in every direction. “Do you want to come home to bed?” she asks James. She reaches to push at a strand of his hair, which has begun to part and flap in the mounting wind.

She hasn’t answered James’s question, hasn’t said what he’d hoped to hear: “You’ll be gone, too. You’ll be in Boston.”

He imagines what will be left for him should he fail the audition: afternoons seated on a tall stool, correcting the drooping elbows and cockeyed wrists of apathetic students. Notes bent and carried off by wind or showers at wooded and

lakeside weddings. Shakespeare in the Park. Quartet performances at teas and auctions. Guest appearances with the Portland Pops: Gershwin, “Sleigh Ride,” “My Funny Valentine.”

James steps back from the touch of her hand on his forehead. “You go on,” he says. “I need to practice.”

He doesn’t watch her go. Instead he leans out and considers tumbling over the railing. Of breaking the river’s surface and plunging below to where the surge is strongest. His body would churn warm against the cold undercurrent, his limbs and hair would splay and flail in slow motion. And his lungs would empty, would expel bright white jets of oxygen from his nostrils and mouth.

He straightens and rubs his palms together. A fine, cold rain has begun to fall. It riddles the rough swells, and pierces them with countless tiny holes. Raindrops pelt the violin case and ricochet off it. The bridge railing is slick now and pinging with raindrops, so James balls cold fists into his coat pockets. But the outer fingers of his left hand have gone numb. He imagines depressing gut strings with the deadened fingers, rocking an unfeeling wrist, easing into vibrato. He thinks of Bela Bartók’s right shoulder, which began to stiffen in 1940. Two years later, the fevers set in.

James begins to shiver. He thinks of *Music for Strings* and reviews the possibilities: Sylvia will leave him, or she will not.

He hunkers into his coat and thinks again of the notes of the third movement. It is the most accomplished of Bartók’s “night music” pieces: dissonant and lonely. Notes like crickets on xylophone, timpani glissandi, fragments, ghostly

murmurs. And the alarm of the violin. James hears the notes sounding and lamenting, and in the rain, they are flawless. No missed notes from yesterday's practice. No thin, railing Gs, no stilted timing. Only pure dismay singing out, a reverberating dread.

Then rapid footfalls. A woman runs past James on the bridge, hair streaming with rain, a coat pulled close. The noise of her heels on the wet concrete annoys him. The skip in the rhythm when she stumbles and regains her footing. But then, he is angry already, with the eerie Bartók and his own measured distance from Sylvia. With the obligation of sound action, the possibility of an unsound G.

Allegro molto. Fourth movement.

James stands at the railing and looks out over the river. Mostly, it is slick and quiet, though broad rough patches interrupt the stiller water at intervals, like islands, their boundaries static. James wonders what keeps their shapes steady, what holds them in place. He pictures Sylvia at home in the dark, sleeping motionless, sheets pulled high, her mind leaping from dream to dream. She has accepted the invitation; she leaves for Europe in a month.

In the end, she had flipped a coin: heads she'd go, tails she'd stay. The penny fell bottom-side up, and the instant she saw it she knew she would go.

"But tails means you stay," said James. The penny rotated a second longer on its edge then settled, Lincoln Memorial facing up.

"Even so," said Sylvia.

James leans farther out over the river; the water appears to bow skyward, to arch nearer to the bridge. James considers removing his boots and wriggling his bare toes, considers jumping shoeless to shatter the river's slick surface. He wonders about the fall: whether he would strike feet first or tumble head over heels, curled like a child. Likely, the final point of contact would come down to fate or chance or a breeze.

James thinks of the final movement of the Bartók piece: a furious dance of abandon. Of Bartók's body, which had failed him in the end while his music excelled. He composed *Concerto for Orchestra* in his last year, and a graceful piece for piano. His final composition, though, went unfinished: *Viola Concerto*, rough notes left for his pupil to complete.

James thinks of Sylvia and the decisive set of her jaw as the coin had dropped and settled. He thinks of the brisk energy that drives and agitates just beneath her skin, and of the things she didn't say, standing beside him on the bridge.

He looks out over the river and thinks of Bartók's words: "I cannot conceive of music that expresses absolutely nothing." And he recognizes all that will remain in Sylvia's absence: the river treading steady from the confluence of the two Fork Rivers to the mouth of the Columbia, parting mountains, sustaining the valley basin. The truss and lift bridge, hazily lit, perpetually connecting the west bank to the east. And the slackwater preserve, where Sylvia once took heady breaths and opened her arms as wide as the nest looming clumsy overhead. The Bartók, too, will remain, and James' violin, as familiar as his own heart and arm.

James turns and leans his head far back to look up at the bridge's parallel towers. At the highest points, the lift sheaves are poised to lower 880,000-pound weights. The grooved wheels will guide the twin counterweights downward along cables, raising the center span so that barges and ships can pass beneath it. James imagines standing on the raised span, some one-hundred twenty feet above the water, the ends of the sidewalks and decks dropping off to nowhere.

He looks down again at the water, black and just fifty feet beneath the soles of his boots. He thinks back, remembers his feet and Sylvia's in the soft sediment of the Oaks Bottom pond. Bare feet sunk into fine sludge, water seeping through at the edges and between their toes. Every movement drew them deeper into the slick and shifting mud, until they were submerged to their ankles, their bodies tilted and off-center, so that, in the end, only by leaning rib to rib, arms around one another's shoulders, could they keep upright. He cannot remember, just as she couldn't, why they had done it: pulled off their shoes and stepped into the pond, a hard fall wind whipping their hair around their faces. But he remembers how it felt: winter-cold and defiant. Truer than life, like Hemingway's notion of a great book.

There is no breeze now to chafe at the river's surface, no wind on the bridge. James reaches down to the foot of the railing, unlatches the clasp, and opens the black case. He lifts out the violin and bow, fits the back side of the violin's lower bout into the pocket above his clavicle. He supports the neck with his thumb and first finger. He rests his right thumb beneath the bow's frog, curves the other fingers to hold the stick. He lowers the bow arm until it dangles alongside his body, gently shakes it until the bow and arm hang heavy and loose from the shoulder. Then he

raises the bow to the violin and inhales without thinking. His lungs fill with the still morning air, and the dark sky and river broaden before him. And James plays the Bartók piece, rehearses it on real strings. He feels the measured pressure of horsehair on gut, turns a great noise loose on the silence: a dance of furious abandon. He holds the violin parallel to the river and bends into the finale: tympanic warning, incensed chords strummed in violins, violas, cellos. He can hear the hammered piano and xylophone scales askew, the majestic sum of the earlier fugue. Then a perfect high G, shameless above the water, a voice found and released. And at the coda: a fleeting pause, a moment suspended, then seven last notes careen, just and bold, to a clean and inevitable quiet.

Pink

Paul's dad kept flamingos—a herd of them in a split-log corral. “One hundred-thirty-two taffy-pink plastic yard birds with black beaks and glossy, hand-painted eyes,” is what Big Earl said to anyone who would listen. “My sons gave them to me—four for each Christmas and anniversary since I married my Minnie.” There was a pale-eyed goat named Mickey, as well, to solve the ongoing problem of mowing around and between a growing gaggle of wire legs.

The flamingos stood on antenna-thin legs, some with lifted heads, others dipping toward the grass. They were genuine Don Featherstones—the real thing, which was the reason Paul and Alice were driving north for the weekend: after forty-nine years and twenty millions birds, Union Products had produced its final flamingo and closed its doors.

Paul's brother Jack had called to tell them: a visit to the islands was in order. There would be a wake of sorts, a party, in honor of the flamingos. And the next day, a ceremonial ride.

Alice rode barefoot beside Paul with her heels on the dash and her toes pressed to the glass. “How does Katya like your new bike?” she asked. They were an

hour into the drive, and these were the first words either had spoken since they crossed the bridge into Washington.

He frowned at the fog outlining Alice's toes on the glass and the smeared prints around them. "She likes it," he said.

"Terrific," said Alice. She *knew* the girl had seen it. Katya was the new girl in his office.

"She said she'd like to ride sometime," he said.

"Terrific," said Alice. She shifted her feet on the glass.

"Apparently, she's got a really nice Serotta," he said. He scowled at Alice's feet.

Terrific, thought Alice. Her own bike was an old, steel-framed Wayzata. Last week, when Paul bought himself the four-thousand-dollar Merckx, he somehow must have forgotten that they had agreed the next upgrade would be hers. Now her bike weighed as much as his old and new ones together.

"She races Monday nights at the track," said Paul.

Terrific. Alice knew a lot about Katya, because Katya had become her husband's favorite new topic.

Katya grew up racing sailboats in Bermuda and studied in Germany and Spain, he told her a couple of weeks ago. Last Tuesday he reported: *Katya knows how to make confit de canard*. And yesterday: *Katya can tango*. *She can do this slinky thing, a low-back boloyo, or boleio, I think she called it*.

Alice imagined Katya prancing around the office in silver stilettos.

Katya can ace a tail-grab back roll on a kite board.

Alice imagined lowering her bare feet to the car floor, opening the sunroof, and unlatching the locks that secured Paul's bike to the rack.

Paul fell silent again and focused on the road.

Usually, Alice liked to watch him drive. She liked the way he raised his chin and narrowed his eyes, the way he lengthened his upper lip as if he were about to speak French. Usually when he drove, she would reach to sift her fingers through the back of his hair; she couldn't help herself. Today, though, he looked a long way off.

Paul and Alice managed to catch the noon ferry at Anacortes, one of the few that wouldn't stop at Lopez or Shaw on its way to Orcas. They parked the car on the lower deck and climbed the stairs. The sky was overcast, and a sharp wind lifted and chopped at the waters of the sound. Paul went inside to the cabin where it was warm, but Alice stood out on the bow and pulled her coat collar up around her ears. Her nose ran and her eyes streamed, and she shifted and re-shifted her stance to keep balanced against the lurching gusts and waves. She wanted the cold and salt spray, and the opaque swells and islands knobbing up in rough shapes.

When Paul and Alice turned onto the gravel drive, Jack and Mickey were out front of the B&B, playing soccer with an oversized red plastic ball. The pink herd was just visible behind the corral rails behind them.

Both the flock and the house were set back a good hundred yards from the road, far enough that cars and cyclists rounding the corner had to slow down to

make sense of it: the fenced huddle of flaming pink, and the B&B. The house was a Victorian Painted Lady, grand and extravagant, with pink doors, turquoise turrets, and a canary-yellow wraparound porch.

Jack dribbled the ball a few yards across the grass. The goat feinted left, then right, then found an opening and whacked the ball skyward with the thrust of a pointed hoof. He waited then, while Jack jogged off to fetch it.

Jack saw the car. He shouted, “Hey!” and anchored the ball with one foot.

Mickey head-butted it, ignoring the greetings and the slam of car doors. He hit it twice, then three times. “Watch this,” Jack said. He lifted his foot before the fourth assault, and Mickey lunged full force; the ball shot off along the side of the house, and Mickey tripped after it, stumbling with the momentum.

“I can’t believe you’re still playing soccer with that cloven-footed beast,” said Paul. The brothers exchanged back-slaps and one-armed hugs.

“It’s all about dodging the hooves,” Jack said. “Check it out.” He raised a pant leg to show twin dents surrounded by swollen, purpling flesh.

Alice knew Jack’s shin, along with every hair and muscle of his calf. In fact, in a line-up, she could identify the lower legs of all of Paul’s brothers, and those of her of her sisters-in-law as well. Because Big Earl, in addition to flamingos, kept bikes—an ever-evolving collection of road bikes and mountain bikes he picked up, fixed and sometimes resold on eBay. Marrying into Paul’s family meant logging hundreds of miles each year on the roads and trails of the San Juans, taking in the views: of the grassy balds and Garry oak and Lodgepole pine, the ins and outs of Puget Sound. And the familiar spinning legs of every member of Big Earl’s family.

Jack hugged Alice tightly and rocked her back on her heels.

“Hey, there!” said Paul. “Get your own girl for that.”

He was joking. But in fact, Alice felt an illicit chill. Jack was her favorite of Paul’s brothers and had been since her first visit to meet the family. Six years ago, Paul turned into the driveway, and there it was: the crayon-colored house, flamingos, a pasture glittered with rain. And Jack, looking like a boy, with his floppy hair and Converse Chucks. They were untied, and his ankles were bare: no socks. Alice heard a sound, like a flipped switch.

Minnie was waiting inside the screen door. She stood on her toes to hug and pat them when they came in. She was Big Earl’s third and favorite wife.

Years ago, during Alice’s first dinner at the B&B, Earl had asked her: “Ain’t Minnie the hottest little thing on wheels?”

Alice looked at Minnie, who was a squat five feet with ringlets dyed a dim, lusterless blonde. She had a round, dimpled face, dimpled arms, and “Big Earl!” captured in a tattooed heart on one dimpled ankle. “She is,” said Alice.

“Go on and take your bag upstairs,” Minnie told Paul. “Big Earl is out back in the shop, and Luke and Lori have already tucked into Spain. You know how they always come early to nab Spain before Mark and Renee can.”

The B&B’s four guestrooms were named for what Minnie had deemed the “Gems of Europe”: London, Venezia, Paris, and Spain. Yes, Spain—the entire country. The house in its entirety, she called La Gemme. Earl and Minnie lived in The Crown Jewel—a private suite on the first floor.

Somehow, Venezia had become Paul and Alice's uncontested domain since their wedding trip to Italy. The room had a balcony with ornate wrought iron chairs overlooking the flock and a faux-stone, faux-Tuscan lions-head fountain on the wall. There was a red-ribboned, dust-dulled straw hat above the bed, a large, glow-in-dark gondola on the bureau, and a plastic "Murano-glass" chandelier overhead. It was the least tawdry room of the four.

Jack, long divorced, got whichever room was left over after the three married couples had staked their claim.

At dinner, the family plowed through nine extra-large servings of corned beef hash with poached eggs on top, a platter of beet salad with currants and red onions, and nine ramekins of warm chocolate pudding.

"Carb loading for the big ride tomorrow," Minnie had said, piling potatoes and beets onto plates.

Now Luke and Lori were in the kitchen on cleanup, and Mark shook the lid off of the Pictionary Box. He laid out pencils and scratch pads for the big game, while Earl set up to make martinis with a cranberry splash.

Paul was in the coat room, talking on his cell. To Katya, Alice was certain. It was not uncommon for her to call him at night or on a weekend to discuss an upcoming presentation. It was not uncommon for Paul to shut himself in a room for hours with the phone.

Normally Alice would team up for Pictionary with Lori and Earl or Minnie; she steered clear of playing with Jack. But this evening she recruited him, along with Mark's wife, Renee.

Mark objected. "The two best players can't be on the same team!" he said.

Lori yelled from the kitchen, over the sound of dishes clanking and sloshing in suds: "Who says *they're* the best?"

Minnie stepped up onto the coffee table to get a word in. She raised her already high-pitched voice: "Let Alice be!" She pointed. "You three are a team, and you three. And Mark and Paul are stuck with me."

Big Earl handed out pink martinis with flamingo stir sticks. Paul came in as the glasses were raised. He looked for Alice, who took a seat between Renee and Jack and didn't look back.

"To the flamingos!" said Earl. He looked at his family and took a breath that puffed his chest out beyond his well-filled stomach.

"Hear hear!" They clinked glasses and drank and the gaming began.

Renee drew first. She sketched an oval with a smiley face on the narrow end and a halo above it, and Jack and Alice yelled together: "A good egg!"

Minnie pushed a card face down across the table to Mark, turned over the timer, and gave him the nod. "Draw, hotshot," she said.

He drew a rectangle with circles inside and lines like sunrays coming out. Beside it, he made a stick figure with multiple legs angling in all directions.

Minnie called out guesses: "Spider! Spider box! Box legs!"

Paul said, “What the hell?” Minnie smacked him on the hand and snapped at the two brothers: “*You* watch your mouth, and *you* draw better!”

Renee whispered loudly, “Oh, *I* know what it is,” and shouted as the final sand grains slipped through the timer’s narrow neck: “Radioactive!”

The first round of martinis went down quickly, and soon one person after another wandered into the kitchen for beer. When Alice got up, Paul followed her.

In the kitchen, they were alone; he reached an arm around her and pulled her close. He kissed the back of her head. “Hi,” he said. “Are you mad at me?”

She patted his arm and wriggled away. “Mad? About what?” She got two IPAs from the fridge.

Paul took one from her and popped the tops off of both with a bottle opener shaped like a Dutch clog. He threw out the caps. “I don’t know. The phone call?”

Alice took a swallow of her beer and looked at the label. “Business, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, I...”

She looked up at him. “Katya?”

“Yeah, but she...”

Minnie yelled from the dining room: “It’s your turn, Alice!”

The thing that most annoyed Alice was that Paul didn’t even know he had a crush on the girl. If he did, he would hide it. “It’s fine,” she said. “It’s work.” She turned to leave, but Paul took her arm and held it.

“She had to give me the latest on a possible new client,” he explained. “We’re doing a presentation in Longview first thing Monday morning.”

Alice felt a quick flush run up the length of her neck. She pictured it: Paul and Katya, thighs a foot apart in the company Lincoln. An hour north, an hour back, the two talking the whole way, no doubt, about the wonders of Katya. "I see," she said. "Terrific."

He turned loose of her. She went back to the refrigerator for a third beer, and took it with the clog opener back to Jack.

Alice's team and Earl's were neck and neck one space from the finish. Minnie's team marker still sat on the square just past Start.

Alice pulled an All Play card from the deck; all three teams would draw and all would guess. If Alice's or Earl's team said the word or phrase correctly, they would win. Minnie's team, as far behind as they were, was really no threat.

The players sat up straight and shifted in their chairs. Minnie shushed everyone and turned the timer. Alice and Earl and Paul put pencils to paper.

The teams whispered their guesses, to keep the others from stealing close answers. They curved their forearms to hide their sketches. Jack called it out in seconds: "Kangaroo!"

Mark moaned and clasped his hair in his fists. Minnie whooped. "Let's see, let's see!" she commanded, and the artists pushed their drawings to the center.

Earl's paper showed the intricate beginnings of a disembodied kangaroo face, with delicate nostrils and glamorous lashes; but it lacked ears and everything below the neck that might distinguish it from a horse. Paul's sketch was spare and unmistakable, a perfect line drawing a kangaroo in motion: ear and tail laid back,

spine curved like a rat's, muscled hind legs and feet extending forward, mid-leap. Its thin forelegs curved inward near its chest.

Alice's kangaroo was like a child's drawing. The animal's head, body, nose and ears were round and appeared to have been stacked together, like the separate parts of a snowman. There was no visible tail, and the feet were nearly as round as the ears. In fact, only a smile-shaped line drawn across its abdomen suggested that the creature might be something other than a bear. Or more aptly, a teddy bear.

Mark whistled. "I don't know," he said. "Looks like cheating to me.

"Or telepathy," said Earl.

Renee called for another round of martinis. Jack and Alice winked and high-fived. Paul leaned back in his chair, tipping it onto two legs.

At midnight, all but Minnie dragged themselves up from their chairs to don jackets and boots. The night was cold, but it was part of the plan: they followed Earl outside and down the steps.

The moon lit the edges of thick clouds, which were huge and dull grey and sliding west. They passed one another at varying speeds like freight ships. Wedges of bright black sky emerged between them, then narrowed and disappeared.

Mickey was unhappy at being disturbed. He staggered from his lean-to in the back corner of the corral and screamed loud and long, like a man falling from a bridge. The flamingos were strange as well, still as statues under the moon, their pink dimmed, their eyes glossier than in daylight.

Alice pulled her shoulders in close against the cold and moved through the corral with the others. Earl led the way, and no one spoke. Somberly, the eight of them pulled pink plastic bodies and wire feet out of the wet earth. Avoiding one another's glances and paths, they laid the birds in the mud on their bare sides, one by one. When at last every flamingo had been quietly put to rest, Big Earl spoke: "To lost comrades and fallen traditions."

The eight of them scanned the muddy pink beasts, laid out flat and at random, like war casualties, their rigid legs splayed and pointing outward in many directions. Alice looked up to find that Paul was looking at her, and Jack too. Earl cleared his throat and continued: "And to those to come."

The clouds shifted, grew light, and darkened again.

Mickey turned his back on them then, and hobbled toward his shelter. Alice and the others tramped back to the house, silent, but for the smack of boots in wet grass and mud, and the slam of the gate.

In bed, Alice turned away from Paul. The glow-in-the-dark gondola shone vaguely across the room, and Alice thought of their honeymoon to the city of islands. It had seemed unreal, like a kind of Disneyland. There were gondoliers costumed in stripes and straw hats and tourists queued at their docks. Countless shops sold cheap, imported glass at artisan prices. But Alice and Paul were deliberately sappy and untroubled, holding hands and winding along concrete side-paths and over small bridges. They sampled prosciutto in each district and drank fifty-euro Brunero. They saw the secret cupboards at the Doge's Palace, and Casanova's cell.

At the Museo d'Arte Erotica, they admired the bike seat installation. And later, in their room, they acted out the painting of the man with the hat and the girl with the wide-wide-spread legs.

Now Alice hitched up her pajama top and scooted to fit her body to Paul's. She pressed her bare back to his chest, and felt his penis, warm and familiar, against the backs of her thighs. Half-asleep, he moved close and burrowed his face into her hair. He reached around her to cup a breast, and breathed into sleep. Even when the distance between them seemed greatest, it was like fuel: the nightly exchange of heat, skin pressed to skin.

Sunday morning, Alice woke in Venezia to the smell of coffee and the bare edge of daylight eking through the blind. Paul snored softly. She slipped out of bed, pulled on thermals, and crept downstairs.

Jack sat already at the kitchen table, drinking coffee and reading the paper. He looked up and grinned in a way that made her grin back.

The air at the center of the kitchen was dry and warm and bristling with electricity. Slips of cold air still lingered at the walls; they stirred and blended with the warm patches as Alice crossed the linoleum. Her wool socks crackled with static. She poured a cup of coffee and half-whispered: "Are we the first ones up?"

Jack pushed the newspaper sections into a tighter pile to make room for Alice at the table. He patted the top of the chair at right angles to his and pushed it out for her. "Dad's out already, in the shop with the bikes." His voice was low to match hers.

Alice pushed her hair out of her eyes, sighed and pressed her cup to her cheek. “Ah, Big Earl,” she said. “What would he do if he’d had sons that didn’t like cycling.”

“Traded us in, no doubt,” said Jack. “Or run off.” He drank his coffee and looked at her sideways. “Speaking of cycling,” he said, “I noticed yesterday that Paul brought his own bike. A new one.”

Alice smiled. “A little gift to himself,” she said.

“I thought you were next in line for an upgrade,” said Jack. “What happened?”

“Yes, what did happen?” She shrugged.

Jack raised an eyebrow, then made his face unreadable.

Alice pressed the rim of her cup against her chin and looked at the lines of Jack’s nose and jaw. His lips were thin, but nicely curved. A long wave of hair broke across his forehead and over his left eye, and Alice felt the urge to scoot her chair closer to his.

Jack smoothed the editorial page on the table in front of him and looked from his hand to hers, as if sizing up his square fingers against her small, narrow ones. “How does Paul like the new project at work?” he asked, then slid back his chair and got up with his cup.

“He complains about it, about how disorganized everyone is, but he seems pretty happy,” said Alice. “I think he likes the idea of coming into a messy situation and taking things ‘in hand.’”

“I could see that,” said Jack. He brought the coffeepot back to the table with him and topped off Alice’s cup.

Steam circled the rim. Alice blew ripples across the coffee’s surface and tried a sip. “I know he is enjoying his little sales buddy,” she told Jack. “Katya.” She snapped the K and the T when she said it.

“Katya!” Jack repeated; he snapped the K and the T as well, and Alice leaned closer.

“Or Kat, if you prefer,” she whispered. “Twenty-seven and strawberry blonde, with legs that go all the way up.”

Jack looked at Alice’s eyes, and at her mouth. His face was still nearly a foot from Alice’s, but she could feel the static in the space between them compress and crackle, like the space between freshly dried sheets. If their lips touched, Alice thought, a spark would send them reeling.

“Good morning!” Paul’s deep voice broke the quiet from the doorway, and Alice’s coffee sloshed from side to side in its cup. And before it could go still again, alarm clocks sounded off softly from upstairs in London and Spain.

Within five minutes, everyone had emerged muzzy-eyed from his or her respective European hot spot, and shuffled en masse into the kitchen. More coffee was put on to brew, cups were passed, elbows were jostled, and the day was in motion.

Paul made his way through the others to the table, where he cupped Alice’s chin and tipped her head back for a firm, two-beat kiss. “How’s the sexiest cyclist in

the San Juans this morning?” he asked. “Want to go talk somewhere for a few minutes before breakfast?”

Alice smiled at him, then went back to her coffee as if the question wasn't in earnest and didn't call for an answer. She knew he wanted to smooth things over, but she couldn't think of a thing he might say that she was in the mood to hear. Jack had given his chair up to Renee and was standing and chatting with Mark.

Minnie came in fully dressed and shooed everyone into corners. She cleared the counters and broke out the various elements of breakfast: chile-cheese eggs and papaya, cornbread and jam.

Big Earl clomped in through the back door, trailed by the cold bite of the morning. “Mount Constitution awaits,” he boomed. “And it's beautiful day for a ride!” Minnie ordered him to the mudroom to take off his boots, but he brushed past her to pull down a bottle. “Coffee *corretada*—like the Venetians drink!” He smelled of damp pasture and bike chain oil, and his voice thundered above the others. “Corrected with whiskey!” he said, and moved around the room, topping off cups.

Earl's bike workshop was big as a barn. It loomed half a football field behind the house and was fitted out with a gas furnace, hanging shop lights, tools and worktables, and racks enough for forty bikes of varying ages, origins, and states of repair. There were wall racks and ceiling racks and parking stands. Handle bars, forks, tubes and tires dangled from the rafters. There were shoe boxes, cigar boxes and empty pickle jars filled with headlights, tail lights and handlebar tape of every color. There were sizers and shims and headsets and cranks, and wire racks full of

jerseys and helmets and shoes. Willing guests at La Gemme could nearly always be fitted with a bike and gear for a ride that suited their level of skill and fancy. There were lightweight racing bikes, beater mountain bikes, and a couple of classic German fixies. And two tandems: a one-size-fits-most beach cruiser with fat seats and upturned handlebars, and an extra-large/extra-small aluminum road bike for Big Earl and Minnie. From the front when they ride, Earl appeared to be on a single, until they come upon something Minnie really wanted to see; then she would stand on her pedals and pop out from behind one of Earl's shoulders or the other, quick and wide-eyed as a baby monkey.

The family clomped into the shop in their bike shoes and gear, full-bellied and whiskey-warmed. They fumbled in their jersey pockets to check for food, lip balm, handkerchiefs—whatever they might need for a three-hour ride and a 2400-foot climb. They marched to the bikes Earl had created for each of them over the years, from solid bargain frames with upgraded parts and custom saddles.

Paul, of course, had brought his own bike for this trip, the new Eddy Merckx SXM. It was a pristine white with black trim and Campagnolo wheels; even the saddle and tape were white. It had been a surprise purchase—to Alice anyway, and it made her a little queasy to look at it.

She turned her back to it and headed for the red, steel-framed Trek she usually rode, but the seat tube was empty, the seat post and saddle gone.

Big Earl walked up behind her then and placed a firm hand on her shoulder. “Young lady, I want you to test something out for me,” he said. “If you wouldn't mind.” He led her to the back of the shop. “It's my newest find, quite a beauty and

just about new. I picked it up on eBay for a friend of Minnie's, but I don't feel right handing it over until it's been on a test ride."

The bike was propped against the shop wall by one handlebar and the saddle: a DeRosa, all carbon and cotton-candy pink, and possibly the prettiest bike Alice had seen.

"Are you sure she'd want someone taking it up Mount Constitution?" Alice asked. "That's a pretty substantial test ride." She almost hoped he would change his mind and agree with her. That he would move her seat back to the LeMond and send them all on their way. To ride the pink bike, Alice thought, would be like trying on a silk strapless when she knew she would be going home in Carhartts coveralls. She might never be willing to push her steel rig up a mountain again.

"She won't mind a bit. I guarantee it," Earl assured her. "Besides," he said, and clapped her on the back. "We need some pink out there today—for the flamingos!"

Minnie came into the workshop carrying a crate full of freshly filled water bottles for the road. "Isn't that a beauty!" she said to Alice, who was lifting the pink bike, trying its weight.

The others wandered over then to admire the De Rosa and its Campy Gruppo. Only Paul did not come over; he was spinning his front wheel and checking the tension on his brakes.

Jack whistled. "Sexy fork," he said. "And winner's pink—the same color as the Giro leader's jersey. It suits you."

Minnie waved from the porch. Big Earl was off the front, followed by his four sons. The women were close behind them pedaling fast across the gravel, letting their bikes find the surest path. Alice hung back and clipped into her pedals last, testing the weight and give of the light DeRosa frame, the twitch of the tires on loose pebbles.

By the time she hit pavement, Alice could almost understand how Paul could forget his promise to upgrade her LeMond and buy a ride like this for himself; the wheels seemed to skim the road, and the mere thought of making a turn took her effortlessly through a corner.

The bike hinted at speed for the taking, but Alice couldn't bear the idea of spinning past the other two wives or inching up on the men.

"Spin, spin, spin," is what Paul would say if she reached him. So she slipped further back and apart from them all. She hummed Patsy Cline and Lady Day, and fell into the whirl of the pedals, the narrow tires on passing road.

When they turned onto the main road to the state park, Paul and his brothers formed a pace line far ahead of her. They crowded close on one another's wheels, drafting to conserve energy, and taking turns at the front—like geese flying in a vee. Although there were differences, Alice knew. For one thing, birds drafted for better lifting force, while cyclists lined up to reduce drag. And with geese, drafting was a system for the greater good: each bird did time in the front in exchange for down time later. Whereas with bikes, one cyclist could suck on another's wheel just to salt away strength for a break-away push to the finish.

A quarter mile up the mountain, Renee slowed down and craned her heads behind her to check on Alice. “You good?” she shouted.

Alice put on a wide smile and raised a thumb.

An hour and a half later, she reached the peak. It had been her easiest climb ever; the DeRosa seemed to propel itself up the grade, it was so light.

The group cheered and waved as she rolled into the parking lot of tower. She had left some lag time between herself and the rest of them on the ride up, to properly appreciate the particular whisper of the DeRosa’s spokes against the island air, the buttery shift of the gears. She felt almost guilty, savoring the most intimate pleasures of another woman’s bike.

She rode past Earl and the brothers, who were sitting along the curb, looking out over the sound and beyond to Canada. They were still breathing hard from the ride, even as they sucked down water and took great bites of smashed PB&J sandwiches they’d retrieved from the back pockets of their jerseys.

Alice rolled to the far end of the lot and unclipped her shoes from the pedals. She lay the pink DeRosa carefully on its side, and sat by the sisters-in-law to eat. She fumbled at the wrapping on her sandwich, faint and disoriented from the climb.

In minutes, the brothers were pushing their empty wrappings deep into their pockets. They leapt up like little boys to walk the rock wall along the cliff edge. They shoved each other and flexed their bulky calves and asked the women which man was the sexiest. They peed behind boulders and whooped down at the dark water dividing the US from Canada, the islands from the mainland, each island from the others.

Jack climbed to the top of the highest boulder and looked up at the stone tower. Alice watched the muscles of his thighs shift as he adjusted his stance, the wave of hair that that fell into his eyes.

She closed her eyes and opened them, and closed them again. She thought of Katya's thighs a foot from Paul's. She pictured the girl wet and in a swimsuit, midflight in a tail-grab back roll. She imagined her, blonde curls falling forward, running long, pale fingers along the sleek carbon down tube of Paul's new Eddie.

The other two women stood to walk to the tower. Alice was tired and still shivering with hunger. Despite her best efforts, tears leaked from her eyes. She imagined leaving Paul. She imagined leaving Paul *and* Jack, and the rest of them, and sleeping in a quiet bed, alone. She remembered the first time they'd come here, the lot of them, to the top of this mountain, the highest peak on the islands. It was on that first trip—she had just met them—and her longest climb yet on two wheels. When they had reached the peak, Paul had taken her higher still, carrying her piggyback up the steps to the lookout tower. His bike clips had scraped and clicked on stone.

"I'm going to marry you," he had said at the top, and he'd kissed the place where a ring would be.

Then, before their sweat could cool, they had clomped back down to rejoin the others, clipped into their pedals, and screamed down the mountain en masse, trailing the dark smell of brake-hot rubber.

Paul sat down beside her then, and brushed her bangs back with his fingers, petting her. She pictured the fine wrinkles he was exposing on her forehead, the tight, the pale pinch that appeared around her mouth after a hard ride.

“Why are you crying?” Paul asked.

She rested her arms across her knees and her head on her arms. “I love the bike,” she said into her sleeves. But I don’t love you—she didn’t say it, because she knew it wasn’t true. But the words sank into her stomach, her knees, the bottoms of her feet.

“Oh, honey,” said Paul. He laughed a little, at the simple reason for her tears “That bike is yours. I bought it when I bought mine, and I had Big Earl build it out.” He answered the question she didn’t ask: “I didn’t tell you because I wanted to surprise you up here. And I wanted be sure you really liked it, that you didn’t feel like you just had to settle for whatever I’d bought.

Alice couldn’t raise her head. She thought about what all of this would mean: the DeRosa would be her own—the featherweight carbon and butter-smooth gears, the bright shimmer of pink. But it was more than that. This gift, this ostensibly generous act, somehow, and without Alice’s permission, justified his new AXM. It excused Katya and the evening calls, and the endless catalog of Katya’s precious talents. It meant that, against her will, she had been cornered, bullied, into gratitude and grace. Or possibly, it meant that he loved her, or it meant all of those things. Beneath the cross of her folded arms, she saw layers of colors out beyond the cliff: pink clouds, turquoise sky, the silver sound. Black island silhouettes.

She thought of what would come next. Minutes from now, the lot of them would mount their bikes, clip in, and dash down the mountain they had spent a long morning climbing. They would roll into the driveway, their tires crunching and spitting gravel. They would turn over their bikes to Big Earl and crowd into the kitchen for lasagna and cold beer. Then, still in their bike clothes, they would trek back out to bring the weekend full circle: There would be no more new birds, but before they left the island for their various homes, the flamingos in the corral would be plucked from the mud, one by one, and planted upright.

Ghost Trees

Typically, the body of a crab is sheltered by a hard, calcified armor. The Hermit Crab, however, lacks this protection on the soft and vulnerable rear segment of its body. To protect its abdomen, which contains such important organs as the liver and the gonads, it inserts its hindmost parts into a gastropod shell.

Near the end of the service, partway through a murmured prayer, a hermit crab emerges from the corner of Sylvia's dead grandmother's mouth. A needle-thin antenna appears first, a periscope turning and testing the air, which is stifling. A fat, closed pincer comes next, pushing out from between scarlet lips like a new bud.

Sylvia is the only one who can see this, seated as she is in a partly curtained corner at the front of the church, near the head of the open casket. Her Grandama's other mourners face the long, pearl-black side of the casket, and are sitting in low in dark pews.

Sylvia's mother sits in the first row. She concentrates on a fresh tissue, alternately folds and smoothes it. Mascara pools below her eyes, and a clump of her snarled hair sticks up in back like a feather. Crazy Aunt Ysa sits beside her, unnaturally small in many layers of black: crocheted shawl, velvet tunic, wool skirt. She is asleep, possibly; her eyes are closed, her hands folded.

Sylvia looks back to her grandmother, to the dark, glossed hair and the mask of calm painted across her face. The lips move: a second pincer now follows the first, then another antenna and a claw. Working together, spiny legs lever at the tight line of her grandmother's mouth until they create an opening just large enough for the creature's bulbous hind end to come through. It is uncovered. Shell-less.

Sylvia's dead grandmother is unmoved by this extrusion. A thing to know about her: even in life she was collected. Steady.

Sylvia's grandmother's heart had stopped in the night. She was ninety-one, and crazy Aunt Ysa found her the next morning. Gran-dama wore a sapphire blue dress and shoes caked with sand. Her body rested neatly in an embroidered chair near the fireplace, which was cold and littered with seashells.

Sylvia had been in Prague when her mother called with the news, playing second clarinet in a guest orchestra. From the tiny, foreign hotel room, and in the wake of Sylvia's travels to Amsterdam, Paris, and Turin, her mother's voice sounded especially distant. She spoke carefully: "Your Gran-dama Clara is dead." She said the name with quick, broad *a's* and a hard *r*, a proper Castilian pronunciation.

Sylvia closed her eyes when she heard it. A longing opened in her throat, an ache.

"Your Aunt Ysa wanted to handle things," said Sylvia's mother. "But of course, you'll have to do it."

Sylvia tried to picture her shadowy aunt negotiating funeral and floral arrangements and meetings with realtors; she could not. And her mother,

chronically muddled and edgy, could hardly manage herself. Besides, her mother was afraid of all three: Gran-dama, Ysa, and the dark cottage.

Sylvia imagined the tremendous task of readying the old cottage to sell. She began considering the several arrangements she would have to make right away, just to get back to the states. She wondered what difficulty her absence would cause for the orchestra.

Her mother interrupted her thoughts. "I suppose the cottage is mine now," she said, "but you should have it, of course."

Sylvia's breath caught. She looked at herself in the small mirror on the wall across the room. Into the phone she said only, "Oh." No other words came to her. In her mind, the longing for her grandmother now merged with a quiet longing for the dark cottage.

"Would you ever live in it, do you think?" asked her mother. "And what will happen to your tour while you are away?"

"The two clarinets from the row behind me will fall over one another to get my seat," she said, and she realized it was true. It would be like sand falling in on itself to fill a new hollow; her place would be filled as if she were never there.

It was the ocean that darkened Gran-dama's cottage in Neskowin, a misty Oregon town that, each year, drew a hundred inches of rain. Sylvia's grandmother had lived in the small, tough cottage for nearly seventy years. Sylvia's grandfather had died before she was born, so for her, it was just Gran-dama's house: painted the same thick grey as the sky, with cracked, ochre trim. It was stark and dull and had a

slight southerly list from years of wind. Small windows were glazed and hazy from salt-air and blowing sand, and a narrow path of broken shells snaked from the graveled street to the front door. Out back was the ocean, churlish, endlessly roused and beating against giant sea stacks and dark, exposed stumps. It was the last house on the strand, remote and isolated, and had always been as beguiling to Sylvia as it was worrisome.

As a child, she had gone to stay at the cottage as often as her mother would let her, through gloomy summers and chilly school holidays. She had slept in the twin bed in the tiny room that had been her mother's, although she never could picture her mother there as a girl. Sylvia's grandmother told her that her mother had always hated the storms and the salt spray that coated everything, the sand in her hair.

Indeed, her mother moved away when she was just seventeen. She went to the city and married a railway lineman, Sylvia's father, who had died before Sylvia was two. Her mother took a job then as a desk clerk, and rented an apartment with a pool for the two of them. On summer weekends, the few when Sylvia was not at the cottage with Gran-dama, she practiced clarinet in the apartment, which looked out over the pool. She labored for hours on her embouchure, working to produce a steadier, more velvety tone. While below, her mother lay in the sun in an orange two-piece with the hint of a skirt, soaking up the heat she'd missed all those years without knowing it. She swam even laps in the clear water, floated on her back, and opened her mouth to taste the chlorine. She had Gran-dama's sharp laugh and fine

skin, but none of the Balearic temperament. None of Gran-dama's and Ysa's peculiar hardness.

It was Sylvia's music, finally, that brought her long stays with Gran-dama to an end. As her music progressed from lessons to recitals to performances, she became reluctant to miss days of practice, and her woodwinds could not bear the humidity of the coast. Moisture in a clarinet, for instance, would cause the inner bore wall to expand and direct pressure toward the outer wind. Humidity such as there was in Neskowin could exert enough internal force to crack the instrument to relieve the pressure.

At the cottage the night before the funeral, Sylvia could not sleep. Her mother's old room was muggy, and the twin bed had no sheets, only a wool blanket spread over the bare mattress. So she made up the bed in her grandmother's room. She shook out wine-colored sheets, tucked them in at the corners, and spread a quilt over the top. She changed into pajamas, hoping the touch of flannel might make her sleepy, but she couldn't quiet her thoughts. The familiar smells of the house, the peculiar yellow grey of the light, made it seem every moment as if Gran-dama would appear from the next room. She wouldn't, of course, and the certainty of that knowledge hummed through Sylvia's mind and legs and fingers so that she couldn't be still. Also, the house knocked and creaked around her with noises she didn't remember from her childhood visits. Then she realized: they were the sounds of no wind.

She got up from the bed and wrapped herself in the warm chenille of her grandmother's robe. She walked in darkness through the silent hall and kitchen to the back door and opened it. Sure enough, the night was completely still. She remembered Gran-dama's words on rare, quiet nights like these: "The sea is listening." This night it felt especially true, but perhaps that was because of her longing for her grandmother, the troublesome emptiness of the cottage.

She was fatigued and disoriented, from grief and memory as much as from jet lag. It was a shock find herself here in her grandmother's gentle, dreamlike world so abruptly after living for months in the bright commotion of trains, hotels, and concert halls, surrounded by the noise of streets and chatter and suitcase wheels, and the sounds of folding metal chairs. She was surprised at the relief this curious silence brought to her now, not just from the clamor, but even from the orderly sameness of nightly performances, even the best of them, when at moments, the music rose around her and drew her inside of it, swept her away from the hall, the chair, the taste of the wooden reed on the tip her tongue.

She considered walking to the water, to the listening sea, but the air seemed thick and too quiet to pass through. The dark sand between the deck and the ocean seemed to bow upward, swollen from below. The steady hiss of the waves was broken now and then by the thunderclap fall of a particularly large wave. White foam shot upward against the dark outlines of the sea stacks.

Sylvia shut the door and switched on the light in the mudroom, then the one in the kitchen, which felt stark and too bright without the steady voice of the wind, without Gran-dama. She poured a glass of brandy and wandered through the house

from one room to the next, smoothing the brocade of the chair where Ysa had found her grandmother only days before. She touched the small figurines Gran-dama had collected and kept in every corner. In the bedroom closet, she pulled close the colorful dresses hanging there to breathe in the familiar smells of savory, orange blossom, the sea.

Sylvia's visits to Gran-dama's cottage had not been like her friends' visits to their grandmothers' houses. For instance, there was no hot cocoa with marshmallows at the cottage and no warm sugar-smell of cookies. Instead, in the house of Gran-dama, there were Sunday suppers of lamb or salt ham with dirty rice, and wrinkled potatoes in a fierce mojo picon. Sylvia and her Gran-dama wore their best dresses and brightest shoes and pinned back their long, dark hair. Sylvia was instructed to rifle through her grandmother's trove of jewels to select a multi-gemmed ring or a centuries-old dragon pin to wear at her throat. And there was rum. Even, from her seventh birthday, a tiny cut-crystal tumbler-full for Sylvia.

After the supper, its echoes lingered: sharp scents of garlic and vinegar clinging to the dark-oiled sides of the cast iron pot, red paprika slashed across linoleum, where the bright spice had eluded the lip of the dustpan. "It is clean enough," Sylvia's grandmother would say, in her brusque accent. "If someone comes here to see how clean is my home, she can go back to her own."

Later on those Sunday nights, Crazy Aunt Ysa would clatter in through the back door, obscured by the dark wool of great-grandfather Romero's hooded cloak and carrying with her the cold of the wet night. Every time, Sylvia would start at the

sound of Ysa's first loud step, then hurry into the side hall where, in secret, Sylvia could watch Ysa's ritual entry: slamming the back door, once, then twice to set the latch. Spreading her arms like broad, heavy wings to shimmy and shiver rain or grit from the cloak's deep folds. Stomping thick, caked sand from her dark boots, her face hidden in the shadows of her hood. Until Sylvia's grandmother would switch on the kitchen light and appear in the mudroom doorway, her scarlet lipstick just refreshed, smiling in her best dress. Then Ysa's face would lift and light up beneath the hood, and she was herself: the crazy aunt, who trekked Sunday nights the half-mile along the sea to drink Xoriguer gin with her cousin and tell stories by the fire. Stories of the cave-pocked coves of Menorca and Ibiza, the native land of the family's women. Grandmothers and great grandmothers, back to days when Barbary pirates swept through the islands to capture dark-eyed, dark-haired Castilian women for trade in Morocco.

"The Balearic Islands were called in Greek *Gymnesiae*," Ysa would say in a gritty whisper, when she had shed her walking garb, shaken out her dress, and taken her place in the green velvet chair. "This means naked," she'd say, "because the people were often without clothes." She tipped her glass first one way, then the other, watching the ice tumble into a new arrangement.

Sylvia's grandmother nodded and waited to hear the story she already knew well.

Sylvia pulled the quilt up closer around her neck. Those nights when Ysa arrived, Sylvia's grandmother sent her to dress for bed, then layered pillows and blankets on the sofa so her granddaughter could listen until she fell asleep. When

Sylvia was very young, her grandmother would tuck her into bed before she sat with Ysa by the fire; but more often than not, she would find Sylvia later, asleep in the hall where she had crept to be near the two women, with their dark beauty and their ease with the sunless tumult of this place.

Ysa cleared her throat and clicked her tongue. "They lived in caves and hollow rocks." She looked at Sylvia, her eyes angry, as if the extraordinary history were her niece's fault, and Sylvia looked away. "The Balearic men were great lovers of women, you see. Three or four men could be traded for a single woman, and those who had meat or tools to sell would sooner trade for wine and women than for gold."

This story of the naked women and the men who traded them was more frightening to Sylvia even than the pirates, who were said to lash high-born husbands to their beds and ravish their wives before cutting their throats.

"The women, if they were kept far from the ocean, would go mad," whispered Ysa, giving Sylvia's grandmother a severe look. "But if they would listen to the sea, if they would refuse to lose sight of it, they would exult and endure."

The crab is free from Gran-dama's lips. It sidles now over her cheek and into the depths of her heavy hair, until only the crook of one pink claw is visible between the dark strands. Sylvia no longer hears the priest's words. When, at last, she looks away from her Gran-dama and into the pews, Ysa is wide awake and fixing her with furious eyes. Ysa's hands rest on the prayer beads at her throat. She breaks her stare to look pointedly at the end of the casket where Gran-dama's head rests on its satin pillow, then looks back at Sylvia. Sylvia holds her breath and checks the

casket; it is impossible that Ysa can see inside. But she narrows her eyes. She lifts a finger, barely, almost imperceptibly, to point at Sylvia, and she nods.

Sylvia is shaken by Ysa's look, but the priest looks at her, too, and nods, and it is time for her to play. She lifts a soprillo from its case beside her, stands, and brings the mouthpiece to her lips. From all the woodwinds, she chose the delicate and difficult instrument for Gran-dama; it is small and rare and pitched an octave above the soprano sax. She has chosen "Eclogue" by Philip Buttall, as well, with its slow, pure lifts and falls, its tones glad and melancholy as wind. She closes her eyes and plays the first notes. The sound startles her; it is extraordinary in the small alcove where she stands, as if it is too large to be contained here. A soprillo sings like a piccolo edged with the pale grit of sax. But in this close space, it expands and echoes inside her. The notes sweep and dip and rise as they should, but they are somehow too big. They fill her head and expand and press outward against the inside of her skull until the force of the tones seeps from her eyes as tears, and she realizes she must end the song, though she has barely begun it. She cuts it short as gently as she can with a long low B-flat. She holds the note and opens her eyes and looks at her grandmothers dark hair and still face, at the red beveled windows on the opposite wall of the church. She sustains the B-flat until it feels like a proper end and she has earned the right to collapse into her seat, to replace the soprillo in the velvet lining of its case.

The mourners below in the church proper are motioned to rise and exit, and Sylvia watches them, shaky and worn out from the terrible volume of "Eclogue." A few remaining tears make their way to the rims of her eyes. She recognizes no one in

the church; they are town acquaintances, she supposes, women and men rough-skinned from the elements, silent or whispering or wiping their eyes. Sylvia wonders at the words or deeds they shared with Gran-dama.

Sylvia's mother stands in the front row and smooths the back of her skirt. She pats at her eyes with a tissue, which comes away damp and black with mascara. She smiles wanly at Sylvia and nods in appreciation of the "Eclogue." She touches her hair, tugs at the snarled cowlick in back, and takes Ysa's elbow. Sylvia stays seated, ready to rise quickly in case Aunt Ysa should make her way up the few steps and approaches the casket where the crab's pincer is barely visible within Gran-dama's hair. But Ysa gives her one last glance, nods, turns, and follows Sylvia's mother into the aisle.

Sylvia remains in her chair until the church is empty, then a few moments longer, then stands, tucks the soprillo case under one arm, and walks to the casket to look: Her beautiful Gran-dama's face painted with stillness, her kind hands, the mouth and dark hair like Sylvia's. And the crab, tucked between shiny strands, unmoving. Sylvia separates the hair and leans closer. She hadn't known there was such pinkness beneath a crab's shell. The creature is motionless, curled around itself, its hind end as alive and exposed as a bare heart.

Sylvia reaches to touch a furry leg. The creature pulls further into itself. Sylvia scoops her fingers beneath the small body and lifts it away from her grandmother's hair. The crab lies still as she closes her hand lightly around it and carries it from the church.

The parking lot is nearly empty. Even Sylvia's mother has driven off in a taxi that will take her to the airport and an early flight back to sun and chlorinated water. "You're so good, Sylvia," she had said earlier, as Sylvia placed flowers and photos at the front of the church. "Gran-dama was lucky to have you." She patted Sylvia's arm to comfort them both.

Ysa is still here, Sylvia sees, waiting for her at the side of the church. Sylvia falters and shifts the soprillo case. She cradles it in her arm so that the hand carrying the crab is curled beneath the case and therefore partially hidden.

Ysa steps out of the shadows. Sylvia trembles slightly at her approach, and is ashamed by the trembling, of her childish fear of this small Castilian woman cloaked in black mourning.

Ysa speaks in her graveled half-whisper: "You will live here now, in the cottage, your Gran-dama's cottage."

Again Sylvia trembles. Since her mother's call to Prague, she has not let herself think of this outlandish notion. She has proceeded rationally, as if the possibility of keeping the cottage does not even exist, which it doesn't. She has scheduled meetings with realtors and arranged for the delivery of moving boxes and a dumpster later in the week.

There is a betrayal in selling the cottage, she knows this and dreads it deeply; it will be a kind of erasure of Gran-dama's history, her dreams and joys, the day-to-day passage of seventy years. And Sylvia is the one who will enact the betrayal, because her mother and Ysa are unwilling to recognize the necessity of it.

But she cannot not help it. It is a fancy, this notion that she might abandon her life and retreat into the dim cottage in this murky, otherworldly town. She has an apartment in Portland, and a boyfriend of sorts, or an ex, perhaps. A violinist who is living in waiting in her apartment to hear the outcome of an audition that might take him away to Boston, or Europe. And of course, she had her own tour, an extraordinary opportunity, three more months in Russia and Portugal and Spain.

“You will live here soon,” Ysa repeats, furrowing her brow and waiting for a reply; Sylvia says nothing.

Ysa harrumphs. “Yes. Well. I’ll come to you this evening,” she tells Sylvia. “We will drink gin, and I will tell you a story.” She does not ask; it is a pronouncement.

Sylvia imagines refusing. She could say no, and spend the night packing her grandmother’s things. She could make tea and a fire, smooth and fold her grandmother’s dresses, stuff tissue into small boots and high-heeled shoes to hold their shapes. She could wrap crystal glasses and bone ash china plates and sort perfumes and letters, deciding what to pack away and what to keep with her.

Ysa narrows her eyes, waiting.

Sylvia acknowledges it: she is afraid of Ysa, even now. She is afraid of her gritty voice, her dark eyes, and her legends. But finally she says yes, and the crab shifts slightly in her cupped palm. Afraid or not, Sylvia will hear a last story her Gran-dama’s would have heard. She will spend a last night by the firelight with her crazy, compelling Aunt Ysa.

Her aunt puts out a small, brown hand, and Sylvia take it with her empty one. Her aunt's fingers are cool and delicately boned.

On her way back to the cottage, Sylvia stops at a store. She tucks her grandmother's crab into her pocket.

The shop owner gathers the things Sylvia will need to keep the crab. A small, heated aquarium, a bag of sand, a shallow wading dish for drinking and bathing, several shells of different sizes and colors. And a spray bottle for misting the creature's body.

"A crab will die without seawater," the owner tells Sylvia. "It suffocates on air."

He is bald and bent, with lengthy arms and legs, a kind of man-crab himself. "They hatch in the water, then crawl to shore when the legs are formed. They breathe first in the water, then in the air, but they always need the sea." His eyes are wide and bright, but he avoids looking at Sylvia directly, glancing instead to one side of the room or the other. He adds a plastic plant to the pile. "For hiding," he says. "Hermit crabs live in colonies, so you might think of keeping more than one. But even then, he'll keep to himself and burrow."

By evening, Sylvia is sorry she agreed to Ysa's visit. She has snuggled down her grandmother's crab, has watched it push the sand and shells about in the aquarium, disarranging them from the way Sylvia had placed them. She watched

while it examined and rejected each of the shells and buried its bare body in the sand.

She has settled into the cottage, touching familiar old cups and spoons, cooking up rice she has found in her grandmother's cupboards. The cottage smells now of garlic and cabbage and cloves: Gran-dama's scents. And Sylvia wants nothing more in the world than to slip between her grandmother's sheets with a glass of gin and a dusty book from her grandmother's shelves.

But Ysa will come. So Sylvia has changed into a purple dress and black patent heels. She has applied her grandmother's scarlet lipstick and donned her grandmother's pearls. The wind is up once more and wailing; she has prepared a fire and sits by it now, and waits. She remembers a story.

"Did you know that the Balearics were the greatest of slingers?" Ysa had asked.

Sylvia shook her head and huddled into her blankets. Gran-dama sipped her gin.

"Each man carried three slings," said Ysa, her gritty voice steady and toneless. "One around his head, another around his body, and one in his hand. They were of different lengths for small and large stones, which the men hurled with great force."

Sylvia wondered how they might feel in her hand: the sling and the stone. She wondered at the strength of a slinger.

“Boys were trained very young to be mercenary soldiers,” Ysa said. “Mothers only allowed their sons to eat bread when they had struck it off a post with the sling.”

Sylvia imagined it. She could be in that story, she thought. Those were her people, hers and Ysa’s and Gran-dama’s. All of the stories were about her, she realized. Everything could have happened to her.

“Were the girls slingers, too?” she asked Ysa.

Gran-dama smiled; Ysa did not. “Certainly they were,” she told Sylvia. “The wisest of them were.”

Sylvia starts at the noise of Ysa at the back door. She stands and smooths the purple skirt of Gran-dama’s dress and goes in to greet her aunt, and it is just as she recalls: Ysa clattering in, shrouded as always in Sylvia’s grandfather’s outsized cloak. She slams the door twice and stomps. Sylvia waits in the kitchen, and for a moment, she feels the old urge to hurry into the side hall and out of Ysa’s sight. But her aunt’s hood is shoved partway back, and already Sylvia can see her face, and she is only Ysa: an old and tiny woman who, even now, tromps down the shoreline to tell stories of the seduction and boldness of her island ancestors. Sylvia waits while Ysa shimmy and holds out her arms, shedding sand and salt rain.

Under her gear, Ysa still wears her funeral garb. She comes into the kitchen and takes Sylvia’s hands and smiles. Sylvia sees that her aunt’s two front teeth are darker than the others. Her palms are warm and moist from her gloves and not at all like the frail one Sylvia had held outside the church.

Ysa laughs a little, and Sylvia laughs as well, at herself, standing here in her grandmother's bright kitchen, surrounded by rose-blossom dishes and milk-glass tumblers, holding the hands of her Aunt Ysa. The naked crab nestles in the sand in the aquarium on the counter, revealing only the slightest glimpse of pink beneath the plastic palm tree.

"Dios mio," Ysa whispers, rubbing her hands together. "Let's drink."

Sylvia has built a fire in the living room and set a tea table with two tumblers of ice and an open bottle of Xoriguer.

"Ah," Ysa sighs. She curls her legs beneath her on the seat of the green velvet chair. "I will miss talking with her." Her whisper is lower tonight, as if she is very tired.

"Yes." Sylvia peers into her glass at the gin and the ice and brings them to her lips.

Ysa takes a breath, summoning the energy to impart her tale. "Some five hundred years ago," she begins, "a band of Turkish Corsairs stormed our island's shores to seize our village. With flintlocks and daggers, they chased our people to the water. Many were killed, others fled in canoes toward the small northern islands to the north, until all were dead or gone. All, you see, but two cunning women, who chose to remain behind."

Sylvia shifts her legs. She feels odd sitting in the brocade chair where Grandama should sit, sipping gin with Ysa. It is odd to listen to a story she had likely already heard, as a child curled in quilts. She feels restless and divided, as if she is three people at once: that captivated child, as wary of the dark legends and she is

eager to hear them, Gran-dama, elegant and alluring in her dark lipstick and pearls, and herself.

“One of the cunning women set out to charm the pirates with her fiery eyes and daring tales,” says Ysa, her voice gritty and even, “while the other, carrying a broad board pierced with large and small holes, stole into the bush.

“She crept with care along the rocky shoreline to a place nearby where a strong breath rose from the earth. She found it easily, even in darkness: a hole the size of two fists that exhaled a great wind. Its fitful breath stank of fishes and sweet sea. It was a flue for an underground cave, the women knew. Sometimes the village men dove into the ocean and swam through the caverns to fish with long spears in this bountiful cave, and sometimes they were lost. And always, the flue that opened in the land belched and hissed and sighed with the rise and fall of the currents.”

Sylvia is tired, and she can feel the warmth of the gin moving through her body. She wants to close her eyes. Instead, as Ysa speaks, Sylvia looks around the room at her Gran-dama’s things: the dark radio cabinet, lace curtains no longer crisp or white, a brown wool rug. Two porcelain nymphs grinning from the mantle, winking and moving in the firelight.

“...in the firelight,” says Ysa, “the pirates sat fixed as the beguiling storyteller wove her tale around them, speaking of knights and treasure and battles with golden swords.”

Sylvia’s eyelids are heavy. She rattles the ice in her glass and takes another drink to keep from dozing, then leans back in her chair.

“And as the tale wound and lured and coaxed ...” says Ysa.

The flickering light from the flames dances across Ysa's face, and in Sylvia's exhaustion, her aunt changes. Her features melt into those of Gran-dama and then into Sylvia's. Sylvia blinks and notices drowsily that Ysa's eyebrows have the same high curve as her own, that their chins bear the same shallow cleft.

"...the second woman lifted the pierced board and held it out over flue."

Sylvia blinks in an effort to listen; her eye stay closed longer and longer.

"The cave's strong breath rose up against the wooden board," Sylvia hears faintly, "exhaling a gust so sudden and fierce that the fine white cloth she wore over her dark hair was loosed and borne away..."

Sylvia can no longer open her eyes; she drifts in and out of dreams.

"... like a comet's tail.

Ysa's voice lilts and speaks on and on, and Sylvia's hears it, or remembers it, or dreams it:

"The woman held firm and lowered the board, thrusting it downward to cover the flue. And with that, the breath of cave, all the winds of the sea, were compressed and forced through the small and large holes of this wooden instrument. Under the burden of such pressure, the sea began to shriek and wail and moan through the humble instrument. It bawled and bayed and roared like a multitude of devils with a clamor so great it was heard in full force at the fireside. The storyteller stopped her tale mid-word. The pirates froze stock still and perked their ears. They peered into the darkness, unsure if they should take up their flintlocks and daggers and face the devils...."

In her sleep Sylvia has a vision: a grey sky turned black, water rising.

“Then one cried out, “Look, see!” and they looked, and saw a length of white, a smoky ghost, twisting and winding and shimmering through the dark sky. It snaked toward them, furling and unfurling, and gathering speed, and bearing with it the awful thunder of the devil’s song, which grew louder and louder in their ears, until it filled their evil skulls and coarse bodies and black hearts, until the burden of such pressure sent them scampering like vermin for their ship, their legs and arms quaking in fear, their fists pressed against their ears...”

A cave grows up around Sylvia.

“Your Gran-dama,” Sylvia hears faintly, or dreams. “The sea. I told her...”

The cold, dark water reaches Sylvia’s waist.

“Moving inside her, sand in her shoes, so pink and open and able.”

When Sylvia wakes, the fire is dead and Ysa is gone. The lights are off, and a crocheted blanket has been thrown over Sylvia’s lap. She remembers the dream that woke her. It was one from her childhood: A creature, a sun-shaped anemone travels the length of her arm, beneath her skin. She can only see its spiny, rolling outline, but somehow she knows what it looks like. It burns orange like a small sun and moves on wriggling arms as long as its round body is wide. When she was a child, she would wake up then, terrified; but this night, she sits quietly in her grandmother’s chair and watches the sun move inside her.

The next time she wakes, her neck is stiff from sleeping in the chair. She turns her head from side to side and smooths her dress. The purple appears blue in the darkness. She stretches out her legs and the soles of her shoes grate across a smattering of sand on the hearth at her feet. She touches her grandmother's pearls at her neck and feels a wave of sadness at the end of Gran-dama's story.

She rubs her hands together to warm them and stands. The room is the same as it always was: the two chairs and worn sofa, the gilt mirror, the painting of a storm-pitched ship pointed forever into the wall of a grey, frothing wave. And from every shadowed nook, small nymphs and pixies grinning in the darkness. Her grandmother's porcelain pets.

Sylvia walks about the room, recalling each peculiar figure. One reclines on his side, upper body raised on an elbow, oversized head propped on an open palm. Twin salt-shaker pixies look out of saucer-wide eyes, black mouths rounded like two small screams. And there is figure that enticed and horrified Sylvia most as a child: a small, carved Wodjanoj the color of pale jade. The water spirit is naked and frozen in laughter, holding his great, round stomach with plump hands, rocking back on his heels, his eyes crinkled almost closed by the enormity of his laughter. And rising up before him, to the level, nearly, of his chin, is his erect penis, forthright and thick as his thigh.

The old clock in the corner ticks in the silence; it's almost four. Sylvia turns to look at the mantle. Beside the water nymphs is the framed photo she had set out at yesterday's service: her lovely Gran-dama in scarlet lipstick and a scarlet dress with black, crocheted lace. Her hair is sleek and swept back. Her nose is slightly crooked

and long for her face, but her smile and eyes are Sylvia's. She seems to laugh at her granddaughter, as if she knows a story Sylvia does not yet know.

Sylvia steps back and yawns, suddenly worn out. She turns to the hallway that leads to the bedroom, sure she will sleep again, with daylight not yet here. But as she passes the kitchen, she sees that the back porch light is off. She walks through the kitchen to switch it on, to rekindle the beacon her grandmother had always left shining through the night's mists. She passes the dimly lit aquarium; the shells are lying empty and open-side up, and the crab is nowhere to be seen.

There are two steps down into the mudroom. Did Ysa turn off the back light when she left? But that would mean she would have gone out onto the beach in the dark to walk home. With the gin and her exhaustion, Sylvia supposed, Ysa might not have noticed. She should not have slept. She should have insisted her aunt stay the night.

It is strange standing there beside the dark shades, with the black night looming just beyond. She wonders uneasily if Ysa might also have forgotten to lock the door. She tries the knob; both Ysa and Gran-dama had a meticulous habit of double-checking doors, so she expects to feel the secure stop of the lock. Instead, the knob turns freely in her hand, and as she pulls, the door opens toward her. In her fatigue, everything seems suddenly eerie, and she now has the sensation of being watched, as if someone is just outside in the dark. She tells herself it is only the funeral and lack of sleep and her odd dreams playing tricks on her; she flips on the back light, throws the door open wide, and looks out.

The back deck, of course, is empty, washed in the light Sylvia has just turned on. Beyond the deck, the sand is empty as well, and the beach to the north and south. Sea grass shivers a little in a soft wind; everything else is quiet. Beyond the sand, the dark water is moving and rolling with its milky crests. Beyond the breakers, the black sea stacks loom, unnatural silhouettes. The rigid stumps of the ghost forest are still and whispering.

Sylvia remembers a night very much like this one, when she'd followed her grandmother across the sand at high tide. Sylvia was bundled in a heavy coat and hood. Gran-dama wore a wide-skirted dress, three heavy shawls, and brown rubber boots, and her long hair was turned loose to the wind. The two of them ran to the shoreline and stood close to the edges of the foam that jetted toward them from the farthest reaching waves. Before them stood the ghost trees: dozens of dark, glistening stumps rising a foot or more above the water. Some were broad and grand, others reached and bent.

"Thousands of years ago," Sylvia's grandmother had told her, "a great catastrophe struck the coast, plunging so many immense trees deep into the sea."

Sylvia imagined it: a fantastical rise and tumult of water, the thunderous crash of trees, some wrenched from the earth, some rent in two, great logs and branches tangled and tossed about like driftwood.

"Just the lowest stretches of their great trunks remained," Gran-dama explained. "They were protected from the air, safe in sediment and sea water."

Sylvia had closed her eyes then, and the waves seemed closer. She shivered there, her shoes sinking in the sand, and imagined a secret, swelling wave that might explode over her just then and hurl her into the toothy stumps.

“Sylvia!” her grandmother had yelled, her dark hair thrashing. Her voice was broken by the hard, irregular wind gusts between them. “Can you hear them speaking? Do you hear the trees?”

The tide tonight is not as high as it had been that night long ago. Still, there is a long stretch of beach between Sylvia and the ghost trees, and beyond that, the foam from spent waves, that slipping up and back on sand. Sylvia walks now across the deck and into the soft sand, listening already. Her patent shoes sink with each step, and with each step, she wrest them back from the sand. She fights the sand to reach the sea’s edge, where at last, she can stand before the ghost stumps and close her eyes. She listens to the whispering. She thinks of her Gran-dama’s dark hair, thrashing, and of her scarlet mouth. And Sylvia grins like the Wodjonoj and spreads her arms.

The Thick of It

The day after the funeral, Alice took to her bed. That's how she thought of it: Taking to her bed. Like a duck to water.

First she prepared. She put on fresh sheets, a sky-blue fleece blanket. She shook out her comforter and let it drift softly down to land full and even over the mattress.

On Paul's nightstand, she positioned supplies. Water bottles, crackers, tissues. On her own table, she arranged other necessities: Paul's leather wallet, worn dark and soft as a dog's ear. The photo of him, crooked grin, live crawdads dangling from his earlobes like earrings, the lake black and smooth behind him. And his wedding band, scratched bright with wear. Luminous.

She dressed in pink flannel pajama bottoms, pink t-shirt, pink socks. She washed her face and brushed her teeth. Then she went to bed, and as if by invitation, a fever came.

She woke in the early afternoon, teeth chattering, and remembered abruptly: Paul is dead. She crept, stooped and heavy-headed to the closet for two more pairs of socks and a grey sweatshirt. She scuffled back to bed and curled tight beneath the

blankets. She anchored the covers under her body and head, wedged icy fingers into the bends of her knees. Her neck muscles ached.

The phone rang. She extended an arm from beneath the blankets and felt for her cell under the edge of the bed. She brought it into her blanket cove and looked at the screen. Minnie. They would be home by now, back on the island. Alice pictured them: Minnie simmering a whole chicken for soup, chopping celery, grinding pepper. Big Earl out on the property, leveling a hedge or turning compost. Alice let the call go to voicemail, tucked the phone under her pillow and closed her eyes.

The family had come to the house on the evening of the accident, had converged on her: Paul's sturdy brothers and father, his stepmother, Minnie. The whole tribe, ordinarily booming and spirited, had moved in softly and surrounded her like batting.

Alice couldn't speak. Hadn't spoken since the police officers had left the house.

"What would you like, love?" Minnie had asked, her short arm stretched tight around Alice's shoulders. "For the service. Anything you like."

But Alice didn't want anything. Nothing at all.

The next time she woke, it was dark, and her skin was dry and searing. Her head pounded, and she remembered: Paul is dead. Tears welled up and burned her dry eyes. She peeled off the sweatshirt and socks with clumsy fingers and hitched up the covers to bare her shins and feet to the empty air. She reached an arm out to Paul's nightstand for a bottle of water. She twisted the cap open and let the liquid

roll across her tongue. When she swallowed, she felt the cool flow through her, down her throat, into her stomach.

She looked at the dark windows, at the unlit light fixture overhead. It reminded her, as always, of a large, glass breast. Frosted flesh, silver nipple. She looked at the furniture in the room, hers and Paul's. The teak armoire, Paul's leather chair, her grandmother's old spinet. The piano could not hold a tuning. Each time it was played, the notes whined downward, slipped lower. On his third visit, the piano tuner had told her: "It won't hold. You're wasting your time."

Near dawn, rain and wind thundered outside the window. The silence was gone. And this time the memory woke along with her, a slow pain. She was shivering again, her body slick now with the clear, salt-less sweat of a broken fever. She wiped down her chest and neck with the grey sweatshirt, watched the storm through half-closed eyes. Black branches flailed. They caught heavy showers, threw them down again in a fierce hiss. They hurled themselves against the glass. They creaked deep at the joints between branch and trunk. Sleep was thick around her, and she dipped into it, rose up, sank deeper.

When she woke again, raindrops sparkled on the branches in early sunlight. She heard birds, and her head no longer hurt. She felt nothing.

Minnie and Paul's brother, Jack, booked the funeral home. They called Paul and Alice's friends and distant cousins, they ordered silver-dollar eucalyptus and

purple tulips, Paul's favorites. And when, in the reception lobby after the service, Alice still couldn't speak, could barely stand, they flanked her and headed off guests. "Thank you for being here," Jack had said. "She'll call if she needs anything," Minnie added. "Yes, anything at all."

Alice was surprised by her own refusal to speak. When people pushed forward to say, I know what you're going through, she said nothing and let them believe that they did. When they said, I'm sure he never felt a thing, she stared back at them, unsmiling.

Alice's mother was at the service, damp and wrinkled from crying. She wept loudly in the lobby, surrounded by lady friends in dark dresses and shiny slacks. They fussed like hens and patted her hands.

Alice blinked at the ceiling, made out shapes in the textured plaster: a monkey with long, plate-flat lips and an s-shaped tail. A hula dancer. She wondered if Big Earl would wake in the night and cry in silence. If Minnie would scoot close to hold him, her round body pressed tight to his back.

Alice pushed back the covers and got up from the bed. The room turned bright white and tilted. She sat back down and held her head until the room stilled once more, then stood again, slowly this time, keeping hold of her head, and shuffled to the bathroom.

She ran water into the tub. She dropped her clothes and looked for her face in the mirror over the sink, found it far off. She saw pinched skin under glassy eyes, Howdy-Doody lines around her mouth. Her hair was snarled and juttled up in back.

She stepped into the bathtub and eased into hot water. It thundered from the faucet and churned at her feet, and she slid down until only her face and knees were out in the air. Heat rushed through her, flooded her hips and thighs, jetted along her shoulders and up through her neck and head, where it turned round and round. The skin on her chest flushed red.

She reached for the faucet with her foot, turned the knob with her toes until only a small stream of hot trickled into the tub.

The furnace ticked in the baseboard, and Alice thought of ping-pong, of leaning forward to the rhythm: tik-ka, tik-ka. Always, she had given away her stroke with her eyes. Paul would slash to her slow-motion backhand, nick the ball off the corner and into the ivy. Then she would go after it, plunge in a silvery hand, emerge with fly dirt, a sticky web trailing a tuft of browned leaf crumbings.

She thought, too, of Paul's smoke-blue shirt. Of the three tiny buttons, the top one undone, dark hair jungling out. And above the buttons: the tan dip of musky throat. Mornings, early, she used to slip the blue shirt from the drawer (stacked with the others in clean, tight slices), and sneak it on over bare skin for coffee on the front porch. The shirt was dwarfing, put her inside the big of him.

She sank further into the bathwater, let her head tip back until just her nose, chin, and breasts were exposed. She floated in heat, and the seashell sigh of water was amplified in her ears. Her eyes burned.

She blew air out through her nose and submerged entirely. If the water were cooler, if her eyes didn't burn, she would have opened them. She would have held her breath and let her mouth gape and fill like someone drowned in a movie.

She lay still until her lungs ached, then thrust her head, gasping, out into the air. She lifted the plug with her big toe.

She had been in the kitchen preparing tiramisu when they came. The sugar and egg yolks had been heated and cooled and blended with mascarpone. The cream was whipped and standing in peaks in the blue bowl. Grated chocolate waited on a glass plate. Alice drizzled split ladyfingers with marsala-laced espresso, and they knocked at the front door.

Two of them stood there. A man and a woman. Grey uniforms with black pockets, blue shoulder patches. Creases from an iron. Shiny shoes. The weight lifted out of her, it vanished, and she thought her feet would rise up off the floor, that she would drift upward like a balloon.

The woman stepped forward and took her arm. "Are you alright, ma'am? Can I help you sit down?"

She guided Alice's weightless body into the living room. Alice did not understand how her feet were moving beneath her. She felt nothing. Saw only bright light through a narrow tunnel. The woman's face at the center. Dark eyes, bare of mascara.

They helped her sit. And they told her: black ice, the bicycle skating sideways, tight curve, steep embankment, we're very sorry. As they spoke she began to shake. Vibrated at first, the room humming, then shuddered, then shook, then quaked like an appliance, like a machine. She wondered how the woman could keep

a steady hold on her arm, how the two of them could sit still while the room shook so.

Alice pulled the corner of a white towel up from the floor and over the lip of the bathtub. As the water receded, she covered the patches of skin that were left to the air. Eventually she was under the towel from neck to knees. She was the opposite of floating. She was leaden. Immovable.

She could hear that the rain had started up again. She thought that the sound was probably beautiful, but she was too far off from herself to tell.

The pads of her fingers and toes had gone white and crepey like dried flowers. She couldn't feel the towel properly. Several times she thought of standing up, of lugging herself out of the tub. When finally she did stand, it was at a moment when she didn't remember having thought of it at all. As if the move at last had been made by her body itself, without influence from her mind.

When she got up, her ears rang. The ringing played like a song. It rose in her. It seemed to lift the drying ends of her hair. She looked through the song to her pale face in the mirror. She looked old. Like an old man. She thought of putting her nails to the glass, of scratching through it into her face. The ringing seemed to come up behind her so that she was surrounded. By the sound, by her pale, old-man's face.

She thought of the old piano and how the notes slid flat and the tuner stopped coming. Paul had wondered then if they might sell the piano, or give it away, but Alice came to like the sound of it. She played through paper stacks of old notes, the drills and scales of her childhood. She played Aurora Lee and Skater's

Waltz too loud, in jagged pecks. With one finger, she picked out the melodies of songs from the radio, changing the words in her head to make them truer as the piano notes whined strange, edged lower, lost tone.

By the time Paul's family had arrived, late on the day of the officers' visit, the day of the tiramisu, Alice was in bed, sleeping on the side where Paul should be. She had lain awake for a long time before the sleeping pill had kicked in. Until finally, she was caught up in a dark whirl and dropped into sleep.

Then a voice came down through cotton from miles above her. Where's your blue shirt, she tried to say, but no words came out. She tried to swim up to the voice. She willed her head to turn, her eyes to open, but she was too muffled, too weighted by the darkness of the covers. She wanted to swing her arms out from under the blankets, to come slamming into the light, but she was sliding down. She couldn't move.

Love, are you okay, the voice called down to her.

I'm going to work, she tried to say. She let herself fall away again, stopped trying to move, thought to herself: I'm keeping this shirt. She was curled around it in the bed like a fruit meat curled onto a pit.

He was cremated in his second best suit. Alice would have sent the better one, the grey-black with the barest murmur of a sheen, along with his favorite silver-green tie. But when she understood that it would be burned, she gave them the black one.

“Do you mind if we have a viewing?” Minnie had asked her.

At first she didn't know what Minnie meant. She turned the words around separately: Viewing. Mind. If we. Fwee. Mine difwee. Then a picture emerged of Paul. In a casket, dead. She shook her head.

Before the funeral she went into the small room to see him. Minnie came with her, kept a soft hand at her elbow. His skin was puffy, as if they'd overfilled him. His hair looked dry. It was puffy as well. Teased up a little and sprayed.

Alice placed a palm flat on his chest. It was firm, like something made of wood and covered with layers of suiting. It was like a bad copy of Paul. She was sorry for him for the way they'd made him up. Sorry for the viewing. That people would look at this copy and think of Paul.

With her fingertips, Alice pulled down the lower lids of her eyes, looked at the webs of red. She scanned her naked body and observed that she was beginning to shrink up in goose bumps. She pulled on the robe that hung behind the bathroom door. Paul's robe, stolen, more or less, from a resort at the south end of Cancun. Not that they didn't pay for it, bit by bit, with every tequila shot, every glass bottle of *agua purificado*.

She buried her face in the robe's collar and inhaled. Gulf Coast Spyce, Tom's Peppermint/Baking Soda toothpaste. Warm leather. She inhaled again, this time too deeply and sneezed.

She could remember the very moment she became attached to his smell. Irrevocably bound to it. They were at an amusement park, on a date early in their

relationship, and she stood behind him in the endless line for Freefall. She'd stood on her toes to rest her chin on his shoulder.

"Show me a woman who's the same size as me," she'd said to him. She bit a mouthful of his hair, crunched it between her teeth. She gestured toward a woman in a green bathing suit top and cut-offs ahead of them in line. "Her? Am I that thin?"

She felt her heartbeat jack up a little watching Paul scan the woman's cleavage, her ass in the shorts.

"More like her," he said, pointing to a woman in long jeans. "Skinnier like that through the hips."

Alice pressed her lips into his neck and inhaled. He reached behind, turned his arm awkwardly to put his palm on the small of her back. Close against him, she could feel his heart beating through his shirt. She smelled the summer heat on him, and soap, and she had to step away from him, drop back onto her heels to keep her breath.

They were at the front of the line now, and the car slid forward on its track to meet them. They were ushered into the narrow cage, strapped against the back wall, and whisked straight up ten stories.

At the top, the cage slid forward and clanked into place. Then came the pause. The flash of time between the clank and the fall that lasted forever. Alice could think and think, and then they were gone. Dropped. Two bodies bolted into a metal box, plummeting a hundred feet toward asphalt. Eventually, of course, the wheels of the cage would hit the bend in the track and they'd be thrown into a quick

braking arc. So that when they stopped dead, they were laid out flat on their backs, their blood screaming through their veins, all the real life plunged out of them.

When Alice emerged from the bathroom, the ringing stopped and hunger struck. She was unsteady on her feet, but she walked straightaway to the refrigerator and threw open the door. She glanced at the clock. It was eight-thirty in the morning, and she hadn't eaten for more than twenty-four hours, but she knew what she wanted: pizza. Cold pizza—and a beer. Who would know? Not Paul; he would never know again. She would drink the last of the six-pack he had brought home just six nights before, and he would never know.

She pulled a piece of pizza out of the box and dug into it, right there in front of the open refrigerator. She took out a beer and twisted off the cap. She took three long swallows and another bite of pizza. She tasted parmesan and provolone, the sweet tang of tomatoes. The beer was rich and hoppy, and she drank it fast so that she would belch. A loud, full burp that would have lit Paul up with pride. She missed him hard then, with a sharp stitch like more hunger. She bit into the pizza and pictured his face, grinning, eyes keen. She opened a second beer before she finished the first. She was beginning to feel just a little bit sick, but she kept eating, drank on. Until she felt tears rising, her voice rising: "I know what I want," she said, loud, chewing still, her mouth full with cheese and crust and beer.